

The POPULAR BOOK OF BOYS' STORIES





The DEATH SWAMP!

RALPH REDWAY

Texas Rangers behind him, the Death Swamp in front of him. . . . No way of escape seems open to the Rio Kid—boy Outlaw. But the "Kid" always shows up at his best when he's in a tight corner.

CHAPTER I

CROWDING THE KID!

THE Rio Kid was hard pressed.

He was not at the end of his rope yet. But he was getting badly crowded, and he knew it.

That was why he had retreated to the edge of the Chicken River Swamp—the Pantano de la Muerte, as the Mexicans called it: the Death Swamp. Few were the riders in Texas, that land of daring riders, who would have cared to ride the precarious paths through the swamp, winding among lakes of foul ooze and acres of quaking bog. Even the Rio Kid, who had ridden the swamp before, pulled in his mustang, under the setting sun, and looked with a doubtful eye at the unending stretch of treacherous green, dotted here and there with clumps of trees, patches of mesquite, bunches of great nodding sunflowers.

There was a peculiar vividness of colour in the grass that grew on the treacherous surface, but the keenest eye could hardly have told where firm land joined sucking quagmire. A tenderfoot might have ridden into the Pantano de la Muerte without knowing that it was there, to sink, horse and rider, into unknown depths, the morass closing over them and leaving no sign that they had ever passed that way.

The Rio Kid was not likely to make that mistake; neither were the men who were hunting him. Looking back in the saddle at the rolling prairie behind him, the Kid could see six or seven Stetson hats bobbing

over the sunlit grass. The Kid had been hunted before: a dozen sheriffs in Texas had hunted the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande, and he had snapped his fingers at them. But it was not a sheriff's posse that was on his trail now. When the Texas Rangers took a hand in the game the Kid knew that he was going to be crowded.

For three days and nights, the Kid had scarcely closed his eyes. He was weary; and the black-muzzled grey mustang was weary to the bone. And his foes were closing in on him, pinning him in to the swamp; and the Kid had to ride the Pantano or turn on the Rangers, gun in hand, and fight his last fight. Yet the Kid hesitated to trust himself and his horse to the narrow causeway winding through the bog, brooded over by the sickly miasma. The sun was sinking, the shadows lengthening on the prairie and the Pantano de la Muerte. Darkness was at hand; and when darkness fell, even the Kid was doubtful of keeping firm ground under his horse's feet. He looked back at his pursuers with a grim brow, his hands seeking the walnut butts of the guns in his holsters.

"Dog-gone the pesky guys," the Kid muttered, "I guess they sure figure on roping us in now, old hoss. But they ain't cinched us yet."

He started as something that whizzed close grazed his Stetson hat and twirled it on his head. The distant report echoed a moment later.

The Kid laughed grimly.

"They sure are crowding a galoot, old hoss," he said to the grey mustang. "I guess it's us for the pesky Pantano."

And the Kid pushed on.

He was going at a walk now, guiding his mustang with meticulous care. One false step on that perilous path meant a plunge into the treacherous morass, and death to horse and rider. The Kid had ridden the path more than once, but all his care was needed; the landmarks were faint and few. It was firm ground under his mustang, but the surface was soft and oozy, and every step of the horse left a deep track. In a few minutes, he was out of sight of the Rangers, winding among clumps of mesquite and willow. But that deep track remained to tell the way he had gone. Sooner or later, the soft ooze would fill up the indentations, and leave no sign—but not before Stone Frazer and his troopers reached the edge of the swamp.

There were plenty of signs for them to follow if they had a hunch for trailing the Rio Kid into the fearful recesses of the Pantano de la Muerte. The Kid smiled grimly at the thought. It would be a bold man who would ride that deadly track in pursuit of him.

The Kid halted.

On an "island" of firm ground, in the midst of seas of ooze, grew a bunch of post-oaks, surrounded by rank reeds and flags that grew in the ooze. The boy outlaw dismounted, and the weary mustang gladly sank down to rest. The Kid drew his rifle from the leather scabbard buckled

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to his saddle. Keeping in cover of the thickets, he looked back the way he had come.

By the winding path, he had covered a hundred yards. In a direct line, he was not fifty yards from the edge of the swamp. And it was in a direct line that a bullet would wing its way.

Thud! thud! thud! Clatter and jingle!

