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The RANGER

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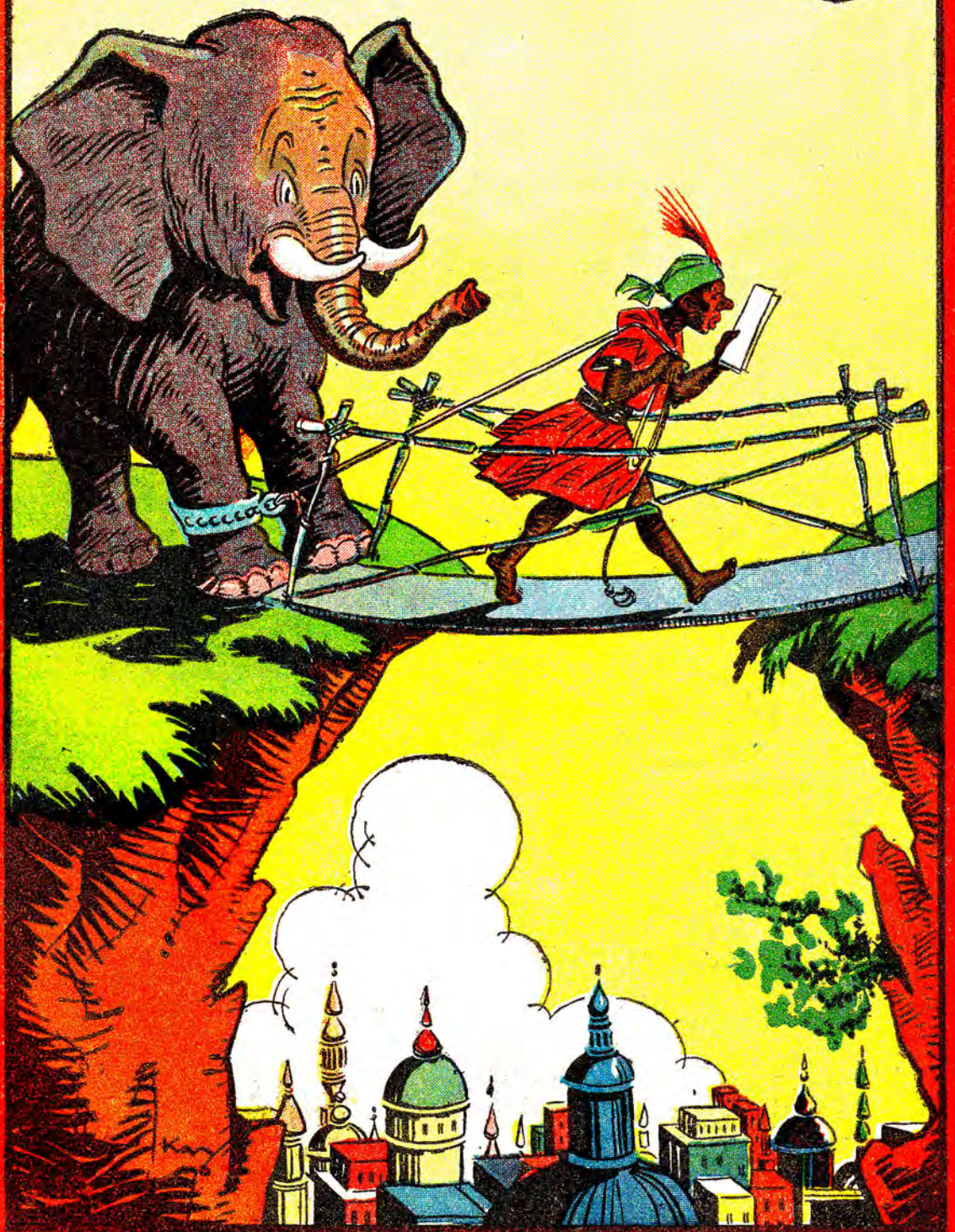

No. 113. Vol. 3.—Week Ending April 8th, 1933. EVERY SATURDAY.

THE OUTLAW KID!

By RALPH REDWAY.

THERE'S A PRICE ON THE HEAD OF THE RIO KID, OUTLAW. GET HIM DEAD OR ALIVE—THAT'S THE CRY OVER THE RANGES! MULE-KICK HALL, OF THE TEXAS RANGERS, GETS HIM ALIVE—BUT HE GETS NO "KICK" OUT OF THE CAPTURE. FOR THERE'S NO HOLDING THE TWO-GUN KID!

Fallen Amongst Foes.

THE Rio Kid had not a care on his mind when he rode into Bullwhacker under the setting sun.

