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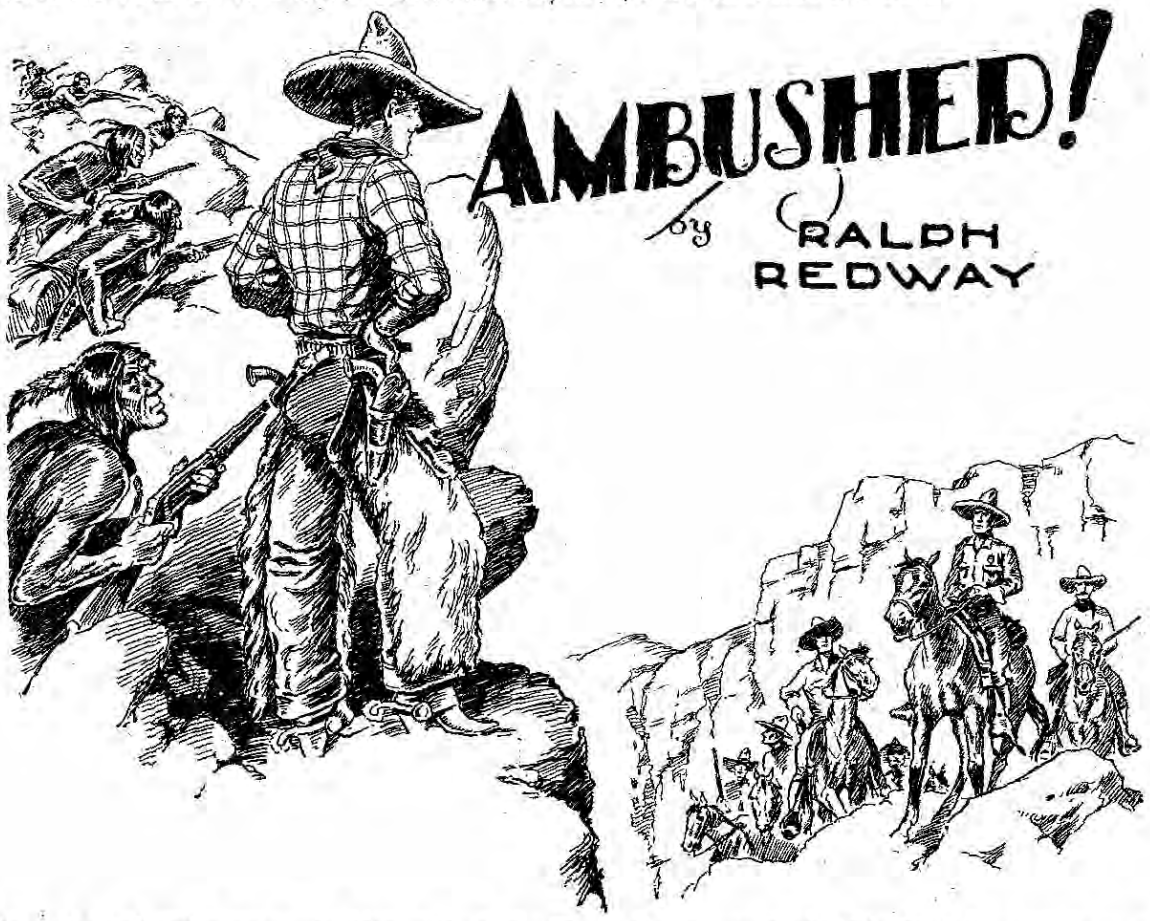
COOL AS A CUCUMBER IN THE FACE OF DEATH!

See this week's Rousing Tale of the RIO KID, boy outlaw!

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

AMBUSHED!

by RALPH REDWAY



By ravine and rocky canyon, in blazing heat, the Texas Rangers trail the Rio Kid, drawing closer and closer to the fugitive boy outlaw. But the Kid's a bad man to crowd—which the Rangers find out when they are led into an ambush of Redskins!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Hunted!

THE Rio Kid rode into the Mal Pais for many reasons, all of them good; but with a clouded brow and a discontented heart.

It was an uninviting region of rock and pine and scrubby thicket, with black barrancas and stony arroyos, waterless for the most part; haunted in its savage recesses by the coyote and the cougar and the rattlesnake—fully deserving its name of the "evil country."

But the Kid had little choice.