The hoof-strokes of the horses, the jingle of harness, came to the Kid's ears down the wind as the Texas Rangers galloped up. Deep in cover, his eyes gleaming over his rifle, the Kid waited. If any man ventured on the narrow path, his life was the Kid's to take. And Lieutenant Frazer, of the Rangers, was the man to do it; the Kid knew that. "Stone" Frazer he was called; a man hard as iron, relentless as an Apache on a trail. Never yet had Stone Frazer given up a trail without getting his man. If he got the Rio Kid it would be the triumph of his career. But the Kid was a bad man to crowd.

Clatter! Clatter!

"Halt!"

It was Frazer's hard, metallic voice that rapped out the order.

On the very edge of the swamp, the Rangers halted in a bunch.

One of the troopers, pulling in too late, felt his horse's fore-legs sinking, and dragged wildly at the reins, his startled exclamation reaching the ears of the Kid.

"Back, there!" shouted Frazer. "Another step is death! That dog-gone fire-bug has taken to the swamp."

The hasty rider slid back over his horse's tail, and dragging hard on the scared animal, extricated him.

A buzz of angry voices reached the Kid.

"He's gone into the swamp." Stone Frazer gritted his teeth. He sat in his saddle, staring across the dreary expanse, where the lengthening shadows of stunted trees lay dark on beds of treacherous ooze. "There goes his trail—right into the swamp."

"I guess he's beaten us to it!" said one of the troopers. "That's why he was headin' this-a-way! He sure is some hombre."

Frazer snapped his teeth.

"We're getting the Rio Kid, dead or alive. Follow me."

And the Lieutenant of the Rangers, with a set, savage face, put his horse to the Kid's trail.

The Rio Kid whistled softly under his breath.

His eyes glanced through the sights. The muzzle of his rifle, peering through the screen of lianas and hanging moss, bore full upon the broad chest of the Ranger. But the Kid shifted his aim. They were hunting him for his life, these hombres; but the Kid was a reasonable galoot, and he knew that they were doing their duty; and he had a fellow-feeling for a pilgrim who took desperate chances rather than trail back.

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Bang!

The roar of the hidden rifle awoke a thousand echoes in the swamp. The bullet passed between Frazer's arm and his body, cutting away cloth. The Rio Kid could plant his lead where he wanted it.

Frazer set his teeth and rode on. He was riding in the face of death; for he could go only at a walk, his horse stepping carefully in the track left by the Kid's mustang. On either side of the narrow trail yawned treacherous bog.

Bang!

Another bullet came from the Kid's cover and it passed under Frazer's other arm. A laugh followed the shot.

"Say, feller!" called out a cheery voice from the "island." "You sure want to trail back, hombre! I guess if you don't beat it, feller, it's you for the long range."

Stone Frazer spat out an oath.

The outlaw of the Rio Grande was there—hidden deep in cover—playing with him. Either shot might have laid him dead in the swamp had the Kid chosen, and Stone Frazer knew it. The Rio Kid never missed unless he wanted to miss.

"You dog-goned rustler!" shouted Frazer. "I'll get you—dead or alive!"

"Forget it!" chuckled the Kid.

Stone Frazer pushed desperately on. His men had halted on the edge of the swamp, and were firing on the clump of trees and thickets that hid the boy outlaw. Bullets crashed through reeds and branches and swinging lianas. But the Kid had changed his position instantly after pulling trigger, and a thick trunk covered him from the Rangers' fire.

Bang!

There was a shrill squeal from Frazer's horse as the third shot roared out of the thickets ahead. The broncho plunged over and fell. A swift leap saved the Ranger as the broncho went down, and he landed on the path as the horse slid into the swamp and was sucked under. Stone Frazer sprawled on the narrow causeway, breathless, dazed by his fall. One of the troopers rushed out on the narrow path and dragged him back to safety. Both were at the Kid's mercy, but the boy outlaw did not fire. Stone Frazer scrambled back to firm land, red with rage. He shook a furious fist at the thickets that hid the Kid.

"I'll get you!" he roared. "Dead or alive, I'll get you yet."

Bang!

A bullet from the swamp spun the Stetson from Stone Frazer's head, and the Rangers rushed to cover.

For the time being, at least, the Kid was safe from the Rangers. He was too deadly a shot for them to hazard another attempt to reach him. But against that, if it came to the waiting game, the Rangers were in the better position. The Kid's only way of escape was through the Pantano.

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CHAPTER II

FOR LIFE OR DEATH!

NIGHT fell on the prairie.

One by one the stars came out in the black sky, twinkling like points of fire over prairie and swamp.

The Rio Kid waited and watched.

From the shore of the swamp came, every few minutes, the ring of a rifle.

