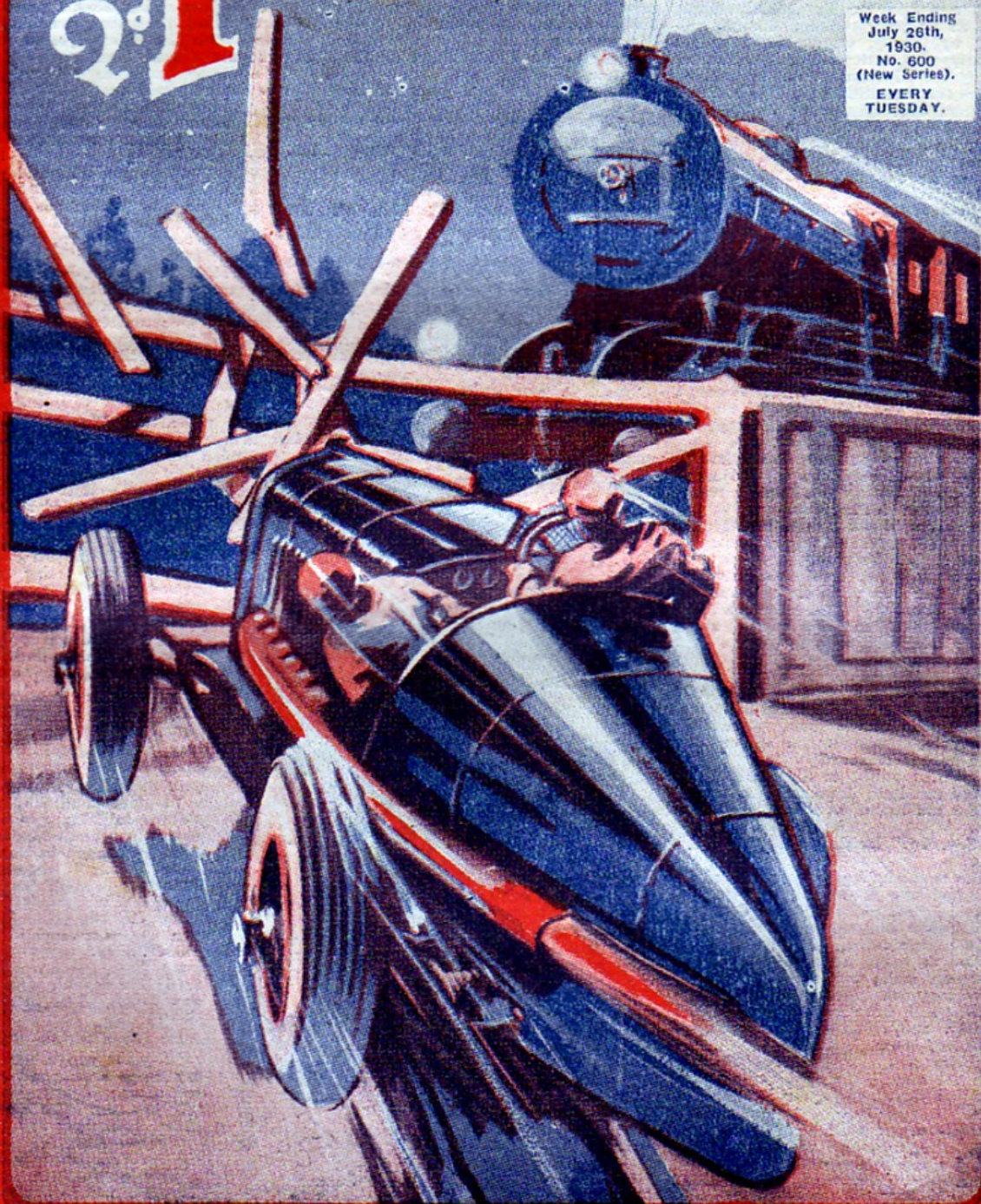


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"FIGHTING SPEED!" First of a Roaring New Motor-Racing Series!

THE RETURN of the RIO KID, Outlaw, IN—

A Rough-House in Plug Hat!

BY RALPH REDWAY.

The Horse Thief!

"LIGHT down!"

The Rio Kid was surprised. The Kid had ridden a long trail that day, and the alkali dust was thick on his goatskin chaps, and on his grey mustang. He had ridden by lonely ways, for Sassafras County was cow country, and more thinly settled than any other part of Texas that the Kid knew. He had seen no man that day, until he came in sight of the town of Plug Hat. The Kid was glad to see the cow-town, for outlaw as he was, and used to solitary trails, he liked the company of his fellow-men.

There were many cow-towns into which the Kid could not have ventured to ride; but he figured that in Plug Hat he was not likely to find trouble. For Plug Hat had a rich and juicy reputation, as the most lawless cow-town in all Texas; a town that law-officers disliked and avoided, and that was a law unto itself. And a town that sheriffs and marshals disliked was a spot where the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande was likely to find repose. Nobody there, he reckoned, was likely to know him; but even if he was known, he would be only one of the many breakers of the law who found a refuge from trouble in Plug Hat.

In that wild and lawless country, the Kid would not have been surprised at a hold-up on the trail, till he came in sight of the camp. But he was surprised now; for the town was scarce a hundred yards ahead of him, when a man stepped out of the mesquite, with a gun in his hand, and ordered him to light down.

The Kid grinned.

He knew that Plug Hat was a wild place. But if a hold-up could take place in full view of the town, without interference, it was surely a wilder place than he had reckoned.

The Kid pulled in Side-Kicker; but he did not light down. He sat in the saddle and looked at the man with the gun.

"Say, bo!" he drawled. "Is this a joke?"

The man who had stepped out of the mesquite was a powerful fellow, with a red beard, dressed in a cowman's flannel-shirt and chaps, with a stetson on the back of his tangled head. He looked as tough a galoot as the Kid had ever seen; but the Kid did not seem alarmed. More than one tough galoot had woke up the Kid for a gopher, and found him a cougar, all teeth and claws.

"Nary a joke!" answered the red-bearded man. The gun in his hand was half-raised. "I guess I want that hoss."

"He's sure a good hoss," agreed the Kid. "He's carried me a long way, and I guess he's carrying me farther, feller. Say, isn't that burg jest ahead of me Plug Hat?"

"You've said it! I guess you're a stranger here?"

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"I reckoned so, or you wouldn't be riding a cayuse of that heft into the town." The red-bearded man eyed the Kid's mount, appreciatively. "Why, dog-gone my socks, I'll say that that mustang is the best piece of hoss-flesh I've seen for a dog's age."

"He's sure the best piece of hoss-

The red-bearded man grinned.

"You're sure some tenderfoot," he said. "How long you reckon you'd keep that cayuse, if you took him into the town?"

"Jest as long as I wanted, I reckon." "Sho! Waal, I'm telling you that the minute Cactus Carter set eyes on that hoss, he would want him."

"I ain't the pleasured of knowing Cactus Carter," said the Kid. "But I sure opine that if he took a fancy to my cayuse, he would have a lot of trouble with the rider."

"Aw, forget it!" said the red-bearded man. "Light down, I'm telling you. It's jest my luck that I spotted you riding into town, and got hold of the hoss afore the other guys. Jest pure

luck, I reckon. You don't want to worry any, stranger; you wouldn't keep that hoss till sundown, if I let you pass with him. You're only losing him ten minutes ahead of time. Now light down, afore I get tired of holdin' this gun."

The Kid laughed.

He had picked out Plug Hat as a place that sheriffs disliked, and therefore suitable for an outlaw who was tired of the llano and the chaparral. But it struck him that that advantage could be over-done. Seemingly it was a town into which no stranger could ride without being deprived of his horse on the spot. The Kid had struck some lawless places in his time; but he figured that Plug Hat was the limit.

"Feller," he said, "you sure do tickle me a whole lot. Mean to say you can corral my cayuse this-a-way, and the guys in that burg yonder won't string you up for hoss-stealing?"

"I guess if all the hoss-thieves in Plug Hat was strung up, there wouldn't be rope enough in Sassafras County," answered the red-bearded man. "But I didn't stop you to chew the rag—I stopped you for that cayuse. I guess I'd be sorry to spill your juice all over the trail; but I ain't waiting any longer. You lighting down?"

He raised the six-gun.

"I never was a guy to say no to a six-gun," answered the Kid, amiably. "If you say light down, feller, light down it is."

"That's sense," agreed the big cowman. "Seeing you're a stranger here, boy, I'll tell you it ain't healthy to sit arguin' with

BOYS! HERE'S YOUR OLD PAL
BACK AGAIN!

And He's Still The Slickest Man on the
Draw!

flesh in all Texas," answered the Kid. "I allow there ain't another critter between the Rio Grande and the Big Colorado, that could keep sight of his heels in a race."

"Waal, light down."

"Hold on your hosses a piece," suggested the Kid. "I've sure heard that Plug Hat is a rip-sorter of a burg; but are they all hoss-thieves in this country?"





Red Harris, when he's got a gat in his grip. You got me?"

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

And he alighted from the grey mustang.

There was a smile on the Kid's handsome, sunburnt face; there was no hint of resistance in his manner. So long as a six-gun was looking at him, the Kid was prepared to be amiable.

Red Harris thrust the revolver back into his holster, and stepped towards the horse. The Kid's smiling and submissive manner quite deceived him; moreover, the Kid did not look dangerous, to the eyes of the burly cowman. He looked a "kid" cowpuncher—almost too good-looking and neat and natty in his get-up for a cowpuncher. In the eyes of Red Harris he was the tenderest of tenderfeet. Red Harris gave all his attention to his prize.

"Say, this is some cayuse," he said, enthusiastically. "I guess you're a dog-goned bonehead to ride him into this country, stranger; but you sure do know hoss-flesh; you surely have picked out a prize cayuse. This hyer is jest luck, for I've sure lost my own cayuse at poker to Colorado Bill, and I was wanting a mount. Cactus Carter will sure cuss a whole lot when he sees this here critter; but first come, first served, I reckon."

"Go slow!" murmured the Kid, as the red-bearded man was about to mount the grey mustang.

"What—great gophers!" gasped Red Harris.

The muzzle of a gun, in the Kid's hand, touched Red Harris lightly in his belt.

"Don't!" smiled the Kid.

The levelled gun, with the Kid's eyes

smiling over it, warned the cowman not to draw. It dawned on him that this handsome boyish cowpuncher was not the tenderfoot he had supposed.

"Search me!" gasped Red Harris.

"That's my hoss!" said the Kid cheerily. "I ain't giving him away—not now I'm the man that's handlin' the gun. Leave that gat where it is, Mr. Harris, or there'll be a dead hoss—thief lying around on this trail before you can say 'no sugar in mine.'"

Red Harris breathed hard.

"Put 'em up!" said the Kid.

The ruffian eyed him savagely, sullenly, and his hands went up slowly above his head. The Kid had him covered; and though his eyes were smiling, the cowman could read death in them.

"That's better!" said the Kid. "I see you've been carefully brought

up, feller, and you know when to do what you're told!"

"You dog-goned durned skunk!" said Red Harris between his teeth.

"Can it!" said the Kid. "I ain't going to plug you, feller; not if you behave. I'm sure obliged to you for puttin' me wise to what I've got to look for in Plug Hat. I reckon I'll borrow your hardware!"

With his left hand the Kid drew the revolver from the red-bearded man's belt. He dropped it in the trail and stamped a heavy heel on it.

Red Harris watched him savagely.

"You're safer without that," explained the Kid. "You sure might figure on spillin' lead, and then I should have to plug you for keeps, and I ain't come to Plug Hat a-shootin'. You get me?"

"Dog-gone you—"

"In the Frio country, where I was raised," said the Kid, "they hang hoss-thieves! I guess I feel powerful inclined to waste my trail-ropo on you, Mr. Harris. I surely do!"

"You dog-goned—"

"I've told you to can it," said the Kid mildly. "You've said your piece, feller, and it's my turn to chew the rag. Put your paws together!"

"I guess—"

"I ain't waiting," said the Kid, making a motion with his six-gun, and the ruffian put his hands together, over his head; and the Kid, with his left hand, threw a loop of cord over them and drew them tight.

"Now step under this cottonwood," said the Kid.

"I guess—"

"Pronto!" rapped out the Kid.

Red Harris stepped under the tree. The Kid reached up and tied the end of the cord to a bough.

"I guess that fixes you!" he

remarked "I sure opine that a hoss-thief ought to be strung up, but I'm letting you off light. You can stand there and cuss, Mister Harris, till somebody comes along and lets you loose. If nobody comes along the trail, I guess you'll worry loose by midnight!"

"You god-darned lobo wolf!" hissed Red Harris. He stood helpless under the tree, his bound hands fastened to the branch above his head. His eyes fairly burned at the Kid's cool, handsome face.

The Kid smiled.

"So-long!" he drawled. "I guess you've got time to do a lot of thinking, feller, and you better think that the next time you hold up a tenderfoot for his hoss, he may turn out a wildcat. So-long, feller!"

The Kid remounted Side-Kicker and rode off towards Plug Hat. Red Harris, left standing under the tree, yelled curses and threats after him, while he dragged and wrenched in vain at the cord that held him secure. His furious voice followed the Kid into the main—and only—street of Plug Hat.

Sharp Shooting!

THE sound of a voice, swearing steadily, greeted the ears of the Rio Kid as he walked into the Plug Hat hotel, leaving Side-Kicker hitched to the hitching-rail in front of the timber building. The Kid had heard plenty of "cuss-words" in his time, and was no stranger to the picturesque language of the cow country; but he had never heard a guy swear so fluently before, and he was interested. He glanced round him and sighted a fat man in shirt-sleeves, who stood by the bar, and who, he guessed, was the landlord of the shebang.

If the fat man was the landlord, he did not seem interested in the arrival of a new guest. His face was red and excited; he was evidently deeply perturbed about something. Taking no heed of the Kid, he continued to swear with undiminished fluency. Three or four other men were in the room, and they listened to him with respectful admiration for his flow of language, grinning to one another the while.

"Pop Short," said one of them. "You sure can cuss a whole lot! You sure can cuss off a bull buffalo's hind leg!"

The fat man still swore, unheeding. Evidently there was something serious the matter. The Rio Kid waited, and watched him for some minutes. He was not the guy to horn into any man's game, and if Mr. Short wanted to swear, it was not the Kid's funeral. But after waiting politely for a few minutes, the Kid grew restive. He wanted refreshment for himself and his steed, and his flow of language, picturesque as it was, was a poor substitute.

"Say, fellers," said the Kid, looking round, "where's the boss of this hyer shebang. I want to know?"

One of the loungers hooked his thumb towards the fat man.

"Stranger," he answered, "that's the guy you want. That's Pop Short!"

"Mr. Short," said the Kid politely, "I dislike interrupting a guy that can cuss like you do, and if there was another hotel in this burg, I'd sure let you run on till the cows come home. But—"

"The dog-goned scallywags!" said Pop Short. "The pesky skunks! The

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all-fired polece ! I guess it was some of Cactus Carter's gang that lifted my pinto! Yep! And if I was as young as I used to be, I'd go hunting them up and down Plug Hat with a gat in my grip. And if there was a man in this hyer burg that was worth calling a man, he sure would put paid to that horse-stealin', rustlin', cow-liftin' thief, Carter."

"Can it, Pop Short!" said one of the loungers. "It sure wouldn't be healthy for you to let Carter hear you calling him fancy names."

"What's the trouble, feller?" asked the Rio Kid curiously. "What's this guy Carter been doing?"

Mr. Short gave him attention at last. "He's lifted my pinto, or some of his friends have," he answered. "A guy can't call his hoss his own in this town."

"You won't get your cayuse back by cussin'," suggested the Kid. "Why not go to the town marshal?"

"Because there ain't one, you bonehead."

"Then you want to go to the sheriff!"

"Guess again!" snarled Mr. Short.

