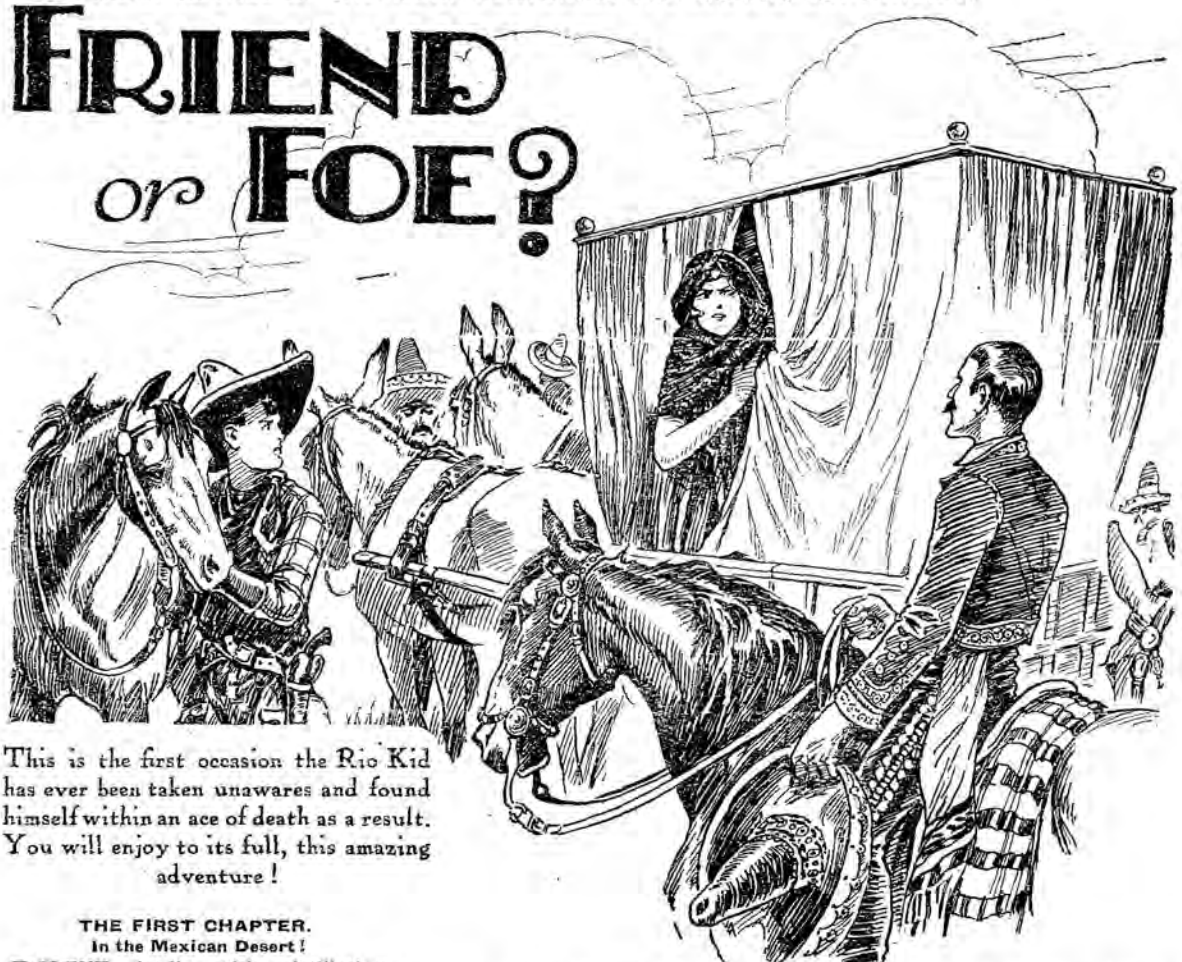
OUR ROARING TALE OF THE WEST, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

FRIEND or FOE?



This is the first occasion the Rio Kid has ever been taken unawares and found himself within an ace of death as a result. You will enjoy to its full, this amazing adventure!

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!" grunted 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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POPULAR. JULY 20th, 1929.

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!"