That remote cow town on the Mexican border was far from the country where he was known, and where sheriffs and Rangers hunted for him. For days and nights, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had ridden and camped on the rolling llano and in the tangled chaparral, his only company that of Side-Kicker, the mustang.

Outlaw as he was, the Kid was still at heart the cowpuncher he had been in the old days on the Double-Bar, before luck had turned on him and driven him outside the pale of the law for no fault of his own. He honed for cowmen's company and cowmen's talk, the rough-and-ready camaraderie of the bunkhouse and the round-up camp.

Bullwhacker was a little cow town, a straggle of shacks and frame-houses, on the bank of the border river, and the population was not more than forty, except when the punchers came in from the ranches.

There was no sheriff, or even a town marshal within a day's ride, which suited the Kid—sheriffs and town marshals were not good for his health. It was, in fact, just the burg that the Rio Kid wanted to hit, when he was figuring on throwing an outlaw life behind him and aiming to make a fresh start.

Bullwhacker was crowded, and the grey mustang had to slow down to a walk when the Kid rode in. Horses were tied to every rail and post; punchers swarmed in the street, and there was a crowd in the wooden piazza of the shack hotel, the building for which the Kid was aiming.

He guessed that something unusual had happened, and he wondered what it was. He halted his horse in front of the shack hotel, and called to a puncher who was waving his Stetson close at hand.

"Say, bo, what's the rookus?"

The cowman looked round at him.

"They got him," he answered.

"Who?" asked the Kid.

"El Cuchillo!" The puncher waved his hand towards a stout wooden shack, standing at a little distance back of the lumber hotel. There was no gaol in Bullwhacker, and the Kid guessed that the shack was being used as one, for the nonce. "They got him there—got him where they want him!"

The Kid whistled.

He had heard of El Cuchillo, the Mexican bandolero. Many a time had he heard of him, and of his raids across the border, of the stolen herds he had driven across the shallow waters of the Rio Grande into Mexico.

For more years than the Kid could remember, the bandolero had preyed on the cow country along the Rio Grande, and many a puncher on a lonely range had fallen under the keen cuchillo from which he derived his nickname.

"Say, I reckon this hyer burg is sure proud of itself, getting that Mexican firebug!" said the Kid heartily.

The puncher grinned.

"Aw, forget it, feller!" he answered. "It was the Rangers got him. I guess the Texas Rangers have been after him for a month of Sundays, and they got him at last! 'Tain't more'n an hour since they rode into town with him."

"Oh, sho!" said the Kid.

"They got him in that shack for the night—they're riding with him at sun-up to hand him over to the sheriff at La Plaza," grinned the puncher. "I guess it's a short shrift and a long rope for that greaser, feller."

"Sho!" repeated the Rio Kid.

He sat very still in the saddle.

The Texas Rangers!

Not once in a dog's age did a Texas Ranger ride into Bullwhacker. It was cruel luck for the Kid. Any day earlier, any day later, he would have missed them; but a malicious fate had to drive him into the cow town on the very day the Rangers were there.

Not a galoot who belonged to the section knew anything of the Rio Kid but his name; but the Rangers knew—only too well. Plenty of them had seen him in the flesh; all of them had seen his picture, posted on the dead-walls in half the towns of Texas, with the offer of a reward of a thousand dollars for the original, dead or alive.

Bullwhacker was no place for him: the Kid got that at once. He wheeled the grey mustang, shifting his holsters a little to bring the walnut-butted guns a little nearer to his grasp. And as he did so he sighted a face in the crowd—a face that was like tanned leather, with eyes that were like cold steel. And those penetrating, steely eyes were fixed on him, the grim, hard face was twisted in a fierce grin, and a brown hand was lifted with a Colt in it.

"The Rio Kid, by thunder! Hands up, Kid!"

It was Mule-Kick Hall, captain of the Rangers. His eyes of steel gleamed over the levelled revolver; his finger was on the trigger. The Rio Kid was quick on the draw—no man was quicker in Texas—but he did not touch a gun. The Kid knew no fear; but he knew enough to go in when it was raining. The slip of his hand an inch towards a gun spelled instant death, and the Kid knew it.

Jim Hall's voice rang out:

"Rangers, this way! It's the Rio Kid! Dead or alive! Hands up, Kid, or you get yours!"

Slowly the Kid's hands went up. The crowd on all sides of him surged, and buzzed, and roared. The name of the Rio Kid passed from lip to lip.

Guns were drawn on all sides. Three or four Rangers pushed through, with revolvers up. Mule-Kick Hall came closer, still watching the Kid like a cat over his Colt. The Kid had no chance—not the ghost of one. He had ridden into a death-trap, and they had got him.