The darkness hid the Rangers from the Kid's sight. With a footing to stand upon, they would have rushed him. But the boldest man in Texas would never have ventured to attempt to rush the Kid's position in the dark. Only fifty feet separated him from the nearest of his foes; but in every foot of it was sudden death. And the winding path, with the horse-tracks marking it, could not be seen now—and would not be seen again till the moon rose. Even Stone Frazer, bravest man in a corps where all were brave, reckless of danger as the Kid himself, did not dream of stepping on the fatal path while darkness reigned. For he knew that before he had



Suddenly from the Kid's lips burst a sharp whistle. "What's the game?" snarled Frazer. The next moment he knew, for the Kid's mustang butted him bodily into the swamp. (See Chapter III.)

picked his way six yards into the swamp, he would be treading where it was death to tread. One false step would be enough. In two minutes the swamp had sucked the carcass of his horse out of sight. Frazer was brave and reckless, relentless as a trailing cougar, but he knew when he had to stop.

Lying in the tufts of bunch-grass, as near the swamp as they could venture, the Rangers kept up an intermittent fire on the "island" fifty feet away, where the outlaw lay hid.

Every minute a bullet whistled through scrub and bush, and scattered twigs and leaves in the gloom.

The Kid took no heed.

He lay in safe cover with his horse, a mass of gnarled roots and twisted trunks screening both.

He was waiting for the moon to rise.

By the first glimmer of light, he intended to lead his horse on into the swamp, following the path he knew. That the Rangers would follow him into the heart of the Pantano de la Muerte was unlikely. But if they did, they would follow only to their death. His rifle had stopped the pursuit, so long as daylight lasted. Five miles deep in the Pantano there was a safe place to camp; whence, on the morrow, he would escape by another path, leaving the swamp between him and his baffled pursuers. If they chose to ride after him it was their own funeral. The Pantano would swallow them as it had swallowed many an unwary rider. Close as they had crowded him the Kid had spared them, when he might have pulled trigger to kill. But if they pursued him into the Pantano their fate was on their own heads.

"Blaze away, you dog-goned ginks," the Kid muttered, as the bullets tore leaf and branch overhead. "I guess burning powder won't buy you anything."

The Rangers knew that as well as the Kid. The firing was desultory; slackening now and then, sometimes dying away for minutes together.

From the eastern sky came a pale, silvery glimmer.

The Kid prepared to move.

In the blackness of the prairie, Stone Frazer stood, while his men loosed off shots, staring into the gloomy swamp. His brow was wrinkled, his eyes gleaming under knitted brows. The sense of defeat was bitter to the Ranger. For three days he had hung on the trail of the Rio Kid, crowding him closer and closer; and at long last he had pinned him in to the Death Swamp, and counted on him as a captured man. And that dreary waste of bog and ooze, instead of stopping the Kid, was befriending him, saving him from his hunters.

Twice the hard-featured Ranger made a stride towards the swamp, almost resolved to go to certain death rather than lose his prey; and twice he checked himself with an oath. To sink into the quagmire as his horse

had sunk, would not capture the elusive Kid. But Stone Frazer swore under his breath that as soon as the moon shone on the Pantano de la Muerte, he would risk everything. He guessed that the Kid knew the ways in the swamp, known of old to Apaches and Mexican outlaws. But he swore that the boy outlaw of Frio should not escape. Either the Rio Kid or Stone Frazer was riding his last trail that night.

No sound came from the swamp, save the croaking of frogs, a faint sound of the wind. The Rio Kid made no sound as he stirred.

Leading his mustang by the bridle, the Kid strode away from the "island" that had sheltered him, setting his face to the heart of the Pantano.

The merest glimmer of light was enough for the Kid. And he could not wait till the moon was high and clear, or its rays would reveal him to the aim of the Rangers. Likely enough they were watching for him to break cover.

The uncertain path wound from clump to clump of willows and bush, from patch to patch of reeds and thicket. The Kid stepped on slowly, his mustang following. Sometimes he had to stop to feel his way for safety—more than once, he had to draw back a foot from a surface that quaked under his tread. His life was in his hands as he penetrated deeper into the morass.

Among the shadows of the swamp, it seemed to Stone Frazer as he watched that he detected a moving shadow. It shifted, spectre-like, appearing and disappearing.

"He's breaking cover!" hissed the Ranger Lieutenant. "Shoot! Give him the lead!"

He threw his rifle to his shoulder and blazed away bullets into the gloom.

There was a burst of rifle-fire from the bunch of Rangers.