He was trailing with Chief Many Ponies, the outcast Apache, and it was in the Mal Pais that the dingy remnant of the Apache tribe had their headquarters, out of reach of the Rangers who would have rounded them up into the reservation. And in the Mal Pais, uninviting as the "Evil Country" was, there was at least security. And the hunt was hot now at the heels of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

The Kid had sojourned long across the border, in Mexico; and he had figured that when he came back to his own country he would find himself, if not forgotten, at least overlooked, and left to ride his own trail in peace. But he had found his memory green, on the banks of the Rio Grande.

The name and fame of the Rio Kid

were not likely to be forgotten; and the news had spread from ranch to ranch, from cow-town to cow-town, that the Kid was on the trail again. And the Kid, who hated trouble, though it so often came his way, and who would willingly have harmed no man, found himself hunted with even more than the old zest.

He had narrowly escaped the sheriff's posse from Blue Pine, before he had been three days back in Texas; and to the very edge of the Mal Pais he had been hunted by the Texas Rangers.

Since it was known that the Kid was in his own country again, every hold-up and shooting within a radius of two hundred miles was laid to his charge, as of old.

It was sufficient for the doer to be unknown, for the deed to be laid to the Kid. His name had become a legend along the Rio Grande and the Pecos; he was like Ishmael of old—his hand against every man, and every man's hand against him!

There were men who knew the Kid better—the old bunch on the Double-Bar Ranch in the Frio country never believed the worst of him. But they were few. The Kid's reputation was a desperate one, from the Staked Plain to the shores of the Mexican Gulf; and his good deeds, which were many, were unknown or forgotten, while his wild ways were the talk of every cow-town, and topic at every round-up and rodeo.

At Trail End, on the edge of the Mal Pais, the Kid had ridden into the town to buy cartridges. He had bought them and paid for them at the store, like any other puncher, and might have cantered out of the town unnoticed. But on the wall of the store was a notice, setting forth that a reward of a thousand dollars was offered for the Rio Kid.

The Kid could not resist the temptation to spatter it with bullets, and he found it entertaining to blot out the print with a shower of lead, under the staring eyes of a gathering crowd.

The alarm went up immediately that the Rio Kid was shooting up the town; there was a rush for horses and guns, and only the speed of Side-Kicker saved the Kid from paying dearly for his reckless entertainment.

After which, the Kid rode into the Mal Pais with Chief Many Ponies, realising that it would be healthy for him to lie doggo for a time.

Under a blazing sun the Kid rode along the bottom of a wide canyon, Chief Many Ponies at his side on a broncho. Where the chief had obtained that cayuse, the Kid thought it better not to ask. Chief Many Ponies had been afoot when the Kid fell in with him; now he was mounted, and it was

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a cinch that he had not bought the horse. It had come into his possession while the Kid was "shooting up" Trail End.

The Kid, like every other cow-puncher, hated a horse-thief like poison. But Chief Many Ponies had been a good friend to him, and at the present time was the only friend he had; and he reflected rather bitterly that a hunted outlaw could not afford to be too particular.

The outcast Apache was a horse-thief, and a cow-thief, and every other kind of thief, so far as the white men were concerned. He would have died before he would have robbed one of his own race.

The Kid could see the distinction, and the excuse for the chief, who looked on all the goods of the palefaces as the just plunder of war. But to ride in cahoots with a Redskin, to whom all other white men were foes, was bitter enough to the Kid, especially with the Redskin riding a stolen horse. But it was the Mal Pais and the den of the outcast Apache, or the steel handcuffs that Captain Hall of the Rangers had ready for him—and the Kid's choice was made.

But the Kid's handsome, sunburnt face was clouded under the shadow of his Stetson hat. He would have liked nothing better than to ride back to the Frio country and punch cows. But the Frio country was closed to him; and punching cows on a peaceful ranch was finished for the Kid.

Even in the Mal Pais he knew that he would have to be wary. On the edge of that barren, pathless tract the most determined sheriff was accustomed to turn back and give up the trail. But the Kid was not dealing with a sheriff's posse now. The men on his trail were a bunch of Rangers, men who cared nothing for hardship and danger, nothing for the reward on the Kid's head; nothing for any consideration but getting their man.

The Kid knew that they would follow him into the Evil Country, and his eyes glinted and his brows darkened at the thought. Amid those wild rocks and canyons and tangled pines the Kid had no fear even of a score of determined Rangers. In the Mal Pais he could hit back; and it was in the Kid's mind to hit back, and hit hard. They were after him for his scalp. If they lost their own in that rocky wilderness it was their own funeral.