His hands went up, and he nodded coolly to the captain of the Rangers.

"Say, feller, this is sure a surprise-packet you got for me!" the Kid drawled. "You got me, if you want me!"

"Keep them up!" said Hall briefly.

He stepped closer. The Kid's hands were up, and stayed up; but Mule-Kick Hall knew how swiftly they would have dropped to the walnut-butted guns if the Kid had had the ghost of a chance. The muzzle of his Colt was jammed in the Kid's ribs, as he jerked the guns away with his left hand.

"Light down!" said Hall.

The Kid was disarmed, and his hands came down now. He dropped lightly from the saddle. Two of the Rangers grasped him, with Hall's revolver still looking him in the face, and searched him for hidden weapons. The Kid made a grimace as they hooked away the little derringer he packed in the pocket

of his goatskin chaps. Perhaps he had had a hope that it might be overlooked. But Mule-Kick Hall was not the man to overlook a thing.

He was taking no chances with the elusive Kid, who had baffled all the sheriffs of Texas, and beaten Jim Hall himself more than once.

"Bring him along!"

Between the two Rangers, with Hall's revolver at his back, the Rio Kid was marched along past the lumber hotel, to the shack at the back. There lay the Mexican bandit whom Hall had roped in, after months of trailing; but El Cuchillo, prize as he was, was not so great a prize as the Rio Kid.

One of the Rangers took down the thick pinewood bars from the door, and turned the key in the lock. The door was thrown open, and from the dusk within there was a glimpse of a swarthy face and glittering black eyes.

"Say," drawled the Kid, "you got me, Hall, you surely got me! But you ain't gaoling me with that Mexican polecat, sure? I'll say it ain't good company for me, feller! It sure gets my goat!"

"Mosey in!" snapped Hall.

His gun was half-lifted.

"Feller," said the Kid politely, "I never was a guy to argue with a gun! I reckon that greaser's company is better'n yours, you pesky, pie-faced geck!"

The Kid stepped in, and the thick, heavy door slammed shut. The key was turned and the bars slammed into place.

The Kid Cinched!

THE Mexican, folded in a tattered, gaudy serape, a crumpled sombrero on his greasy dark head, sat hunched on a bench, leaning back against the wall in a corner.

Juan Jerez, known as El Cuchillo, had killed more men than he had fingers and toes. All along the border his desperate reputation was known. Fierce as a jaguar, and more treacherous, rustler and cow-thief in Texas, bandolero in his own country of Mexico, he was a guy on whom the Kid would gladly have pulled a gun had he met him on the llano or the sierra.

Fate had made the Kid an outlaw, but between the cheery Kid and the black-browed, glint-eyed bandit there was a great gulf fixed. It sure got the Kid's goat to be forced into his company.

But there was no help for it, and the Kid was philosophical. After a glance at the Mexican, which met a stare of black hostility, the Kid gave him no further heed but proceeded to examine his new quarters.

At sunrise the Rangers were to ride out of Bullwhacker with their two prisoners, and it was a day's ride to La Plaza, where prison doors would close upon them. Under Jim Hall's steely eyes on the ride there would be no chance of making a getaway—the Kid knew that. And once in the sheriff's hands at La Plaza the game was up. He had the night, but if sun-up found him still in Bullwhacker the Kid's goose was cooked.

There was only one room in the shack. It was built of strong pine planks on sawn poles. There was one window, but that had been boarded up outside for additional security, since El Cuchillo had been lodged there. The door was thick and strong, the lock was stout, and bars outside had been added, like the planks over the window, to keep the bandit safe.

Through a crack or a crevice here and there came a glimmer of the sunset, but it was very dusky in the hut, and deepening to thick darkness. A couple of benches were the only furniture—there was not even a mat on the sandy, earthen floor. The Kid whistled softly.

Outside the shack he could hear a tramp of feet. Safe as it was, the prison-hut was not left unwatched. One of the Rangers paced by it, with his rifle under his arm; and the Kid reckoned that the watch would last through the night.

The Kid threw himself at last on the unoccupied bench, facing the Mexican hunched in the other corner. The greaser had not spoken a word, but his black, snapping eyes had watched the Kid as he examined his quarters, never leaving him.

He was little more than a shadow to the Kid's eyes—a burly man, looking burlier in the heavy serape that wrapped his muscular form. But in the deepening dusk the Kid caught the glint of his watching eyes. Deep as was his repugnance for the savage bandit from over the border, the Kid was conscious of a touch of fellow-feeling for a companion in misfortune.

"Say, bo, I guess that this is a cinch!" he drawled.

