

HERE'S ANOTHER ROARING TALE OF THE WEST, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

# The PLOT of DON PEDRO!

by RALPH REDWAY



## THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Plot!

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 hacienda.

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. Caramba! 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.

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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. THE POPULAR—No. 546.

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 Ximenas. 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. "Senor 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, senor?"

"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, senor," 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 Ximenas glanced round him. "Ho 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."

"Senor! 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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"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."

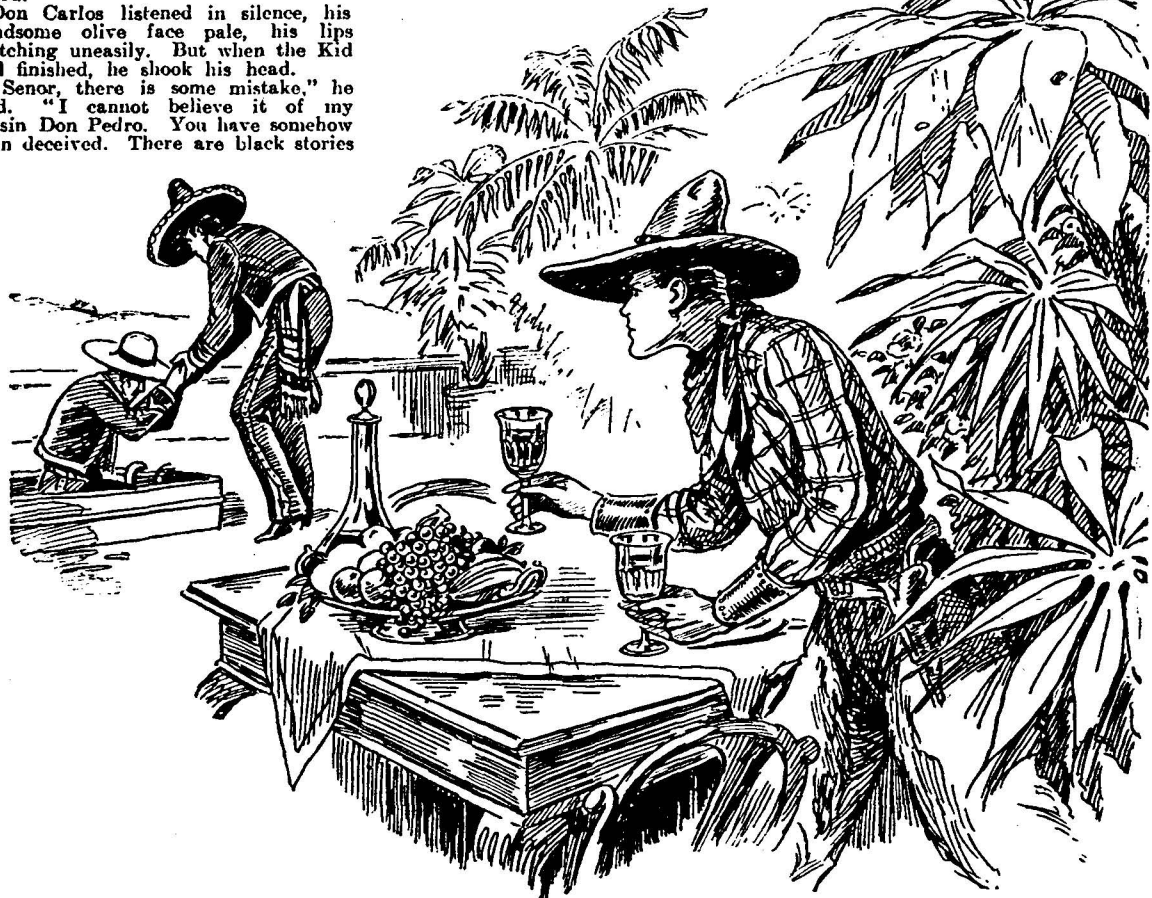
"Nary a mistake, I reckon."  
 And the Kid repeated what he had heard.

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 hercabouts."



**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!**

**F**ROM 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!

SENIOR 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 medico, 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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