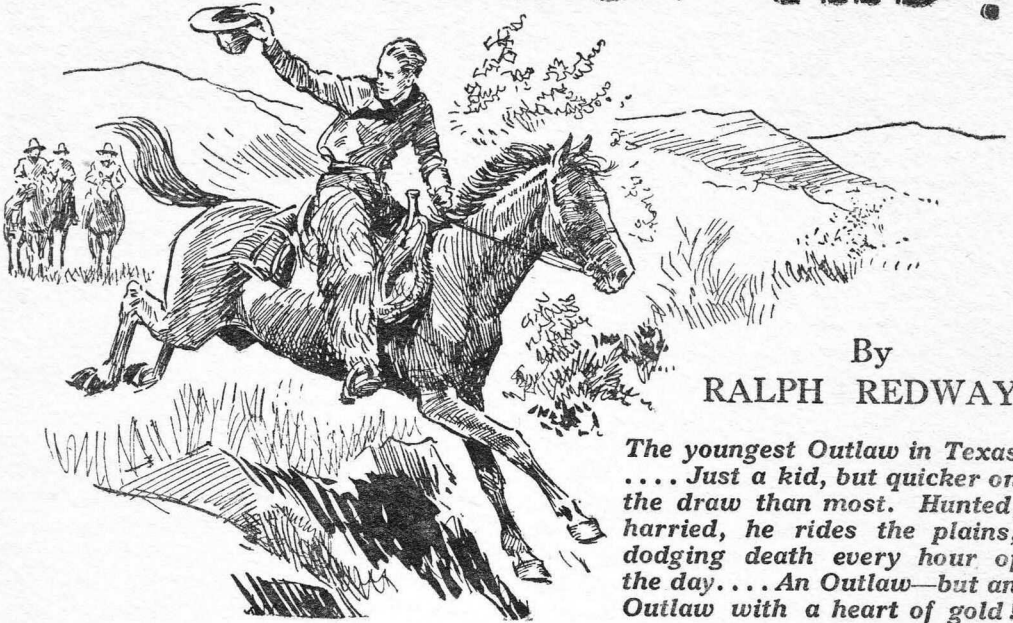


The OUTLAW KID!



By
RALPH REDWAY

The youngest Outlaw in Texas Just a kid, but quicker on the draw than most. Hunted, harried, he rides the plains, dodging death every hour of the day. . . . An Outlaw—but an Outlaw with a heart of gold!

THE FIRST CHAPTER

ON THE JACK-RABBIT TRAIL!

“**H**OLD in your hosses!” It was a quiet drawling voice. There was no excitement in it—no hint of a threat. But the driver of the Jack-Rabbit stage pulled in his team so suddenly that the horses almost rolled back on their haunches.

“The Rio Kid!” he ejaculated.

He dragged on the reins as the horseman pushed out of the mesquite into the trail.

There was no need for the Kid to lift the long-barrelled Colt in his hand that hung at his side. The sight of the handsome, sunburnt, reckless face, in the shadow of the Stetson hat, with its circle of silver nuggets, was enough for the stage-driver. He might have chanced whipping his horses to a rush

in dealing with any other outlaw in Texas. But he was not taking chances with the Rio Kid.

The Kid smiled sourly.

From the window of the vehicle two or three startled faces looked out. But no weapon was shown. The passengers in the stage coach did not horn for gunplay with the Kid.

“I see you know me, Ribbons!” said the Kid, as the driver brought the trampling horses to a standstill.

“I should smile!” answered Billy Fresh, the driver. “Say, I ain’t giving you any trouble, Kid—not by a jugful!”

“I guess it’d be the last thing you’d do this side of Jordan, if you did,” answered the Kid. “Tell them guys to light down and pony up the dust.”

Billy Fresh eyed him curiously.

“Say, Kid, you holding up this hearse?” he asked.

"You've said it."

"It's sure a new break for you, Kid."

The Rio Kid shrugged his shoulders.

Without waiting to be bidden, the passengers were descending from the stage into the rough trail. Scared glances were cast towards the boy rider, sitting in the saddle of the grey mustang, his revolver held down by his side. They knew the name and fame of the Rio Kid, and they knew that that long-barrelled, walnut-butted gun was ready to spit fire and death with lightning swiftness.

"Say, Kid——" went on Billy Fresh.

"Aw, can it!" snapped the Kid. "This hyer is a new break for me, jest as you say. I allow it's the first hold-up I ever figured in, but it sure ain't going to be the last. They won't let me be anything but an outlaw, and it's me against all Texas!"

The Kid's eyes flashed.

The boy outlaw was in a black and bitter mood, and that mood had lasted for days. It had lasted since he had ridden away from the Lazy O Ranch in the Packsaddle country, to avoid being rounded up by the Texas Rangers.

Wild as the Rio Kid's reputation was, wild as were the deeds laid to his charge, the Kid was at heart what he had always been—a cowpuncher born and bred, as in the old days on the Double-Bar Ranch at Frio. And the Kid had made an attempt to leave outlaw trails behind him—an attempt upon which fortune, at first, had seemed to smile.

But it was not to be. The Rio Kid was destined not to run his ranch—not to ride Side-Kicker on peaceful trails. Fate had been against him, and he had been hunted from his new home,

driven from his hope of leading a peaceful life within the law. No man in Packsaddle could say that the Kid had wronged him; many had been proud to call themselves his friends; but the shadow of the past had fallen on him once more, blackening his fair prospects.

Now, as he rode once more an outlaw trail, a hunted man with a price on his head, after his attempt to throw the past behind him, the Kid's thoughts had taken a new line.

They had made him an outlaw again—they had driven him to the sierra and the chaparral, and the Kid, in his bitterness, swore that what they had made him he would be! If they would not have him for a friend they should have him for a foe, and they would learn how dangerous a foe. Outlaw, gunman, fire-bug, hunted for his life, why should he not live up to his reputation, and take the game as well as the name?

In that bitter mood the Kid rode the Jack-Rabbit trail, for the first time, as what men called him—a fire-bug and a hold-up man. The die was cast. The Kid, at last, had become what he was called.

Sitting Side-Kicker in the trail, the Rio Kid watched the frightened passengers alight. His gun was ready, but it was not wanted. No man there was likely to burn powder with the Rio Kid.

"One — two — three," the Kid counted, as the passengers stepped out. "Put up your paws, you-'uns!"

They stood in a row in the trail, with their hands up. The Kid pushed his horse a little nearer.

"I guess you've got another passenger, Ribbons!" he said coolly.

"I guess not," said Ribbons.

"Can it!" said the Kid. "Jonas Sylvester, the boss of the Silver Star

Ranch, got on this hearse at Injun Ford. I guess I'm wise to it, and I reckon Jonas has been selling cattle, and he's going back to Jack-Rabbit with a big wad. Tell him to hop out."