"Si, senor! came across in the gloom. "El capitano Hall is in great luck with two such birds in his snare. You are the Rio Kid?"

"You've said it, hombre!"

"I am El Cuchillo." There was a note of pride in the voice of the bandit, which made the Kid grunt. "Birds of a feather, senorito!" said the Mexican. "And caught in the same snare!"

The Kid rose to his feet, a glint in his blue eyes.

"Hombre," he said, "I reckon the sheriff at La Plaza will hand out the same stuff to both of us when he gets a cinch on us, and there's no two ways about that. But we ain't birds of a feather, hombre, not by long chalks, and you want to remember that, and keep on remembering it. I ain't got a gat to pull on you, greaser, but I got a set of knuckles that will alter your features some, and then a few, and some more! Chew on that, Mister Jerez, if you ain't honing for trouble."

The Mexican made no reply to that, but his black eyes gleamed and snapped. He hunched himself in the corner in his serape, and was silent, only the glitter of his snake-like eyes in the dark telling that he was wakeful.

The Kid sat down again, silent, too.

The shouting and clattering in Bullwhacker had died down. Only to the Kid's ears came the steady tramp of the Ranger pacing before the shack.

Once came a sound that made him start and draw a quick breath. It was the whinny of a horse—a whinny he knew! Side-kicker was not far away—in the stable behind the lumber hotel, the Kid reckoned. The grey mustang missed his master, and that sound from his faithful cayuse went straight to the Kid's heart.

It gave him a pang, and for a minute the cool carelessness faded from his face. He rose from the bench, his teeth set.

"By the great horned toad!" muttered the Kid restlessly. "If a guy could get out of this rat-trap and get hold of a gun and a cayuse——" But he laughed the next moment. "Kid Carfax, you *gink*, the *jig*'s up! Mule-kick Hall allowed that he'd get you, dead or alive, and you've sure helped him all you know how, you ornery bonehead, you! It's you for the long jump, and I'm telling you so!"

"Senorito!" came the voice of the Mexican, now invisible in the darkness.

The Kid spun towards him impatiently.

"Aw, can it!" he snapped. "I guess I don't want any more from you, Juan Jerez!"

"Will you wait for dawn, and the ride to La Plaza?" breathed the Mexican. "Fool! Only a few hours divide us from death! Stand in with me, and we will beat the Rangers yet! Come this way—to this corner! Look, or, rather, feel, for you can see nothing!"

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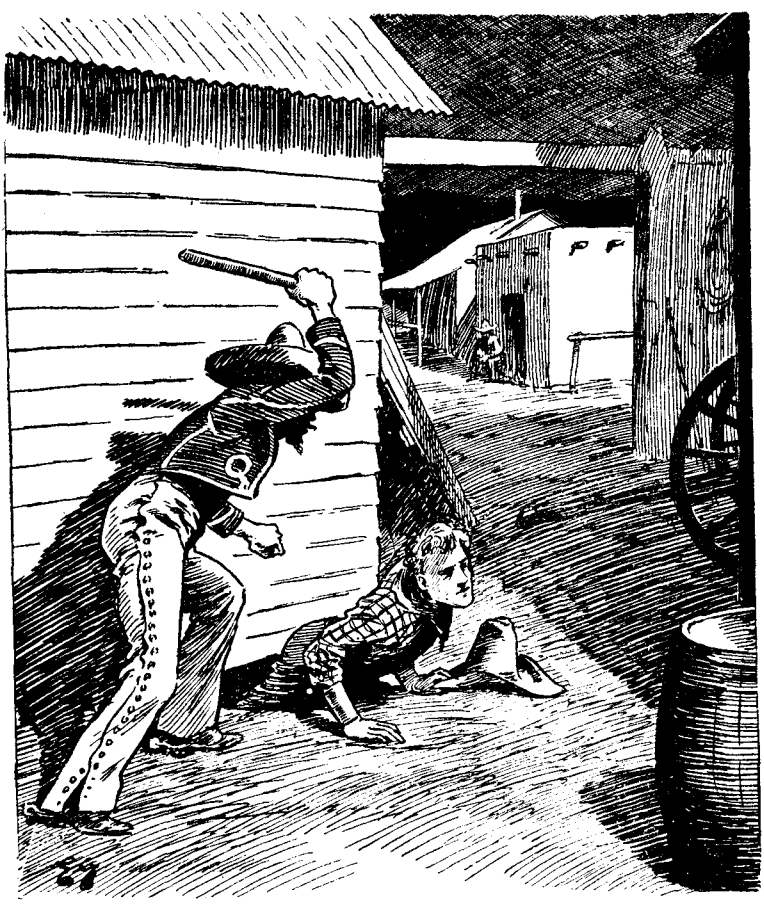

Unsuspicious of the crouching bandit, the Rio Kid crawled through the hole under the shack, and his head and shoulders came into view. "You like not the company of the lobo-wolf, El Cuchillo! You are finished with him now!" hissed the bandit, and his hand, grasping a bludgeon, rose ready to strike.

beyond the lamp, was watching him steadfastly.

