

5 SMASHING COMPLETE STORIES and SPECIAL COMIC SUPPLEMENT!

The POPULAR

2^d



AT THE
MERCY
OF THE
RAPIDS!

Plug Hat who had sworn deep vengeance against the new sheriff over their bootleg whisky in the Red Flare saloon. But the threats had not been carried out, so far.

"You reckon you're going to make the grade, sheriff?" asked Colorado Bill.

"I'm sure going all out to do that very thing," answered the Kid. "This hyer is a new job to me, but I guess I can make good."

"They've sent for Two-gun Stone," said Colorado abruptly.

He watched the Kid's face curiously as he spoke.

Two-gun Stone was a name well known on the border. The Kid had heard of Two-gun Stone the gunman.

"Sho!" said the Kid.

"They were talking about it in the Red Flare last night," said Colorado. "Cactus Carter is laid up with his arm in a sling. And his bunch don't seem to be honing for trouble with our new sheriff. But Stone will be in town this evening."

The Kid smiled.

"I guess I've heard a whole lot about that guy," he said. "He's shot up more men than he's got fingers and toes, and he's greased lightning on the draw. And Cactus has sent for him?"

The Kid shook his head.

"I guess a galoot of that left ain't wanted in Plug Hat," he said. "This hyer burg is going to be kept in order now I'm sheriff, feller. We don't want rough-necks from all parts of Texas locating here. Two-gun Stone won't be allowed to locate in Plug Hat."

Colorado grinned.

"He's coming, shoriff, and he's coming a-shooting," he said. "It will be up to you."

The Kid nodded.

"I guess I got a word to say about that," he remarked.

And with a nod to Colorado the Kid walked across the plaza to the Red Flare saloon, the headquarters of Cactus Carter and his bunch.

The Sheriff Gives Order!

"THE sheriff!"

It was a murmur from the crowd in the Red Flare, as the Rio Kid walked coolly in at the door.

The Red Flare was the roughest dive in Plug Hat, and the crowd that haunted it, the roughest and toughest crowd in any part of Texas. Early as the hour was there was already a large crowd in the saloon, gathered about the bar where Mexican Dave, the greasy proprietor, dispensed bootleg liquor. Poker players sat at little tables, and at the upper end of the long room was a faro layout, surrounded by gamblers. Cactus Carter presided over the faro table; but another man was dealing the cards, one of Cactus' arms being in a sling. The gunman had not yet recovered from his shooting match with the Kid.

Near the gunman stood his inseparable associates, Red Harris, Yellow Dick, and Sandy Tutt. All of them looked round as the murmur announced that the new sheriff had entered.

Dark looks were cast at the Kid from all sides.

[There were a score of men, at least,

in the saloon, who longed to draw a gun on the sheriff; the kid had entered a hornet's nest, in walking into the Red Flare.

The Kid glanced over the crowd, and walked up to the bar. Mexican Dave eyed him evilly and uneasily.

The Kid's manner was cool and unconcerned. From his cheery smile, no one would have guessed that he was the best-hated man there, and that he was in the midst of deadly foes.

He gave the saloon-keeper a nod.

"I guess I've dropped in to chew the rag with you a piece, Dave!" he remarked casually.

"You are welcome, senor!" said the Mexican. "What will you take?"

"I guess I ain't troubling the fire-water, feller," said the Kid. "You've heard that I'm sheriff now, I reckon?"

"Si, senor."

"And I guess you know that a faro lay-out is agin the law of this hyer State of Texas?" went on the Kid.

The saloon-keeper stared at him blankly.

"You're wise to that!" said the Kid amiably. "Now, feller, I want you to know that this hyer town of Plug Hat is going to stand for the law, now that I'm sheriff. That game stops from now on."

"The faro—stops!" ejaculated the saloon-keeper.

"Jest that!" said the Kid. "I guess this is the only town in Texas where it's still going on; and it's stopping right now. You get me?"

Mexican Dave was silent.

His black eyes glinted at the sheriff of Plug Hat. His dusky hand made a convulsive movement towards the gun that was hidden, ready to his grasp, under the bar.