The Kid, as his keen ear caught the ring of a distant hoof, and knew that pursuers were close behind, said to himself grimly that they might ride into the Mal Pais but that they should not find it so easy to ride out again. The Kid had resolved to turn on his hunters, and for once to live up to the desperate reputation that all Texas had given him. If twenty Texas Rangers vanished from the knowledge of men, on the trail of the Rio Kid, it would put the whole country wise to it that the Kid was a bad man to crowd.

At the distant echo of a ringing hoof on rock, Chief Many Ponies glanced at the Kid, with a glitter in his black eyes.

"Ugh!" he grunted. "Paleface follow!"

The Kid made a grimace. He hated to hear the Redskin speak of the Rangers as palefaces—as if Many Ponies counted him, the Kid, as a Redskin—and that made the Kid more savagely exasperated against the hunters who were driving him into the recesses of the Mal Pais, into the dingy tepees of the thief-Apaches who skulked there.

He glanced back, his hand dropping to the walnut butt of a gun.

Chief Many Ponies drew in his stolen broncho, and touched his finger to his lips. The Kid relinquished the gun.

"It's your say-so, chief!" he muttered. "This is your country. What's the game?"

With a sign the Indian told him, without words. Chief Many Ponies was a man of few words.

The two horsemen dismounted and led their mounts into the cover of a mass of boulders. Leaving the animals there, they crept back, and from the cover of the rocks watched the open canyon.

Again came the ring of a hoof, closer now. A horseman was following the canyon, no doubt a scout of the Rangers, and there was still less doubt that he did not know how close he was upon the hunted outlaw.

The Indian listened, and held up one finger, and the Kid nodded. Only one man was coming—a detached scout looking for sign. In the black eyes of the Indian there was a glare of ferocity. His bronze hand touched the knife in his girdle.

The Kid set his teeth. The Ranger scout, if he found sign in the canyon, would not carry the news of it back to his comrades.

The hoof-beats ceased. The Kid, peering from cover, saw the Ranger dismounted, scanning the ground for sign. There was little sign to be picked up on the hard, stony, sun baked earth; but the Ranger's eyes were keen. He walked his horse forward, still scanning the ground, occasionally shooting a sharp, searching glance round him at the walls of rugged rock and belts of scraggy pine. But keen as his eyes were, he did not see the Kid and the Apache.

Leading his horse, he came on slowly, scanning for sign, till he was passing the heap of boulders, within six feet of where a white man and a Red crouched out of sight.

The spring of a hungry jaguar was not so sudden as the spring of Chief Many Ponies. It seemed in the same instant that he was crouching at the Kid's side, and that he was upon the Texas Ranger, bearing him to the ground, so suddenly and swiftly that he had no chance to draw a weapon.

The Ranger crashed down, the Indian above him. The man's face went white as he glared up at a coppery visage with blazing eyes, and a knife thrown up, to be buried to the hilt in his throat.

The Rio Kid looked on with stony eyes.

The Ranger was his enemy, hunting him to death. He was a white man, about to die under the knife of a Redskin. The savage resolve of the Rio Kid melted away in that instant. Swift as Many Ponies himself the Kid leaped forward, caught the descending arm, and arrested the stroke even as it reached the throat of the fallen man.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Kid's Warning!

CHIEF MANY PONIES gave a grunt of surprise and rage.

He tore his arm free of the Kid's grip, his black eyes ablaze, and threw up the knife again for a blow at the fallen Ranger. But the Kid shoved him back with such force that the Redskin reeled and fell against the boulders.

The next instant the Kid's riding-boot kicked at the revolver the Ranger in the same second had grabbed from his belt. The gun went flying from the Ranger's hand, exploding as it fell, the bullet whistling away across the rocky canyon.

A six-gun in the Kid's grip looked the Ranger full in his bronzed face.

"Let up on that!" snapped the Kid.

Chief Many Ponies, grunting, righted himself and stood looking on, with lowering brow, knife in hand. But he stood back, leaving the matter in the hands of the Kid.

"You darned gink!" growled the Kid, his eyes gleaming at the Ranger. "You reckoned you'd pull a gun on me, and me standing between you and the Injun's knife, you dog-goned cuss!"

"I guess I was pulling on the Injun," said the fallen man, staring up at the Kid's gun. "Say, you're the Kid!"

"You've said it."

"I reckon I know you, though I ain't seen you before," said the Ranger. "Well, you got me by the short hairs, Kid. Pull trigger and get it over!"

"You was trailing me!" said the Kid bitterly. "Well, hyer I am. You've found me, you durned gink!"