For a long minute the two eyed each other in silence, as they had done just before their battle. Then, raising his hand in a grave salute, the strange lad spoke.

"Well fought, great warrior!"

Tomahawk's smouldering glare changed to blank astonishment. But the old pugnacity rasped in his voice when he replied after a brief pause.

"Talk English, pup, and cut out the soft soap!" he snapped. "Proper Injuh stuff this, eh? Make a man comfy and well, so's he can last longer under th' torture later on! Waal, I gotta hand it to yuh. Yo're th' fust guy who ever put Tomahawk Ted to sleep wi' yore fancy tricks. Yo're a witch-doctor all right, and yo've got me cold. O.K.—I kin feel pain ag'in now all right! So call in yore skunks and git on with th' torture!"

White Indian's hand moved impatiently, as though to wave the aggressive speech aside. Soberly he replied in the Western tongue.

"Thar ain't goin' to be no torture, Tomahawk. It never was on th' programme!" he said quietly, to the scout's increased amazement. "The Suns have never tortured a captive since I've been their medicine-man. That stunt outside was just to test you. I only slung my knife at you to see if you really were the wonderful fighter without nerves that we've all heard about. In another minute after that, I'd ha' been inside that ring shaking hands with you—only you suddenly cut loose like a locoed buffalo, and laid waste half my men!" he added, with that quaint, boyish grin of his.

Quickly, however, he turned serious again, while Tomahawk simply gaped.

"And you won! You stood the test!" he said earnestly. "Tomahawk, I never knew men could fight like you. Everything I've heard about you, scout, adds up! I was bluffing when I said my men watched you all the way from the Rio—matter of fact, you fooled them several times, and they are *Sun* Indians. Savvy? Also, if it comforts you any, they don't bear no malice! They don't like you none, any more than any other paleface. But they know a great warrior when they see one, and they shore admire you plenty. Yo're a clever scout, Tomahawk, and a heap big scrapper. But——"

He nodded sombrely.

"Yo're a heap big fool as well!"

"Ho!" The bewildered Tomahawk, who had been lapping up the sincere compliments with his usual childlike vanity, snorted. "Fool, eh? How come?"

"Because," answered the lad softly, "you've let Snake Lurden talk you into trying to kidnap me. Only you would have tried it, or stood a chance of pulling it off. Which is why he employed you. You swallowed his black lies! You made yoreself his dupe! And by helping Snake Lurden, yo're helping to betray your fellow-Texans and your own country—*to Mexico!*"

"Wha-at?"

Tomahawk let loose a full-throated roar of stupefaction. Mexico—once the tyrant rulers of Texas, and now the hated enemy of every man, red and white, in the south-west! As always, the mere mention of that name was as a red rag to a bull. His huge fists opened and shut in a savage, ugly gesture. And when he spoke again, his voice was no longer loud, but hoarse and shaky.

"Go on! Cards on the table! If yo're tellin' me lies, I'll limb yuh! If yuh ain't, by glory, I'll kill Snake Lurden!"

Gracefully the slender youngster rose and came nearer.

"Tomahawk," he cried, in the same earnest voice, "I want to be friends with you—now that I know you! Believe me, I've got a man's size job on my shoulders, keeping the Suns in order, and fighting the worst band of curs and traitors who ever infested the south-west! I'm no boaster, but I hold the lives and safety of every white man west of the Mississippi in these two hands! One word from me, and the Suns, Kiowas, Piutes, Comanches, even the Sioux, will paint the West red! But I'm not giving that word unless I have to. I need your great help! And to prove that there's peace between you and me—— Here!"

Two heavy Navy revolvers and a hunting-knife were suddenly tossed at Tomahawk's feet. Eagerly he grabbed up his guns, spun the loaded cylinders, and stroked the long barrels lovingly.

Then he gave White Indian a keen level stare.

"Yo're square, boy! Shoot!" he said bluntly. "But remember this. If what yuh say about Lurden and Mexico's the truth, yuh and me bury the hatchet. And by the same token, if Lurden's bin p'isoning my mind ag'in yuh with lies——"

The giant's voice thickened to a deep, menacing growl.

"I'm goin' right back to th' Rio and tear him apart with my bare hands!"