"Well, what's the matter with going to the sheriff?" asked the Kid. He was really curious. The Kid disliked sheriffs himself, but he saw no reason why the landlord of the Plug Hat should share his dislike.

"Because there ain't no sheriff, you jay!" answered Mr. Short. "There ain't been never more than two sheriffs in Sassafras county, and both of them died with their boots on; and I ain't heard of any galoot that is anxious for the job since. If you was to offer it with a bag of dollars sticking on to it, I guess you wouldn't find nobody to take it!"

"Search me!" said the Kid, in surprise.

Mr. Short resumed swearing. He seemed to find some relief in this for the loss of his pinto.

"Feller," said the Kid, "you'll be losin' your voice if you keep on cussin' that way. Ain't there a man in this town who's white enough to stand for sheriff, and ain't there white men enough to elect him if he stood?"

"I guess there's plenty of guys in this burg would be glad to elect a sheriff," answered Mr. Short. "But I guess if they elected one, they'd have to bury him the next day, and nobody's houin' for a front place in the town cemetery!"

"Oh, sho!" said the Kid. "Well, I've heard that this town of Plug Hat was a warm corner, but it sure does look to be like the hot place with the lid off. But if there ain't any marshal and there ain't any sheriff, you surely want to go and look for that hoss-thief with a gun, feller!"

"Say, you got a lot to say for a kid cowpuncher," remarked one of the men in the room, coming towards the Kid. "I reckon you're the guy that Red Harris went to meet on the trail when he saw you coming down the hill."

"I'm that guy!" assented the Kid.

"Then I guess you've hoofed it into town."

"I guess not," said the Kid, smiling. "I've sure ridden into this burg on the back of my cayuse, feller!"

"Then what was Harris doing to let you get away with it?"

"The last I saw of Mr. Harris, feller, he was standin' under a cottonwood with his hands tied to a branch, cussing like our friend here," said the Kid. "That's how I left him."

The Plug Hat man stared at the Kid.

"And who tied him up?" he demanded.

"This very identical guy," answered the Kid.

"I guess that's a durned lie," said the Plug Hat man. "Harris wouldn't make more'n a small mouthful of a kid cowpuncher like you. I guess—"

"Let the puncher alone, Colorado Bill!" said Mr. Short. "What do you want to be kicking up a rookus for, the minute the feller puts his nose into town?"

"Aw, don't you worry about this infant, Mr. Short," said the Kid. "This guy don't mean any harm, and he's going to ask pardon for saying that what I said was a durned lie!"

"You reckon?" grinned Colorado Bill.

"I reckon!" assented the Kid. "Because if you don't, I've got a gun here that will make you wish you hadn't forgotten your nice manners to a stranger!"

"You dog-goned young bonehead!" roared Pop Short, forgetting even the loss of his pinto in his anxiety for his new guest. "Don't you draw on him, Bill—I tell you I won't have my floor all mused up!"

Colorado Bill's hand was already on his gun.

"Take Mr. Short's advice, feller," said the Kid. "Don't pull that gun—it won't be healthy."

"By thunder!" said Colorado Bill, and he dragged his gun from the holster.

Crack!

There was plenty of men in Plug Hat who were swift on the draw. But the swiftness of the Rio Kid seemed like magic.

Colorado's gun was only half out of its holster when the Kid fired.

There was a roar from the cowman as the gun was smashed out of his hand by the bullet.

It flew across the room and dropped on the sanded floor, and Colorado stood clutching his right hand with his left, uttering howl on howl of agony. The shock had jarred his arm from wrist to shoulder, and for the moment he figured that his hand was shot off.

The Kid smiled at him over his smoking gun, with a wary eye at the same time on the other men in the room. He was watchful for anyone to draw a gun. But no other guns were drawn. The Plug Hat men were staring blankly at the kid cowpuncher who was so wonderfully quick "on the shoot."

"Carry me home to die!" ejaculated Mr. Short. "Say, bo, where did you learn to pull a gun like that? Why, that beats Cactus Carter."

"Feller," answered the Kid, "I was pullin' a gun before I stood as high as a cowman's cinch."

"Ooooooh!" roared Colorado Bill.

"Oooooooch!"

He rubbed his numbed right hand, astonished to find that it was still there.

"Say, you don't want to make a fuss," drawled the Kid. "You ain't hurt, feller, though I guess that gun of yours will never be any use again. You want to nurse your arm a piece, that's all. You want to be pleased that I didn't shoot your fingers off. But I'm a peaceable galoot, and I didn't come to Plug Hat a-shooting."

Colorado Bill glared at him and nursed his numbed arm. The Kid smiled and holstered his gun and turned to the landlord.

"Mr. Short," he said, "now our friend here is through, I guess I want to see about fodder for me and my cayuse."

"Your cayuse?" said Pop Short.

"Where'd you leave your cayuse?"

"Hitched on the rail outside."

The hotel-keeper grinned sourly.

"You sure are a tenderfoot, and you don't know Plug Hat," he said. "You won't need any fodder for your cayuse."

"And why not?" asked the Kid.

"Because I reckon he's not there now," answered the landlord. "No cayuse that was ever hitched in Plug Hat ever stayed hitched more'n a minute."

"Oh, great gophers!" ejaculated the Kid.

He rushed to the door, while the men in the Plug Hat hotel chuckled—even Colorado joined in the chuckle as he nursed his arm.

The Kid stared out at the hitching-rail. Pop Short's statement was well-founded. The rail was untenanted, and Side-Kicker had disappeared.

The Kid Horns In!

THE Rio Kid's brow set grimly. Many and strange had been his experiences in the wild cow country, but Plug Hat Camp was a new thing even in the Kid's experience.

Certainly, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande was not likely to be troubled by the law in such a warm corner. Evidently there was no law in Plug Hat but the law of the Colt, and the man who was the quickest to draw it. But lawlessness carried to the extent of cinching a galoot's cayuse got the Kid's goat. The Kid had not come to Plug Hat to hunt for trouble; indeed, the Kid, wild as his reputation was, never did hunt for trouble. But trouble had a way of dogging his trail and coming to him unsought. And now it had come again. For the Kid, peaceable as his intentions were, was the last man in Texas to have his horseflesh lifted without raising Cain.

He looked along the rugged street, dusty and hot in the glowing red sunset of Texas. At a distance was the plaza, an open space in the centre of the town, with the signs of several saloons in full view.

There was a crowd in the plaza, gathered chiefly outside the Red Flare Saloon. Thirty or forty men were standing crowded round a man who was mounted on a cask, and round the outskirts of the crowd were a dozen or more on horseback. Something was going on in the plaza. Even at that distance the buzz of voices and the sound of laughter reached the ears of the Rio Kid.

He turned back into the lumber hotel.

"Say, Mr. Short," said the Kid. "I sure don't see my cayuse, and I guess some guy has rustled him. Mebbe you could tell me where to look for him?"

"Mebbe," answered the landlord. "But I guess you don't want to look for the cayuse, Mister—Mister—"

"Brown!" said the Kid amiably. Even in a hot place like Plug Hat, the Kid did not care to announce his real name. "Texas Brown, sir."

"Waal, Mr. Brown, your best guess is to buy another hoss and ride out of town," said Mr. Short. "There's a plenty hosses for sale in Plug Hat—any day in the week, Mr. Brown."

"I ain't doubting that," said the Kid. "I guess from what I've seen of this hyer burg, there'll always be hosses for sale here."

"You've said it," grinned Colorado

Bill, "and if you've got a fancy for your own cayuse, you can sure buy him at the auction."

"The auction?" repeated the Kid.

"I guess he's being sold already," grinned the cowman. "I can hear the boys in the plaza, and I guess that means an auction. Cactus Carter always auctions a hoss when he lifts it off a stranger, and I reckon it was Cactus lifted your cayuse."

"I guess I saw a whole caboodle of guys in the plaza," said the Kid, his frown deepening. "If they're selling my hoss, it won't be healthy for the guy that sells him, or for the guy that buys him, either."

"I reckon you'll be in time for the sale if you hump along," answered Colorado.

"Can it, Colorado," interrupted Pop Short. "If the puncher aims to horn in and make trouble, Cactus will fix him for the cemetery, and you're wise to it, dog-gone you. Mister Brown, you take my advice and get out of town without meeting up with Cactus."

The Kid smiled; a grim smile.

"I ain't getting out of this town yet,"

he said, "and if I was, I guess I wouldn't be hitting the trail without my cayuse."

"Aw, don't act foolish," said Pop Short. "I tell you Cactus is a gunman, and if you worry him any, you're a dead puncher. Look here, if you're set on getting that cayuse, you can buy him — if you're heeled. But buy him peaceable."

The Kid laughed.

"This sure is some town, where a guy is wanted to buy his own hoss," he said. "If I buy that hoss, feller, all I shall give for him will be a chunk of lead."

The Rio Kid swung out of the hotel and walked up the rugged, dusty street towards the plaza.

"Say, I'm going to see Cactus shoot him up!" remarked Colorado Bill, and he followed the Kid, and the rest of

the loungers in the lumber hotel went the same way. Pop Short shook his head sadly. Mr. Short, like other peaceable residents in Plug Hat, would have been glad enough if a stranger had come to town, who was able to play Cactus Carter at his own game—which was gun-play. But he did not figure that this boyish-looking puncher could do it. Cactus was a "killer," with a reputation as wide as Sassafra county, and he was acknowledged leader of the whole lawless element in Plug Hat. Mr. Short's opinion was that "Texas Brown" was going straight to be accommodated with a place in the camp cemetery.

The Kid walked coolly up the dusty street and reached the plaza. He stopped on the edge of the crowd to take his bearings before he horned in. The Kid meant business, but he was wary, and not in a hurry.

He looked keenly and curiously at the man mounted on the cask. The man was rather a slim fellow, dressed with rather more elegance than most of the men of Plug Hat; and he packed two guns. His face was hard, clean-shaven but for a little black moustache, and the eyes were keen, sharp, searching, and cold as ice; the eyes of a professional gunman. The Kid nudged a burly cowman near him, and asked:

"Say, who's that galoot, feller?"

The cowman stared.

The Rio Kid shoved forward.

Two or three rough fellows stared round at him. "I advised him not to shove, with inroads attached. But the Kid smiled amiably.

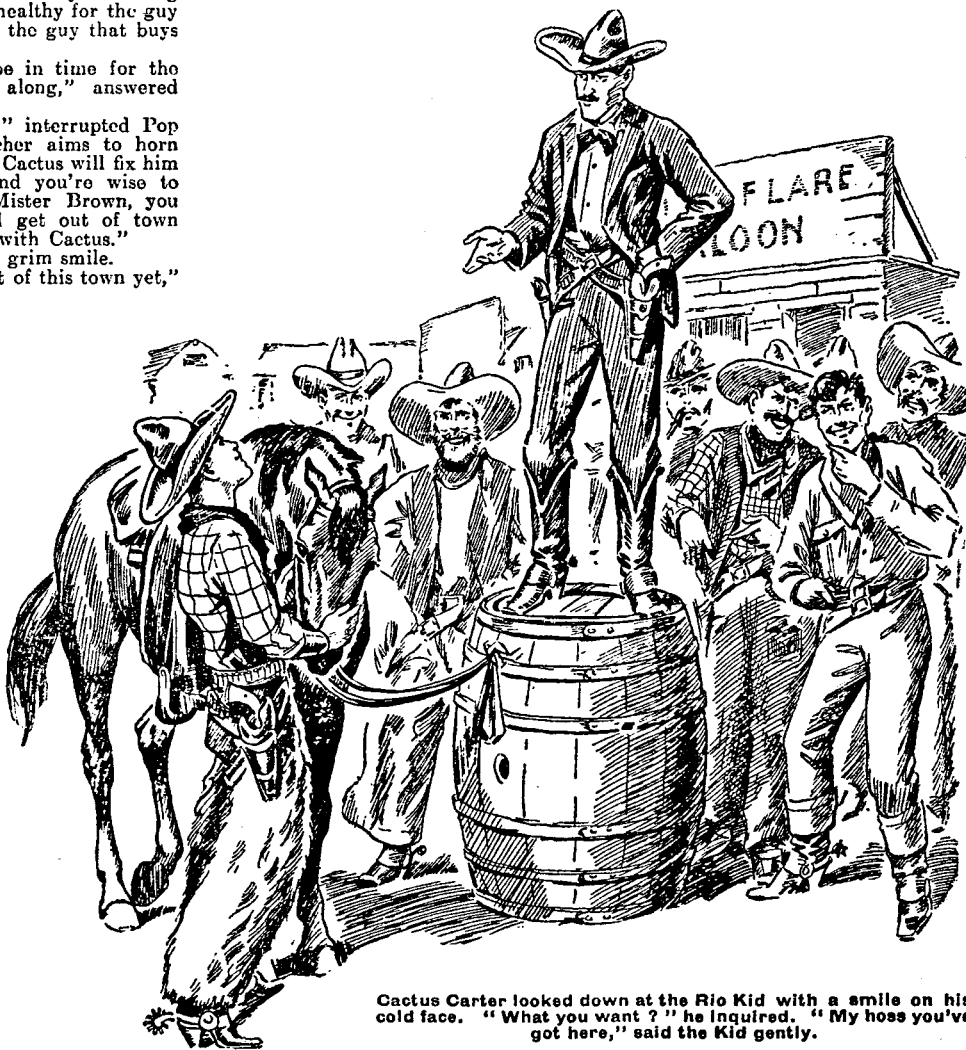
"I sure want to see the hoss," he said. "You see, fellers, that's my hoss, and I've called for him."

"Great gophers! You the tenderfoot that rode that cayusa into town?"

"Yep!"

There was a roar of laughter.

"Here, Cactus!" yelled Mesquite.



Cactus Carter looked down at the Rio Kid with a smile on his cold face. "What you want?" he inquired. "My hoss you've got here," said the Kid gently.

"You're a stranger hyer, if you don't know Cactus Carter," he answered.

"I sure guessed he was Carter, but I wanted to know," said the Kid. "Say, he's selling a cayuse?"

"Yep! There it is, tied to the cask."

The Kid pushed a little forward, and through the crowd he sighted Side-Kicker, tethered to the cask on which the gunman stood.

"Say, gents!" Cactus Carter was speaking. "I sure want you to walk up with your bids. Don't keep me here all night. Mesquite yonder said two hundred dollars for this mustang. Who's the next?"

"Two-twenty!" called out a voice.

"Two-twenty I'm bid for this cayuse!" said Cactus Carter, who was evidently used to conducting auctions. "Who's making it two-fifty?"

"Here's the tenderfoot, and he's called for the hoss."

Way was made for the Kid at once. He was allowed a free passage through the crowd to reach the auctioneer.

He arrived in the open space round the cask. And Side-Kicker turned his head, and whinnied to his master. The Kid stroked the mustang's glossy neck.

Cactus Carter, from the top of the cask, looked down at him, with a faint smile on his cold face.

"What you want?" he inquired.

"This hyer cayuse," answered the Kid gently.

"Bidding for him?"

"I sure never struck a town in Texas afore, sir, where a guy's hoss was stole under his nose, and offered for sale ten minutes after!" said the Kid.

"Mebbe," answered the man on the

ask—"mebbe. You're learning, boy. If you ain't bidding for the hoss, stand back!"

"I ain't bidding for the hoss," said the Kid mildly, "and I ain't standing back a whole lot, neither. Gents, I'm a stranger in this hyer town, and I only want to know. If this hyer is a joke that you guys play on strangers, why, I'm ready to laugh as loud as any galoot hyer. But if it's business, I just want to say that I don't stand for it."

There was another roar of laughter. "Say, boy, you hit the horizon while you're all in one piece," said Cactus.

"But I want to know," persisted the Kid. "I guess it's only polite to put a guy wise. Mean to say that a stranger can't ride into this hyer burg without having his cayuse lifted off him this-a-way?"

"Jest that," said Cactus.