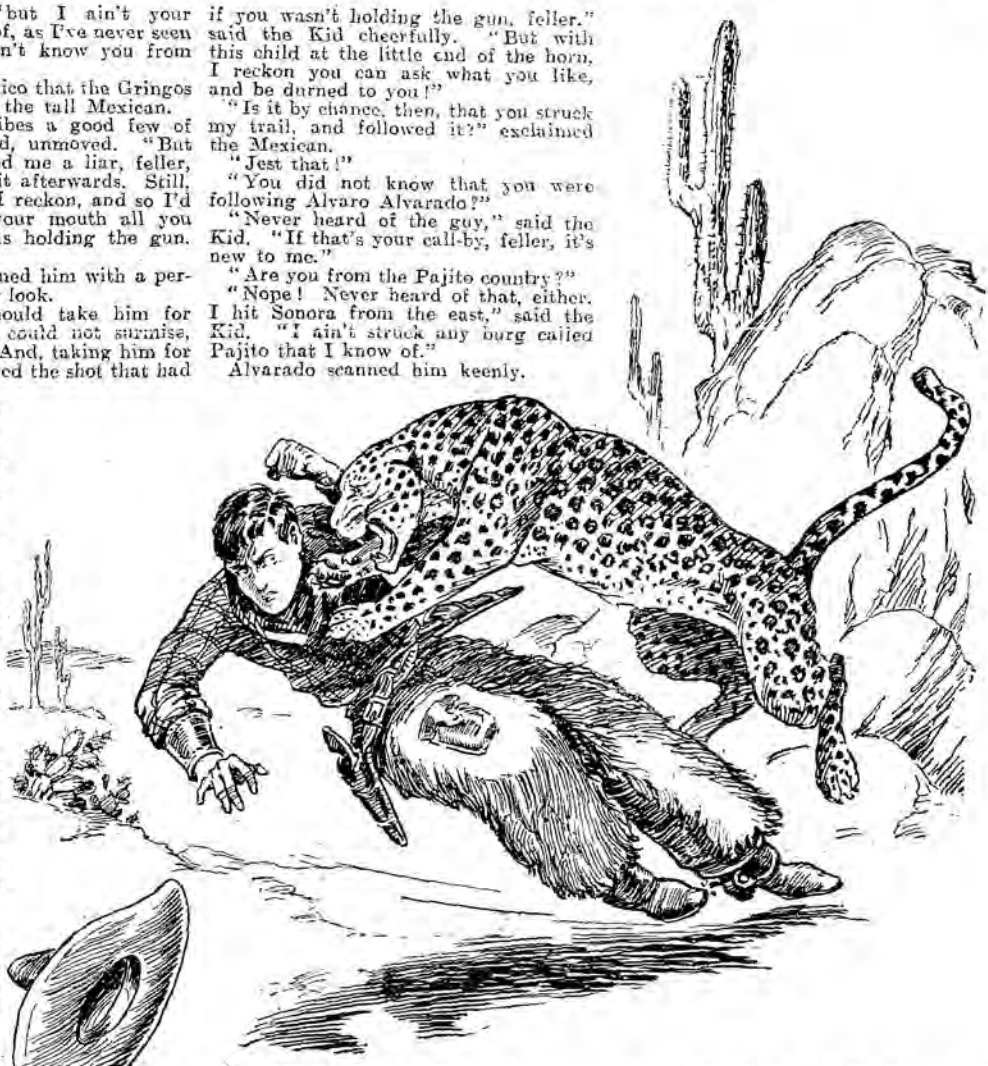
"You did not know that you were following Alvaro Alvarado?"

"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 hurled 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, senor," 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 alcalde of Pajito represents the law in this part of Sonora, senor, 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 alcalde I sure ain't giving him any information."

"I will trust you, senor," 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, senor, 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.

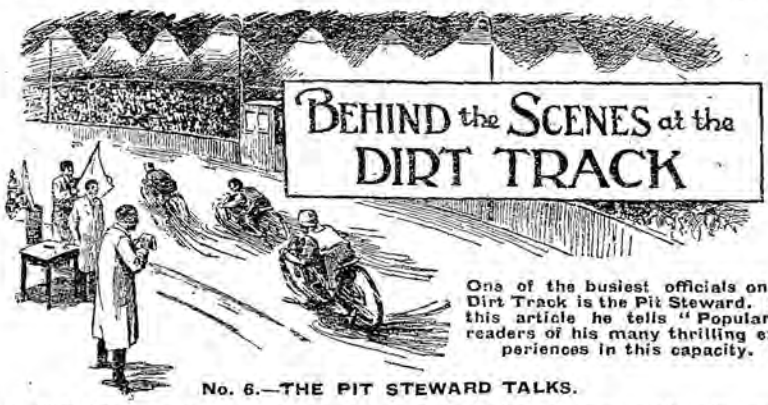
"Senor, if I had doubted before I know now that I can trust you," he said. "Ride where you will, but you are welcome at my camp, if you will ride with me into the desert."

"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.*)



BEHIND the SCENES at the DIRT TRACK

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.

No. 6.—THE PIT STEWARD TALKS.

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 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, had no chance of getting out of it, and with reluctance he presented his signature to each of the girls.

I found the missing rider at last among the spectators.

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.

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 the alcalde of Pajito—or, at least, looked for pursuit from 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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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, senor."

"What's in the litter?"

The Kid asked the direct question.

Don Alvaro's glance turned swiftly on him.

"Are you curious, senor?" 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, senor."

"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, senor, 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, senor."

"Your sister, then."

"I have no sister, senor."

"Well, I ain't asking questions," said the Kid. "I guess you're a square man, and we can let it go at that."

"Senor, 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, senor, 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 cavalcade, 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 cavalcade 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, senor," 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.

"I guess we'll hit it before sundown," said the Kid.

"Si, senor. We camp there for the night."

"And hit the trail again to-morrow?" asked the Kid.

"Si, senor."

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.

"Senorita, we camp!"

There was no answer from behind the curtains.

"Senorita, 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, senorita."

"To keep me prisoner here?"

"Not a prisoner, senorita; 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, senorita."

"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——"

Alvarado winced.

"Have I not told you, senorita, 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 her 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, senor?"

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 13*)

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, drawling 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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