"You've got the drop," said the Ranger coolly. "If I'd knowed you was so near I'd have had a gun in my paw, and that Injun wouldn't have got me so easy. But I ain't got no kick coming. Burn powder and get done."

The Kid gazed at him over the gun. The man—lean, brown, muscular, cool as ice in the presence of death—was not the man that the Kid desired to send over the range if he could help it. He was the kind of man the Kid would have liked at his side on any hard and dangerous trail. The Kid watched him for a long moment, and then slipped the gun back into his belt.

"What d'you call yourself?" he asked abruptly.

"Pecos Pete."

"Well, Pecos Pete, you want to beat it—and beat it pronto!" said the Kid. "And I reckon if you're wise you won't stop this side of the Rio Pecos. The valley of the Pecos is a safe place for you, Pete."

The man from the Pecos grinned.

"You talking turkey?" he asked.

"Sure! Hit the trail!"

"Look here, Kid, I ain't no more tired of life than the next man," said Pecos Pete, raising himself on his elbow and staring up at the Kid curiously. "But I ain't double-crossing you, outlaw and fire-bug as you are. If I beat it outer here I got to hump it back to Captain Hall and report. Mule-Kick Hall is on your trail, and I guess you know what that means. So if you ain't satisfied, use your gun while you got the chance. I ain't letting up on you a Continental red cent if you let me skip. Chew on that, Kid."

The Kid laughed.

"I ain't banking on your letting up," he said. "I got a message for your big chief. You're going to take it to him."

"I guess I'll do that pronto."

"You want to tell Mule-Kick Hall that I'm here in the Mal Pais, and ready for any guy that comes after me," said the Kid slowly. "Tell him I ain't honing for trouble with the Rangers. I'd give half my roll to ride clear of them and save trouble. I know they call your captain Mule-Kick Hall because he's got a hefty punch, an' they say he never lets up on a trail. Well,

I reckon he's going to let up on this one. Tell him to leave me alone in the Mal Pais. I guess if he wants to get busy there's hoss-thieves and hold-up men a-plenty along the Rio Grande waitin' to be rounded up."

"I'll sure tell him." said Pecos Pete, with a grin.

"You figure that it won't make any difference to him?"

"It sure won't."

"Tell him," said the Kid quietly, "that now I'm back in Texas I ain't honing to give any man trouble. I jest want to be left alone. And tell him that if he rides into the Mal Pais after me not a man in his outfit will ever ride back to the plains. I'm sure wanting to save trouble; but if I'm crowded after this, you're the last guy that will get away alive after I've pulled a gun. Now beat it back to your outfit."

"I'll sure tell him." Pecos Pete picked himself up and stood looking at the Kid scrutinisingly, not unsympathetically. "But it won't cut no ice, Kid, and I'm telling you fair and square. The Rangers will get you afore sundown, if they have to hook you out of the deepest hole in the Bad Country."

The Kid shrugged his shoulders.

"I've told you to put him wise," he said. "After this it's his own funeral if he crowds me. Now git!"

Pecos Pete walked across to his horse. The Kid had spared his life, and the Ranger did not deign to glance at the tattered Redskin. Chief Many Ponies. But the eyes of the Apache gleamed and glittered at him, and he broke into a guttural mutter and gripped his knife almost convulsively.

"Can it, Red!" said the Rio Kid unceremoniously. "You ain't carving that galoot, nohow. I guess I'd rather the Rangers rode wide of us."

"My white brother talks like a squaw," said Chief Many Ponies. "Heap good kill paleface!"

The Kid smiled bitterly. The Indian was right—he talked like a squaw. He had sent a warning to Mule-Kick Hall, knowing well enough in his heart of hearts that Hall was the last man in Texas to listen to it or heed it. He knew, as the Indian knew, that he had desired to spare the Ranger's life, to the peril of his own. Pecos Pete dead under the Redskin's knife, there was a chance of blinding the trail and escaping the hunt; but with Pecos Pete gone to call the Rangers to the trail, escape was more difficult, if not impossible. In a quarter of an hour or less the Kid knew a score of Rangers would be on this very spot hunting for a sign of him. All Texas called him a desperate gunman, and he had resolved to live up to it; yet, with his gun aimed at Pecos Pete's heart, he had holstered it again unused.

Yes, the Redskin was right—he was talking and thinking like a squaw; not like a warrior whose life was in his own hands, and likely to pay for an impulse of mercy. Why should he hesitate to pull trigger on the men who were hunting him to his death?

"Heap good kill!" growled Chief Many Ponies discontentedly.

The Kid laughed rather harshly.