"And s'pose a guy don't stand for it, what's likely to happen to him?" asked the Kid, in the same mild tone.

"Suthin' sudden," answered the man on the cask, with a grin. "There was a stranger hyer yesterday who raised objections. He's in the camp cemetery now."

"Sho!" ejaculated the Kid. "Now stand back!"

"Not in your lifetime!" answered the Kid. "I'm done asking questions. Now I want my hoss."

"How much you bid?"

"Nothing, unless it's a pill from a Colt," said the Kid. He glanced round at the staring crowd. "Gentlemen, this sale is off. This hyer critter ain't for sale now. This critter is mine, and any galoot that says he ain't mine has got to back it up with a gun!"

Beaten to the Draw!

THE Rio Kid spoke quietly, but clearly, and every man in the Plug Hat crowd heard him. There was a swaying back of the crowd. They had been gathered thick round the auctioneer's rostrum; but in a moment, as it seemed, there was a wide lane left in the throng. The Plug Hat men were accustomed to getting promptly out of the line of fire.

The Kid was left well alone, facing the cold-eyed man on the cask. The latter was eyeing him searchingly.

The Kid stood in an easy, almost careless attitude, but his hands were very close to the walnut butts of his guns, low-slung in the holsters. His eyes were on Cactus Carter's warily.

A glint was in the icy eyes of the man on the cask.

"Say, puncher," he said quietly, "you're shooting off your mouth a whole lot for a kid. I guess you want to get back to your ranch in a hurry."

"That's where you miss your guess, Mr. Carter," answered the Kid cheerfully. "I've come to Plug Hat to stay a while; and I ain't hitting the trail nohow. Jest now I want this hoss."

There was a breathless hush in the plaza of Plug Hat. All the crowd knew now that it would be gun-play.

Cactus Carter made no motion to touch a gun. There was a faint smile on his face, and his hands hung carelessly at his sides. But all knew his swiftness on the draw. And every moment they expected to see a gun leap from his holster, and ring out the death-knell of the boy puncher who defied him so recklessly. Well they knew that Cactus Carter's apparent carelessness was only due to the fact that he was assured that the life of the puncher was in his hands, to take when he pleased.

The Kid made a movement as if to unhitch the rope that tethered the grey mustang to the heavy cask.

"Don't touch that rope, puncher,"

Ever heard of an Outlaw becoming a Sheriff? Gee, No!



Ever heard of a BOY Outlaw wearing the Sheriff's star! Surely Not!

Well, next week you'll hear all about it in the most thrilling tale of Texas ever written—

"THE RIO KID SHERIFF!"

said Cactus Carter; and his voice was soft and almost pleasant.

"Why not?" asked the Kid. "The critter's mine, and I'm sure going to take him back to the shebang yonder."

"I guess not," smiled Carter.

"But afore I go," continued the Kid, "I'd be powerful glad if some guy would tell me who cinched my hoss? I sure want to kick that hoss thief across the plaza."

"I guess you don't want to hoof it a long way to find that galoot," said Cactus Carter.

"Mebbe it was!"

"Mebbe it was."

"You look the sort of dog-goned, pizen skunk that would steal a hoss," remarked the Kid, in a casual tone. "I guess in any other burg you'd have been strung up, Mr. Carter, jest on your looks."

There was a buzz in the crowd, and the gunman caught his breath. It was the first time, since Cactus Carter had been king-pin in Plug Hat, that he had been talked to like this.

The hardening of his face, the glint-

ing of his eyes, warned the Kid, used to such signs, that he was about to draw. But the Kid drawled cheerily:

"Yep! I'll say you look a born lobo-wolf, Mr. Carter, and I guess I needn't look any farther for a hoss thief. I don't stand for hoss stealin', Mr. Carter. You get down off'n that cask and I'll boot you across the plaza, jest like I said! You sure ain't worth dirtyin' a cowman's boots on! But you got to learn to keep your thievin' hands off my hoss!"

Like lightning the gunman's hand moved.

But swift as he was the Kid was swifter. Cactus Carter's gun was out of the holster; but the Kid's Colt was looking him in the face before his hand could rise.

The Kid did not speak; but his eyes gleamed over his gun, and Cactus Carter kept his hand down.

Had he lifted it, he knew that a bullet would have crashed through his brain before he could fire.

Cactus Carter, who had never been beaten to the draw before, knew when he had met his master. His face whitened, not with fear, but with deadly rage; his eyes scintillated at the Kid. But he kept his hand, with the gun in it, down at his side.

There was a gasping of deep-drawn breath in the Plug Hat crowd. Cactus Carter was standing helpless under a gun—the first time any eye in Plug Hat had seen such a sight. For a second or two there was no sound but that startled gasp from the watching crowd.

"Drop that gun!"

The Kid spoke suddenly, sharply.

The gun crashed to the ground beside the cask. The Kid uttered no threat; the threat was in his eyes, and his levelled Colt. Cactus Carter's life hung on a thread; and life was dear.

He still remained calm; only the pallor of his face, the burning of his eyes betraying his deadly rage. Why the Kid did not shoot was a mystery to the staring onlookers, for by the law of the Colt—the only law in that lawless cow-town—he was entitled to shoot his enemy dead as soon as he made a motion towards a gun. But the Rio Kid had his own ways, and they were not the ways of Plug Hat.

"Now the other," said the Kid.

Cactus Carter, in silence, lifted his other gun from the holster, and dropped it to the ground. The action was watched in awed silence by a hundred pairs of eyes.

"That sure is sense," remarked the Kid pleasantly. "You're a good little man, Mister Carter, and you know how to do as you're told. I ain't got no hunch to spill your juice, so long as you behave."

Cactus Carter drew a hissing breath. "Now hump down off'n that cask," said the Kid. "I ain't going to spill your juice, feller, if you don't make

(Continued on page 11.)

That Mad Drive!

THE blue shape of the hurtling Connaught split the greyness of the road like an azure streak. Behind the wheel Jack sat, with his foot hard down on the throttle pedal, Cope at his side with his injured arm wrapped about in cloths to protect it. Fifty miles lay behind them, and Jack had driven faultlessly, never losing a second. Cope had worked out how much time they had for the journey, and Jack now knew that half a minute's delay would make them miss the boat they were trying to catch, and on which they now intended to ship the entire car.

They had one hundred miles still to travel, and a shade over two hours in which to do the distance. Already Jack was handling the machine as though he had been born driving it. He had forgotten the faint nervousness with which he had started.

The fierce crackle of the exhaust, the booming of the engine, and the shrill whine of the supercharger were music which spurred him on. They had no hooter, but the noise that the racing machine made was more than sufficient warning at cross-roads.

They overhauled fast traffic as though it were standing still. Jack took curves wide, hugging the side of the road, and they were travelling at something very close to 100 m.p.h. when they plunged over the Welsh border.

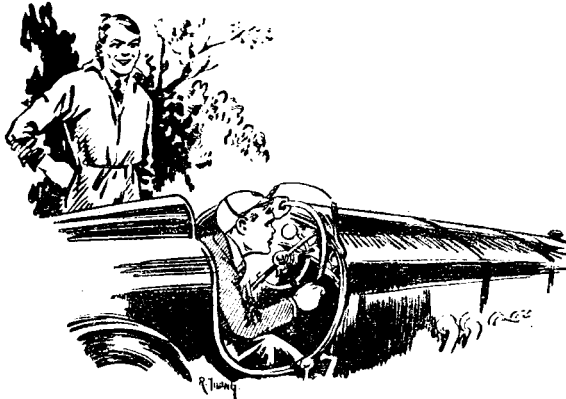
They cloared the wild hills of Bettys-Coed, and Cope guided Jack over a short cut that missed Bangor and brought them to Menai Bridge—with twenty-five miles to go and twenty minutes in which to do the distance.

"Kick her wide open, or we miss the boat!" Cope yelled.

"All right!" was Jack's answer, and his goggled gaze bored past the windshield as he watched the straight road.

They were doing a hundred again before he reached the end of the straight,

IT'S JACK KING'S AMBITION TO GET INTO A MOTOR WORKS AND BECOME A PUKKAH RACING "CRACK." YOU'VE READ HOW HE CAN HANDLE A CAR.—THE POINT IS, WILL HE GET A CHANCE OF DRIVING A RACER ON THE SPEEDWAY?



SEE

"JACK KING—SKID KID!"

By ALFRED EDGAR,

next week's tale of smashing motor-racing adventure, featuring our schoolboy speed merchant!

and saw an empty-looking village ahead. He hurtled through it, and braked madly for a bend, changing down. Screaming in gear, the car spun around it, then opened up once more along another straight.

Faster and faster yet they travelled. They passed the hundred miles-an-hour mark and flung without easing their speed into a long curve. They were almost clear of it when Cope let out a yell:

"Level crossing!"

It showed in front—white gates closed across the road! And Jack saw a train bearing down! The crossing was fifty yards ahead.

Jack's right foot stamped the throttle pedal full down to the floorboards. Cope ducked in his seat. Jack huddled down and held the car like a projectile for the gates. They came at him like a

white screen. He tightened his grip on the wheel, and set his teeth as he saw the train almost entering the crossing.

There was the fraction of a second of suspense, then the blue Connaught hit the barrier in the very centre. Woodwork splintered and flew out. The car leaped high—and hurtled on!

Jack saw the buffers of the locomotive level with his head. He saw the smoke-box, its pounding drivers, the clattering bogey-wheels—and the other gates opposite.

The engine was on them. It seemed as though it must strike the car and grind it to debris under its steel-flanged wheels—then they were past it, the second gate was shattering as though it was made of cardboard.

The car ripped through, skidded, straightened under Jack's quick hands, and plunged on with the throttle kicked wide open.

Behind them, broken woodwork was still flying about the crossing.

"After that, we ought to catch the boat!" Cope panted.

And they did!

The following day Jack learned that No. 1 car in the Connaught team had won the Ulster Grand Prix—and that Phil Hartz had finished nowhere.

He sat with the paper before him, picturing the scene as the winning machine raced home—and he reminded himself that he had helped the car to victory with the spare supercharger from the machine he had driven.

"Cope told me that even Mr. Franklin himself couldn't have handled the car better than I did," he murmured. "And he said I must have plenty of nerve, the way I split those gates. Well, that settles it! I'm going to make dad get me a job in a motor works, and I'm going to be a racing driver. I don't know how I'll wangle it—but I'm going to do it!"

THE END.

A ROUGH HOUSE IN PLUG HAT!

(Continued from page 6.)

me; but if you don't jump to do as you're told, you're a dead horse thief. You get me?"

Cactus Carter, still in dead silence, stepped down from his rostrum.

"Now let that hoss loose."

For a second the gunman hesitated.

The eyes of all Plug Hat were on him, breathlessly. On more than one face there was a mocking look. Men who had trembled at a glance from the ice-cold eyes, were grinning now.

The bitter humiliation of his defeat, of obeying the orders of the boy puncher, was almost too much for the desperado. But he read death in the clear, steady eyes of the Rio Kid, and his hesitation was brief.

He cast loose the mustang.

"Gents," said the Kid amiably, with

a glance at the staring faces round him, "I'm powerful sorry to spoil your fun, but this sale's off, like I told you. I ain't come to Plug Hat huntin' for trouble, but I don't stand for horse-stealin', and I'm sure going to boot Mr. Carter across the plaza, like I said, jest to warn him to keep his thievin' hands off a guy's cayuse."

He made a stride at the gunman.

With his left hand, the revolver in his right, the Kid grasped Cactus Carter and spun him round.

Crash!

There was a yell from the gunman, and a roar of laughter from the crowd as the cowpuncher's heavy boot landed on Cactus Carter.

The gunman staggered away.

The Kid followed him, and his boot crashed again, and yet again, till the gunman, panting, desperate, fairly took to his heels, and fled across the plaza.

The Kid, with a smile holstered his gun, and leaped on the back of Side-Kicker. No man in Plug Hat was disposed to contest with him the owner-

ship of the grey mustang, since the defeat of Cactus Carter.

"Say, Kid!" called out Colorado Bill. The burly cowman seemed to have forgotten his own defeat, in his admiration for the puncher who had beaten Cactus Carter to the draw. "Say, you want to hit the trail afore Cactus gets hold of a gun agin! Say, you want to ride, puncher!"

The Kid laughed.

"I guess I ain't hitting the trail a whole lot," he said. "I'm sure stopping a piece in this hyer burg. If Cactus wants me agin, he will sure find me to home."

With a clatter of hoofs and a jingle of spurs the Rio Kid dashed away down the street towards the lumber hotel. He left the crowd in a buzz behind him. It was the biggest excitement that had ever struck the cowtown. And before the sun had set, on every lip was the name of "Texas Brown," the stranger in Plug Hat.

THE END.

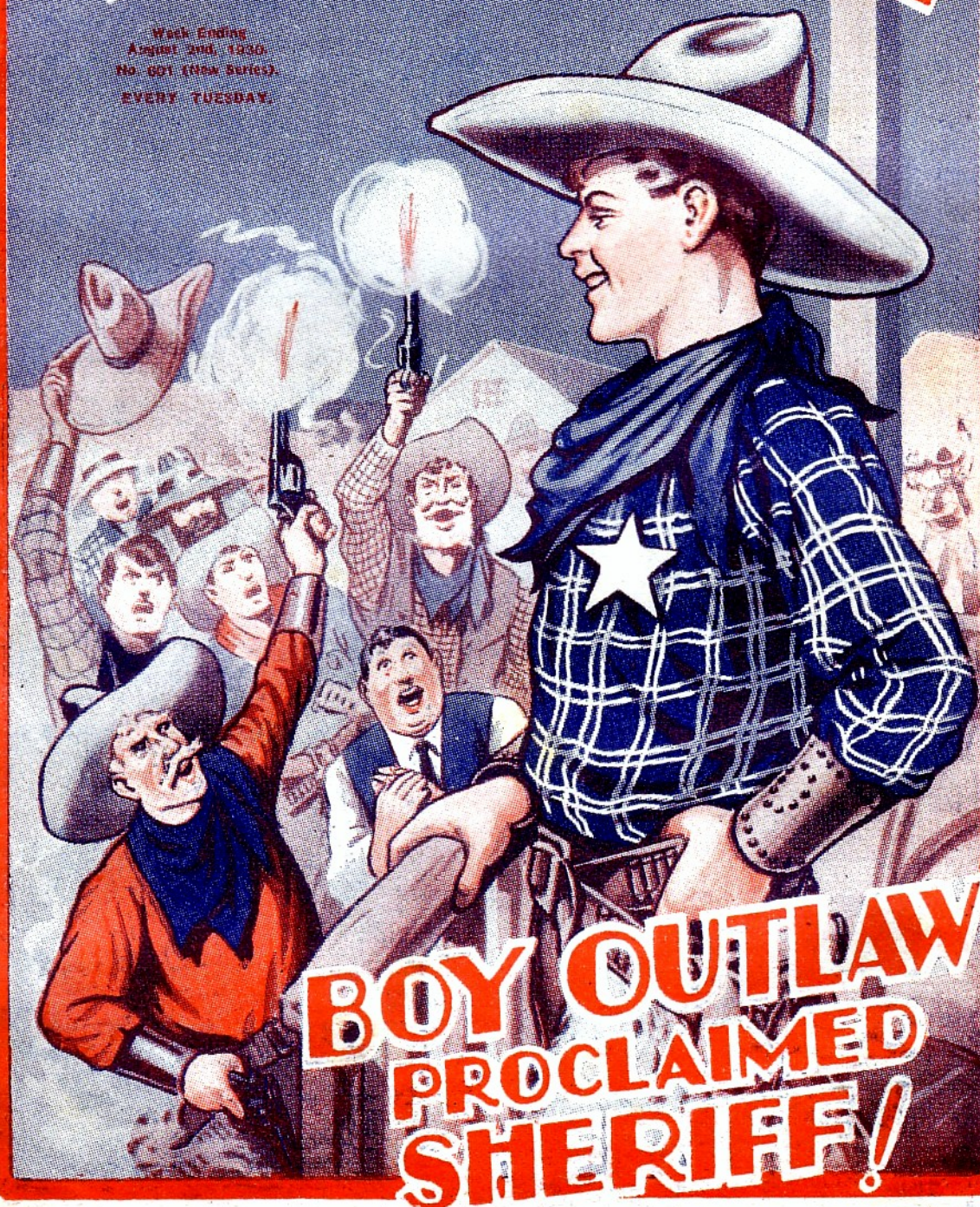
THE POPULAR.—No. 600.