Billy Fresh grinned.

"You're too late, Kid."

"How come?" asked the Kid.

"Mister Sylvester ain't in this hyer hearse. We was stopped a mile out of Injun Ford by the Jadwin gang, and they've got him."

"Sho!" ejaculated the Kid.

He rode closer to the stage and peered in at the window. The vehicle was empty. The three passengers, standing at the side of the trail with their hands up, were all it had contained. Those three passengers—a storekeeper, a bar-tender, and a bank clerk, of Jack-Rabbit—were hardly worth any hold-up man's attention. Jonas Sylvester, the wealthiest rancher in the section, was big game, and he was the Kid's game, now that the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had taken to an outlaw trail in deadly earnest.

"Sho!" repeated the Kid. "Carry me home to die!"

Billy Fresh chuckled.

"Yo're more'n an hour too late, Kid," he said. "Them guys—three of them—held us up a mile outside the Ford. They was after Sylvester's roll, and they sure was mad when they found that he'd banked the money for the cattle at the Ford. Yes, sir, Mister Sylvester hadn't more'n ten dollars in his rags, and him the richest man in Jack-Rabbit. I'm telling you that they was horn mad."

"Sho!" said the Kid. "And what for did they take the guy out of the hearse? What was the good of the guy without his dust?"

The driver chuckled again.

"I guess the Jadwin gang know

how to make him spill dollars," he said. "Mister Sylvester will have to buy his skin dear from that gang. Bill Jadwin will sure make him sweat dollars."

The Kid smiled grimly.

He could guess what the rich rancher's fate was likely to be in the grip of the most savage and lawless gang of desperadoes in the section. No torture known to Apache or Comanche would be spared to force plunder from him. Mister Sylvester, of the Silver Star Ranch, would have fared better at the hands of the Rio Kid.

Billy Fresh gathered up his reins.

"I guess I'm late for Jack-Rabbit, Kid," he said persuasively. "You going through them guys, say?"

The Kid made a gesture.

"I sure ain't picking crows," he said. "I stopped this hyer hearse for old Sylvester. I reckoned he'd have ten thousand dollars in his rags."

"That was what the Jadwin gang reckoned, I guess!" chuckled Billy. "And they was hoppin' mad! But I guess they'll sweat ten thousand dollars out of him afore he hits the Silver Star again, search me!"

He grinned at the Kid.

"You're sure too late, hombre," he said.

The Kid made no answer; he burst into a laugh. It was a ringing, good-humoured laugh. The Kid had a sense of humour. This was the first time he had followed an outlaw trail in earnest, and his intended prey had slipped through his fingers. The Kid was amused.

Deep in his heart, perhaps, the Kid was glad that it had happened so. It was passionate resentment, something like despair, that had led him to live, for once, up to his wild reputation. But Fate had intervened once more.

"Say, you ginks, you can sure hop into that hearse," said the Kid, with a gesture to the waiting passengers. "You ain't my game!"

The three passengers gladly took advantage of the permission. The Kid turned to Billy Fresh.

"You can beat it, Billy," he said curtly.

"Sure!" said Billy cheerfully.

The driver cracked his whip, and the stage rolled on along the trail towards the cow-town of Jack-Rabbit.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

THE WAY OF THE KID!

"YOU pesky gink!" growled the Rio Kid.

He was speaking to himself.

There was a cloud on the Kid's brow, a glint in his eyes. He was angry—angry with himself, irritated by the thoughts that he drove from his mind and that would return.

From the Jack-Rabbit stage-trail the boy outlaw had ridden away through the mesquite at a gallop. But the gallop slackened down to a loping trot, the trot to a walk.

"You dog-goned geck!" growled the Kid.

More and more slowly the Kid rode, as if checked by some power outside his own will.

He drew the mustang to a halt at last, and Side-Kicker lowered his head and began to crop the herbage. The Kid, sitting idle in the saddle, communed with himself angrily.

"If you ain't the prize boob, Kid Carfax!" he said. "If you ain't the world's biggest bonehead, carry me home to die! Ain't you hit enough trouble, you gol-darned gink, without hornin' into another guy's? Say!"

But it was useless for the Kid to argue. He knew what he was going to do, all the while he argued.

Rancher Sylvester, of Jack-Rabbit, had been his game. He had expected to find the rich rancher in the Jack-Rabbit stage. From cover on the trail he had seen the stage drive out of Indian Ford, with the Silver Star rancher in it; and he had cut across country to waylay the stage half-way to Jack-Rabbit. He was glad that he had failed, he admitted that now. Driven to desperation by the persecutions of Fate, hunted by innumerable enemies, the Kid had figured that he was going to be what they made him. But there was nothing to it, he was not a hold-up man. Even had Rancher Sylvester been on the stage, he doubted now whether he would have lifted the rancher's wad. There was nothing to it, and the Kid realised that. And he had ridden away, realising that; but—

But in spite of himself, his thoughts lingered on the rancher, a prisoner in the hands of the Jadwin gang.

The Kid knew the reputation of the Jadwins. Three brothers, the hardest cases in Texas: savage, lawless, ferocious; wanted for a dozen murders and robberies. He could have pitied even a deadly enemy who had fallen into the hands of the Jadwin gang. And Jonas Sylvester was no enemy. He was a fat old rancher, popular in the section, well liked by his outfit, and he had a wife and daughter at home at the ranch. The wife and the daughter the Kid had never seen, but his thoughts went to them now.

He knew what he was going to do. The Kid's old weakness had cropped up again. He was going to horn into trouble that was not his. He had ridden the Jack-Rabbit trail to hold up Rancher Sylvester, and he was going to risk his life to save the man from the outlaws, for the sake of the



“Hold in your horses!” As the quiet, drawing voice came from the horseman, with levelled Colt, beside the trail, the driver of the Jack-Rabbit stage pulled in his team so suddenly that the horses almost rolled back on their haunches. “The Rio Kid!” he ejaculated.

wife and daughter who would be waiting, with anxious hearts, at the ranch. That was what the Kid was going to do. A strange enough outcome of his first essay as a hold-up man on the trails.

Long the Kid sat idle in the saddle, debating the matter in his mind, yet knowing all the time how the debate would end. He swung Side-Kicker into motion again, at last wheeling round and riding back the way he had come.

“It’s you that’s the prize gink, Kid Carfax,” he said bitterly, as he rode back to the Jack-Rabbit trail. “Say, wouldn’t this guy Sylvester put the

riata round your pesky neck as soon as the next man? He sure would! Why can’t you leave him to what’s coming to him, you gol-darned geck? Say!”

There was no answer to that question; only the Kid knew that he was not going to leave Jonas Sylvester to what was coming to him.

He reached the open trail, and rode in the direction of Indian Ford. A mile out of Indian Ford, Billy Fresh had said, the rancher had been taken from the stage. It was there that the Kid’s trail began.