"You heard my message, chief," he said. "Well, dog-gone you, if they follow us deeper into the Mal Pais, I guess the whole outfit is going to the happy hunting grounds. I'm telling you, Red, that they're going to find the Rio Kid a bad man to crowd. Let them follow our trail—and not a man of them will ride home to tell how they found us!"

The Indian's eyes glistened.

"Now my brother talks like a warrior and a chief," he said. His coppery face glowed at the vision of the massacre of the whole Ranger outfit in the dreary recesses of the Mal Pais.

They remounted and rode on into the barren lands. From the canyon the Apache turned into a rocky arroyo, where there was only room between rugged walls of rock for a single horseman to ride. The Indian led the way, well acquainted with every foot of the Mal Pais, and the Rio Kid rode after him, the sure-footed mustang picking his steps on loose stones and slippery ridges.

It was a steep ascent, slow and hard going. Long before they reached the top of the narrow arroyo horses' hoofs were heard in the canyon below. The Indian glanced back.

"Rangers come!" he said.

The Kid grinned.

"I guess they're welcome. I'd sure make the grade if all Texas was following us up a path like this dyer. Beat it, Injun, and leave me to hold them back."

"Ugh! It is good."

The Apache pushed on, leading the broncho by the bridle now. The Kid dismounted and sent on Side-Kicker after the Indian. He turned in the narrow arroyo, dropped on his knees behind a rugged boulder, and gripped a six-gun in his hand.

He waited.

The Rangers knew the way they had gone; they had heard the horses clattering in the arroyo, and loose stones rolling back and rattling down the steep declivity, even if they had not picked up sign. The Kid knew they were coming, and he waited for them.

Round a bend of the winding arroyo came a man on foot, gun in hand, eagle-eyes searching as he came. He was not ten feet from the Kid when the boy puncher rose behind the boulder with levelled revolver.

A mocking smile was on the Kid's face as he looked over the gun.

The Ranger started convulsively.

"The Kid!" he breathed.

He swung up his gun swiftly.

But he was not swift enough; it was seldom that any guy was swift enough when it came to gunplay with the Rio Kid.

Bang!

The Ranger gave a yell of anguish as his right arm dropped to his side, broken by a bullet, and his gun clanged on the stones.

The man went staggering back, to collapse groaning on the rocks. There was a rush of feet as four or five men, guns in hand, came rushing round the bend in the rocky wall.

Bang! Bang!

They leaped back for cover faster than they had come.

Loud and mocking rang the laughter of the boy outlaw.

"Say, you ginks, you a-honing to see the Rio Kid? Well, here I am, you guys! I'm your antelope, with the wool on. You gotta come and take me!"

He laughed again, with derisive mockery.

A Stetson hat showed round the rocks, and the Kid fired, and the hat sailed away, torn from its wearer's head by the bullet.

"We'll git you, Kid!" shouted a hoarse voice.

"I'm sure at home if you want me!" shouted back the Kid. "Say, you gecks, don't you like the smell of burning powder?"

But his taunts failed to draw the wary Rangers under his fire. Only in his view lay the wounded man, groaning—expecting every moment a bullet from the boy outlaw to finish him. But that bullet did not come.

The Kid waited, standing the enemy off, till a signal from Chief Many Ponies told that the Apache and the horses were clear of the ravine at its summit. Then he followed his Indian comrade, coolly, leaving the way open to the Rangers if they chose. But it was long before the bunch were satisfied that he was gone, and emerged from cover.

Meanwhile, the Kid was mounted again on a high upland to which the steep arroyo led, and he rode on with Chief Many Ponies into the heart of the Mal Pais. They rode by wild and barren ways, where it seemed impossible that human eye could pick up sign and follow. But Mule-Kick Hall was well known for his skill and tenacity on the trail; and the Kid knew that he would not be shaken off. Harder and grimmer the Kid's face was growing, as black and bitter thoughts coursed through his mind. A second time he had spared a foe. He had put his bullet through an arm instead of through a head; but the enemy was not thinking of sparing him in turn. The Kid swore that that should be his last act of merciful folly, and that the resolute hunters who were trailing him should find their death in the shadows of the Mal Pais.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Trapped!

"THUNDER!" growled Mule-Kick Hall.

He sat in his saddle and stared round him with glinting eyes and lowering brows.

Eighteen men rode with Captain Hall, of the Texas Rangers. A wounded man had been sent back in charge of a sound man to Trail End, to spread the news there, and thence to all the cow-towns, that the Rangers were crowding the Rio Kid, and that the chances were that the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande would be roped in at last. Eighteen lean, brown, hard-bitten men, Hall himself the leanest, brownest, hardest-bitten of all.