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The POPULAR

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Week Ending
August 2nd, 1930.
No. 601 (New Series).
EVERY TUESDAY.



BOY OUTLAW PROCLAIMED SHERIFF!

SMASHING COMPLETE TALE OF WESTERN ADVENTURE

The RIO KID—SHERIFF!

**RALPH
REDWAY'S
ROARING
ROMANCE
OF TEXAS.**

◆◆◆◆◆
**The Foes of Plug
Hat!**

◆◆◆◆◆
THE Rio Kid hitched his holster a little forward, to bring the walnut butt of a gun nearer to his hand.

The Kid was sitting at his ease in a rocker on the wooden piazza of the Plug Hat Hotel, in the cowtown of Plug Hat. At a little distance was the plaza, where the naphtha lamps of half a dozen saloons flared, dimming

the light of the stars. From the direction of the plaza a burly, red-bearded cowman came striding, and he stopped at the rickety wooden steps that led up to the piazza where the Kid sat. It was the sight of him that made the Kid shift his gun into easier reach.

Red Harris paused for a moment or two, and then came tramping up the steps, which creaked under his weight.

"Say, you're here!" he said, stopping in front of the Kid.

The Kid nodded cheerily.

"Right hyer," he assented. "If you're looking for me, feller, you've found me to home."

Pop Short, the landlord of the lumber hotel, looked out of the door, a frown on his fat face.

"Here you, Harris," he exclaimed, "and you, Mister Texas Brown! You step down into the street afore you begin burning powder. I ain't the guy to interfere with any gun's amusement; but I'm telling you, bullets ain't no respecters of persons and I'll say you can't do your shootin' on my piazza. You light down into the street."

"Can it you geck!" growled Red Harris. "I ain't come hyer a-shootin'." I got a message for this guy what calls himself Texas Brown."

"Spill it, feller," said the Kid amiably.

Red Harris eyed him surlily. The look on his hard tanned face showed how willing he was to pull a gun on this stranger in Plug Hat. But he did not touch a gun. The Kid, during the few hours he had been in Plug Hat, had beaten a better man than Red Harris;



and the burly rough-neck did not seek trouble with the puncher who had gone one better than Cactus Carter.

The Kid gave him a cheery smile.

"Spill it!" he repeated.

"I got a message from Cactus Carter," said Harris.

"I reckoned so," assented the Kid. "I kinder opined that that pesky horse-thief, Carter, wouldn't be satisfied with me bootin' him across the plaza. I'm sure ready to boot him again if he ain't satisfied."

Red Harris made a gesture towards the lighted piazza.

"Carter's waiting for you," he said.

"You'll find him in the Red Flare; and you want to pack your gun when you go. And I guess Cactus is going to make you sorry you horned into Plug Hat."

The Kid nodded thoughtfully.

"Cactus is waiting for me in the Red Flare, is he?" he asked.

"Ho sure is."

"And he's going to give me an even break, if I come a-huntin' him?" asked the Kid.

"Sure."

The Kid laughed.

"I was raised in the Frio country," he said, "and guys in that country are born with their eyes peeled. Say, Mister Harris, you hump back to Cactus Carter and tell him not to wait. He won't see me in the Red Flare this evening."

"You ain't coming?" asked the red-bearded cowman.

"I surely ain't," answered the Kid.

"But if Cactus Carter is hunting me, feller, he ain't far to come. What's the

matter with Cactus walkin' up the street!"

"If you're afeared to come—" jeered Red Harris.

"Feller," said the Kid placidly, "I ain't afeared of any two-legged guy in Texas. But I guess I ain't such a bone-head as to put my cabsas into a hornet's nest. No, sir! You tell Cactus I'm waiting for him here, and I'll step down into the street and meet up with him as soon as he wants. And tell him that if he don't come he's a yellow coyote, and I'll sure boot him again, same as I did before, next time I see him."

Red Harris scowled and turned away, and tramped down the steps. The Kid watched him as he strode back to the Red Flare saloon, and disappeared into the doorway.

Pop Short came out on the piazza, with a grin on his fat face.

"I guess that message will bring Cactus," he said.

"You reckon?" smiled the Kid.

"Sure! If he don't show up, I guess his jig is up in Plug Hat," said the landlord. "The whole burg's chewing the rag about the way you beat him to the draw and booted him for stealin' your cayuse. If Cactus don't shoot you up, feller, he may as well pull up stakes and slide out of Plug Hat. You was sure a jay not to plug him when you had him covered."

"I didn't want to spill his juice if he'd ride clear of me," said the Kid. "I didn't come to Plug Hat hunting for trouble. But I wasn't letting a guy steal my horse right under my nose. Say Mr. Short, I never struck a town in Texas before that was packed so full of horse-thieves as Plug Hat. They

THE POPULAR.—No. 601.

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WHO'S WHO IN OUR GRAND SOUVENIR GROUP PHOTO OPPOSITE.

Left to right, standing: Duckworth, K. S. Dutespahn, R. W. V. Robins, Woolley, Geary, Tate, H. Tyldesley, J. C. White, Mandren. Left to right, sitting: Larwood, Hammond, A. P. F. Chapman (Capt.), Hobbs, Butcliffe.

string up horse-thieves in Frio, where I was raised."

Pop Short grunted. "I guess half the town would be strung up if they was to string up the horse-thieves in Plug Hat," he answered. "Cactus Carter and his bunch run the town, and the country, too, since the last sheriff was shot up."

"Why don't you elect a new sheriff, and get that bunch rounded up?" asked the Kid.

Mr. Short grunted again. "There ain't a man in Sausarfas county would take it on," he said. "It would be sudden death."

The Kid laughed. "Here comes Colorado Bill," added Mr. Short. "I guess he's got a'nthin' to say to you, Mister Brown."

The big cowboy came up the wooden steps and gave the Kid a nod and a grin. The Kid smiled. A few hours since he had shot a gun out of the burly rowman's hand, but that feat seemed to have earned him the cowman's esteem.

"Say, Texas," said Colorado Bill. "You want to keep your gun handy, 'I guess my gun's always handy," said the Kid. "Is that ornery horse-thief Carter coming a-shooting?"

"Sure! That's what I've come to tell you," answered Colorado, "and he won't stop you waiting long. You want to step down into the street, Texas, and he'll be along in two shakes of a coyote's tail."

The Kid yawned, and rose from the rocker.

"I guess I'll be on hand," he said. And he descended the creaking wooden steps into the rugged street of Plug Hat.

Gun to Gun!

CACTUS CARTER stepped out of the Red Flare saloon. In the plaza of Plug Hat, the glaring alaphtha lamps made it as light as by day.

Outside the saloon was a crowd of the citizens of Plug Hat, in a buzz of excitement, and another crowd followed the gunman out of the saloon.

The slim, hard-faced gunman was perfectly cool. Not a flicker of emotion could be read in his cold face.

Yet more than one man in the crowd had a suspicion that Cactus Carter, the "killer," the man who was said to have shot more men than he had fingers and toes, disliked the task that lay before him.

Hitherto, Cactus had been monarch of all he surveyed in the cow-town; he was a dead shot, and quick as lightning on the draw, and absolutely ruthless in the use of the weapons of which he was a master. Many a hard-bitten desperado in the lawless cow-town feared the glint in the cold eyes of the gunman. He was undisputed king-pin of Plug Hat; it was an open secret that the late sheriff, who had sought to establish law and order in Sausarfas county, had fallen by his hand. Among the desperate refugees from the law who found a hiding-place in Plug Hat, more than one had tried conclusions with Cactus, and he never failed to fix his adversary for the camp cemetery. And it was a matter of wonder in the wild cow-town, that a puncher who looked a mere lad had come into town, beaten Cactus to the draw, disarmed him, and booted him across the plaza.

The Popular.—No. 601.

The lawless authority of the king-pin of Plug Hat hung in the balance now. He had to shoot up the man who had booted him or fall from his high estate, to become an object of derision to those who had followed him and feared him. And for once—for the first time in his savage career—the gunman was feeling doubts.

But he dared not give way to his doubts. Once he backed down in a contest, his reign was over, and his place would be taken by some more reckless and desperate ruffian. It was the price of his position that he had to be ready to set his life upon a cast.

Cactus had stood there at the bar, with his "bunch"—Red Harris, Yellow Dick, and Sandy Tutt, his three closest associates, ready for the Kid to horn in. And though the Plug Hat crowd dared not draw his enmity upon themselves, individually, by spoken comments, Cactus was well aware of what the mob of rough-necks were thinking, and he had nerved himself to the task of seeking the Kid alone. His reputation, his standing among the wild crew of which he was "king-pin," required that he should meet and defeat his rival, playing a lone hand.

Never before had there been doubt in Cactus's heart when he set out to encounter an enemy. And now that he doubted, he hid his doubts well. He swung out of the saloon and walked down the plaza towards the lumber hotel.

On either side of him the crowd surged.

Thirty yards away, the lights of the lumber hotel glared on the rugged street.

In the centre of the street, full in view in the bright light, stood the Rio Kid—"Texas Brown" as he was called in Plug Hat. And had Cactus known the real name of Texas Brown, he would have known that he had reason for the doubt that so strangely chilled his heart.

The Kid stood easily, his hands by his sides, within quick reach of the guns in the low-slung holsters. This was not a new game to the Kid; he knew every turn of it.

He waited, with a cheery smile on his face. If there was a doubt in the mind of the gunman, there was none in the Rio Kid's.

Slowly, Cactus came up the rugged street.

The Kid was watching him warily from the moment he stepped out of the Red Flare. And he was watching not only Cactus, but with the tail of his eye he was keeping tabs on the throng on either side of the street. The Kid had sized up Cactus very keenly, and he did not expect an even break from the gunman, if Cactus had a chance to double cross him.

Cactus was not touching a gun yet. Slowly, foot by foot, he drew nearer to the Kid, his eyes upon him, his hands empty. As he drew nearer and nearer, the buzzing in the excited crowd died away to a breathless hush.

Each of the adversaries eyed the other like a cat, each ready for action as soon as the other made a movement to draw. Thirty yards had been reduced to thirty feet, and still neither touched a gun.

At twenty feet, the gunman, in sheer desperation, put his fate to the touch.

In a single movement, that was so rapid that the eye could scarcely follow it, he flicked his gun out and fired from the hip without raising the weapon.

Rapid as he was, the Kid was as fast, or faster.

Like magic, a gun was in the Kid's hand, and he, too, fired from the hip without wasting a split second in lifting his gun.

The Kid felt the wind of a bullet that clipped the edge of his Stetson hat; the gunman had fired too hurriedly. But the Kid's return bullet, so close that the two bullets sounded as one, went unerringly to the mark.

Cactus Carter staggered.

A roar burst from the Plug Hat crowd, silent till that moment in tense excitement.

All eyes were on the gunman. The Rio Kid's bullet had gone home, and the gunman staggered, but he did not fall.

He stood unsteadily, his gun-hand sagging at his side, his face white as chalk. Every man in the street expected to hear the Kid's gun roar again and again, and to see his opponent fall riddled with bullets. But the Kid stood gripping his smoking gun, without pulling the trigger.

"By the great horned toad, he's got him!" yelled Colorado Bill.

The gunman stood swaying. The gun dropped from his hand to the ground with a clatter.

A blaze of demoniac rage came into Cactus's eyes. His right arm hung at his side, disabled by the bullet. With his left he dragged his second gun from his belt.

Bang!

The Kid's Colt roared again, and the gun spun from Cactus' hand before he could use it.

A hoarse cry came from the gunman. He staggered, and fell to the earth.

"Cactus has got his!" roared Colorado Bill.

"Aw, forget it!" drawled the Kid. "He ain't got his, not worth a red cent. I've jest tickled his sn, and Cactus is worth a whole crowd of dead men yet."

The Kid's smoking gun was still in his hand, his wary eye watching. He was ready for some member of the "bunch" to take up the quarrel for the fallen gunman.

But the "bunch" were not loitering for trouble with the puncher who had shot up their leader. They gathered round the gunman.

Cactus Carter was lifted, and carried back into the Red Flare. The Kid, still wary and watchful, strolled back into the lumber hotel.

Not Caught Napping!

"SIDE-KICKER, old boss!" murmured the Kid.

The grey mustang turned his head and whinnied softly as the Kid stroked his glossy neck.

The mustang was stalled in the barn behind the lumber hotel. And it was the Kid's intention to camp that night in the barn.

In a town like Plug Hat, the Kid did not care to trust his cayuse out of his own sight. Indeed, Pop Short made no secret of the fact that the mustang would probably be missing by morning. His own pinto had been lifted from that barn the same day; and the Kid had already learned that no man's horse was safe in Plug Hat.

Pop Short showed him into the barn with a glimmering lantern.

"You figure you'll bed down hyer, Mr. Brown?" he asked.

"I reckon!" answered the Kid. "I sure don't want to wake up in the morning and find this hyer cayuse gone, feller."

"You're said it," agreed the landlord. "I guess your hoss will be safer with you along, sir. But you won't be so all-fired safe yourself."

"How come?" asked the Kid.

Pop Short shook his head.

"You've laid out Cactus Carter," he said. "But Cactus is only one of a bunch—and a dog-goned tough bunch."

"They didn't seem to be honing for trouble," remarked the Kid.

"I guess they ain't honing for gun-play with the guy that's shot up the all-firdest gunman in Sassafras county," answered Pop Short.

"You're too mighty sudden on the shoot to please that bunch, Mister Brown. But if you don't hear from them to-night, if you sleep in this barn, I shall sure be surprised."

"I guess it cuts no ice," said the Kid. "I'm bedding down here along with my cayuse."

"It's your say-so; but you'd sleep sounder behind a barred door, I reckon."

"I guess I'll sleep as sound as I want, feller."

And Pop Short, leaving the lantern hanging on a nail, retired, and left the Kid to his own devices.

The Kid, having looked after the comfort of his horse always his first task put out the lantern.

A glimmer of starlight in at the barred, unglazed window was light enough for the Kid.

There was a faint smile on the Kid's handsome face as he moved in the gloom of the barn.

The big door was closed, but the lock on it was out of action; it had been forced when the landlord's pinto was lifted that day. The Kid could have wedged the door fast as it opened inward, but he did not take the trouble.

He stepped to the barred window and looked out in the dim starlight.

The hour was late, and the lumber hotel was shutting. He could hear Pop Short bolting and barring doors and windows.

From the plaza there was still a glare of light from some of the saloons. But the noise of the cow-town was dying away.

The Kid was in no hurry to turn in.

He remained at the window for some time, looking at the stars and the shadows, thinking, and listening to the sinking noise of the town as saloon after saloon closed down.

All was darkness and silence at last.

The Kid left the window and sorted

out a bundle of straw for a bed. On the bundle he arranged his blanket, stuffed with straw, where the glimmer of starlight fell in upon it from the window. He stacked straw round it, and smiled as he finished his task.

If any guy spied into the barn that night he would see, or figure that he saw, a sleeper rolled in his blanket in the straw. And if that dummy sleeper stopped a bullet or two it would not greatly concern the Kid.

Beside the window, close to the wall and hidden in thick shadow, was a wooden bench. On that bench the Kid stretched himself to rest. The night was

on the butt of a gun. Then he lay without motion, waiting.

From the stillness a faint whisper reached his ears.