But he did not touch the gun.

"You don't seem to have a lot to say," remarked the Kid cheerfully.

"But you get my meanin'?"

"Si, senor!" gasped the Mexican.

"Chew on it," said the Kid. "I shall drop into the shebang later in the evening; and if the faro game is still going on, this saloon will be closed, by order, and you will be booted out of town. That's the lot, for you."

The Kid turned from the bar, and walked towards the faro table. He left a murmuring crowd behind him.

He stopped at the faro table, and met the glittering eyes of Cactus Carter. He gave the gambler a cheery nod.

"Evenin', Carter!" he said amiably.

"I guess you heard what I said to the greaser yonder. This game stops from now on. I'm sure going to make Plug Hat the cleanest town in Texas." He glanced up at the clock that was dimly visible over the bar through the fumes of smoke. "I'm droppin' in here again at nine o'clock. If this gambling game is going on then, this shebang closes for keeps."

"Mebbe you'll find somebody here to talk to you about that!" said Cactus Carter.

"I get you!" assented the Kid. "There's talk that you've sent for Two-gun Stone, the gunman. You better tell that guy that he won't be allowed to locate in this town."

"Who's going to stop him?" asked Cactus.

"The sheriff—that's me," said the Kid. "We got plenty of rough-necks in Plug Hat, and we sure don't want any more. You put Mister Stone wise that if he shows up in Plug Hat, he will be ridden out of town on a rail. Put him wise in time, and it may save him from getting hurt."

"Search me!" said Cactus Carter.

"I mean business," said the Kid. "I'll say this town of Plug Hat is going to be an example to all Texas afore I'm through with it."

And the Kid strolled away to the door.

Careless as his look was, the Kid was warily on his guard; but no gun was drawn as he strolled slowly through the crowded saloon. He walked out of the doorway into the sunlit street.

"By the great horned toad!" said Red Harris, when he was gone. "I guess this hyer is the limit, Cactus! I guess—"

"The durned, dog-goned jay!" muttered Sandy Tutt. "I guess I came mighty near pulling a gun on him."

Cactus' lip curled in a sneer.

"There ain't a guy here durst draw a gun on that galoot," he answered,

"But I guess Two-gun will fix him."

He turned to the gaming-table again.

"Make your game, gents."

The faro game was resumed. As the evening advanced, the crowd in the Red Flare saloon thickened. There was an incessant clinking of glasses, and buzzing of voices. The crowd was thick round the faro lay-out; and Cactus Carter, with a cold, expressionless face, superintended the dealing of the cards, and the raking-in of the stakes. But Cactus was thinking little of the game— which, if the new sheriff kept his word, was to be the last game of faro played in the cow-town. He was thinking of the gun-play that was scheduled for that evening, and of "Texas Brown" rolling on the floor of the Red Flare, riddled with bullets.

The Two-Gun Man!

POP SHORT, landlord of the Plug Hat Hotel, eyed the Rio Kid curiously, as he sat at the trestle table eating his supper. The Kid was the only guest, at present, in the lumber hotel; but that was not the reason why Mr. Short favoured him with such particular attention. Pop, like all the rest of the cow-town, had heard that the "bunch" had sent for Two-gun Stone, the famous "killer," and he wanted to know how the new sheriff was taking it.

Since the news had leaked out that Stone was coming, almost every eye in Plug Hat had watched the Kid keenly, watching for a sign of doubt or hesitation, anxious to see whether there was a streak of "yellow" in the new sheriff.

For Two-gun Stone was famed far and wide; his accuracy with his firearms, his swiftness in the use of them, his cold-hearted ruthlessness, were talked of in hushed tones in every cow-town from the Rio Grande and the Pecos to the border of Kansas. Stone was a desperado of the first water, who notched his guns for every man he killed; and he was known to have sixteen notches on the butts of his six-guns. There were few parts of Texas where Two-gun Stone could have walked a free man; but in wild cow camps like Plug Hat, he walked like a master; and even desperato gunmen like Cactus Carter regarded him with awed respect.