A little man, tough as steel, bow-legged from constant riding, with eyes like flints—a man hard as iron, hard and rapid as the kick of a mule—that was Jim Hall, the man who was hunting the Kid. There was no more mercy in him towards the law-breaker than in a wolf or a grizzly bear. His own life he counted as nothing in comparison with getting his man. Getting his man was Jim Hall's one article of faith, and as a rule he got his man. The most desperate gunman in the cow camps lowered his eyes and walked softly when Jim Hall was on hand. More than once the Ranger had taken the trail of the Rio Kid—and this time he swore that he would be successful.

The Kid was cornered in the trackless Mal Pais; men were on the watch for him on all sides if he sought to make a break from the fastnesses of the "Evil Country." There were many trackless miles within the limits of the Mal Pais; but Mule-Kick Hall swore that he would comb them all with a fine comb till he cinched the elusive Kid. Yet for three days he had ridden, with his hard-bitten bunch, by ravine and rocky canyon, in blazing heat, and camped on rocky uplands by night; and still the Kid was at large.

Again and again had the Ranger scouts found track of him; again and again had they flattered themselves that they were at his heels. Once, from a

high cliff, he had waved his Stetson to them and laughed aloud, and vanished again before a bullet could reach him. Once, in the dark night, a rattling of rapid bullets had startled the Ranger camp, and they volleyed into the darkness, the volleying only answered by a mocking laugh that died away in the night.

Savage and bitter Hall's temper was growing, more savage and bitter with each passing hour of searching, of fatigue, of disappointment. But never for one moment did he dream of hitting the back trail. He had laughed when he had received the Kid's message, sent by Pecos Pete. Now he did not laugh; but his resolution grew harder and harder.

In the Mal Pais was the refuge of many a law-breaker—horse-thief and cow-thief, hold-up man and gunman, outcast Indian and Mexican bandit. But they had fled before the coming of the Rangers. Hall and his men, combing the Mal Pais, found many a deserted hut or wattled jacal. And in a desolate, lonely canyon they found abandoned Indian tepees, where the remnant of the tribe of Chief Many Ponies had been wont to gather. Signs of fugitives they found many, but fugitives they found none. They cared for none, save only the Rio Kid. The Kid was still in the Mal Pais, and day by day they hunted him harder.

In the glare of hot sunshine Hall and his lean bunch rode into a rocky gulch high up in the Mal Pais. It was then that Mule-Kick Hall growled "Thunder!" as he stared round him. Many a sign had led the Rangers to that remote hollow in the barren uplands. Hall was sure, at last, that he was close behind the Kid. A hot and dusty and thirsty trail had soured the best temper in the bunch, and savagest and sourest of all was Mule-Kick Hall.

He stared round at rocky, inaccessible walls that shut in the gulch pine-trees and straggling juniper growing here and there in the rugged clefts. There was ample cover there for a hundred men. If the Kid had chosen to turn at bay he could have sold his life dearly before the Rangers roped him in. But that was a risk the Rangers took as a matter of course. At every step of a broncho a bullet might have come whistling, to empty a saddle in the bunch. More than once the Rangers had wondered that the Kid, well known to be the deadliest shot in Texas, had not picked off some of the outfit from cover, at a distance. But the Kid, desperately hunted as he was, seemed to be holding his hand.

THE KID AT BAY! *The Kid's gun spoke and the Ranger gave a yell of anguish. His right arm dropped to his side, his gun clanging to the stones, and he staggered back, holding his injured arm. There was a rush of feet, and four other Rangers appeared.* (*See Chapter* 2.)

"Thunder!" repeated Jim Hall savagely. He pushed back his Stetson and wiped his perspiring brow. "That dog-goned firebug is leading us a posky dance, you 'uns! He sure is! But we'll get him!"

"Forget it, feller!" drawled a cool voice.

Jim Hall started, and almost spun round in his saddle.

It was the voice of the Rio Kid that answered him.

"Dog-gone my cats!" gasped the Ranger. "What——"

"Look up, you gink!" came the Kid's voice. "Look up, you gol-darned man-hunter, and see what's coming to you!"

Jim Hall looked up.

High up the rocky wall of the gulch the Rio Kid stood in full view, on a narrow ledge. The halted bunch of Rangers stared up at him. Every hand was on a gun, but no gun was lifted for the moment. They sat in their saddles and stared up at the Kid. He was twenty feet above their heads, and below the ledge where he stood the wall of rock was almost perpendicular. A bullet might have reached him—but never a man.