(Next week's RANGER will contain more thrilling chapters of John Brearley's magnificent adventure story. Make sure of your favourite weekly paper, buddies, by ordering it in advance.)

THE OUTLAW KID!

(Continued from page 315.)

The Kid, in sheer wonder, approached the corner where the Mexican sat on the bench, from which he had not stirred. He shifted now, and in a few moments more the Kid knew why he had remained immovable in that corner, with his serape draped round him. It was to hide a secret.

He pulled the bench aside now. In the corner that it had concealed was a deep gap in the sandy floor at the back of the shack. The Mexican whispered, and the Kid stooped, groped, then whistled a low, soft whistle.

The poles that supported the walls were planted deep in the earth, but the planks nailed to them were flush with the ground. Before the Kid had joined him in his imprisonment the bandit had been burrowing, like the rat he was—and the Kid guessed that he had been almost caught at the game when the Rangers came with the new prisoner.

That was why he had sat hunched in the serape in the corner, never stirring, hiding his hope of escape, doubtful whether he could trust the Kid, unwilling, doubtless, to help the Gringo to escape with him if he could have helped it. But it was both or neither.

"By the great horned toad!" breathed the Kid; and in the darkness the Kid's eyes were dancing.

Treachery!

THE Rio Kid chuckled softly.

"Feller!" he whispered. "I'll say you're some hombre!"

"Silencio!" breathed the Mexican.

The hour was late. Bullwhacker lay silent and sleeping under the stars of Texas. But in the silence the steady tramp of the sentry Ranger was heard, pacing to and fro in front of the shack.

The Kid on his knees, groped an arm's length in the cavity under the back wall. The sandy soil was easy to dig if a guy had a tool. The Kid had not thought of such a stunt, for he could not dig with bare hands. He reckoned he would have thought of it if he had had a chance of getting by with it. He caught a glimmer of steel in the Mexican's hand. It was a tiny stiletto.

"They was sure boncheads to leave you that, hombre!" muttered the Kid.

The Mexican grinned.

"It was hidden in my boot, senor! It has served me before, amigo; once it found the throat of the carcelero, in a carcel in my own country."

The Kid made a movement of repugnance. Even to save his liberty, to save his life, it irked him to pull in cahoots with this cutthroat. His movement did not escape El Cuchillo, and the black eyes snapped with hate.

"Will you save your life?" hissed the Mexican. "Will you help me to escape and help yourself, or remain here to ride with the Rangers at dawn?"

The Kid drew a deep breath.

"I guess we're in cahoots till we pull out of this, greaser!" he said. "But when we step outside we hit different trails instanter. I reckon it gets my goat to let loose a lobo-wolf of your heft, it sure does! But they ain't stringing up this Kid at La Plaza—no, sir! Get to it!"

The Mexican did not speak again. He knelt to the work of excavation. With the short, keen knife he dug and loosened the sandy soil, scooping it out with a tin pannikin which had been left in the shack.

The Kid took the pannikin from him and scooped the loose earth while the bandit dug. They worked in silence, save for their laboured breathing and the occasional clink of the knife on some large stone embedded in the soil.

In the shack the heap of displaced soil and stones grew. Deeper and deeper grew the cavity, outward under the plank wall.

It was weary work with such tools; but life and liberty depended on it, and neither of the prisoners slacked.

An hour—another hour—and then the Kid, reaching his arm under the pine wall, could feel open space without, behind the wooden building; a breath of the night wind came to him through the opening.

All the time, in front of the shack, sounded the steady tread of the Ranger sentry.

There was a muttered curse from the Mexican as the blade of the stiletto snapped short on a stone.

"Great gophers!" muttered the Kid. "That's hard luck; but I guess we'll make the grade, feller!"

"Silencio!"

With the stump of the knife, with the tin pannikin, and with bare hands, they dug and dug, dragging away earth and stones, making the cavity under the wall larger and larger, wider and wider.

At last there was room for them both to crawl through and emerge into the outer air.

"Good!" muttered the Mexican.

He leaned back on the bench, dewed with perspiration, breathing hard. Faintly but clearly in the silence of the night came the tramp of the sentry Ranger.

The Kid waited.

The Mexican's eyes gleamed strangely at him in the gloom. El Cuchillo stirred. He grasped the bench, and, with a single wrench of his sinewy arm, broke off one of the legs. There was a sharp crack of the breaking wood, and the Kid started.

"You durned bonehead!" he breathed. "If that Ranger guy hears——"

The tramp of the sentry had receded. It was heard again, passing in front of the shack. The Kid listened with painful intensity; but the man had heard nothing.