"You figure he's there, Yellow Dick?"

"I guess so," came the soft answering whisper of the man peering between the bars. "I sure reckon he's there, Sandy."

"I know the guy was bedding down in the barn," came another voice. "Mexican Pote was watching, and he allowed that the guy went into the barn and never came out agin."

"He's sure there!" muttered Yellow



Pop Short started back in surprise at sight of the three captive gunmen. "Waal, carry me home to dis!" he yelled. "What you got thar?"

warm, and he did not miss his blanket. With his head pillowed on his arm the Kid closed his eyes and almost immediately sank into slumber.

Where he lay he was invisible to anyone entering the barn; and he knew, too, that if the door opened, the creak of the rusty hinges would awaken him instantly.

He slept as peacefully as if he was rolled in the deepest cover of the chapparral.

A couple of hours had passed when the Kid awoke.

He awakened, as he always did, with his mind perfectly clear from the mists of sleep, and without a movement or a sound.

He lay still and listened. He knew that something had awakened him, and he listened intently to learn what it was.

A grim smile crossed his face as he saw a black shadow fall across the starlit space inside the little barred window.

It was the shadow, grotesquely exaggerated, of a head outside the window, blocking the starlight.

A face was pressed to the opening between the wooden bars, peering into the dusky interior of the barn.

Silently the Kid's hand moved, closing

Dick. "And sleeping as sound as if he was in a pesky hotel at San Antone."

The shadow left the window.

But the three rough-necks of Plug Hat remained close, for the Kid, straining his ears, could still hear their whispering, husky voices.

"What's the game, Red? I guess if we push open the door and run in on him—" muttered Yellow Dick.

"Guess again," grunted Red Harris. "You 'member how them hinges creaked when we got Pop's pinto this morning. I guess they creak loud enough to wake a guy if he was sleeping like a greaser full of pulque."

"We got to get him!" said Sandy Tuit. "I'll say Cactus will be apt to get mad if we don't get him, Red."

"We're getting him all O.K.," answered Red. "There's light enough from the window to drill him where he lies. I guess I'm putting lead through him from the window."

"Say, it's pesky low-down to plug a galoot asleep!" muttered Sandy. "I guess I wouldn't stand for it, Red."

"You dog-goned jay, you want to wake him up and stand in front of his gun, after the way he shot up Cactus!"

came careering from the opposite direction. The driver touched his brakes to steady his machine round the bend; but he forgot that the surface of the road was slippery from the rain that still showered down.

They saw him get into a skid. The tail of his car swung round, leaving two great swathes on the road behind as it slashed dead in their path.

Jack pulled over to cut inside the other car, and in that instant the driver tried to get out of his skid, wrenching his machine in the same direction, so that it seemed that the two must crash.

Sid heard the tearing scream of the brakes on the chassis. Jack hauled the steering-wheel over, as though to dive at the side of the road. Instead, the rear of the machine slithered round, spinning them to the middle of the road and sliding almost backwards. Again Jack twisted on the wheel, pulling the car broadside on, then he let the tail fling round, missing the other machine by a yard.

He pulled straight. They rolled on and came to a stop, just as a crash sounded behind them.

Sid, both hands clutching the rim of the scuttle, turned a scared face to Jack.

"Thought we was goin' to smash!" he gasped, and added: "Might's well go back and be sacked."

Jack turned the chassis, and they rolled slowly around the turn again. The car they had met was off the road. It looked as though it had been trying to wrap itself around the telegraph post that stood there. The radiator was all battered, and a gentleman was climbing slowly from the machine. On the opposite side of the road the car bearing Ben Moran and Mr. Lucas was just stopping.

"That's one of our new sports saloons. That's why I never recognised it from behind! They must ha' been tryin' it out." Sid exclaimed, as he saw the car, and a moment later they pulled up beside the wreck.

The old gentleman came across to

them as Jack climbed down from the bucket seat.

"I thought we were going to hit one another," the gentleman said. "Did you skid like that intentionally—so that you'd miss me?"

"Yes, sir," said Jack, and behind him Sid's eyes almost popped out of his head. But he believed Jack, because he knew that Jack wasn't the sort to tell lies.

"It was the smartest piece of driving that I've seen in my life, and I—"

A roar broke in on his words as Moran and Lucas came charging from their car.

"What the periahin' heck d'you think

DOWN BY THE SEA!

Look out for our representative at the seaside resort you are visiting; he is giving away splendid prizes and thousands of dandy free gifts. Also, numerous competitions will be held for which attractive prizes will be given. Very large quantities of small gifts will be distributed to readers who are seen making a prominent display of The POPULAR.

you're doin' whoopin' about the road on that chassis!" Moran snarled as he wagged a finger under Jack's nose.

"You're sacked for that!"

"Control yourself, Moran. Let me deal with this," came the chill voice of the general manager. "Give an account of yourself, King."

Jack faced him; the rain driving against his cheeks. But before he could get out a word, the man from the wrecked car said:

"I'm Baddelley Baron—Sir Baddelley Baron, an this boy has just shown a masterly piece of driving. Look at the mark!" He pointed to the broad sweeps left by the tyres on the wet road.

"I got into a nasty skid, and he certainly saved my life. If we'd hit, I should have been killed, without a doubt, and the whole thing is entirely the fault of that wretched car round the telegraph-pole."

He glared at the smoking, steaming front of his machine as he spoke.

"Nothing but trouble since I've had it, and—" He broke off, then nodded to the chassis behind Jack and Sid. "Is that for sale? Could you put me a body on it? If you can, I'll buy it, on one condition!"

"The machine is certainly for sale, Sir Baddelley," said Mr. Lucas, and his stony face melted into something resembling a smile.

"Very well, I'll give you a cheque on deposit now; but these two boys must not suffer for their—or—their impetuosity."

Mr. Lucas was too much of a business man to miss the sale of a thousand guinea machine, just for the sake of sacking a couple of work boys, and he said:

"They can consider themselves admanahed, Sir Baddelley, that is all."

The baronet smiled, then he shook hands warmly with Jack. If he would have said anything else, he didn't get the chance, because Jack and Sid climbed back to the chassis in silence at a jerk from the general manager's head.

The chassis rolled slowly and quietly away at a sedate twenty miles an hour, Ben Moran glaring after them. They travelled a mile or more before Sid said anything. Then he heaved a whistling sigh of relief.

"Ben Moran is a good driver," he said. "But I lay he couldn't ha' handled a machine like you did, Jack, when we get back, I'll make you a wreath o' sparkin' plugs an' crown you the 'Skid Kid!'"

THE END.

(There's motor-racing thrills galore in "THE HILLOLIMB HEROES!" next week's stirring story of the "Skid Kid." Order your POPULAR well in advance.)

THE RIO KID—SHERIFF!

(Continued from page 6.)

to the door of the barn, where Pop Short stood yelling with laughter.

"Beat it!" said the Kid tersely.

"Let our arms loose, you gol-darned geck!" hissed Sandy Tutt.

The Kid shook his head.

"I guess it will make Plug Hat smile some to see you fixed up like that," he answered. "Just beat it! I'll sure help you with my boot."

The three rough-necks, still tied together in a bunch, only able to use their legs, staggered out of the barn. The Rio Kid's boot, vigorously applied, started them, and they staggered away as fast as they could.

Loud yells of laughter greeted them as they appeared in the street of Plug Hat and zigzagged their way along the rugged street towards the plaza, to reach the Red Flare, where they had friends to let them loose. With faces black with fury, gritting their teeth with rage, the bunch of rough-necks lurched and staggered along, amid roars of laughter that woke every echo of Plug Hat.

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It was an hour later that the Rio Kid, having finished his breakfast, came out on the piazza of the lumber hotel, and looked into the street. Pop Short was on the wooden piazza, and with him nearly a dozen other citizens of Plug Hat. The whole party made a movement towards the Kid, and the puncher, for a second, eyed them warily, and his hands slid towards his guns. But it was not a hostile movement. Every face was friendly, and every member of the numerous party raised his Stetson in salute to the Kid. And the Kid, who was politeness itself, raised his Stetson in acknowledgment of the greeting, wondering the while what this demonstration might portend.

"Mister Texas Brown!" said Pop Short, who had evidently been selected as spokesman. "This hero is a delegation of the most substantial citizens of Plug Hat, and they're sure proud to make your acquaintance."

"You do me proud, Mr. Short, sir," answered the Kid politely.

"And this here delegation," continued Pop Short, "is here to put a request up to you, Mister Texas Brown."

"Hear, hear!" said the delegation, with one voice.

"Shoot!" said the Kid. "This hero delegation," went on Pop Short, "requests you to stand for election for sheriff of Sassafras county."

"Hear, hear!" repeated the substantial citizens of Plug Hat.

The Kid jumped.

"Mo for sheriff!" he gasped.

"Just you!" said Pop Short.

The last sheriff was shot up by Cactus Carter's bunch, and like I've told you, no galoot in this section is honing for the job since. Mister Texas Brown, this delegation of citizens reckons that you are the man for the job. This delegation asks you to stand, and will use their influence to get you in."

The Kid gasped.

The boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had come to Plug Hat to keep out of the way of sheriffs. He stared blankly at the delegation of substantial citizens of Plug Hat.

"Carry me home to die!" he ejaculated.

The Kid's eyes danced.

"Gents," he said, "you do me proud. I guess if you want me I'm your mut-ton, with the wool on. Gents, it's a cinch."

And a cinch it was. The Rio Kid, once an outlaw, hunted by half the sheriffs in Texas, was the new sheriff of Plug Hat.

THE END.

(Don't miss reading "BY ORDER OF THE SHERIFF!" next Tuesday's gripping tale of the Rio Kid—i'ts great, chums!)

BY ORDER OF THE SHERIFF!



**HOT FROM
THE PEN
OF
RALPH
REDWAY.**

The New Sheriff!

"SHERIFF!"

The Rio Kid grinned. Strange enough was that title to the ears of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

He was not used to it yet. Every time a man in Plug Hat addressed him as sheriff, it tickled the Kid's sense of humour.

For the Kid had ridden into Plug Hat to get away from sheriffs and all their works, and to ride clear of Jim Hall and the Texas Rangers. There was a reward of a thousand dollars on the head of the Rio Kid, and plenty of galoots in Texas who were keen and eager to rake it in.

The Kid wondered, at times, what Sheriff Lick, of San Juan, or Jim Hall, of the Rangers, would have thought had they heard of the new sheriff of Sassafras County, and known his real name.

The Kid guessed that they would have sat up and taken notice, could they have known that Sheriff Brown of Plug Hat was that celebrated outlaw and fire-bug, the Rio Kid.

But that was the Kid's own secret.

No man in Plug Hat knew or suspected, and Cactus Carter and his bunch, who were against the new sheriff, tooth and nail, never dreamed of that chink in his armour.

"Sheriff!" repeated Colorado Bill.

The Kid could not help grinning, and Colorado grinned, too. To his

eyes the Kid was "Texas Brown," the boy cowpuncher. And undoubtedly Texas Brown was very boyish-looking for a sheriff, especially the sheriff of so wild and lawless a cow-town as Plug Hat.

"Say, you ain't used to it yet!" grinned Colorado.

"I sure ain't!" assented the Kid.

"It's a cinch all the same," said the big cowman. "You been elected sheriff, Mister Brown, and you was backed up by all the guys in this section who stand for law and order."

"You've said it!" assented the Kid.

"And I'll say you're the man for the job," said Colorado. "There wasn't

establish the reign of order in Plug Hat. But the Kid knew that their hope was a doubtful one, and that most of his backers fully expected him to be shot up before he had been sheriff long.

The Kid was standing in the doorway of the lumber shaek that was the sheriff's office at Plug Hat. The Kid had found the shack untenanted and ready for him. His predecessors in office were in the camp cemetery.

From the doorway of his office the new sheriff looked out over the sunny, dusty plaza. Outside the many saloons of Plug Hat horses were hitched to the rails and posts.

That was a common enough sight in any cow-town in Texas; but it was new in Plug Hat. For only a few days ago no man outside Cactus Carter's bunch could have left his cayuse unguarded without having the animal lifted. Horses were stolen in broad daylight in the street of Plug Hat. And for any guy who

raised forcible objections, there was accommodation in the cemetery. But the Kid had changed all that already. For the first time since Plug Hat had had a local habitation and a name, a galoot could call his horseflesh his own. The new sheriff had announced that any guy caught horse-stealing would be strung up on the nearest cottonwood. And as he was ready to back up the new regime with his gun, horse-stealing had died a sudden death in the town. And that alone had made the new sheriff widely popular, except among the horse-stealing fraternity.

There were plenty of rough-necks in

The Rio Kid, Outlaw and Sheriff,

Tackles his Job with Great Vim!

another guy in Sassafras County wanted it. Sheriffs die too quick in this locality. I sure figured that you would be shot up before the election was over; but you ain't shot up yit."

The Kid chuckled.

The Kid was quite aware why all the substantial citizens of Plug Hat had stood for him as sheriff. He was quicker on the draw than any other guy in the section. He was the only man who cared, or dared, to make a stand against Cactus Carter, and the rest of the lawless element. They hoped that he would pull through the hectic time that lay before him, and

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 heft 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 put 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.

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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 docs?" 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.