But it was only for a moment or two that the dim shadowy form had appeared in the open. The Kid was in cover of a long fringe of muddy willows, hidden from sight.

A few minutes more and Frazer strained his eyes in vain, unable even to pick up the direction the fugitive had taken. Indeed, he was not sure that his eyes had not deceived him, and that the Kid was not still lying in cover on the "island" fifty feet away. All was dim shadow and uncertainty. If the Kid was gone, he had gone without a sound, flitting shadow-like into deep shadows. Frazer stared impatiently at the sky. Would the moon never come?

It came at last, a silver crescent sailing from banks of fleecy clouds. Silvery light fell on the swamp, lighting the endless flats with a ghostly radiance.

Frazer strained his eyes to see. There was nothing that stirred—all was still. If the Kid had broken cover, he was gone, far out of sight before the moonlight revealed him.

Again Stone Frazer strode down to the edge of the swamp. But again he checked himself. Until the light was clearer, he could not venture. He waited, gritting his teeth with fierce impatience. Had the Rio Kid gone, or was he still lurking in cover, waiting with ready rifle for an attack? Stone Frazer muttered a command to his men. He stepped on the narrow path at last, revolver in hand; and the troopers, strung out in single file on foot, followed him. If the Kid was there, they were fairly under his fire in the moonlight that was now bright and clear. But Stone Frazer had a hunch that he was gone.

But his heart beat fast as he picked his way towards the "island" where the Kid had lain. At every step he expected a shot. But no shot came, and at last the Ranger plunged into the trees.

"Vamoosed!"

The Kid was gone, as he had suspected. The Pantano de la Muerte had swallowed him from sight and knowledge.

The Rangers searched through the trees and thickets. But they knew they were searching for what was not there. The Rio Kid was gone.

"Hyer's his trail!"

One of the Rangers shouted. He was kneeling and scanning the ground where the footprints of a man, the hoof-tracks of a horse, led away into the endless gloom of the swamp. Stone Frazer ran to the spot.

"Dog-gone him! He knows that path through!" he muttered.

"I guess he's made his get away," said the trooper.

"Forget it!" snarled Frazer.

He stood staring into the swamp, his brows knitted, his eyes gleaming with savage determination. To follow was death—a thousand chances to one against any man getting through who did not know the path, and the Pantano de la Muerte was new country to Frazer. But the stubborn determination of Scottish ancestors was in Frazer's character. He had never followed a trail without getting his man. Death—a thousand deaths—should not stop him on the trail of the Rio Kid.

"Get back," he said, briefly. "Camp—and wait for me. I'm going on."

"Not alone?"

"Sure! One man's enough to sink in this dog-goned bog," said Frazer, between his teeth, "and if I get to the Kid, I guess I'm as good a man as he is. Get back and camp—and wait for me twenty-four hours. If I ain't back by then, ride in and report that Lieutenant Frazer died on duty. Don't chew the rag—git!"

Silently the troopers trod back to the edge of the swamp and gained the prairie, to camp there and wait. Not a man would have refused to follow had Frazer ordered them. But he knew that he was going to almost certain death, that only the wildest run of luck could save him from sinking to death in the Pantano. He was taking the longest chance of

his life, and he knew it. But he did not hesitate. He did not give a glance after the troopers.

Bending by the verge of the "island," he scanned the track by which the Kid had gone. Hoof-prints and footprints were there—already filling up with ooze. But they told the way the Kid had gone. So long as the trail was visible, so long as the moon shone clearly enough to show it, he could pick his way onward, death walking by his side at every step. If the tracks were obliterated, if the moon failed in its light, he would lose the path; and a plunge into the depths of the quagmire would end the last trail of Stone Frazer. On such a trail it was useless for his men to follow; he would not throw away their lives. His own he would throw away, rather than admit defeat and suffer the outlaw to escape at leisure. They should not say at headquarters that Stone Frazer had turned back from a trail without getting his man.

He trod on the track left by the Rio Kid.

By fringing willows, by patches of reeds, by mossy knolls, he followed the track. Here and there, where the ooze had silted in, the tracks disappeared. But he found them again, and pressed on. An hour—two hours—and the Ranger was still treading in the track of the Kid.

The moon disappeared behind a bank of clouds, and the Ranger halted; standing in darkness to wait for the light. But the silver crescent shone again, and he pressed onward. Twice or thrice, in spite of the guiding tracks, he slipped into the swamp, and dragged himself back from death. And then, at last, came a wide soft patch, where the ooze had completely covered all sign left by the Kid.

