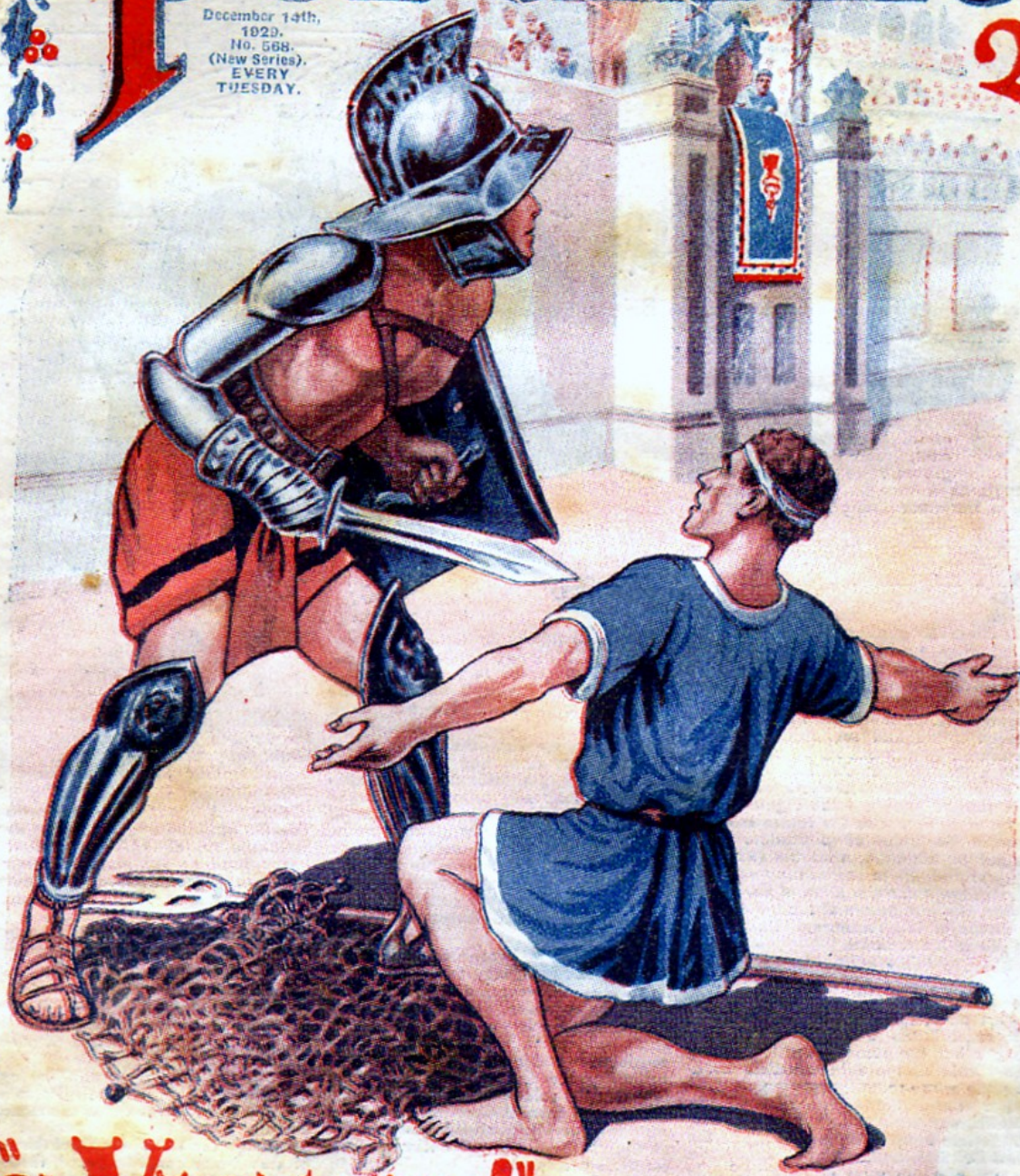


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CHRISTMAS IN THE WEST WITH THE RIO KID, OUTLAW!

# THE TRAIL IN THE SNOW!



It is not the first time the Rio Kid, outlaw, has saved an enemy at the risk of his own life!

## THE FIRST CHAPTER. Shot for Shot!

**A** NOTHER 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 the grey mustang, 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!"

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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 retort, and 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

By  
**RALPH REDWAY.**

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 the fire.

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

Many enemies the Kid had, and he looked for gun-play if he met up with any of them. But this was not the kind of gun-play that he looked for. Potting at a guy from cover while he was following a difficult and dangerous trail that slowed down his horse and made him an easy mark—that was not what the Kid looked for from sheriff or ranger. It was no sheriff's man, no Texas Ranger, who was burning powder in the pines, the Kid reckoned; it was some private enemy, some roughneck or gunman who had a bitter grouch against him. Heap plenty of scallywags, roughnecks, and bushwhackers had fallen foul of the Kid, and this was one of them, he figured, who had got him where he wanted him, in the lonely passes of the Hueca sierra.

His eyes gleamed with rage, all the more because of his helplessness to retaliate.

He had released a gun from a holster, and he glanced up again at the dark pines crowning the hillside.

But the bushwhacker was still in cautious cover. Evidently he was a man who knew the Kid well, and knew well that a single glimpse of him would have been enough for the most unerring shot in Texas. Only a glimpse the Kid wanted—the merest glimpse. But he did not get it.