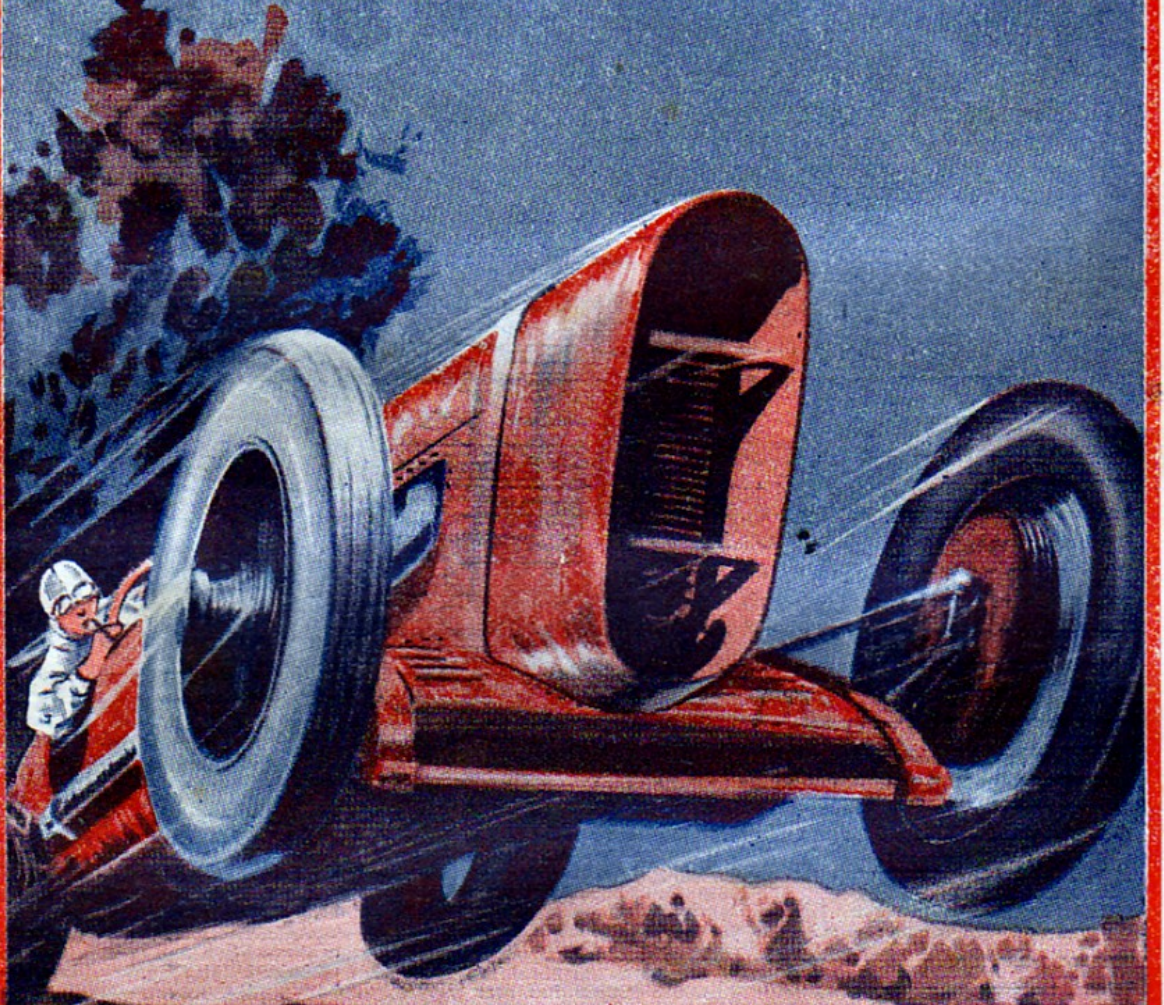
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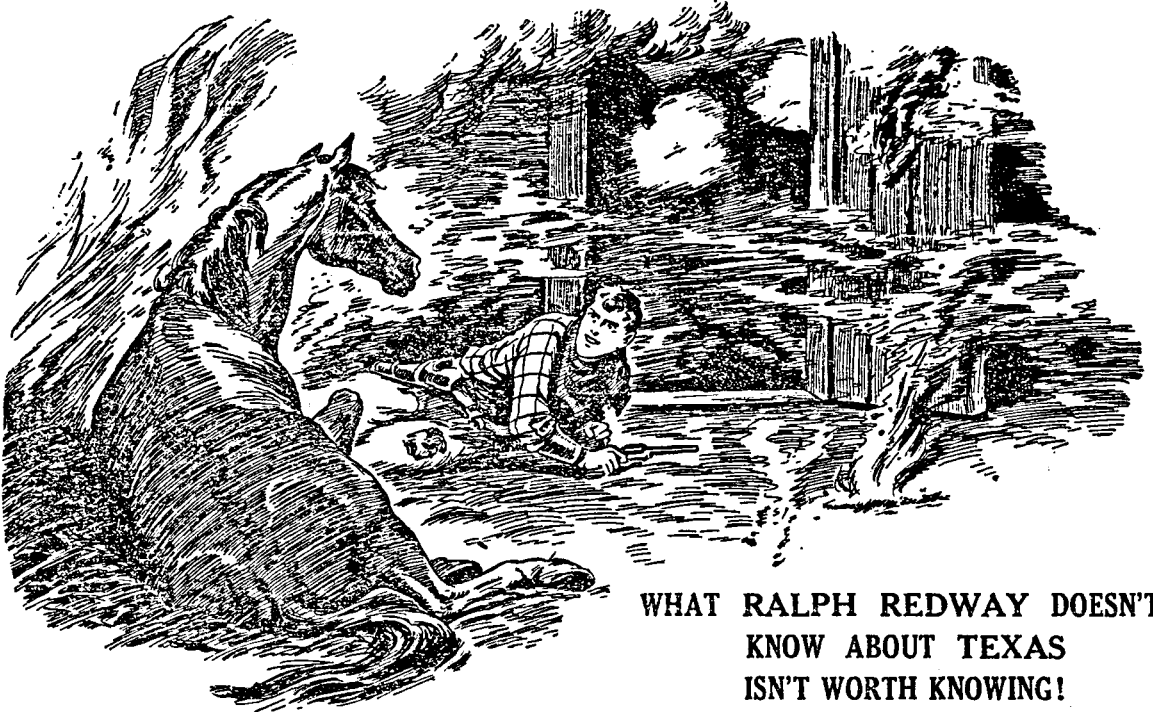
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The SKID KID
SKIDS to
VICTORY!

OUR MOTOR-RACING YARNS ARE THRILLING THE WORLD!

UNDER The KID SHERIFF!



WHAT RALPH REDWAY DOESN'T
KNOW ABOUT TEXAS
ISN'T WORTH KNOWING!

◆◆◆◆◆
Fire!
◆◆◆◆◆

WAKE snakes!" murmured the Rio Kid.

His eyes opened.

The Kid had been fast asleep, and dreaming.

In the mists and shadows of sleep the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had forgotten that he was no longer an outlaw; that he had been elected sheriff of Sassafras County; and that he was now Sheriff Brown, occupying the sheriff's office in the cow-town of Plug Hat.

The sheriff's job was still new to the Kid; and in his sleep he was dreaming of other days—not very far behind him, when he had ridden the prairie trails with a sheriff's posse on his track.

He dreamed of the day when the sheriff of San Juan had run him down in the Pecos country, and the Kid had fired the dry grass to drive back the posse; and escaped on the back of Side-Kicker amid a sea of flame and smoke.

The dream was strangely real. It seemed to the Kid that he heard the crackle of the flames; that his nostrils were choked by the thick smell of smoke.

He struggled to breathe; and awoke. And he awoke to find that it was not all a dream. There was smoke in the room where he lay; and through the darkness of the night came flickering glimmers of flame.

The Kid started up in his bed. It was seldom that the Rio Kid was taken by surprise. Whether as an outlaw, riding lonely trails in the chaparral, or as the sheriff of Sassafras, ruling the rough mob of Plug Hat with a gun in his hand, the Kid was wary as

a wolf, watchful as a lynx. But he was surprised now. The fire had started while he was asleep and dreaming, and he awoke in the midst of smoke and crackle and gleaming flame.

"Wake snakes!" ejaculated the Kid. He leaped from the bed.

The sheriff's office in Plug Hat consisted of two rooms; the office in front and the bedroom behind, with a shed attached at the rear, in which the Kid's mustang was stabled.

It was a rough building, but strong and solid; the walls of thick logs that would stop bullets at close range, the roof of stout timber, the windows thickly shuttered and barred, the doors barred and locked.

Former sheriffs in Plug Hat had made their quarters as secure as they could; though that security had not saved them from being shot-up by the

had been king-pin of Plug Hat before the new sheriff was elected; and this was his way of getting rid of his rival.

The Kid threw on his clothes in a few seconds. The room was thick with smoke, whirling and eddying. The dry wood of the walls and roof, splashed with petrol, burned like tinder. But if the bunch had hoped that he might suffocate in his sleep, they were disappointed. The Kid was not the guy to go out so easily as that.

While he dressed with lightning rapidity, the Kid's thoughts moved as rapidly. The bunch would be on the spot, with guns ready to riddle him with lead as he rushed out of the burning house—if he succeeded in getting through the smoke and the flame.

He could picture Cactus Carter, and Red Harris, and Yellow Dick, and Sandy Tutt, skulking in cover of neighbouring cabins and shacks, with guns in their hands and murder in their hearts. But he had to get out of the burning building and chance the lead. And the Kid was thinking less of himself than of his horse.

Side-Kicker was in the shed at the back, equally in danger from flames; and to the Kid, his cayuse's danger was a more pressing matter than his own. Through the crackle of the fire came to his ears a shrill squeal from the now alarmed mustang.

So it was to the back door that the Kid turned, which led direct from the sleeping-room into the shed. This door was not fastened; and the Kid had it open in a twinkling. The shed was surging with smoke; the wooden walls were burning and blazing like the rest of the building. Side-Kicker trampled and squealed wildly.

"Steady, 'old hoss!" said the Kid,

◆◆◆◆◆
A NEW BROOM SWEEPS CLEAN—
Especially if the Rio Kid Handles It!
◆◆◆◆◆

rough-necks of the cow-town in the long run. "But "shooting-up" the new sheriff was a task from which the most desperate gunman in Plug Hat shrank; the Kid walked the streets of the cow-town as securely as he might have walked in San Antonio or Austin.

The foes who dared not face him in the open had sought him in his fancied security, and with a more terrible weapon than Colt or bowie-knife.

The building was on fire; and the fierceness with which it burned told that gasoline had been sprayed over it before a match was set. Cactus Carter

And the grey mustang calmed down at once at the sound of his master's voice. In a moment his soft muzzle was nuzzling the Kid.

The Kid plunged through the blinding smoke to the shed door. This door was locked, bolted, and barred; and the Kid hurriedly unfastened it.

"Down, old hoss!"

The mustang dropped to the floor, and the Kid, having hurled the door wide open, dropped on his face. He knew what would follow the opening of the door.

Bang, bang!

Two Colts roared from the darkness without, and the bullets whizzed in at the open doorway. Had the Kid been standing he would have been shot as he stood.

Bang, bang, bang, bang!

The six-guns roared and roared. Two men, the Kid reckoned, had been posted behind the building, the others keeping watch in front.

Bullets from the rapid six-guns rained into the open shed, and whizzed over the Kid and his horse as they lay hugging the earthen floor.

With the sound of the shooting came a sound of distant voices—shouting, calling. It was three in the morning, and the night was black, save for the glare of the flames at the sheriff's office. But the town was awakening—doors and windows were opening, and men calling to one another. Help would come; but it would not come in time for the Kid. For the burning roof was already falling in, with showers of sparks and a roar of flame, and the Kid had to hit the open without delay.

Bang, bang, bang! roared the six-guns.

Thick eddy smoke blocked the doorway; the Kid could see nothing; neither could his foes see anything but smoke. But they knew the door was open, and they fired and fired into the doorway.

"Down, Side-Kicker!" the Kid whispered to his horse. "You want to keep doggo, old hoss. Down!"

And the well-trained mustang, taking no heed of roaring flame and showering sparks, remained motionless. And the Kid, crawling on his stomach like a snake, glided out of the open doorway under cover of the heavy mass of smoke, while bullets flew over him into the shed.

Three yards from the doorway the smoke was thin, and the Kid's eye caught the flash of a six-gun as it fired. His gun was in his hand, and he fired at the flash, and there was a yell and a heavy fall. Another yell, of startled fear, followed, and the hurried sound of running footsteps. One enemy had fallen, the other was running; and the Kid leaped to his feet and threw lead after the man who ran.

"Side-Kicker!" he yelled.

With a trample of hoofs the mustang came charging through the smoke at the Kid's call.

In a moment he was with the Kid.

"Good old hoss!" gasped the Kid, and he leaped on the bare back of the grey mustang.

Saddle and bridle the Kid did not need. He dashed away from the burning building, and the clattering hoofs awoke the echoes of the rugged street of Plug Hat.

Burned Out.

POP SHORT, the landlord of the Plug Hat Hotel, stood, half-dressed in his piazza, staring towards the leaping flames that lighted up the plaza in the centre of the town.

A score of men were already out of their cabins, all staring in the same direction. Against the red glare of the fire the figure of a horseman appeared, and the Rio Kid dashed up to the lumber hotel with a clatter of hoofs. He drew rein and jumped down.

"The sheriff!" gasped Pop Short.

"Say, sheriff, I guess they've burned you out!" exclaimed Colorado Bill.

"I guess they have!" said the Kid coolly. "But I reckon there's one of the bunch that will never burn a guy out again. Get a move on, you galoots! You want to get hold of buckets afore the fire spreads, or I guess Plug Hat will go up in smoke!"

"I guess it was Cactus Carter," said Mesquite.

"I guess it was," said the Kid. "But that cuts no ice now. We got to get the fire down."

"You bet!"

The whole cow-town was awake by this time. Every door was thrown open, and a crowd gathered in the plaza. There were several other buildings near the sheriff's office, all of wood, and there was danger of the fire spreading, in which case Plug Hat might have shared the fate of many a western town, burned out to the last shack.

"Look after my cayuse, Mr. Short," said the Kid; "and you guys follow me."

There was no chance of finding the incendiaries. The Kid's escape, and the awakening and turning-out of the whole town, had scared them to cover. The Kid did not expect to find any of them on the spot, except the man he had shot as he escaped. The wretch still lay where he had fallen, on his face, and Colorado Bill found him, and turned him over to look at him. The red-beared face was recognised at once.

"It's Red Harris!" shouted Colorado.

"And he's gone up!" said Mesquite.

"I reckoned he'd got his, whoever he was," said the Kid. "Let him lie, and get spry with them buckets."

"He was one of Cactus' bunch," said Yuma Dan. "I guess Cactus wasn't fur off when this hyer fire started."

"I reckon he's lying low now," said Colorado.

"Get on with it!" snapped the Kid.

There were fifty or sixty men in the plaza now, and under the Kid's direction, they formed a line to the creek, and buckets of water were handed rapidly along and soused on the burning building.

The fire burned obstinately, for petrol had been used freely on the timber. Five or six empty cans were lying about. But the steady drenching of water subdued it at last, though not till the sheriff's residence was nothing more than a black and smouldering ruin. Almost every man in the town lent aid in drowning the fire; but there were several idlers who lounged outside the Red Flare saloon opposite and looked on. They were Cactus Carter, Yellow Dick, and Sandy Tutt, and they were half-dressed, as if they had come suddenly from bed at the alarm, though they had not forgotten to belt on their guns. The Kid, for the present, took

no heed of them. Not till the last spark was out, and only an eddy black smoke rose from the burned-out ruin, did the Kid give attention to anything but the fire.

But when it was all over the sheriff gave his attention to the three loungers across the plaza. Now that the fire was out, darkness had fallen again; but a dozen lanterns were alight, and candles glimmered in the windows of many cabins. The Kid, after a last look at the burned-out building, to make sure that all was safe, walked across to the Red Flare saloon, and Colorado and Mesquite and Yuma Dan, and a crowd of others followed him.

The Kid was not touching a gun; but Cactus and his bunch eyed him warily as he approached.

"Say, you guys wasn't lending a hand with the buckets," said the Kid.

"I guess you're no friend of mine," answered Cactus surlily, "and you'd sure got a-plenty to help."

"Sure," assented the Kid. "I reckon you guys was woke up by the fire and the shooting, and you hadn't time to get your rags on, like the rest of us."

"You've said it," agreed Cactus.

"You wasn't on the spot when the fire started?" asked the Kid pleasantly. "And you didn't hoof it back to your dive, and fix yourselves up like you was just startled out of bed?"

"Nope," said Cactus, drawing a deep breath. "What you getting at, Mister Sheriff Brown? If you reckon I know anything about the fire—"

"You was durned careless, sheriff, to get your shack on fire," said Yellow Dick.

"Some guy was pesky careless," assented the Kid. "He was sure careless enough to spill gasoline all over the outside of my shack and set a light to it. You don't know who it was?"

"How should I know?" asked Yellow Dick.

"Why, you dog-goned lobo-wolf," burst out Colorado, "you figure that we don't know it was your bunch burned out the sheriff? One of you has got shot up, and that one's Red Harris."

"And Red wasn't there without the rest of the bunch," said Mesquite.

Cactus set his lips.

"If Red was there, he was on his own," he answered. "I guess Red had a grudge agin the sheriff. But me, I was fast asleep, and I woke up when I heard the shooting."

"And you don't know who was with Red in this hyer game?" asked the Kid.

"I sure don't."

The Kid smiled.

"If you've got any proof, sheriff—"

said Sandy Tutt. "I ain't got a whole heap," said the Kid, "and I reckon I don't want very much, feller."

"Lynch 'em!" shouted Mesquite.

"Hold in your hosses, feller!" said the Kid. "We got law and order in this town now I'm sheriff. There ain't going to be no lynching. You can't hang a guy on suspicion, though I guess the suspicion is pretty strong. Cactus, your best guess is to get on your cayuse and ride out of town before morning."

Cactus gritted his teeth.

"I ain't riding!" he answered.

"Suit yourself, feller," said the Kid, and he turned away. "Gents, I reckon you can hit your little bunks agin; but I want all my deputies to be on hand in the morning."

"I guess a rope and a branch would fit them guys!" growled Colorado.

"Aw, forget it!" said the Kid. "Lynch law is stopped in this burg,

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along with promiscuous shooting and faro. This hyer town of Plug Hat is going to be the prize town for law and order so long's I'm sheriff."