Side-Kicker’s swift hoofs covered the ground rapidly. The Kid’s keen

eyes picked up the spot when he reached it. He did not trouble to dismount. He read the signs where the stage had halted, and where three horsemen had trampled the trail. He picked up the prints of the boots, where Jonas Sylvester had walked into the chaparral, a prisoner in the hands of the three riders.

Not a sign escaped the lynx eyes of the Rio Kid. There were few men in Texas so keen at reading signs. It was a game at which the Kid could beat Apache or Comanche. But he knew that difficulties would begin later. The Jadwins would look for pursuit, though not by the Rio Kid; they would blind their trail the best they could.

"Shucks!" grunted the Kid.

More than a mile he had followed the Jadwin trail through tangled thickets and scrubs. For a time there had been the footprints of the man who had walked among those of the three horses. But after a time those footprints vanished, and the Kid figured that the prisoner had been taken up behind one of the riders. Indeed, the Kid's unflinching eyes could pick out which of the horsemen had lifted the rancher, for the deeper tracks of the animal told of the double weight. Three hours at least had elapsed since the Jadwins had ridden that way, but the trail was more than fresh enough to the Kid—it was fresh enough for any plainsman—and he knew that the Jack-Rabbit outfit would be following it. But now the Kid had come to a wide stretch of stony ground, thick with alkali dust blown in the wind, and he dismounted from the mustang to search for sign.

He had expected something of the kind. He knew that the Jadwins would not leave a trail that any galoot in Texas could follow with his eyes

shut. So far, a tenderfoot could have followed them, but from now on the keenest Apache might have been beaten.

Beyond the alkali plain lay a range of low hills. Somewhere in the hills the Jadwins had taken refuge with their prisoner, but the alkali dust told no tale. The tracks of the Kid's own mustang were obliterated almost as soon as they were made by the wind that tossed the dust in clouds ever shifting.

It seemed, for a little time, that the Kid himself would be beaten. He tried to and fro, and long minutes passed; and a sound came from the dim chaparral behind him that told of horsemen approaching. The Jack-Rabbit outfit were coming on through the scrubs, and they would come on the Kid if he lingered there.

But it was not long that the Kid lingered.

Few eyes would have picked up the sign that guided the Rio Kid onward. But anything that was visible to an eagle's eye was visible to the Kid's. One broken twig in a sage-bush was enough, and the Kid rode forward at a gallop, the shifting alkali dust behind him washing out his trail as fast as it was made.

The direction was all he wanted, and that almost indistinguishable sign had told him. The Jadwins had turned at a sharp angle from their former course, aiming to cross the alkali plain diagonally, though a pursuer would naturally have figured that they had struck right across it to the refuge of the hills.

The Kid rode at a gallop, and the inequalities of the plain soon hid him from the eyes of the Jack-Rabbit outfit when they emerged from the chaparral at the spot he had left behind.

The Kid reckoned that at that spot they would be beaten, and he looked for no further following.

It was the task ahead that occupied his thoughts.

The Jadwin trail, if the Kid had picked it up correctly, lay almost parallel with the line of the hills. But at some point they would turn off to strike into the hills, and if the Kid missed that point he might ride on and leave what he sought behind him.

He slackened speed, scanning the ground, and at last dismounted and proceeded on foot, the patient mustang following him.

Overhead, the blazing sun of Texas poured down heat ; the plain reflected the glare. But the Kid did not heed dust and heat. For mile on mile the alkali plain lay round him, dotted with dusty, scrubby sage, and here and there a gaunt cactus. And it was the broken blade of a yucca that told the Kid that he was still on the right trail ; and later, a single hoofprint that the dust had not obliterated. An outcrop of stone, thick with dust, sheltered that single sign from the wind, and preserved it for the Kid's eyes, which gleamed as he scanned it.

" I guess them Jack-Rabbit guys won't pick up a trail like this, a whole lot ! " chuckled the Kid.

He looked back.

There was no sign of horsemen on the plain. The men from Jack-Rabbit had been beaten, as the Kid expected, and as the Jadwins certainly had calculated. The Kid pictured them hunting for a sign that they would never find, swearing and cursing ; he laughed at the mental picture. If the Jadwins and their prisoner were found it would not be by the outfit that had ridden out of Jack-Rabbit to search for them.

The Kid pressed on.

He had forgotten all his doubts and hesitation now—forgotten that he was horning into another man's trouble that did not concern him—in his keen interest in picking up the most difficult trail he had ever followed.

He picked it up, sign by sign and inch by inch. From that point the Jadwins had been less wary and watchful, certain that they had left no sign behind that any but a magician could have followed. Two trackless miles—trackless to any but the Rio Kid—lay behind the gang, and they had felt safe. From now onward the Kid's hard task was easier. He picked up trampled sage, a burnt match, and a cigar stump—infinitesimal objects in the rolling plain, but not too infinitesimal for the eyes that found them. Where the gang had turned, at last, towards the line of the hills, the Kid turned, too ; and now he remounted Side-Kicker, and rode.

Black and barren lay the arid hills before him, and in the rugged line was a narrow opening—a dark, rocky gulch, by way of which, if the Kid's figuring was not out, the Jadwins had ridden into the hills. The Kid's eyes were not seeking sign now ; they watched the dark hills before him as he rode, and his gun was very near his hand.

He reached the dark opening at last, and rode into it—a split in high rocks, scarce six yards wide, rugged and precipitous. It wound away into the mass of the hills, and the eye could not follow its windings more than a score of yards ahead.

The Kid dismounted again.

Followed by his mustang, gun in hand, the Kid tramped up the rugged, rocky floor of the gulch. Suddenly, from the silence of the hills came a sound to his ears ; and the Kid halted, breathing hard, and listened.

It was a cry that had reached him—the cry of a man in pain. It was repeated, ringing eerily down the rocky gulch.

The Kid's eyes glittered.

He made a sign to Side-Kicker, and the mustang halted.

The Kid moved on—silently now as a panther stealing on his prey.

Again came the cry—and again. It guided the Kid, if he had needed guiding. With his gun gripped in his hand, finger on trigger, the Rio Kid crept on. And as he came round the base of a great cliff, and a startling scene burst upon his eyes, he knew that he had come to the end of the trail.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

SHARP SHOOTING!

“DOG-GONE you, hombre! You reckon you want more?”

It was a deep, gruff, savage voice.

Bill Jadwin, the leader of the outlaw gang, stared down grimly at the bound man who lay at his feet.

On either side of Rancher Sylvester knelt Sam and Mike Jadwin. The boss of the Silver Star Ranch lay helpless, bound hand and foot with raw hide ropes. His face was white and tortured. On his broad chest lay a huge mass of rugged granite, held in position by the two ruffians who knelt. Its weight almost crushed the hapless man stretched beneath it.