He pushed on—slowly! Side-Kicker was a good cayuse, sure-footed as a mountain goat; but the path was sloping, slippery, perilous; hurry meant a fall into the snowdrift below.

Crack!  
Had the man above stepped out of the pines and taken deliberate aim nothing could have saved the Kid. But he hugged cover as he potted at the boy outlaw, and it spoiled his shooting. But the fourth bullet clipped a lock of hair away from the Kid's head, and he did not reckon that it would last much longer. And as the bullet whizzed by so close, and the report followed it, booming among the frosty pines, 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.

He stood in full view, and the Kid knew him. The Rio Kid had wiped out the Jadwin gang at Jack-Rabbit—except Mike Jadwin. It was the last of the Jadwin gang who had tracked him in the Huecas. Standing in the open, the bushwhacker clapped the butt of the rifle to his shoulder, taking deliberate aim, to riddle the fallen outlaw with bullets before he ventured to approach him.

Bang!

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

Mike Jadwin did not pull trigger.

The rifle dropped from his 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 the distance a six-gun was of little use in any hand but the Kid's.

The Kid holstered his revolver, remounted the 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.

"I guess, old hoss," said the Kid cheerily to the grey mustang, "I kinder guess that that guy has got his—and if the coyotes of the Huecas don't get him, I shall sure be surprised, old hoss."

And the Rio Kid rode cheerily on his way.

## THE SECOND 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 cave 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.

The Kid's idea was to gather pinecones, and renew his camp-fire in the cave, and cook his beans and bacon and boil his coffee before he saddled up to hit the trail. The Kid did not intend to linger in the Huecas—the Kid had his own plans for that Christmas-tide, and it was not a lonely Christmas in the sierra that he planned.

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 was 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. And that the man who had left that lonely trail was in need of help would have been plain to a less searching eye than the Kid's. The footprints were irregular—it was the track of a man who had sometimes tottered, sometimes halted—and in one place was unmistakable sign where he had fallen on his knees and dragged himself up again to stagger on his way.

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

The Kid had no time to waste if he was to carry out the plans he had laid for that Christmas. He had ridden into the tractless waste of the Huecas to throw pursuit off his trail; and he was satisfied that he had succeeded. It was the Sun-Dance ranch, on the western side of the sierra for which the Kid was bound—where, if his plans did not miscarry, he was to be an unexpected guest that Christmas. But the Kid 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 sighed.

"You gink!" he said to himself. "You're an ornery guy that can't mind his own business—you sure must horn into another galoot's troubles, as if you ain't got a whole heap of your own. You dog-goned geek, ain't you aiming to get out of the Huecas jest as fast as hossflesh can go, and have you got time to go trailing some pesky bone-head that's lost himself in the snow? You sure ain't!"

The Kid shook his head.

"You ain't got the time and you ain't got the inclination, and all the same that's jest what you're going to do, you pesky mutt!" he told himself.

A pale gleam of wintry sunshine came through the dark clouds banked over the Huecas. The Kid blinked in the dazzling reflection from the carpet of snow.

"Say, old hoss!" he called; and the grey mustang came from the cave at his call.

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 sign 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 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.

Twenty 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 THIRD CHAPTER.

In Peril of His Life!

"CARRY me home to die!" murmured the Rio Kid.

It was Mike Jadwin who lay in the snowdrift twenty 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 to 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.

(Continued on opposite page.)

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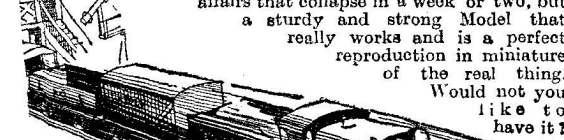
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Hand below hand he swung himself down the stout rope. It stood the weight easily enough; it was built to stand the strain of the wrench when a careering bull was suddenly roped and brought to a standstill. And the mustang, trained to stand firm when 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, and 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 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.

"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.

"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 raised the lump of rock high over the head of the outlaw who had saved his life. One fierce blow and the Rio Kid would never wake again!

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 FOURTH 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 pinecones 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 snowdrift 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 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. He did not know why the boy outlaw had risked his life to drag him from the snowdrift; why he had brought him to the cave and tended him like a brother.

He had a blood-feud with the Kid. The last of the Jadwin gang had trailed the Kid like a bloodhound to kill him. And the Kid knew it; he had not been left in any doubt about that. Yet he had taken the risk of death to drag the ruffian from the drift in the arroyo; he had tended him in the cave with unflinching care. The dull, savage brain of the outcast could not understand it.

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

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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 the end of a trail-rop.

The Kid glanced at the bushwhacker and nodded.

"Feel'n 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 pascar 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, and there was silence.

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 illumining the dusky hollows.

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

He was kneeling at last, 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.

The Kid had saved his life, risked his own to save it; the Kid was letting him—an enemy—go free, after tending him while he lay helpless. It was Christmas-tide, the Kid had said; and in the savage mind of the bushwhacker there lingered some memory of far-off boyhood, of Christmas and its associations. Strangely enough, a long-forgotten phrase came into his mind, old words, half remembered—"Peace on earth, good will to men—"

The hand that held the murderous rock trembled. He could not strike.

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, startled 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 donick, 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, and their eyes met.

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.

(Where does the Rio Kid spend his Christmas? See next week's quick-moving yarn of the West entitled: "TRAPPING THE KID!")