"You!" said Mule-Kick Hall between his teeth, staring up, his grasp almost convulsive on the butt of a six-gun.

"You've said it, feller," drawled the Kid. "I guess I've got you where I want you now! And if any guy in that bunch lifts a gun it will be the last thing he'll do this side of Jordan."

Hall laughed savagely.

"You dog-goned firebug, you figure that you can hold up this bunch?"

"I sure do," said the Kid coolly.

"Get away with it, if you can," said Mule-Kick Hall. "Why, dog-gone you, if you wipe out half the bunch the rest will take you where you belong. You're my mutton, Kid!"

"Forget it," said the Kid. "Ain't I telling you that I've got you where I want you? You locoed bonehead, there's thirty rifles aimed on you now, and if I give the word it's you for the coyotes and the buzzards!"

Mule-Kick Hall set his teeth.

There was no sign of enemies to be seen; but the Kid's words carried conviction. The Rangers stared about them uneasily. They were bottled up in the narrow gulch between high, rocky walls, and if the Kid had anything like the force he mentioned at hand their goose was cooked, and they knew it.

"Show yourself!" called out the Kid.

There was a stirring in the silent, lifeless walls of the gulch. From rock and crevice and pine-clump, dark, coppery faces looked out, and every coppery face looked over the barrel of a rifle. Thirty Apaches, the savage and ruthless outcasts of the Mal Pais, were there, lining the rocks with rifles aimed at the bunch below. Chief Many Ponies grinned down at the Rangers. It was the Kid who had planned that ambush; the Kid who had carefully left sign to lead his hunters into it; the Kid who had carried out the plan, and trapped Mule-Kick Hall and his men. Now, Chief Many Ponies was ready to do his part with rifle and knife and tomahawk. And every copper-faced savage in the outcast gang was ready and eager to follow his lead.

Jim Hall's face set like iron. He knew that he had ridden to the end of his trail; that his life was the Kid's to take, and the life of every man in his bunch. One volley from the rifles above, and hardly a man would remain in his saddle, for there was no time to hunt cover. The whole bunch was full in the line of fire as soon as the Kid chose to give the signal.

Another call from the Kid and the Apaches sank back into cover. But though they were no longer to be seen rifle-muzzles were looking out from cover, as the horsemen below well knew. Faces were pale and hard set in the Ranger bunch. They had hunted down the Rio Kid—to their own death!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Way of the Kid!

THE Rio Kid looked down on the silent, grim-faced bunch of riders, a mocking smile on his face.

He had them, as he had said, where he wanted them. They had followed him into the heart of the Mal Pais, mocking his warning, and now he had only to utter a word to see the whole outfit wiped out. It was the hour of the Kid's triumph—the hour of the defeat of Jim Hall, who had never acknowledged defeat before. Grim and fierce the Kid's resolution had been, and yet now that he had the bunch where he wanted them, he did not give the word to burn powder. The gang of thief-Apaches waited impatiently for the word, and already guttural murmurs reached the Kid's ears as he stood on the ledge looking down on his foes. A gesture from the Kid silenced the murmurs; but fierce, black eyes were scintillating; nimble, bronze fingers caressed ready triggers. It could not last long.

"You've got us, Kid!" Jim Hall's voice floated up, husky with rage. "Dog-gone you, it's your game! You durned lobo-wolf, in cahoots with Redskins——"

A flush stole over the Kid's mocking face.

"Aw, can it!" he rapped. "I guess a guy with twenty galoots on his trail has to find friends wherever he can. I guess shooting off your mouth won't buy you anything, Jim Hall."

"You ain't wiped us out yet," snarled Hall. "I reckon we'll get some of you when the rookus begins, darn you!"

He made a motion with his pistol hand.

From the Kid's hip came a spurt of smoke and fire, and the six-gun spun from the Ranger's hand, crashing to the rocks. Jim Hall gave a yell of pain, and sucked at a hand that was wet with blood.

There was a stirring among the ambushed Indians, as if they took the shot for a signal. The Kid's angry voice roared:

"Lie low, you Injun ginks! Lie low, dog-gone you!"

There was a grunting and a growling from the Apaches; but the voice of Chief Many Ponies enforced the Kid's order, and the Redskins held their hands. But suppressed ferocity was growing fiercer and fiercer.

"What you waiting for?" came Jim Hall's husky, enraged voice. "You got us, Kid. We'll die kicking; but you got us. Burn powder, you fire-bug, unless you've learned from your Injun friends to torture your prisoners."