“You want more, dog-gone you?” growled Bill Jadwin.

A faint cry was the only answer.

The ruffian uttered an oath.

“Say, Mister Sylvester, I reckon you know where you are,” he snarled. “You're with the Jadwins. And I guess you've heard of their reputation. You reckon you can beat us to it, when we've got you by the short hairs, jest where we want you—say?”

“I guess the hombre wants some more,” chuckled Sam Jadwin. “You jest heave another rock on him.”

The rancher panted.

“You scoundrels! My outfit will get you and hang you for this.”

Bill Jadwin gave a savage laugh.

“I guess your outfit won't find us in these hills,” he said. “You had your eyes open the way we came. You sure saw the trail blanketed. You figure that any guy on the Silver Star Ranch will ever pick up sign enough to follow us home?”

The rancher groaned.

“You've got it coming to you,” snarled Bill Jadwin. “We reckoned we'd lift off'n you the wad you got at Injun Ford, selling cattle; and there was nothing to that. But we got you.”

“We sure did, feller,” chuckled Mike Jadwin.

“I guess it was ten thousand dollars,” said Bill Jadwin. “But I sure reckon it's going to touch you for twenty thousand to get clear of this, Jonas Sylvester. You get me? You got to fix up the paper fair an' square, and stay here with us, while Mike goes to collect on it. And if the dollars ain't paid on the nail, and anything happens to Mike, you want to be sorry for yourself, for you'll burn at the stake like you was with the Apaches in the Staked Plain. You get me, durn you?”

There was no mistaking the ruffian's savage earnestness. But the only reply from the rancher was a cry of pain. The heavy rock crushed him to the earth with its weight.

“Heave on another rock, Bill,” exclaimed Mike Jadwin impatiently. “The guy will sure talk turkey then.”

“Never!” panted the rancher. “You may kill me, but I will never sign the draft! You shall never touch a cent of mine!”

"I guess we'll see about that," snarled Bill Jadwin; and he grasped a heavy boulder, and placed it on top of the great mass that already crushed the hapless man.

A low moan burst from the rancher. "I guess that will do the trick," grinned Sam Jadwin. "Say, hombre, you want to have some hoss sense! I reckon your bones will sure begin to crack."

The rancher moaned again. The pain was intolerable. And the obstinate doggedness died out of his face.

"Release me!" His voice was a faint moan. "I will sign."

Bill Jadwin laughed hoarsely.

"I kinder guessed you would," he jeered. "Say, you gink, you've sure

been wasting a whole lot of time. I reckon them twenty thousand dollars is coming to us."

"Not in your lifetime," said a quiet voice.

The three ruffians spun round at the voice, with startled oaths. The boulders piled on the rancher, no longer held in position, rolled off with a crash, and the tortured man breathed again.

The three outlaws grasped their weapons as they turned, and the Rio Kid rapped out sharply:

"Put 'em up!"

In amazement and rage the Jadwin gang stared at him. Suddenly, as if he had fallen from the skies, the Rio Kid had appeared on the scene, and



"I reckon them twenty thousand dollars is coming to us," laughed Bill Jadwin. "Not in your lifetime," said a quiet voice. The three ruffians spun round at the voice to face the Rio Kid's guns. "Put 'em up!" rapped the Kid.

the Jadwins could scarcely believe their eyes as they stared at him. A gun was in either hand of the Kid as he stood scarce a dozen feet away.

The Kid smiled over the levelled barrels at their enraged faces.

"I guess you don't collect them dollars, a whole lot, fellers," he drawled. "I surely guess not. Keep them guns down, or you get what's coming to you—sudden."

"The Rio Kid!" breathed Bill Jadwin.

"I guess you're wise to me," smiled the Kid.

The bound man on the earth turned his head, gazing at the Kid.

"Help me!" he panted. "Save me—save me from these demons! I will reward you! Any reward you name!"

"Can it!" interrupted the Kid. He spoke to the rancher, but his eyes were eagle-like on the three glaring outlaws. "I guess I ain't after your dollars, Mister Sylvester."

"The Rio Kid!" repeated Bill Jadwin, his grasp convulsive on the gun he dared not raise. "You dog-goned fire-bug, what you horning into this game for? You that's wanted by a dozen sheriffs—you that's hunted by the Texas Rangers! Let up, you gink, and stand pat, I'm telling you!"

"Not by a jugful!" answered the Kid cheerily. "I guess I'm here to get that hombre away from you, feller!"

"What durn business is it of yourn?" roared Bill Jadwin. "You an outlaw, same as this gang——"

"You've said it," agreed the Kid. "I guess Texas won't let me be nothing but a pesky outlaw. And that goes. But not the same as you, Bill Jadwin, I reckon. Not in your lifetime, hombre. But I guess I didn't

hop into this outfit to chew the rag. Put up your hands!"

The three ruffians hesitated. Well they knew the shooting of the Rio Kid; and his two Colts bore full upon them. But they were three to one and hardy desperadoes and burning with rage at the thought of being robbed of their prey. A quick glance was exchanged among the three.

"Don't!" said the Kid warningly.

"I guess we'll take you into the rifle, Kid!" said Bill Jadwin hoarsely.

"Stand in with us!"

"Forget it!"

With a fierce curse Bill Jadwin lifted his gun-arm, and his brothers acted as promptly.

Crack-ack!

Both the Kid's guns roared instantly. Bill Jadwin spun over backwards with a bullet in his heart. And Sam Jadwin crumpled where he stood, and dropped, and never stirred again. Mike Jadwin's hands flew above his head, and he yelled:

"Let up, Kid! Let up!"

The Kid eyed him grimly.

"I guess you wasn't any too soon putting up them paws!" he snapped. "I reckon you can live, you dog-goned coyote! Keep 'em up!"

The Kid advanced and disarmed the ruffian, who eyed him with malevolent hate.

"Git on your cayuse, an' beat it," said the Kid briefly, when he had searched Mike for weapons. "Light out, you durn scallywag, afore I change my mind and send you after the other ginks! You get me?"

There was a crash of hoofs as Mike Jadwin threw himself on his horse and galloped down the gulch. He turned in the saddle to shake a clenched fist at the Kid, and yell out a threat at which the Kid smiled

contemptuously, and then he vanished from sight, and the galloping hoofs died away in the distance.

The Kid turned to the rancher.

A few slashes of his bowie-knife and the boss of the Silver Star was free. The Kid helped him up, and the rancher sat gasping on the rock that had so lately crushed him to the earth.

The Kid went to the two remaining tethered horses, cast one loose, and saddled the other and led it to the rancher.

"I guess you can borrow this cayuse," he said. "Say, Mister Sylvester, they'll sure be powerful anxious about you at the Silver Star, and you want to hit the trail pronto."

Sylvester rose from the boulder. His eyes were strangely on his rescuer.