And that this handsome boy puncher, deft as he was with his guns, could stand against the terror of the cow country, nobody believed; and few ventured even to hope. And Pop Short's fat heart smote him a little, for it had

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By Order of the Sheriff!

(Continued from page 13.)

been his stunt to get the Kid elected sheriff, and he had not foreseen this move on the part of the defeated rough-necks.

There were plenty of other men in the room, all keenly interested in the boy sheriff. They wondered to see him eating his supper with cool unconcern, apparently interested only in the supper. Pop Short broke the silence at last.

"Say, Texas," he remarked, "what you thinking?"

He had no doubt that the Kid's thoughts were running on Two-gun Stone.

The Kid looked up. "Me?" he said. "I was jest thinking that these flapjacks are the best I've tasted for some time, Mr. Short. Better'n a guy can cook for himself over a fire in the chaparral. I guess that Chinese cook of yours is some cook. I'll say he earns his keep."

"Look here, you durned bonehead, ain't you thinking about Two-gun Stone?" demanded Mr. Short.

"Jest at present, nope," said the Kid. "Naturally, feller, I'm thinking of my supper, when I'm eating my supper—specially as it's good."

"Two-gun Stone will be in the Red Flare this evening."

"Well, I ain't going to the Red Flare till nine o'clock," said the Kid. "I got to drop in then to see that they've closed down the faro, like I said I would."

"You'll go all the same, if Stone's there?" persisted Mr. Short.

The Kid raised his eyebrows.

"Boy," said Mr. Short, after a long pause, during which the new sheriff ate frijoles with a good appetite, "I guess there's nothing to it. If it was only Carter and his bunch, I'll say you'd pull through. But—I guess I got to put you wise. Your best guess is to get on that mustang of yours and ride out of Plug Hat afore Stone hits the town."

"You reckon?" grinned the Kid. "Say, feller, are you fed up with your new sheriff already?"

"Not in your lifetime," said Mr. Short. "Why, ain't the town a new place since you been sheriff? There ain't been a hoss stole in the place; and Cactus' bunch ain't shot up a single guy. Plug Hat men don't hardly know the town; and a guy can hitch his hoss anywhere he likes, and find him there agin when he wants him. But I guessed that Cactus never would take it lying down—and now he's got Two-gun Stone to come here and handle you—and I guess the old times is coming back agin!"

And Pop Short shook his bald head sadly.

"That guy Stone surely does seem to have got a whole lot of guys scared stiff!" remarked the Kid. "But don't you worry, Mr. Short—that guy ain't locating in this town. I ain't allowing it."

"Then you ain't hitting the trail?" asked Pop Short.

The Kid laughed.

"Jever hear of a sheriff hitting the trail because a gunman was coming to town?" he asked. "That ain't in the picture at all, feller."

The Kid glanced round at Colorado Bill, who was smoking a Mexican cigar, sitting on the end of the trestle table. Colorado's rugged, bearded face was

thoughtful and gloomy. Since the Kid had been sheriff, he had picked out a dozen likely men as deputies and sworn them in; and Colorado was the chief of the "posse."

"Say, Colorado," drawled the Kid, "you want to call the posse together and be on hand at the Red Flare at nine sharp. That dive is closing down if the faro lay-out ain't stopped like I told Mexican Dave."

"The game ain't stopped," said Colorado. "It's sure going on jest the same as usual this minute."

"That does it!" said the Kid. "We're going to close down the Red Flare and boot Mexican Dave out of town."

"I guess Two-gun will be there," said Colorado, "and there ain't no two ways about it, sheriff. The Red Flare won't close down while Stone is around."

"You'll leave Stone to me," said the Kid. "You and the other guys will be on hand to see fair play. You'll keep your guns handy to see that Cactus' bunch don't horn in while I'm talking to Stone. You get me?"

"I got you," assented Colorado. "We're backing you up, sheriff, right till the cows come home; but it ain't no secret that there ain't nary a guy in Plug Hat will stand up to Two-gun. But if you're going to tackle that pizen polecat, I reckon all Plug Hat will be on hand to see fair play. We'll sure see that you get an even break, sheriff."