Nevertheless, treading very carefully, fearful of obliterating the slenderest mark which might give him the Kid's trail again, Frazer's keen eyes searched every inch of the narrow path. But not the slightest clue could he find and, with an oath, he halted, baffled and desperate.

No sign—no trace of man or horse.

Had the Kid followed a false path and sunk in the depths of the Pantano?

Frazer shook his head at the thought. The Rio Kid was not the man for that.

He had gone on—camped, perhaps, in some secure spot—leaving no trail behind.

Stone Frazer muttered fiercely.

To turn back—to crawl wearily out of the swamp, defeated, without his prisoner—leaving the outlaw to snap his fingers and laugh at his failure! The man who had never failed on a trail, beaten at last by a boy! Not if a thousand deaths awaited him.

The Ranger pushed on. Behind him lay safety—and defeat; before him lay, unless by a miracle, a fearful death. And with gritting teeth, Stone Frazer pushed on.

CHAPTER III

CINCHED!

THE Rio Kid slept peacefully.

The Kid was not the hombre to leave anything to chance; but there were no chances here, so far as the Kid knew. He was five miles in the swamp, and he had left no trail that could guide a pursuer to his retreat. For a wide space behind him, as he knew, the ooze of the swamp had covered his trail, leaving no sign. Even a man who was bold enough to follow his trail as far as it led would have to stop then—unless he chose to step on to death. A false step on either side was fatal—and by what chance could a pursuer pick the tortuous, unmarked path? Not a chance in a thousand.

Weary from his long trail, the Kid had rolled himself in his blanket, and lay down by the side of his weary horse, and both of them slept the sleep of deep fatigue. Five miles in the swamp was an acre of firm ground, where cottonwoods grew with wide-spreading branches, and the bunch-grass was thick. In deep, thick grass the Kid lay sleeping in his blanket, dreaming of old days on the Double-Bar Ranch, when he had ridden with the old bunch, before he had been outlawed for no fault of his own, and a price set on his head. Only by a miracle could a desperate man, seeking his way in the pathless Pantano, win through to the Kid's camp, and the Kid slept peacefully. But it was the thousandth chance that happened.

It was a touch that awakened the Kid. Moonlight was paling into sunrise; dim light fell among the cottonwoods. The Rio Kid started from slumber, in a grasp that was like iron. There was a metallic click as he started up. As he reached instinctively for a gun, he realized that his hands were not his to use. Something held his wrists—something hard and fast. The Rio Kid sat up in the grass, his blanket falling away, with the handcuffs on his wrists, and looked grimly at a haggard, muddy, worn and weary figure that bent gloatingly over him.

And Stone Frazer's eyes burned at him.

"Cinched!" said the Ranger hoarsely. "Cinched at last! You firebug, you're through."

"Search me!" said the Kid.

He was through: that was a cinch. Only for an instant his eyes blazed at his captor. Then he was cool and calm again. If the game went against him, the Kid knew how to face the music without a squeal. The Ranger had beaten him to it, and the Kid had no kick coming.

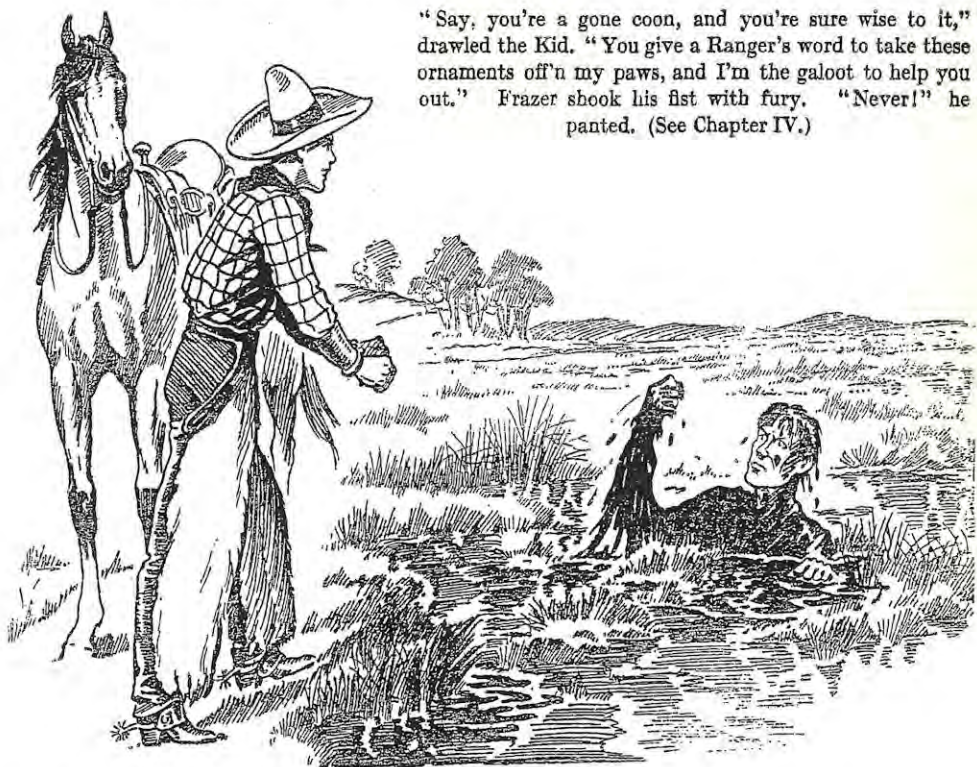
Stone Frazer's eyes fairly gloated over him. The man who never failed on a trail had won the desperate game at the finish.