"Follow me, senor!" muttered El Cuchillo; and the strange gleam of his eyes in the gloom struck the Kid again.

With the bludgeon in his dusky hand the Mexican plunged into the cavity.

There was room for him to crawl through, but he grunted and panted as he forced his way, brushing on crumbling earth. The Kid waited impatiently till the way was clear.

Once outside it was easy to wind away in the darkness from the sight of the sentry, and approach the stables from another direction; then Side-Kicker for the Rio Kid, a Ranger's cayuse for the bandit, and they would ride—to part for ever the minute they pulled out of Bullwhacker.

Impatiently the Kid waited till the bulky Mexican was clear of the cavity under the wall.

"Venga usted!" breathed the Mexican from without. "Come, senor!"

The Kid would not have been a whole lot surprised if the greaser had burned the trail without waiting for him to follow. But the bandit was waiting, crouching by the side of the shack without.

The Kid plunged through. The passage was easier for the slim Kid than for the Mexican. He ducked under the wall, and his head and shoulders came into view.

"Senorito!" It was the bandit's whispering voice as the Kid was rising. "You like not the company of the lobo-wolf, El Cuchillo! You are finished with him now!"

The dusky hand rose and fell like lightning, and the bludgeon crashed on the head of the Rio Kid. The bandit had turned on him like the treacherous wolf that he was.

The Kid sank back into the cavity like a log, stunned and senseless. And El Cuchillo, grinning, darted away into the darkness and disappeared.

The Luck of the Kid!

THE Rio Kid stirred.

A low groan left his lips.

His eyes opened in a wild stare. For a long moment he did not understand. But recollection flashed into his mind. His head was aching; he was hunched in the excavation under the plank wall; his Stetson lay beside him. There was no sign of El Cuchillo. How long he had lain there, crumpled up and senseless, the Kid did not know.

He suppressed a groan as he lifted his head and stared about him. Stars glimmered down from a dim sky; shadowy buildings loomed in the gloom. All was silent, save that, from the other side of the shack came a steady, tramping tread. It was the tread of the Ranger sentry passing to and fro in front of the shack, and evidently never dreaming of what had happened behind it.

The Kid drew a deep, deep breath.

There was no sound of alarm. Bullwhacker lay in slumber; only the pacing sentry was wakeful.

The escape of the Mexican bandit had not been discovered yet, and the Kid, as he realised that, set his teeth, and his eyes glittered.

El Cuchillo had struck him down by treachery, and left him senseless, to fall again into the hands of Mule-Kick Hall, aiming to cinch a cayuse from the stables behind the lumber hotel and ride for the plains. The Kid could picture the black-bearded, dusky ruffian creeping and lurking in the darkness, stealthy as a jaguar. But the bandit had not got away with it yet!

The first sound of a hoof-beat in the silence of the night would have been a sound of alarm, and there was, as yet, no alarm. El Cuchillo had not succeeded yet in cinching a cayuse.

Without a horse he could not hope to escape. On foot on the plains he had no chance of getting clear. And it had not been so easy as he figured to cinch a cayuse.

The Rio Kid dragged himself silently from the excavation, and stood in the dim starlight behind the shack. He passed his hand over his aching head. His brain was clear again now—clear and alert.

Something had delayed the flight of the Mexican. That delay had given the Kid time, and he was the galoot to make the most of the chance. Fate had had a kick coming for him when he rode into Bullwhacker; but the fickle goddess was turning his friend now.

The Kid had figured that he was going to find Side-Kicker, and ride, and if his eyes fell again on the treacherous lobo-wolf who had double-crossed him, there would be no riding that night for El Cuchillo.

Silent as an Apache the Kid glided away from the shack, keeping the building between him and the pacing Ranger.

A few minutes more and he was in the shadow of the stable wall behind the lumber hotel.

The night was growing old; it was verging towards dawn. But as yet the darkness was unbroken, save by the pale glimmer of the stars. From within the wooden building in the shadow of which he crept, the Kid could hear faint sounds of horses. Side-Kicker, he reckoned, was there, and once the grey mustang was between his knees the Kid counted on freedom.

Silently, in shadow, he crept round to the front of the stable. His keen eyes watched for the bandit. There was a sound again of stirring horses; the animals seemed restless, as if something had disturbed them. The Kid wondered whether El Cuchillo was in the stable, picking out a cayuse. Yet if he was there, why had he not already led out a horse, and burned the trail?

How long the Kid had lain insensible behind the shack, he did not know, but he reckoned that it was at least a half-hour. El Cuchillo had had plenty of time—yet something had delayed his flight.