"What more would any galoot want?" said the Kid. "Say, here comes Mesquite, looking as if he'd lost a Texas dollar and found a Mexican cent. What's the rookus, Mesquite?"

"Two-gun's come!" gasped Mesquite. There was a buzz in the room, and a rush to the door. Only the Rio Kid remained seated at the table, plying his fork on the frijoles. The Kid did not see why the arrival of the gunman should interrupt his supper.

There was a clatter of hoofs in the rugged street.

The trampling horse came to a halt in front of the lumber hotel. A couple of minutes later a man strode into the room where the Kid sat.

A crowd followed him in.

The Kid had never seen Two-gun Stone before; but he knew at once that this was the man. He was a slim man, with a face as hard as if carved in granite, and eyes like flint. One cheek was deeply marked where a bullet had scored in one of the gunman's innumerable affrays. The scar extended from the corner of the mouth nearly to the ear on the gunman's right cheek, and added to the savage grimness of his look. The two guns, from which Stone took his name, were slung in low holsters, revealing the butts, where were the notches that numbered the killer's victims. Save for the grim, overbearing stare of the hard eyes, there was nothing truculent in the killer's looks. He walked softly, with a suggestion of the crouching of a panther in his manner. He gave the Kid a careless glance, and sat down at the trestle table a short distance from him. Pop Short hurried

to place before the newcomer the best supper that the Plug Hat Hotel afforded.

There was deep silence in the room. The new sheriff of Plug Hat and the killer who had been brought in to deal with him sat within six feet of each other.

The Kid, to the wonder of the on-lookers, went on with his supper as calmly as before, his appetite evidently undiminished by the proximity of the iron-faced desperado. A few minutes later Red Harris came in and exchanged a nod and a greeting with the newcomer. Then the flinty eyes of the gunman roved round and rested on the Rio Kid with a penetrating look. All eyes were on his face, and all saw the contemptuous smile that dawned there. Stone had learned from Red Harris who the Kid was, and his look showed that he did not think a whole lot of the new sheriff of Sassafras county.

The Kid ate beans calmly; but he was wary to his finger-tips. If the killer wanted to hurry matters, the Kid was ready. But Stone was apparently keen on his supper after his ride into town, and after that one penetrating look, he gave the new sheriff no further heed.

He finished his supper at last, washing it down with something stronger than the soft drink that the Kid preferred. When he rose from the table, he stood looking across at the Kid, and the hush in the eating-room of the Plug Hat Hotel was breathless. Only the Kid seemed unaware of the general palpitating excitement.

"I guess you're the guy they call Texas Brown in this burg?" he said.

"You've got it," assented the Kid. "You allow you're sheriff of Plug Hat?"

"Sure."

"Harris here lets on that you're going to stop the faro game at the Red Flare?"

The Kid nodded.

"That's what I aim to do," he replied.

"You figure that you'll get by with it?" said the gunman contemptuously.

"Quien sabe, as the Greasers say," answered the Kid. "Who knows, feller? All I know is that I'm going to do my little best, like I'm bound to, bein' sheriff and standin' for law and order."

"I guess Cactus Carter can see to all the law and order that's wanted in this burg," said Two-gun Stone. "I reckon I'm in cahoots with that guy, and I've come here to see him through."

"So I hear!" said the Kid amiably. "But it don't cut any ice, Mr. Stone. I'd hate to put you to a lot of trouble, and I ain't no objection to you bedding down in Plug Hat for the night, seeing you've ridden a long trail to-day. But I want you to hit the horizon in the morning."

"Say!" ejaculated the gunman, staring at the boy puncher as if he could hardly believe his ears.

"Don't I make it plain?" asked the Kid. "Well, I'll make it plainer. Now I'm sheriff, I'm cleaning up this camp. I aim to make it as clean as any cowtown in Texas. Killers ain't wanted here. Promiscuous shooting is a back number now in Plug Hat. There may be burgs in Texas where they want you, Mister Stone; but Plug Hat ain't one of them. Don't let me find you here to-morrow morning, or you will hear something drop."