Slowly the Kid rose to his feet.

"You sure are some hombre, feller," he said. "But you've got me guessing. I guess I never left a sign for you to pick up."

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"Say, you're a gone coon, and you're sure wise to it," drawled the Kid. "You give a Ranger's word to take these ornaments off'n my paws, and I'm the galoot to help you out." Frazer shook his fist with fury. "Never!" he panted. (See Chapter IV.)



"I took a chance," said Frazer.

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid. "I guess there was a good half-mile without a sign, and even a Comanche couldn't have picked one up."

"You've said it."

"And you took a chance on that?" said the Kid in wonder. "Feller, I pass it up to you. By rights, you oughter be dead a hundred times over afore you horned in here. How'd you make it?"

Frazer shook his head. How he had won his way through the swamp, by what miracle he had avoided the death that lurked at every step, he could not have told. Death had dogged his way, yet some strange freak of fortune had stood him in stead. A score of times, a hundred times, he had felt himself slipping to destruction, yet he had won to safety—and at long last he had won through. The Kid gazed at him in reluctant admiration. The worn, haggard face told of the strain the Ranger had gone through. He had reached the Kid's camp, sinking with exhaustion. But he had reached it, and the Kid was his prisoner.

Frazer dropped on a log, breathing hard. His hand was near a gun and the Kid smiled as he noted it.

"You don't want a shooting-iron, feller," he drawled. "I guess I know when I've got my medicine. Say, you sure are some hombre! I pass it up to you."

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Frazer made no reply.

For a long time he sat on the log, while the sun rose higher on the vast stretches of the Pantano de la Muerte: the Death Swamp that had so nearly been his grave. Even yet he could hardly believe in his good luck; could hardly believe that he had won through under the shadow of death, and that the Rio Kid was his prisoner. But he rose from the log at last. He unpacked provisions from the Kid's slicker pack, and made breakfast for two.

The Kid ate awkwardly with his manacled hands; but he ate with a good appetite. He was a prisoner, but he was not yet behind the walls of a calaboose. While there was life there was hope; and there were many chances yet—especially in the heart of the Pantano de la Muerte. Bacon and beans and steaming coffee refreshed the Ranger; and the Rio Kid ate as cheerily as if he had been a free man with an open trail before him.

Then Frazer made preparations for taking the back-trail. The Kid's gun-belt, with the walnut-butted guns, was slung on the mustang, the Kid's eyes following it longingly. But even the Kid could not have handled a gun with the handcuffs on his wrists.

"I guess the cayuse will follow!" said Frazer.

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"I reckon we're beating it."

The Kid grinned.

"I guess I ain't sure of that, feller," he remarked.

Frazer's square jaw set.

"Dead or alive, Kid," he said quietly, "I guess you'll mosey along after me on the back-trail, or you'll stay here with a bullet through your heart. It's your say-so!"

"A live coyote is better'n a dead grizzly, feller," smiled the Kid. "I reckon I'll hoof it."

"You're wise," said Frazer briefly.

And he started. The Rio Kid followed him. Behind them trailed the black-muzzled mustang.

Under the hot sunlight, miasma was rising from the swamp. Trailing masses of vapour blotted out the landscape, and through them dim shapes of trees and bushes loomed. Mosquitoes buzzed in myriads, and the croaking of frogs, the chirrup of cicadas made a dismal chorus. Stone Frazer tramped on steadily. For some distance from the Kid's camp the path was easy to find; and then the Ranger reached the spot where, for half a mile or more, the ooze had obliterated all traces, and the swamp stretched before him, seemingly without a path.