"Waal, it's your say-so, sheriff," grunted Colorado. "But—"
"Feller, you talk like a Dutch uncle," said the Kid. "But I've lost my beauty sleep, and I'm hitting a bunk at the hotel till morning."

And the sheriff walked away to the Plug Hat Hotel, and the crowd broke up and dispersed to their cabins. Darkness and slumber descended once more on the cow-town of Plug Hat.

Run Out of Town!

THREE men sat, with grim faces, in the Red Flare saloon, when the morning sun shone down on Plug Hat.

Outside, in the sunny plaza, a crowd was gathering.

Cactus Carter, Yellow Dick, and Sandy Tutt watched them through the open doorway, sullenly and uneasily.

The trio had the Red Flare to themselves. A couple of weeks ago the Red Flare had been the roughest and most frequented joint in Plug Hat. Bootleg liquor had been dispensed freely over the bar by Mexican Dave, the proprietor, and a faro game had been run by Cactus Carter, who was a gambler by profession. The new sheriff had closed the saloon down. Mexican Dave had been run out of town, and the order had gone forth that no faro game should be played. That was a reform that startled a good many of the new sheriff's supporters; but the Kid, as he explained, was not in the sheriff business for his health. So long as he was sheriff he was going to maintain the law, and he maintained it. Plug Hat hardly knew itself these days, with the gaming-tables closed down, promiscuous shootings sternly forbidden, and horse-stealing a thing of the past. Among the rough-necks the discontent was deep, but not even Cactus and his bunch had dared to raise opposition. In the deserted saloon, Cactus and his friends had their quarters, while they waited for better times.

"I guess there's suthin' comin' to us, Cactus!" muttered Yellow Dick, as he stared out at the gathering crowd in the plaza. "I reckon we'd have been better to have hit the trail last night."

Cactus Carter snapped out an oath. "I guess I ain't hitting the trail," he answered. "What we got to hit the trail for, you boob? There ain't a piece of evidence to frame us up with that fire last night. We was safe in cover afore a guy got on the spot, and I guess the sheriff never saw us."

"Every guy in Plug Hat knows that Red was one of our bunch—"

"That cuts no ice," answered the gambler. "Red had plenty of other friends in town; and I'll tell all Texas they can't fix it on us."

"Mobbe they won't worry about fixing it on us," said Sandy Tutt; "but what's to stop them lynching us without? I'll say they'd lynch us at jest one word from that dog-goned sheriff!"

"He ain't saying the word!" snapped Cactus. "They've got him in to keep law and order in the town, and he sure can't stand for a lynching. He can't do anything without proof, and there ain't a piece of proof. All we got to do is sit tight. I guess I ain't moseying out of Plug Hat. We've failed this time, but we'll get him next time. We got to get him."

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"It's your say-so!" muttered Yellow Dick. "But I can sure see Colorado in that crowd yonder, and he's got a rope over his arm."

"Dog-gone Colorado!" answered Cactus. "I'm telling you the sheriff won't stand for a lynching. And where'd we hit for if we lit out of Plug Hat? There ain't another town in Texas where we could show up without a sheriff or a town marshal roping us in? You're wanted for shooting, Dick; and I guess there's shootings and cattle-lifting agin you, Tutt. Me, I guess it gives me a crick in the neck to think of locating in any town outside Plug Hat. We got to stick."

"You've said it!" assented Sandy Tutt.

"This hyer is our last holt," said Cactus. "I guess if we quit Plug Hat, we got to take to the chaparral. I ain't honing to begin as an outlaw, like that fire-bug, the Rio Kid, that's hunted all over Texas, or like Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith. And I guess that's all we got, if we quit Plug Hat."

"Here comes the sheriff!" muttered Yellow Dick.

"Let him come!" snarled Cactus.

The Rio Kid appeared in the sunny plaza. He walked across to the Red Flare, and following him came Colorado, Mesquite, Yuma Dan, and a dozen other Plug Hat men who were sworn in as sheriff's deputies. And following them came a buzzing and interested crowd. Colorado had a lasso looped over his brawny arm, and Yellow Dick and Sandy Tutt looked long and anxiously at that lasso, wondering uneasily what it was meant for. The Kid stopped in the open doorway.

"You guys to home?" he called out cheerily.

"Yep!" snarled Cactus Carter.

"Step out here!"

"What's wanted?"

"You are!" answered the Kid tersely.

"If it's lynching—" began Tutt.

"Aw, forget it, feller," said the Kid. "Don't I keep on telling you that this here is an orderly town now, and lynchings is off? Step out lively. I ain't burning you out, like you did me last night; but I guess if you don't step out lively, I'll fan you with bullets till you get a move on. Pronto!"

Cactus Carter's hand hovered over a gun.

He was sorely tempted to draw and fire on the handsome figure in Stetson and goatskin chaps, that stood in the sunny doorway.

As if the Kid read his thoughts—as probably he did—a gun appeared in his hand.

"Step out!" he snapped.

And the three gunmen stepped out of the saloon, not venturing to touch a gun. They stepped out into the glare of the bright sun of Texas, into the midst of the buzzing crowd. The Kid's gun remained in his hand. He had not lifted it; but the Plug Hat rough-necks had had some experience of the way "Sheriff Brown" could shoot from the hip, and they did not want to sample his shooting. Cactus Carter eyed the Kid savagely.

"Now what's the rookus?" he demanded.

The Kid pointed along the rugged street to where it joined the prairie trail. The three gunmen followed his pointing finger with their eyes, and then looked at one another, and at the Kid.

"Meanin'?" muttered Cactus.

"You got to beat it," said the Kid.

"This hyer town don't want your company any longer. You allow that there ain't no proof that you burned me out last night, and I guess you've said it. There ain't! If there was, I'd string you up in a row on that cottonwood yonder. But there ain't, and I'm letting you off light. There ain't any proof that I'd care to hang a man on; but, all the same, I don't need telling who was in cahoots with Red Harris in firing my shebang. You get me?"

"I guess—" said the Kid calmly. "If there's a doubt that you tried to make it last sickness for me last night, I'm giving you the benefit of it. But this town is tired of you! Git!"

"I guess you want to go while the going's good!" growled Colorado, and he held the rope significantly.

Cactus Carter ground his teeth.

"And s'posin' we don't beat it?" he hissed.

"I ain't s'posing anything so foolish!" said the Kid. "If you don't beat it, pronto, you're going up in a row on that cottonwood. If I can't prove that you burned me out last night, I guess there's plenty proof that you've shot, and stole horses in this very burg. Killers and hoss-thieves ain't wanted in Plug Hat these days. Quit or hang!"

"You durned dog-goned—" began Cactus, in a voice husky with rage.

"Cut it out!" interrupted the Kid. "I've told you to go, and I ain't waiting. I give you five minutes to get your cayuses. I guess they ain't your cayuses, any more than they're mine, if you come to that. But I ain't raking up old troubles. Get out of Plug Hat, and keep out, and I'm sure done with you. Come back agin, and I'll see you strung up, as sure as there's Greasers in Mexico. Now, you getting?"

Cactus Carter, his face aflame with fury, reached for his gun.

"Better not!" smiled the Kid. The muzzle of the six-gun the Kid held at his side was turned on the gambler. With his revolver half-out, Cactus Carter paused—just in time to save his life.

Slowly, furiously, he relinquished the butt.

"That's hoss-sense," said the Kid approvingly. "I guess if you'd got that gun out of leather, Cactus, it would have been your last stunt on this side of Jordan. Now beat it while you're in one piece."

Cactus cast a fierce glance round at the watching crowd.

"I got friends here," he said. "Ain't any guy standing by me to keep me from being run out of town?"

Only silence answered the gunman's appeal. There were a good many rough-necks in Plug Hat who jibbed at the rule of the new sheriff. But there was none who cared, or dared, to draw a gun against him.

Cactus breathed hard.

"You getting, feller?" asked the Kid politely.

"I'm getting!" said Cactus. "But you ain't heard the last of me, dog-gone your hide! I guess—"

"Nuff said!" interrupted the Kid. "You're wasting time—a sheriff's time. Get your cayuse, and beat it."

Five minutes later the three gunmen were mounted, and riding out of the plaza. A crowd followed them down the rugged street that led past the Plug Hat Hotel to the open prairie. On the piazza of the hotel, Pop Short waved a fat hand to the three in farewell. They

rode on, silent, grim, savage, watched by the crowd till they left the town behind, and entered on the prairie trail.

On the trail, Cactus reined in his horse for a moment, and looked back.

He was run out of town—run out of the town where he and his bunch had so long ruled the roost, the town that they had turned into an imitation of the hot place with the lid off. In his rage, the gambler came near to wheeling his horse and spurring back into the cow-town, gun in hand, to stake all on a last desperate attempt to win back all he had lost.

Only for a moment he thought of it, for he knew that if he rode back with his gun in his hand, he would ride to death under the Colt that never missed. With black rage in his brow, savage vengeance in his heart, Cactus Carter rode on with his companions, and the grassy prairie swallowed them from the sight of Plug Hat.

News for the Kid.

THE thud of hoofs, and the jingle of bridle and spurs, in the rugged street of Plug Hat, did not attract the attention of the Rio Kid. The outlaw-sheriff sat in a rocker in the open doorway of the new office that had been built within a few days after the fire, and looked out into the sunshine. But the sound of a passing rider was too frequent to cause the Kid to glance at the horseman who came clattering in the plaza.

There was a cheery expression on the Kid's sunburnt face.

He had made the grade as sheriff of Sassafras County. His sway was undisputed in the cow-town of Plug Hat. On the ranches round about the town, for the county was all cow country, there had been much talk and discussion about the new sheriff, and more than one wild outfit of reckless punchers had threatened to ride into town, shoot up the sheriff, and re-establish the old order. But nothing had come of such threats so far, and the sheriff reckoned that nothing would come of them.

And the Kid, as he sat at ease in his rocker, looking out into the sunny, dusty plaza, was thinking that he had found a comfortable refuge, after so many wild days on an outlaw trail, and figuring that it would be a long time before he quitted his career as Sheriff Brown, of Plug Hat. And he did not look at the passing horseman till the man happened to come into his direct line of vision, and then the Kid gave a start, and the pleasant smile vanished from his face, leaving it grim.

For the man who was riding past the sheriff's office was a Texas Ranger, and the Kid had only too good reason to know a Ranger when he saw one.

The horseman rode past the office. He had come into town at a gallop; but he was now going on at an easy trot, looking about him as he went, as if in search of some particular building.

The Kid drew a long, long breath. Colorado Bill, who was lounging outside the office, moved, and looked in the doorway at the Kid.

"Say, sheriff!" he grinned.

"Shoot!" said the Kid.

"I guess that's a Ranger jest moseyed along."

"You reckon?" said the Kid indifferently.

"You bet," said Colorado, "and it sure is a change from old times, sheriff: I guess when Cactus' bunch was ruling the roost hyer, a Ranger couldn't have ridden down the street of Plug Hat without suthin' hittin' him sudden."

"I guess so," assented the Kid.

"This town sure has changed," said Colorado. "There's a heap of rough-necks levanted, since Cactus was run out of town. Pop Short figures that they've gone to join in cahoots with Cactus, and that we shall hear some-

Say, what's bitin' you, sheriff?" added Colorado. The Sheriff of Sassafras county had given a start at the mention of the celebrated Ranger captain. "I've heard of Jim Hall," said the Kid, easily. "I guess I heard of him gunning after some outlaw cuss down in the Mal Pais."

"Yep—that fire-bug they call the Rio Kid," answered Colorado. "Some guys say the Kid's dead—he ain't been heard of for a long time now. I guess Mule-Kick Hall got him at last: they say Hall always gets his man in the long run."



The three gunmen stepped out of the saloon, not venturing to touch a gun. But the new sheriff had his six-gun ready in case of trouble.

thing drop one of these days. Some guys allow Cactus ain't gone far, and that he's hiding in the buttes. What you reckon, sheriff?"

"I reckon it won't be good for Cactus' health to stay around Plug Hat," answered the Kid. "But there sure is a change, now that a Texas Ranger can ride through the burg without being shot on sight. I guess he's heading for the hotel," he added carelessly.

Colorado glanced down the street. "Nope: he's stopped, and turning back," he said.

The Kid shifted his rocker a trifle further into the office. He was unwilling to come under the view of a Texas Ranger if he could help it. He was standing for law and order now: and Sheriff Brown did not want to have to shoot in defence of the Rio Kid.

"I seen that guy afore, down to Blue Grass," said Colorado. "He's Austin Red—one of Mule-Kick Hall's troop.

The Kid smiled.

"That guy's coming back hyer," remarked Colorado. "I guess he's calling to see the sheriff, sir."

"Wake snakes!" murmured the Kid. "He's riding a good critter," said Colorado. "I guess a month ago, Cactus would have sold that critter for him, arter he'd been filled full of lead. Yep; he's sure coming to see you, sheriff. Here he is."

With a jingle of bridle and spur, the horseman drew rein outside the sheriff's office.

The Kid shifted his gun-belt a little, to bring a walnut butt a little nearer to his hand. But he sighed. It would be a cruel trick of fate, to make the sheriff of Sassafras an outlaw once again.

"Say," came the Ranger's drawing

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Under the Kid Sheriff!

(Continued from page 13.)

voice, addressing Colorado. "This hyer is Plug Hat, ain't it, feller?"

"You've said it," answered Colorado.

"I guess it ain't up to its reputation," said Austin Red. "It's as quiet as any cow-town in Texas—durn my boots, if I didn't think I was at home in Austin, when I moseyed in. I've heard you got a noo sheriff in this burg, that ain't been shot up yit like the others."

"I guess we got a noo sheriff, and I allow he's made things hum," answered Colorado, "I'll have you know, sir, that Plug Hat is a sample for all Texas; and if you tie up your cayuse to a post in the morning, you'll sure find him there in the afternoon. Yes, sir."

"You surely surprise me," said the Ranger. "Waal, my captain has heard of this hyer noo sheriff, and he's sent me along to have a pow-wow with him. Is he to home?"

"Jest inside the shebang," answered Colorado, "Mr. Sheriff, sir, a Ranger to see you from Mule-Kick Hall."

"Mosey in, feller," called out the Kid.

The Kid was glad, at that moment, that he had lately changed his pun-cher's outfit for a garb more suitable to his position as sheriff. He had not been willing to make the change; but he reckoned it was needed, and he was glad of it now. Austin Red, so far as he knew, had never seen him personally, though he must be well acquainted with the published descriptions of the Rio Kid; and he hoped that there would be no recognition. The Kid was getting used now, to standing for the law, and he hated the idea of being driven once more to standing against it.

The Ranger swung into the office with a clink of spurs. The Kid rose from the rocker, and nodded to him civilly.

Austin Red stared.

"Say, you the sheriff?" he ejaculated.

"You've got it," said the Kid.

"Bub, you're starting early in life," said the Ranger. "Say, you ain't the sheriff's little boy, stringin' me along?"

The Kid laughed. His boyish look struck the burly Ranger; but the Kid did not mind that, so long as nothing else struck the keen, surprised eyes of the man from Austin.

"That there's the sheriff, Austin Red," said Colorado, from the doorway, "and I allow he lays over any other sheriff in Texas."

Austin Red scanned the sheriff curiously. His glance lingered long on the handsome, sunburnt face. The Kid read in his eyes that he was wondering where he had seen some similar face before; and the Kid knew, if Red did not, that it was in the published pictures of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande that the Ranger had seen such a face. But the Kid counted a good deal on the position of sheriff to cover him, and he did not count in vain. There was only a momentary wonder, and nothing like suspicion, in the man from Austin's looks.

"You got business with me?" asked the Kid tranquilly. "Shoot, feller! I guess I got to be in the saddle soon."

"Yep! If you're sheriff of Sassafras, I got a message for you from my captain," answered the Ranger.