There was a tense pause.

"Red here tells me that you're hornin' into the Red Flare at nine, to close down the shebang," said Stone at last.

"Red's sure well-informed," said the

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Kid, with a nod. "That's jest what I aim to do!"

Stone laughed.

"I'm moseying along to the Red Flare now," he said. "It's half an hour to nine. That gives you time to saddle up and git."

"Lots of time, if I wanted," said the Kid.

"It's your best guess," said Stone. "If you horn into the Red Flare to-night, Mister Kid Sheriff, I shall reckon you've come a-shootin', and act accordingly. You got that?"

"I got it!" assented the Kid.

With another contemptuous look, the gunman turned and walked out, with Red Harris grinning at his side. There

And the Kid strolled out on the wooden piazza, humming the tune of a Mexican fandango. Pop Short drew a deep breath.

Face to Face!

THE Red Flare Saloon was crowded.

Mexican Dave was accustomed to seeing his "dive" pretty full in the evening; but on this especial evening the crowd was a record. All the other dives on the plaza were deserted.

doubted whether the boy puncher would arrive. If the sheriff stepped into the Red Flare that evening, it was death either to him or to Two-gun Stone. And the Killer's reputation was deadly. Even among the new sheriff's backers there were doubts whether he would stand the test; and scarcely a doubt that, if he stood it, he would fall in the deadly contest.

The excitement was at fever-heat as the hand of the clock over the bar indicated nine.

"I guess the sheriff's taking water!" murmured Red Harris. "I surely guess he ain't coming in, Cactus!"

Cactus Carter's eyes turned to the door for the twentieth time.



The gunman, staggering under a rain of lead, was firing, too, but with disordered aim, at the new sheriff.

was silence till they were gone; and then Pop Short spoke.

"Mister Texas Brown, you sure did talk to that bulldozer like a Dutch uncle, but I sure want to see you get on your cayuse and ride. I'll tell the world, I'd hate to see you shot all to pieces by that bulldozer!"

"Mister Pop Short," answered the Kid, "you're sure talking out of the back of your head. Ain't I sheriff of this county? And ain't it my duty to stand for law and order? I ain't a-looking for trouble with any guy. But I'm shooting that bulldozer out of town, and I'm closing down the Red Flare. I've started cleaning up this camp, and I allow I'm going through with it!"

"Then I guess," said Mr. Short, "that you can rely on me, as a friend, to see you buried decent. I'll say that."

"I'm sure powerful obliged!" said the Kid, laughing. "But I ain't jumping at the offer. Colorado, you geck, get the boys together, and hump along to the Red Flare. You'll be wanted for closing down that dive, after I'm through with Two-gun Stone!"

Cactus Carter sat at the faro table, superintending the gambling game as usual. The faro lay-out was crowded; but all the players constantly glanced at the open doorway. By the table stood Two-gun Stone, his iron-hard face indifferent in expression, his low-slung guns well to the fore. The greasy Mexican saloon-keeper behind the bar was grinning. The election of the new sheriff promised to be a heavy blow to Mexican Dave—if he was allowed to carry on. But Mexican Dave calculated that the career of the new sheriff would be even more brief than that of his predecessor.

Almost all Plug Hat had crowded into the Red Flare, and, spacious as the saloon was, the crowd jostled one another at every turn. Among the crowd were Colorado Bill and Mesquite, and the other members of the new sheriff's pose.

They were there to see that Texas Brown had an even break when he faced the killer. And they were ready—and more than ready—to deal with Cactus Carter's bunch, if the rough-necks chipped in. But some of them

There was a sudden buzz.

Into the open doorway of the saloon stepped a handsome figure in goatskin and Stetson. The Kid was sheriff, but he still wore his cowpuncher's garb.

"He's come!" breathed Colorado.

The Rio Kid stepped into the saloon.

He smiled faintly as he felt himself the cynosure of every eye in the crowded dive.

Two-gun Stone breathed hard.

"I guess he wants it!" he said.