In the moonlight the night before, Frazer had won through that trackless stretch—how, had him guessing. He halted, staring over the treacherous expanse. Not a sign remained of his passage—nothing that the eye could pick up. Landmarks, he knew, existed for those who knew the

path; but for a stranger's eye there was no sign. Once he had won through, with miraculous luck; but he knew that such luck would not be his again. He turned to the Kid.

"You savvy the path, Kid?"

"Sure."

"I reckon you'll go ahead."

"You ain't takin' a chance again, feller?" grinned the Kid.

"Not any."

The Kid paused, coolly considering the matter. Stone Frazer touched the butt of his gun.

"Dead or alive, Kid?" he said icily.

"Feller, you sure talk like a Dutch uncle," said the Kid amiably. "I'll sure mosey on ahead if you're set on it."

"Get going," said Frazer briefly.

The Kid smiled.

He led the way, by the unseen path, treading warily. Close behind him strode the Texas Ranger. Behind the Ranger trailed the black-muzzled mustang.

The smile still lurked on the handsome, sunburnt face of the Kid. He hummed the tune of a Mexican fandango as he went.

Suddenly from his lips burst a long, sharp whistle.

Frazer started.

"What's that game?" he snarled, his hand going to his gun. If the whistle was a signal, it was difficult to understand, in the heart of the solitary swamp, where there was no other human being within miles. Frazer stared round with savage suspicious eyes.

The next moment he knew, as there came a trampling of hoofs behind him and the rushing mustang struck him, and he was hurled bodily from the path into the fatal clutch of the quagmire.

CHAPTER IV

STONE FRAZER'S DEFEAT!

THE Rio Kid laughed.

Loud and long he laughed as he stood on the narrow path and stared at the struggling figure in the swamp.

Frazer had struck the treacherous surface in a heap, and his weight as he struck drove him down.

Madly he struggled.

Head and shoulders, dripping with ooze, rose from the surface of the swamp, but he was down to his arm-pits. And the grip of the morass that held him a prisoner was sucking him lower.

He was not five feet from the spot where the Kid stood in safety. But

he might as well have been five miles. Frantically he strove to drag himself up from the clutch of the bog. Every effort only sank him lower.

His eyes turned on the Kid, ablaze with fury.

"You dog-goned rustler!" he panted.

He drove his hand down through thick, clinging mud to his belt and dragged out a revolver. He knew that he was a doomed man—that it was only a matter of minutes before the morass closed over his head—that there was no hope—no glimmer of hope. And his only thought was to make sure of his prisoner—if yet he could. Dead or alive—dead if not alive! Squelching in quaking mud, he dragged up his arm, the revolver in his hand. It came out thick with mud and ooze, choked with slime. The weapon was useless. With a fierce oath, the Ranger hurled it at the Kid—and the Kid, laughing, kicked it as it flew, and it dropped into the swamp and vanished from sight.

"You sure are some hombre!" grinned the Kid mockingly. "Say, feller, any galoot in Texas could have told you that the Rio Kid was a bad man to crowd."

Frazer did not speak.

Wildly, desperately, he strove to drag himself back to the path. He could not move an inch from the spot where the quagmire held him. It closed round him, gripping, tenacious, gluing him to the spot. The sweat ran down his face as he struggled, and with every wild effort he sank deeper, sucked down as if by some gigantic beast eager to devour him. And still his eyes burned with fury at the Kid. To be tricked like this—tricked at the finish!

"You sure didn't count on Side-Kicker, hombre," drawled the Kid. "Side-Kicker sure is some hoss! Why, you ornery guy, I was jest waiting for you to give me the chance, and that cayuse of mine only wanted to hear my whistle to jump to it! Say, I'll trade with you. You ready to talk turkey?"

Frazer struggled.

"Say, you're a gone coon, and you're sure wise to it," drawled the Kid. "But I reckon I could help you out a few. You give a Ranger's word to take these here ornaments off'n my paws and call it a draw, and I'm the galoot to help you out. Is it a trade?"

"Never!" panted Frazer, shaking his fist with fury.

The Kid's face set hard.

"You sure are a hard cuss, Stone Frazer!" he said. "They don't call you 'Stone' Frazer for nothing! You sure ain't much time left—you want to guess again, and you want to do it pronto."

The Ranger did not answer.

He was sinking to his neck now. His arms, outspread on the treacherous surface, stayed him, but his arms were slowly sinking in. His face was white as death, but hard as iron.

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"Say, you want to guess again!" urged the Kid.