"You're the Rio Kid, same as that hombre said?" he asked.

"Sure!"

"The outlaw of the Rio Grande?"

"You've said it!"

"And you've saved me from those fiends!" muttered the rancher. "Say, this sure gets my goat! They won't believe this in Jack-Rabbit!"

The Kid laughed.

"They'd sure believe you a whole lot, if you told them that the Rio Kid had held you up for your roll," he said.

"They sure would," said Sylvester. "Outlaw and fire-bug, whatever you are, you've saved me, and you've got a friend for life if you want one, Kid!"

"Forget it," said the Kid lightly. "I guess I horned into this rookus jest because I never could mind my own business, feller. Get on that cayuse, and hit the trail."

The Kid called to Side-Kicker and mounted, and rode down the gulch with the rescued rancher. They rode in silence. Far away on the alkali

plain a horseman was vanishing in the dusty distance, and the rancher cast a glance for a moment after Mike Jadwin.

"You've made a bad enemy there, Kid," he said.

The Kid shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess I've made a whole heap already, and one more won't worry me any," he answered carelessly. "This way, Mister Sylvester. I guess you'll be meeting up with your friends soon. There's an outfit from Jack-Rabbit in the chaparral, and I allow they're hunting for you."

They rode on in silence across the alkali plain towards the chaparral that bordered the Jack-Rabbit trail. On the edge of the dark green chaparral horsemen were seen, at last, moving to and fro on the plain, and the Kid grinned. The Jack-Rabbit outfit were trying to pick up the Jadwin trail in the alkali dust. But the horsemen turned their heads, and bunched together, and there was a shout as the two approaching riders were seen on the plain.

The Kid pulled in his mustang.

"I guess you hit it alone from here, Mister Sylvester," he said. "It sure would not be healthy for me to strike that bunch."

The rancher glanced at the distant horsemen now approaching them, and turned to the Kid again.

"They're my friends," he said. "Ride with me, Kid, and I'll answer for your safety."

"Not by a hatful," grinned the Kid. "Say, Mister Sylvester, them guys are hunting you, and, likewise, they're hunting a galoot who held up the Jack-Rabbit stage this morning after your wad, thinking you was aboard."

"And that was——"

"This hombre," said the Kid, laughing.

"Search me!" said the rancher, in amazement.

The Kid raised his Stetson.

"Adios, hombre!" he called out lightly; and, with a touch of the spur, Side-Kicker leaped into speed, and the Kid galloped away.

"Kid!" called out the rancher; but there was no answer, and Sylvester rode on to join his friends.

Far in the distance a little cloud of alkali dust marked the way of the Rio Kid. It died down, and the Kid was gone.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER

SHOT FOR SHOT!

A SHOT rang from the pines, and the Rio Kid set his teeth hard. It was not often that the wary Kid was caught at such a disadvantage, but in the windy, snowy passes of the Huecas he had not looked for a foe. It was bitter winter weather—in many a drift on the ranges cattle froze, and up in the rugged Huecas the snow was stacked in every arroyo and gulch and gully. Even Side-Kicker did not find easy footing, though Side-Kicker could clamber wherever a goat could clamber.

But the path the Kid was following by a barren, snowy hillside was slippery with snow. On his right the slope rose steeply to a belt of pines; on his left it fell more steeply to a deep ravine choked with snow, where a fall meant burial at the bottom of a thirty-foot drift. Slowly but surely the grey mustang trod that perilous path across the rugged hill, through a bitter wind, so bitter that even the Kid's goat-skin chaps hardly protected his legs from its bite, and his hands in his cowboy gloves were chilly.

It was going to be a hard Christmas-tide in the uplands of the cow country

—frozen death to many of the herds, to many, perhaps, of the men who herded; but up in the Huecas the grip of winter was harder and more savage than on the wind-swept ranges below.

At least, the Rio Kid told himself, the hunt for him would slacken; sheriffs and rangers would have no hunch for tracking him by frozen hillside and yawning snowdrift. In the Huecas he looked for no foe, though the hunt had been hot at his heels on the plains. But the Kid for once missed his guess, as he was suddenly apprised by the rifle-shots that rang out from the pines a hundred yards above him.

A shot, and another shot; and both too close for comfort. The Kid's glance swept up the rugged slope to the pines; but the man who pulled trigger was unseen, skulking in the cover of the gaunt trees, keeping out of the Kid's sight while he burned powder. That, no doubt, accounted for the lead whizzing by the Kid without touching him, close as it flew; the unseen marksman was more careful of his own skin than anxious to penetrate the Kid's, though the way he pitched his lead showed that he was keen enough to drop the boy outlaw from his horse.

"You durned polecat!" the Kid muttered, his eyes gleaming at the frosty trunks that hid his enemy. "You dog-goned prairie wolf! I guess if you'd show yourself a piece I'd put you wise about potting at me from them pines, you all-fired scallywag!"

But the marksman did not show himself; the keen eyes of the Kid, scanning the belt of pines high up the slope, detected no sign of him. And the Kid pushed on his way, knowing that for quite a distance he had to

ride under the fire of his enemy, powerless to escape. For no horseman could have ridden up that steep slope, slippery with snow, to the pines, to get to close quarters, and below lay only the deep-piled snow in the hollow. The Kid had to pursue his way, and to pursue it slowly, for a single false step meant death to horse and rider.

Crack! came again from the pines, and the Kid felt the sting of the bullet as it tore through his Stetson hat. It grazed his forehead, and a tiny trickle of blood ran down under the Kid's thick hair. It was the third shot, and it had gone closer than the others. The Kid bitterly figured that the unseen gink was getting the range fine. And it needed long minutes for the Kid to pass out of range of the pines, and for every second of those long minutes he was under fire. The Kid reckoned that it was all Texas to a Mexican dollar that he would be all shot up before he could wind round the hill and get out of range.

The Kid's eyes gleamed under his knitted brows; his teeth were clenched with rage.

Crack!

The Rio Kid pitched suddenly off Side-Kicker, and crumpled into the snow.

There was a yell in the pines above—a yell of triumph. From the shadows of the gloomy trees a man leaped, rifle in hand. It was Mike Jadwin.

Bang!

It was the roar of a Colt, and this time it came from the boy outlaw who was crumpled in the snow beside his pawing mustang.

The rifle dropped from Mike Jadwin's hands, and he staggered back to the pines, yelling.

The Kid was on his feet the next second.

His ruse had succeeded; he had drawn his enemy from cover, and his gun was levelled to send his second shot through the heart of the bushwhacker.

But a desperate leap back into the trees saved Jadwin.

The Kid's shot missed him by a fraction of an inch as he disappeared into the pines.

He was wounded—there was blood on his face, spots of crimson on the snow, but his yell of rage showed that he lived. Twice again the Kid fired, sending his lead whistling into the pines. But no answering shot came. The bushwhacker's rifle lay where he had dropped it, and at a distance a six-gun was of little use in any hand but the Kid's.