The Kid strolled to the bar. The crowd made way for him. He gave Mexican Dave a nod, and gestured with his hand towards the crowded faro table.

"That game ain't closed down, feller," said the Kid.

"No, senor," grinned the Mexican.

"You got your orders!" said the sheriff of Plug Hat. "This dive closes down for good to-night, and you quit town!"

He walked away towards the faro table, the crowd still clearing for him.

Thick as the crowd was, they contrived to leave plenty of room round the Kid. Room would be wanted when the lead began to fly; and there was no doubt that it would be flying soon.

The Kid reached the faro table. He stopped; and though he did not look directly at Two-gun Stone on the other side of the table, he was watching him. Behind Stone, as behind the Kid, the space was clear.

"Cactus Carter," said the Kid softly, "I'm here to tell you that this game closes down right now."

"You figure it does?" grinned the gambler.

"Sure! By order of the sheriff!" said the Kid quietly. "Sheriff's orders go in this hyer burg, now this infant is sheriff. Shut this game down!"

"Say!" drawled Two-gun Stone across the table.

The Kid's eyes fixed on him.

"You got anything to say, Mr. Stone?" he asked politely.

"Jest a few," said the gunman.

"Spill it!" said the Kid.

He stood with the tips of his fingers barely touching the butts of the guns in the low-slung holsters.

On the other side of the faro table Two-gun Stone stood in the same attitude. There was a silence as of death in the crowded saloon, broken for a moment or two by the shuffling of feet as the lane behind the two adversaries widened.

At any instant now the shooting might begin; each of the opponents was waiting and watching for the other to make a motion to draw. Their eyes met across the faro table that gleamed with spread cards and piled stakes.

"I got this to say," drawled the gunman. "I gave you a chance to get on your couryse and ride for your life. I reckon it was your best guess to jump at that chance while you had it, puncher!"

"Feller," said the Kid, "that ain't no way to talk to a sheriff. And you don't want to forget that you've got orders to beat it out of this cow-town at sun-up!"

The gunman smiled—a wolfish smile.

The Kid was watching his eyes, and the murderous gleam that intensified in them was all the warning he needed.

He knew that the gunman was about to draw, and his own hands closed on the walnut butts of his guns.

Like a flash, Two-gun Stone whipped the guns from his belt, his movement so swift that the eye could not have followed it. He was firing a fraction of a second later.

But the Kid's guns were out as swiftly, and they roared together from his hips.

A bullet struck the killer in the chest and another in the shoulder even as he pulled trigger. Fast as he was, the Rio Kid had beaten him to the draw by a split second.

Two-gun Stone staggered.

There was a streak of crimson on the Kid's cheek, and he felt the blood running down his arm.

But he was still firing across the faro table, and the smoke of the guns and the roar of the reports filled the Red Flare.

The gunman, staggering under the rain of lead, was firing, too, but with disordered aim, and the lead flew right and left of the puncher across the faro table and smashed on the walls of the saloon.

In a cloud of smoke, his face set and grim, the Kid was still shooting—till the gunman went down with a heavy crash, and his smoking guns rolled from his hands.

There was a yell of almost delirious excitement from the Plug Hat crowd.

"Two-gun's got his!"

The Kid ceased to fire. In the space of seconds he had fired six times, and every bullet had gone home.

Two-gun Stone lay on the floor, riddled with lead. As the Kid lowered his guns, the blood ran down under his sleeve and dripped on the floor. He did not heed it.

Two-gun Stone, tiger to the last, made a fierce effort to rise—to grasp at one of the guns that had fallen from his hands. But he fell back again. The guns, notched to record the death of sixteen victims he had shot in his savage career, lay within his reach, but

his hands could not touch them. He fell back, and did not stir again.

"By the great horned toad!" roared Colorado Bill. "The sheriff has got by with it! Two-gun's got his!"

Cactus Carter leaped to his feet. His right arm was in a sling, but with his left hand he grasped at a gun. The Kid's Colt lifted.

"Forget it, Cactus!" smiled the Kid. And the gambler hurriedly withdrew his grasp from the gun. He stood trembling with rage.