Puzzled, watchful, alert as a lynx, the Kid crept on, and stood by the stable door, which was ajar. From within came a dim glimmer—a lantern was burning there, swung to a rafter. And now the Kid's ears picked another sound beside that of the restless stirring of horses—a sound that was faint, but unmistakable close at hand.

"By the great horned toad!" breathed the Kid.

It was the sound of a struggle—almost in silence; but the Kid could hear the faint scuffling, the panting breath.

And then the Kid knew what had delayed the bandit's flight. The horses were watched—one of the Rangers was sleeping in the stable to guard them; that was why the dim lantern burned. The Kid reckoned that he might have guessed as much—Hall was a man to guard every point. The faint sound of struggle told its own tale—El Cuchillo was grappling there with the watchman in the stable.

The Kid pushed the door silently open.

The lantern-light within was dim; but it was enough for the Kid. Within three yards of him was Side-Kicker, the mustang; and as if he knew his master had come, the mustang's head turned, and the intelligent eyes fastened on the boy outlaw. And the Kid's eyes danced as he saw, hanging on a hook on the wall a gun-belt and holsters—his own guns!

But then his eyes turned on the strange scene that was being enacted close at hand. And he caught his breath as he saw a tanned face, and glittering pin-points of steely eyes——

"Mule-kick Hall, by the great horned toad!" breathed the Kid.

It was the Ranger captain who was in the stable. His slicker and blankets showed that he had slept there. He was not sleeping now! He was on his back on the crumpled blankets, fighting for his life—and fighting a losing fight! For a brawny knee was planted on his chest, and two dusky hands were gripping his throat.

The Ranger's fingers tore desperately at those gripping hands, and tore in vain. Over him bent the Mexican, his black eyes glittering, his teeth set.

The Mexican's back was to the Kid—he did not see him, did not hear him. But Hall's despairing eyes glimpsed the boy outlaw as he stood gazing.

For a second only the Kid looked. Then he turned to the mustang. It was no funeral of his, he reckoned. Swiftly, silently, the Rio Kid picked up his saddle, saddled Side-Kicker, and loosed him from the halter. Swiftly, silently, he caught down the gun-belt, and buckled it on.

His heart was singing in his breast, with the certainty of freedom. Once on the back of the grey mustang, with his guns in his hands, the Rangers would not stop him—all Bullwhacker would not stop him. Life and liberty lay before the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande—and he led the grey mustang to the door.

But he stopped. It was no funeral of his, he told himself savagely; but he stopped. The mustang stood and waited, as the Rio Kid turned back. No funeral of his—the Ranger was his foe, his bitter foe, who had sworn to trail him down to death. And yet the Kid turned back.

Mule-kick Hall was at his last gasp, and the Kid could not leave him so. And the desperado who was choking out his life in deadly silence—he was the lobo-wolf who had turned on the Kid and treacherously struck him down and left him for recapture!

The Kid called himself a gink and a bonehead for horning into another man's funeral—and his enemy's! But he swung swiftly across to the struggle—and his grasp fastened on the back of the assassin's dusky neck.

"Carambo!"

El Cuchillo gasped out the word in startled amazement as that grasp fell on him, dragging him back.

"You pesky, double-crossing lobo-wolf," said the Kid. "I guess you're getting yours!"

With all the strength of his sinewy arms, he dragged the bandit from the Ranger, and flung him across the stable. El Cuchillo crashed down, and sprawled half-stunned. The Kid grinned down at the panting Ranger, as Mule-kick dragged himself on an elbow.

"Say, feller, I guess you want to hustle, if you aim to ride this baby to La Plaza at sun-up!" he drawled.

The Ranger panted, struggling for his voice. Only a gasping gurgle came from his strangled throat.

The Kid laughed and ran back to his horse. He led the grey mustang from the stable at the run, into the glimmer of the stars. He swung himself into the saddle.

The Ranger sentry, pacing before the shack, swung round at the sight of the Rio Kid, mounted on the grey mustang, breaking into a gallop. His rifle leaped to his shoulder, but the Kid was gone before the rifle cracked, and a bullet hummed yards from the boy outlaw as he galloped, his two guns roaring a song of freedom and defiance.

. . . . .

Mule-kick Hall and his men rode out of Bullwhacker in the sunrise; and bound to a horse in the midst of the Rangers, was one prisoner—not two! With them went El Cuchillo, to the justice that had long waited for him.

Far away on the prairie, the Rio Kid was riding under the golden sunrise, free as the wind that whistled past him as he galloped, and humming a merry tune as he rode.

(Popular Frank Richards returns to the RANGER next week with another rollicking story of the cheery Chums of Grimslade.)