The Kid holstered his revolver, remounted his grey mustang, and pushed on his way.

He was smiling now—a grim smile.

Mike Jadwin had regained the cover of the pines, wounded; and the Kid figured that a wounded man had little chance of pulling out in the bitter wintry waste of the Huecas.

A few minutes more, and the Kid had passed round a bend of the hillside, and the dangerous path was behind him. From the man in the pines came no sound or shot as he went. He was done with Mike Jadwin.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER

THE TRAIL IN THE SNOW!

“OH, shucks!” said the Kid.

Grey dawn was creeping over the sierra.

The Kid had camped for the night in a place he knew, high up in the Huecas—a cave in a lonely canyon that had afforded him refuge before, when sheriffs and their men had been hard on his traces.

Rolled in his blankets and slicker,

the Kid had slept, without waking till dawn crept over the Huecas.

Now he was standing at the mouth of the cave, looking out on a world of white.

But almost the first glance that he took as he looked out from the cave mouth showed him something that brought a startled exclamation to his lips.

It was a track in the snow.

High up in the Huecas, the Kid reckoned that there would be no man but himself to leave a trail.

He stared at the footprints.

If there were any galoot but himself in those lonely passes, he reckoned that it must be some puncher from the ranges, who had lost his way in search of stray cattle. If that was it, the puncher had lost his horse also, for the trail that ran past the cave in the snow was left by cowboy riding-boots.

"Shucks!" repeated the Kid.

He stepped out and bent over the trail to examine it. The thought of Mike Jadwin came into his mind for a moment. But he was long miles from the pine wood where the bushwhacker had fallen under his bullet—what was left of the last of the Jadwin gang, he reckoned, was only bones gnawed by the hungry coyotes of the sierra.

The snow had ceased to fall towards morning. It lay thick and velvety as far as the eye could reach. It was since the cessation of the snowfall that an unknown man had passed along the canyon; or the tracks would have been covered up.

An hour ago, the Kid reckoned, the galoot had passed, leaving a trail in the snow, winding away into the rocky wilderness.

The Kid stood with a thoughtful brow.

Somewhere in the hills amid the

snowdrifts, was the man who had tramped by on foot in the night; passing the cave, without knowing anyone was there—passing by the help that he needed.

For, outlaw as the Rio Kid was, he was the galoot to help any man—especially a cowman—who was down on his luck; and cheerfully would he have shared his blankets and his grub with a puncher lost in the snow-waste.

"Oh, shucks!" growled the Kid, for the third time.

He stood where he was, gazing thoughtfully and frowningly at the tell-tale prints of the man who was lost in the snowy waste, whose staggering footsteps were leading him only to death in a snowdrift.

The Kid was not thinking of a camp-fire now, or of breakfast. More likely than not that sinking wanderer in the snow had already sunk down to die; but if there was a chance of saving him every minute was worth a fortune. More likely than not it would be a dead man, frozen stiff, that the Kid would find at the end of the trail, if he followed it; but there was a chance that he would find a living man, and that chance was enough to make the Kid forget his own business and horn into another guy's. He chewed cold, hard bacon by way of breakfast as he followed the trail in the snow, the grey mustang following at his heels.

The trail was more than easy to follow.

Deep in the velvety snow the tracks had sunk, and again and again the Kid came on signs where the wretched man had fallen and dragged himself up again.

Once the trail led him by the very edge of a precipice, where the tottering man, in the darkness, had passed within a foot of death. But the



Facing page 80

THE RIO KID'S GOOD TURN!

Specially painted by Savile Lumley

This fine colour plate shows the Rio Kid, a hunted Outlaw, risking his own freedom to succour a helpless enemy.

wanderer, unseeing, had passed in safety, for the trail led on and on into the blinding wastes.

The Kid reckoned that he was gaining on the man fast, even if the wanderer was still pursuing his tottering way. And then suddenly the trail ended.

The Kid halted.

The trail ended on the verge of a cliff, and beyond lay a deep hollow where the snow lay piled in a drift.

The sudden end of the footprints told its own tale.

In the darkness the wretched wanderer had staggered blindly over the edge of the cliff, and fallen into the chasm beyond, and there were no signs that he had climbed out—indeed, climbing out would have been impossible, even for a man in his full strength.

The Kid whistled softly.

It was the end of the trail—an end that might have been expected—indeed, the end the Kid had looked for.

The boy outlaw of the Rio Grande dropped on hands and knees, and crawled to the edge of the cliff.

It was neither easy nor safe to approach the verge, down a steep cliff that was almost like a wall.

Forty feet below was the snowdrift in the hollow. The snow was deep—how deep the Kid could not tell.

Into it the wanderer had fallen, and there he still lay—the Kid knew that. Frozen to death long ago.

The Kid caught his breath.

Deep in the snow at the bottom of the cliff something stirred.

The Kid's keen eyes picked out a dark object that lay there in the snow—the figure of a man, half-buried in the hollow that had been made by his fall.

But the man had not been frozen

to death—not yet, at all events. For he was stirring.

A gleam of the sun, through a rift in heavy clouds, fell like an arrow into the arroyo below the cliff. It gleamed on a white, hard, stubbly face that was turned upward—a face on which blood had frozen—a face that the Rio Kid knew.

“Sho!” said the Kid.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER

IN PERIL OF HIS LIFE

“CARRY me home to die!” murmured the Rio Kid.

It was Mike Jadwin who lay in the snowdrift forty feet below. It was the last of the Jadwin gang—it was the bushwhacker who had fired on the Kid from the pines, savagely and ruthlessly seeking his life.

Wounded, weak, sinking from loss of blood, the desperado had struggled to escape from the snowy wilderness into which hatred and revenge had led him. He had lost his horse—fallen from it, as likely as not—and, on foot, he had covered many weary miles in snow and darkness—to fall, at last, over the cliff into the snowy arroyo, and find a grave there.

The Kid's face hardened.

It was not some lost cowpuncher who had left that trail in the snow. It was Mike Jadwin, thief, outlaw, bushwhacker, assassin. Let him lie where he had fallen.

He turned away from the giddy verge, and crawled back, and stepped to the grey mustang who stood waiting.

“I guess, old hoss, that it's us for the trail,” said the Rio Kid; and he threw the reins over his arm and led the mustang away.

From the icy silence behind him came a cry.

It was a faint cry, inarticulate; but

it told that the man who lay half-buried in the snowdrift was conscious, that he knew that another human being was at hand in that frozen solitude.

The Kid halted.

The cry was not repeated. It seemed as if all the remaining strength of the wretch had been expended in that one effort.

The Kid moved on again.