"Never!"

"Then go down, like the dog-goned obstinate gink you are!" snapped the Rio Kid, and he turned away to his horse.

The way lay open to the Kid. Sooner or later, with no hand to prevent him, he would work his wrists free of the handcuffs. He had but to return to his camp, and take his own time. And he turned his back on the white, despairing, but still stubborn face of the Ranger, who would make no terms with his prisoner, even in the moment of death.

He turned away—but he turned back.

"Say, you geck——" he appealed again.

Stone Frazer answered with an oath.

"My men'll get you! You won't get them bracelets off in a hurry! I wouldn't give you a dog's chance to save my life!"

His arms were under the surface now. The ooze was up to his square obstinate chin. Still his eyes, from a face of death, glared defiance at the outlaw.

The Rio Kid stood still. Escape was open to him, even with the irons on his wrists; and he had offered his enemy a fair chance of life. Again he turned away—and again he turned back. The man who was dying in his sight was a true man, a brave man, and the death was fearful—and the Rio Kid realized that he could not stand for it. A brave man, a true man: such a man as the Kid would have welcomed as a comrade had not fate made him an outlaw, and the other a hunter of outlaws. The Rio Kid gave a sigh. He called himself a dog-goned gink for what he was going to do—but he knew that he was going to do it.

He lost no time. There was no time to lose—it was a matter of moments now. With his manacled hands, the Kid unhooked the coiled riata from the mustang's saddle and uncoiled the rope. Stone Frazer watched him—unbelieving.

Whiz!

The looped end of the rope dropped on the quaking surface.

"You want to get a hold, and you want to get it pronto," said the Kid.

Frazer's white face stared at him. He made an effort and dragged up his hands from the clinging quagmire. The effort forced him lower and the ooze was over his chin. He shut his teeth hard; his mouth was under now. But his hands were grasping the lasso. The Kid was saving him—and by the act, yielding himself a manacled prisoner again! But he was saving him—if yet there was time.

The Kid's manacled hands held the rope, dragging, hard and harder. Frazer held on to it desperately. It seemed as if even the Kid's sturdy strength would fail to drag him from death. But the steady, powerful pull on the rope told; the Ranger felt himself moving. His shoulders were over the surface as the Kid dragged with all his strength in the effort.

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Slowly, sullenly, as if reluctant to yield up its victim, the quagmire released him. Sprawling through the bog the Ranger reached the edge of firm land where the Kid stood and his grasp was on solid earth. Thick with mud, foul with slime from head to foot, Stone Frazer dragged himself on the path.

He rested there on his knees, panting, exhausted, giddy with the close escape from a terrible death. The Rio Kid dropped the lasso and stepped back, a mocking smile on his face. He had saved his enemy and given up his freedom; he asked nothing from Stone Frazer and expected nothing. He called himself a gink; but he did not regret what he had done.

Slowly the Ranger rose to his feet still breathing hard and deep. His eyes avoided the Kid's.

"Why did you save my life?" he muttered.

"Search me!" answered the Kid.

There was a moment's silence.

"Get on!" grunted the Ranger.

The Kid's eyes flashed, but he led the way in silence. Squelching mud, the Ranger followed him. The grey mustang loped behind. Under the burning sun, through the miasmic vapours, they followed the path. The Kid hummed a tune; but the Ranger's brow was black, and grew blacker and blacker.

He called a halt at last. It was yet a mile to the edge of the swamp where Stone Frazer had left his men the night before. But the Ranger's keen eye could now pick up signs of the way he had come, and he needed no further guidance. He signed to the Kid to fall behind, and the Kid shrugged his shoulders and obeyed.

Slowly Stone Frazer tramped on—more and more slowly. He stopped at last, and swung back on the Kid.

He did not speak. But he stretched out his hands to the Kid's manacled wrists and unlocked the handcuffs.

"Meaning——?" asked the boy outlaw.

"You've beat me, Kid," muttered the Ranger. "Dog-gone you, you've got me beat! You hit the trail."

"Sure!" smiled the Kid.

The Ranger hesitated a moment. Then he held out a muddy hand. The Rio Kid gripped it; and Stone Frazer turned away, and tramped on—alone!

The Ranger who had never failed on a trail had a failure to report at last. From the Pantano de la Muerte, by hidden paths, the Rio Kid rode, a free man. Many a foe followed the trail of the boy outlaw—many a pursuer tracked him by llano and sierra, but among them Stone Frazer was never seen—since the day when the Kid had saved him from sinking to death in the Death Swamp.