The Kid glanced round on the buzzing crowd.

"Gents," he said, "this dive is closing down right now, and it don't open agin. I guess you want to beat it quiet and peaceable. Colorado, you take that Greaser from behind the bar and boot him into the street. And if he don't beat it lively, fan him with lead and start him for Mexico!"

"You bet!" grinned Colorado Bill.

"Cactus, old-timer, I'll give you time to pick up your cards and your chips," said the Kid. "But you want to get a move on; get to it. You don't want to waste your sheriff's time!"

The crowd poured out of the Red Flare. The most truculent rough-neck in Plug Hat did not dream of disputing the orders of the sheriff now! In ten minutes the place was deserted; the naphtha lights were out; the door was locked, and the key in the possession of the sheriff.

The Kid walked away to the Plug Hat Hotel, where Pop Short bandaged his arm. Mr. Short made no secret of his surprise at seeing the Kid still alive.

"I guess," said Mr. Short, "that you've got me beat to a frazzle. I suro reckoned I was going to plant you in the morning. And you've shot up Two-gun Stone that had sixteen notches on his guns. And you've closed down the Red Flare. Search me! I'll say that after this, sir, you'll have Plug Hat feeding from your hand."

"Sure!" said the Kid cheerily.

THE END.

(Another thrilling story of the Rio Kid next week. "UNDER THE KID SHERIFF!" is a yarn you'll be certain to enjoy.)

BILLY BUNTER'S SECRET!

(Continued from page 11.)

Apparently his explanations had had no effect whatever upon that youth. Inexplicable as it was to Bunter, Arthur Augustus could not see that he was in the right all along the line.

It was clear enough to Bunter. Bunter's amazing intellect moved in mysterious ways its wonders to perform.

But Arthur Augustus plainly took a different view. Argument was wasted on him. Bunter realised that.

A cunning gleam came into his little round eyes behind his spectacles.

Arthur Augustus was prepared to handle the Owl of the Remove, to get possession of the key. Evidently it was a case for stratagem—more of Billy Bunter's masterly strategy.

"I think this is rather unfeeling, D'Arcy," said Bunter, shaking his head. "I've asked you here, and given you a good time, and never told you what I thought of you. After that, you turn on me like this. I've given

up expecting gratitude of anybody, but really, this is rather thick. If you insist, though—"

"I do insist, Buntah."

"Here goes, then!"

Bunter turned back to the door of the wine cellars.

D'Arcy followed him.

The Owl of the Remove laid the electric torch on the bottom stair. It glimmered on the oak door as Bunter put the key into the keyhole.

"Suppose they jump at me? They're capable of it."

"Fathead!"

"Well, you jolly well go in first!" said Bunter. "You can talk to them, see, while I nip off."

Bunter turned the key softly and silently. Arthur Augustus stood ready to step into the cellar.

The door opened.

All was darkness beyond; but a sound of breathing could be heard.

Mr. Pilkins and Walsingham had apparently settled down again on the rugs Bunter had kindly furnished them with, and turned off the electric light to sleep. But they were not sleeping, for a sound of stirring was heard as the door opened.

Bunter breathed hard.

He pushed the door open, leaving the key in the lock.

The next moment Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, greatly to his surprise, received a violent shove in the small of the back.

The swell of St. Jim's, taken quite by surprise, staggered forward into the cellar, falling on his hands and knees.

"Bai Jove! What—"

Click!

Billy Bunter jerked the key out of the door, grabbed up the electric torch, and fled up the stairs.

He closed the upper door and locked it, slipped the key into his pocket, and crept away up the big staircase.

In the morning one of Bunter's guests would be missing. Nobody—at least, so Bunter hoped—would be likely to guess what had become of him.

Five minutes later Billy Bunter was snoring peacefully, sleeping the sleep of the just!

THE END.

(Once more Billy Bunter has saved himself by the skin of his teeth. But there'll come a reckoning soon. You can only be sure of reading "BUNTER'S BOLT!" by ordering your POPULAR now!