It was a savage-hearted ruffian, a wretch whose hands were stained with blood, who lay at the bottom of the cliff. A scallywag whose life was not worth saving, if the Kid could save it ; and only at the imminent risk of his own life could he save the man who had sought to kill him, who would seek again to kill him, given the chance.

But the Kid turned back.

He took the coiled riata from his saddle, and approached the verge of the cliff again.

Crawling to the edge, he looked down.

Deep in the hollow that the force of his fall had driven in the snow, lay Jadwin, but he did not stir now. He was unconscious. The Kid looked long and hard at the savage, bearded face.

Then, coolly and quietly, he secured the end of the riata to the horn of his saddle, and threw the slack of the rope over the cliff.

The mustang, well away from the verge, planted his forefeet firmly to stand the strain, knowing what was required. The Kid patted Side-Kicker's neck.

"Stand to it, old hoss," he muttered.

Taking hold of the rope, The Rio Kid crept over the verge of the cliff. The mustang watched him with intelligent eyes as he slid over the dizzy verge.

Down below, the end of the forty-

foot rope was straggling in the snow beside the senseless bushwhacker.

The Kid did not look down.

Hand below hand he swung himself down the stout rope. It stood the weight easily enough ; it was built to stand the strain of the wrench when a careering bull was suddenly roped and brought to a standstill. And the mustang, trained to stand firm when the rope gathered in a charging steer, stood firm now, and the trailing rope over the precipice gave hardly an inch.

Hand below hand the Kid swung in dizzy space. The face of the cliff hollowed out as it descended ; there was no foothold for the Kid, nothing that his feet could touch. He swung in space, lowering himself into the windswept arroyo, swinging to and fro in the bitter wind.

Slowly but surely the Kid went down, till his riding boots touched the snow of the drift, and he stood, sinking in snow till it was up to his belt. Under it he felt firm footing, some ledge of rock from the cliff that jutted out into the arroyo. It was upon this that the falling bushwhacker had landed, and it had saved him from plunging to certain death in thirty feet of snow that was banked in the chasm.

There was no movement from Mike Jadwin ; his eyes were closed, he seemed scarcely to be breathing. The blood was clotted over the gash that the Rio Kid's bullet had left above his ear. Half an inch nearer, and Mike Jadwin would never have stirred after it touched him.

The Kid stooped by his side, then started and felt his heart throb. He was on the very edge of the rocky ledge that supported the fallen bushwhacker. For a second his foot had gone over space—space filled with

snow that was ready to swallow him and hide him from all eyes.

"Gee!" murmured the Kid.

Very carefully the Kid felt his way on the snowy ledge. Bending over the insensible bushwhacker, he wound the end of the lasso round him, under his shoulders and knotted it fast.

Jadwin did not stir.

But as the Kid rose from his task the

"The Kid!" repeated Jadwin. "The Rio Kid! Dog-gone you, you durned firebug, you've got me now—got me dead to rights!" He made a feeble motion to his belt, and his nerveless fingers groped on the butt of a six-gun.

The Kid kicked the gun from his hand and tossed it into the snow in the abyss.

From the shadows of the gloomy trees a man leaped, rifle in hand. It was Mike Jadwin. Bang! Next moment there was the roar of the Colt held in the Rio Kid's steady hand, and Jadwin staggered back yelling.



ruffian's eyes opened, and he cast a wild glance round him and stared up dazedly at the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. The Kid looked down at him grimly, and slowly recognition dawned in the eyes of Jadwin. Recognition—and fear—fear that made his eyes dilate and his faint breath come with a sob.

"The Kid!" he muttered huskily.

"Right in once!" said the Kid.

"I guess you won't be wanting your hardware, Mike!" he grinned. "Can it! You figure that I'm here for your scalp? Forget it!"

He turned away from the ruffian. Jadwin made an effort to rise, and sank helplessly back.

That he expected death—ruthless death—at the hands of the man he had trailed and sought to kill was evident in his looks. Why the Kid

turned from him without driving a bullet through his heart the ruffian could not guess. Neither could he understand, as the Kid went up the rope, hand over hand, swinging himself up the face of the steep precipice. Jadwin watched him, with half-closed eyes, dizzily, uncomprehendingly.

Hand above hand the Kid went, climbing steadily. The strain on his arms was heavy, and once his hands slipped and the Kid hung on, resting, his breath coming quick and fast. Then he climbed again, with set teeth, all his strength in the effort.

High over him, on the rugged rock, the grey mustang stood fast, never yielding to the tug of the rope. Higher and higher rose the Kid, till he was at the top of the precipice, and clambered over, and sank down in the snow, with aching limbs, breathing in deep gasps. For long, long minutes he had swung over a terrible death; but he had made the grade at last, and now he lay in the snow, gasping for breath, waiting for his strength to revive.

But he did not rest long. Still breathing hard and deep, the Kid rose to his feet and moved over to the grey mustang. To pull the bulky ruffian up the cliff would probably have been beyond the Kid's strength, sturdy as the boy outlaw was; but Side-Kicker was there to help.

"I guess you want to hump it, old hoss!" murmured the Kid. "You sure got to pull that firebug up, old cayuse."

He headed the mustang away from the cliff and set him in motion. The rope tautened, and the half-conscious ruffian below felt the drag of it.

Mike Jadwin gave a faint cry as he felt himself dragged up.

"Hump it, old hoss!" murmured the Kid.

The grey mustang moved on steadily, dragging the tautened riata after him.

The Kid, on hands and knees, moved back to the edge of the precipice.

Lying there on his face, he grasped the rope, and gave a tug, to ease the strain on the mustang. But Side-Kicker was more than equal to the strain; slowly and steadily he moved on away from the cliff, dragging on the rope; slowly and steadily the burly ruffian swung up from the snowy ledge below, and swung at last clear of the snow.

The Kid looked down.

As the rope slid past him, dragged by the steady pull of the mustang, Mike Jadwin rose nearer and nearer, closer and closer to the dizzy edge of the precipice where the Kid lay. Steadily he came up, till he was pulled on to the cliff.

"Whoa, Side-Kicker!"

The grey mustang ceased to pull.

Jadwin lay sprawling on the snowy summit of the cliff. The Kid lay beside him for some minutes, exhausted with his efforts.

He staggered to his feet at last.

He released Jadwin from the riata, coiled it, and hung it on the saddle of the grey mustang; then he lifted the bushwhacker to his feet.

"I guess you got to hit the trail pronto, Mike," he said pleasantly.

Only a dull, uncomprehending stare replied. The Kid half led, half carried the burly ruffian to the horse and lifted him to Side-Kicker's back. Mike Jadwin sagged in the saddle.

He could not have sat the horse without the Kid's aid. But the Kid was there to help him; his strong hand held the bushwhacker on the mustang's back as Side-Kicker moved away.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER

THE END OF A FEUD!

A RUDDY gleam of flame lighted the shadows of the cave in the Huecas.