The Kid's face twitched.

"Can it, Hall, you gink!" he said bitterly. "I got you where I want you. It's your own funeral, dog-gone you! But a white man can't stand for it. I guess these Injuns is ready to back me up in wiping out your bunch; but they won't be ready to take orders to let up on you. You savvy that, I guess. Give me your word to ride back to Trail End without drawing rein——"

Hall interrupted him with a curse.

"I'll ride out of range of them rifles, and not a cayuse's length farther," he snarled. "Shoot if you want, dog-gone you!"

"You're a hard man, Jim Hall, and a hard man to save," said the Kid quietly. "I guess it won't be easy for me to make these Reds hold their fire. But I don't stand for it, and I guess I'll do my durndest. Hit the trail, you-uns, as fast as you know how, and take your chance."

He turned his back on the Rangers, facing the hillside where a score and a half of Redskins lurked in cover with ready rifles.

"Hold your fire!" he snapped, as fierce eyes glared on him from the rocks. "I guess I'm giving orders here, you Reds. Down with them rifles, pronto."

Chief Many Ponies' glittering, black eyes met the Kid's fiercely for the moment. But the Kid's steady gaze never faltered, and the Indian chief lowered his rifle, and his action was followed by the rest.

There was a clatter of swift hoof-beats in the gulch below. The trapped Rangers had not lost the chance. If the Kid succeeded in holding off the Indian attack, it could only be for moments. But those moments were enough to save Mule-Kick Hall and his bunch.

In hot haste the horsemen swung round and spurred wildly, and galloped down the rocky gulch, the way they had come.

Clatter, clatter, clatter! Jim Hall, with one backward, bitter look at the handsome figure on the ledge, rode as hard as any of his bunch. Out of that death-trap the Texas Rangers spurred madly; and a few moments were enough for them. But from three or four of the Apaches, in spite of the Kid's angry roar, came whistling bullets. Then, with a yell of ferocity, heedless of the Kid, the whole gang of copper-skinned outcasts leaped from cover, and blazed away with their rifles after the hard-riding bunch.

But the few moments had been enough. Two or three of the Rangers were rocking in their saddles; but the whole bunch swept out of range behind a spur of cliff at the lower end of the gulch. They were saved, and the Rio Kid had saved them. The Redskins knew better than to pursue Texas Rangers and come to close quarters with them. Round the Kid, on the rocky ledge, the thief-Apaches crowded with burning eyes and threatening scowls and lifted tomahawks. And the Kid stared at them coolly and disdainfully. Chief Many Ponies drove back the threatening crowd, and stood before the Kid, his dark face working with rage.

"What does my brother mean?" asked Chief Many Ponies, in a choking voice. "Has his heart turned to water at the sight of his enemies? Is he a coward who fears the sight of blood? He called the Apache braves from their lodges to lie in wait for his enemies, and then——"

"And then he didn't stand for it, Injun," said the Kid. "I guess you won't understand if I talk to you for a month of Sundays, so I guess I ain't chewing the rag. Them guys was after me, and I guess they'll be after me still; and I've let up on them. If you ain't satisfied, Injun, I guess you've got a kick coming. I've sure let you down bad." The Kid took the revolvers from his holsters, and laid them on the rocks. "You've lost that bunch, Injun, and that's a cinch. But if you ain't satisfied, you've got me, and I ain't kicking none. It's your say-so."

The eyes of Chief Many Ponies glittered at him, and the bronze hand was hard on the handle of the long knife. Slowly the Indian's grasp relaxed on the weapon.

"My brother has followed many trails with Chief Many Ponies," he said. "He has saved Many Ponies from death at the hands of his enemies, and the chief does not forget. Let my brother live. But with Many Ponies he will never follow a trail again."

The Apache made a sign to his men, and they followed him into a cleft of the hillside, obedient, but casting back many a black, savage look at the Kid as they went. The last stealthy fall of a moccasin died away—the Rio Kid was left alone. Slowly he picked up his guns and thrust them back into the holsters.

In a few hours, at the most, the hunt would be hot at his heels again, and the Kid alone to face the music.

Yet, though he smiled in bitter self-mockery, there were no regrets in his heart as he rode the grey mustang by a solitary trail into the barren depths of the Mal Pais.

THE END.

(The Rio Kid has escaped the Texas Rangers for the time being, but they are hot on his trail. And in next week's gripping yarn, "CORNERING THE KID!" he finds himself surrounded. Don't miss this story, boys!)