The camp-fire, fed with pine-cones and broken branches, burned steadily, and cast a radius of warmth and light.

Outside the cave the setting sun glimmered on sheets of snow. The Huecas were deep under a snowy pall.

On the blankets by the fire Mike Jadwin lay.

He was alone in the cave.

But he knew that he was not to be left alone. The Kid would return. Every time he had left the cave he had returned again, and Jadwin knew that he would come.

For three days Jadwin had been in the cave under the Kid's care. He had been very near death when the Kid had saved him from the snow-drift in the arroyo, but care and warmth and food had brought him round. The Kid had rescued him in time; the bushwhacker was on the way to recovery now. He was able to sit a horse—if he had had a horse to sit—and on a horse he could have escaped from that dreary waste of frost and snow and ice and frozen



Mike Jadwin, his eyes burning at the motionless form of the Rio Kid, crept closer. One fierce blow and the Kid would never wake again. The Jadwin gang would be avenged. The hand that held the jagged lump of rock was raised

rock. On foot it was very doubtful.

He was thinking of that as he lay by the fire.

What the Kid's game was the ruffian could not understand.

But what he could understand was that the Kid's horse would carry him to safety if he could lift Side-Kicker; and that, although the Kid had disarmed him, there might be other ways of getting at the boy outlaw and turning the tables on him.

And now, as he lay by the ruddy camp-fire waiting for the Kid to return, Mike Jadwin held in his hand, hidden from sight under a corner of the blanket, a jagged lump of rock. He had pondered and planned and schemed while he lay in the Kid's blankets in the Kid's camp, and that was the outcome. The desperado was waiting and watching for his chance.

There was a trampling of hoofs in the snow without, a jingle of harness ; the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande was returning at last.

A burning glitter came into the sunken eyes of the man who lay by the fire.

The dim daylight at the entrance of the cave was darkened by the handsome figure of the Rio Kid. He led Side-Kicker into the cave ; and, to the bushwhacker's surprise, another horse followed at the end of a trail-rope.

The Kid glanced at the bushwhacker and nodded.

"Feelin' fine?" he asked cheerily.

"I guess I'm mending," muttered Mike Jadwin.

"You sure are mending," said the Kid. "I reckon you'll be able to hit the trail in the morning, feller. Say, I've rustled you a cayuse."

Jadwin stared at the horse.

"That's my critter," he said.

"Sure!" said the Kid, smiling. "I figured that he would be loose in the Huecas, and I've sure been trailing him some. I guess I've had a long pasear hunting that cayuse, Mike ; but I got him at last and roped him in."

The Kid led the horses into the cave and fed them. The bushwhacker lying in the blankets watched him in silence. His grasp was hard on the hidden lump of rock. If his chance came——

The Kid came towards the camp-fire.

Mike Jadwin's eyes gleamed strangely in the firelight. The Kid sat carelessly on a boulder within a few feet of him.

"Say, feller, I reckon you're mended enough to hit the trail at dawn," he said. "We're sure getting to the end of the fodder hyer ; the cayuses have finished up their feed, and the grub's running short for us. Now you've got a hoss, I guess you will be able to make the grade, say?"

"I reckon!" muttered Jadwin.

The Kid made supper for two, and they ate, while the darkness fell on the Huecas and deepened outside the lonely cave. From the heights above a bitter wind blew, laden with snowflakes. It was a black and bitter night on the sierra, but within the cave there was ruddy light and warmth.

The Kid mended the fire with pine-wood, banking it up for the night, and yawned.

"I guess I'll be turning in," he remarked.

"You've fixed me up in your blankets," muttered Jadwin.

"I guess the slicker's enough for me."

"You letting me go in the morning?"

The Kid looked round at him.

"Sure!" he answered.

"What's your game, Kid?" muttered the ruffian. "You shot up the gang at Jack-Rabbit, and I was trailing you for your life. You ain't letting me light out arter that? What's your game? There's a reward out for me at Jack-Rabbit. You figure on handling it?"

"You durned pesky bonehead!" answered the Kid. "Forget it!"

"Then what's your game?" snarled the bushwhacker. "I guess I ain't wise to it. You've saved my life, and you've got back my hoss for me. And you tell me I can hit the trail?"

"Sure!"

"And why?" snarled Jadwin.

The Kid laughed.

"You can search me," he answered. "You're a bad man from the toes up, Mike, and I reckon your life wasn't worth saving; and I sure don't know but you'll be gunning after me agin if you get a dog's chance. I don't rightly know why I don't put a bullet through your cabeza, like you deserve, you pesky fire-bug; but I guess I was always a dog-goned gink, and you can put it down to that if you want.

"It's Christmas," said the Kid, reflectively, "and mebbe that helps. Anyhow, you ain't going to leave your bones in the Huecas—and that's a cinch."

And the Kid, rolled in his slicker, settled down with his feet to the fire.

For a long time there was silence. The cave was deeply dusky, the fire dulled by the wood the Kid had banked on it. Only every now and then came a flicker, dancing on the rocky walls and for a moment illuminating the dusky hollows.

Jadwin stirred at last. Slowly he raised himself from the blankets.

He was standing now, the jagged rock in his hand. His chance had come, and the ruffian's eyes burned at the motionless form of the Kid stretched by the fire.

He crept closer.

One fierce blow, and the Kid would never wake again. The bitter feud would be ended, the Jadwin gang avenged!

The sinewy hand that held the jagged lump of rock was raised—

It was lowered again.

He could not do it! The murderous hand was lowered. The ruffian crept back to his blankets.

A soft voice drawled in the silence.

"Say, feller, I reckon that was your best guess."

Jadwin started violently.

The Kid was not asleep!

He sat up in the folds of the slicker, and the firelight caught the gleam of a gun. It caught also the Kid's smiling eyes as he looked at the scared face of the bushwhacker.

"Why, you bonehead," said the Kid, "I was awake and watching you; and if you'd tried to cave in my cabeza with that rock, I guess I'd have drilled you so sudden you'd never have known what hit you till you woke up on the other side of Jordan!"

Then he laughed.

"Say, Mike, you're sure a bad man, but you ain't so pesky bad as you allow! Go to sleep, hombre, and dream of a Merry Christmas!"

There was silence in the cave.

Under the wintry glimmer of the morning sun two horsemen rode by snowy paths in the Huecas. From the cave they took different trails—Mike Jadwin to the east, and the Rio Kid to the west. They parted in silence; but at a little distance the Kid turned his head and found that Mike Jadwin was also looking back.

The Kid smiled and waved his hand.

"Merry Christmas, feller!" he shouted.

And Jadwin, his grim, stubbly face breaking into an unaccustomed grin, waved back and shouted, too.

"Good-bye, Kid! And a Merry Christmas to you!"

And they rode their different ways.

THE END