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"Spill it!"

"I guess you've heard of that fire-bug, the Rio Kid?"

"Who ain't, in Texas?" answered the sheriff of Plug Hat.

"Sure!" assented the man from Austin. "Waal, Mule-Kick is after that guy like grim death after a nigger. I guess he's hunted him all through Texas; but that guy surely does know how to hide himself at the bottom of a hole, and pull the pesky hole in after him. But Mule-Kick allows that he might have made a break this-a-way, seeing that Plug Hat was the very town where any gunman, or cow-thief, might reckon he was in clover."

The Kid nodded with a smile. Mule-Kick Hall had been right in his surmise; for it was precisely to keep out of way of the Texas Rangers that the Kid had first ridden into Plug Hat.

"Mule-Kick is combing the Blue Grass country for him now," went on the Ranger, "and, hearing there was a noo sheriff in this burg that was standing for the law, he sent me along with a message, Mr. Brown. I guess

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he wants you to keep your eyes open for that fire-bug, the Rio Kid, and send word along to us, pronto, if he shows up hyer."

"I guess no outlaw or fire-bug would figure that Plug Hat was healthy for him, since I've been sheriff," said the Kid, shaking his head. "Things is changed hyer since Cactus Carter and his bunch was running the town."

"That's so," said Colorado. "I guess the Rio Kid might have horned in in Cactus' time, and that bunch would have given him the glad hand, from what I've heard tell of the cuss. But Plug Hat ain't no place for him now."

"All the same, I guess we're going to keep our eyes peeled, if Mule-Kick Hall thinks the fire-bug might mosey along this-a-way," said the Kid gravely. "I guess that outlaw's worse medicine than Cactus Carter or Two-gun Stone. I shall sure watch out for him."

"Word to us at Blue Grass if he shows up," said the Ranger.

"You hanging on long at Blue Grass?" asked the Kid carelessly.

"Yea; until we've combed it for the

Kid. There's sure news that he rode through Blue Grass a few weeks ago on that grey mustang of his'n."

"Where you hitting after you leave Blue Grass?"

"Search me," answered the Ranger. "Anywhere where there's news of the Rio Kid. But I reckon Mule-Kick is likely to mosey into this town, and look over the pesky population, and make sure that the Kid ain't here under some new name. He's surely got as many names as any guy in Texas. Waal, so-long, sheriff! I guess I'm hitting the back trail."

"So-long, feller! And mention to Captain Hall that it will do me proud to have him visit this burg," said the Kid. "And if I ain't to home when he moseys in, my deputies will help him all they can."

"Sure!" The Ranger strode out to his horse, remounted, and rode away with a jingle and a clatter.

The Rio Kid stood in the sunny street, looking after him.

There was a thoughtful cloud on his brow.

If the Rangers came to Plug Hat—if they found the Kid there, acting as sheriff—Mule-Kick Hall knew the Kid's face as well as he knew the back of his own hand. The new sheriff breathed hard.

"Say, sheriff!" The Kid started. He had forgotten that Colorado was there. He glanced at his burly deputy. Austin Red, in the distance, disappeared in a cloud of dust.

"Say, I guess I know what you're thinking, sheriff!" grinned Colorado.

The Kid started.

"You reckon?" he said.

"Sure! There's a thousand dollars on the Rio Kid for the guy that can earn it," said Colorado Bill. "And if he rode through Blue Grass, as that guy allows, I guess it's on the cards that he hit this country, Plug Hat was just the burg he would make for—afore your time, sheriff. Say, what's the matter with having the posse out, and combing Sassafras for that fire-bug? I guess if that thousand dollars is going to be raked in, it might as well come this way as any other, sheriff."

The Kid looked at him curiously.

"Feller," he said, "you surely do get the big idea when you set your think-box going. I sure picked you out to be chief of my deputies, because I allowed you had heap hoss-sense, Colorado. Feller, you call up six men at dawn, and take three days to ride every trail in the county, and if you find that fire-bug, the Rio Kid, you cinch the reward. And I allow I ain't claiming a Continental red cent in it."

"You've said it, sheriff," said Colorado joyfully. "You riding with us?"

"Sure!" said the Kid. "Ain't it my business, as sheriff of this hyer country, to rope in that fire-bug if he's around? I sure ride with you to-morrow. And if the Rio Kid is in Sassafras County, I guess we'll see the colour of his hair."

The Kid's face was dark and thoughtful when Colorado left him. With Mule-Kick Hall and the Rangers so near, and likely to ride that way, prudence counselled the boy outlaw to mount the grey mustang, and hit the trail for parts unknown. But he shook his head. He was sheriff of Sassafras now, and he was staying sheriff.

THE END.

(More thrills for the Kid sheriff next week in "THE BAR-2 BUNCH," a powerful yarn of Texas.)

2 BATS AUTOGRAPHED by the AUSTRALIANS, and 7 OTHER BATS won by "Popular" Readers!—See inside!

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A Bunch on a Bender!



"THEY'RE coming, sheriff!" "Shucks!" growled the

Rio Kid. "They're sure coming!" said Colorado Bill.

"Feller," snapped the Kid, "do you figure that I'm blind and deaf? I guess I know they're coming, the pesky boneheads." Colorado grinned.

The new sheriff of Sassafras county seemed unusually edgewise that day.

The Rio Kid—known in the cow town of Plug Hat as "Texas Brown"—stood on the wooden piazza of the Plug Hat Hotel.

From that coign of vantage he had a view in one direction of the rugged street and plaza of the cow town, in the other, of the prairie trail from the open cow country.

It was in the latter direction that the Kid was looking.

Far away on the plain there was a cloud of dust, kicked up by the heels of many horses.

A dozen riders, at least, were in the bunch that galloped along the dusty trail towards Plug Hat.

The Kid's brow was wrinkled with troubled thought.

Trouble was coming to the new sheriff—in the shape of that bunch of reckless cowpunchers from the Bar-2 Ranch.

Plenty of trouble had come the Kid's way since he had become Sheriff of Sassafras. But this was a new kind of trouble that the Kid disliked.

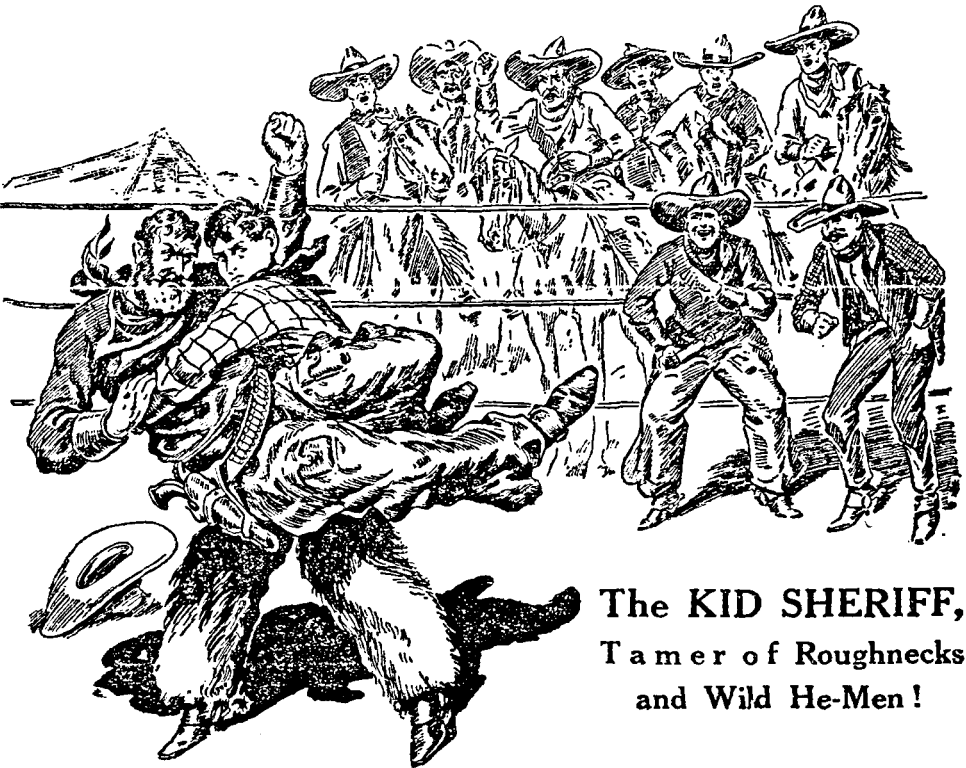
For the Kid himself had been bred a puncher, and though he had been an outlaw and was now a sheriff, he was still a cowman to the finger-tips, and his sympathy was all with the men who rode the ranges.

With the rough-necks of Plug Hat the sheriff had dealt with an unsparing hand. Cactus Carter and his gang had been run out of town, the gambling saloons had been shut down, shooting affrays sternly prohibited, horse-stealing barred. Plug Hat, once a byword for lawlessness, had become one of the most orderly cow towns in Texas, and a crowd of rough-necks and gunmen had cleared off in disgust, seeking fresh woods and pastures new. Plug Hat citizens hardly knew their town these days, so changed had it become under the rule of the new sheriff. The Kid's word, backed up by his gun, was law in Plug Hat; but with the punchers on the surrounding ranches it was a rather different matter.

All Plug Hat knew that the Bar-2 bunch were riding into town that day, and wondered what the sheriff would do.

For the Bar-2 men were coming on a "bender."

They had received their pay, and were



The KID SHERIFF, Tamer of Roughnecks and Wild He-Men!

THE BAR-2 BUNCH!

bent on spending it in the way to which they had become accustomed.

They were good fellows enough in their rough-and-ready way, and the Sheriff of Plug Hat, a puncher himself, could not help feeling a sort of sneaking sympathy with them, though they were out to break the law into small pieces.

They earned their money by long days and nights of hard work and hard riding, and when they got their leave they liked to spread themselves in a wild and whirling jamboree.

They were accustomed to ride into Plug Hat in a wild bunch, shooting up the town in sheer exuberance of spirit. Doors were closed, stores were shuttered, and peaceable citizens hunted cover, when a bunch of wild punchers rode into town, cavorting up and down the rugged street on shaggy bronchos, and firing their revolvers right and left. Not that they aimed to hurt anybody,

so long as nobody interfered with their fun. If some unfortunate citizen stopped a bullet it was his bad luck, one of those incidents which naturally occurred in a cow town like Plug Hat.

But Plug Hat was an orderly town now, and such entertainments as "shooting up the town" had to cease. The citizens looked to their sheriff to see that such wild proceedings ceased, and the Kid knew his duty, and was going to put it through.

But he was worried.

With gunmen and rough-necks and bushwhackers the Kid had a stern hand, but he hated the idea of coming into conflict with a bunch of merry punchers, who meant no real harm, though they did a great deal without meaning to.

Hence the troubled frown on the Kid's handsome, sunburnt face as he stood on the hotel piazza and watched the cloud of dust drawing nearer and nearer across the prairie.

Word had gone all through the town that the Bar-2 bunch were coming. It was known that the sheriff was not going to allow them to shoot up the town in their old wild way. When they came they were going to keep order, like a parcel of farmers on a trip to Austin. But they did not look like it as they came careering along the prairie trail, some of them already banging away with revolvers to show that they were out on a bender.

The sheriff had gathered his deputies, had six good men and true to back him up if it came to fighting. But he hated the idea.

"Say, sheriff, you ain't skered of that bunch, sure?" asked Mesquite, with a grinning look at the Kid's troubled face.

"Aw, forget it!" grunted the Kid. "I guess they mean trouble," said

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Colorado Bill. "Mohave Dave is leading that bunch, sheriff, and Mohave is sure hunting trouble. He allows they're going to see the faro game started at the Red Flare again. They sure want to throw their dust on the faro table like they used."

"There ain't going to be any faro game in Plug Hat so long's I'm sheriff," grunted the Kid. "Likewise, they ain't going to shoot up the town. This here town has been cleaned up, and it's going to stay cleaned up. But—"

He broke off discontentedly.

"There's going to be shooting if you stop them, sheriff," said Yuma Dan. "They are sure wild, and they mean trouble. The Bar-2 bunch are the wildest outfit in the county."

"They look it!" grunted the Kid.

"It's up to you, sheriff!" said Pop Short, the landlord of the lumber hotel. "You got to keep order in this here town."

"Ain't I wise to that?" snorted the Kid.

"There's plenty of rough-necks ready to join up with them if they get a riot going," said Mr. Short. "I guess there's a whole heap of guys in Plug Hat waiting for jest such a chance."

"Sure!" said Colorado Bill. "And Mohave has been swearing for days past that he's going to make Plug Hat jest like it used to be, and that he won't stand for turning it into a Sunday-school town."

Clatter, clatter! Thud, thud, thud! Bang, bang!

The beating of wild, galloping hoofs could be heard now, and the banging of revolvers fired in the air by the approaching bunch. Evidently the Bar-2 outfit were in great spirits, and looking forward to a bender in Plug Hat.

"They won't be long now!" said Colorado Bill.

The Kid sighed.

He had to get going at the risk of getting into a shooting affray with the punchers from the Bar-2 ranges. He hated the idea, but he had his duty to do as sheriff. In a very short time now the bunch would be riding in from the prairie, and if they were not stopped the whole town would be held up by the rioting punchers. Bullets would be flying right and left, windows smashing, peaceable citizens hunting cover, and the whole rough element of the town turning out to join in the riot. The Kid had to get going.

"Them guys are going to be stopped," he said. "We got to get a move on, fellows."

"They won't be stopped without gunplay, sheriff," said Colorado. "They're coming into town full gallop."

"I 'member the last sheriff," remarked Mesquite reminiscently. "He got in the way of a bunch that was riding into town. They rode over him."

"They won't ride over me," grunted the Kid.

He descended the steps of the piazza. His men followed him, but with rather doubtful looks.

Standing in the way of the wild bunch that was galloping into town was asking for the severest trouble, for it was quite certain that the Bar-2 men would not halt when ordered. They would come on at full gallop, and any guy standing in their way would have to jump lively or be trodden under the thundering bronchos. Nothing but a volley would stop the charge of the reckless punchers, and that was a

desperate measure of which the sheriff certainly was not thinking.

"Say, sheriff—" began Colorado.

"Aw, can it!" interrupted the Kid. "We ain't time now for chewing the rag. That bunch has got to be stopped and talked to."

"I'll say they won't stop—"

"Forget it," said the Kid. "Get a hustle on, you'uns, and get hold of a dozen riatas."

"Shucks! You ain't aiming to rope them in?" exclaimed Mesquite, in astonishment.

"Nope, you bonehead! Get them riatas, pronto!"

Riatas were plentiful enough in Plug Hat. A dozen forty-foot ropes were quickly at the disposal of the sheriff.

He rapped out his orders quickly.

The lassos were stretched across the street, from the lumber hotel on one side, to Perkins' store on the other.

The ropes were placed one above another—the lower ones knotted to the hitching-posts, the upper to beams and window-frames.

In a few minutes there was a barrier of strong ropes across the street, barring the way of any horseman riding into town.

Behind the barrier the sheriff stood

like schoolboys on a holiday. But every man in the bunch packed a gun; and Mohave Dave, the foreman of the ranch, packed two, and was reputed to be very quick and handy with both of them. So long as they were not opposed or interfered with, the Bar-2 bunch were cheery and good-humoured, regarding the damage they were going to do as sheer fun, and recklessly heedless of an accidental death or two that might result from wild shooting. But if they found law and order in the way, the Bar-2 men were the guys to draw and fire without stopping to think. They had been used to having their own way at Plug Hat, and they did not approve of the changes brought in by the new sheriff. Indeed, it was known that those changes had been discussed with great animosity in the bunkhouse at the Bar-2, and that Mohave Dave and his friends had declared their fixed intention of restoring the old order. And if the pesky new sheriff stood in the way, the Bar-2 bunch made no secret of their aim to shoot up the new sheriff, as sheriffs in Plug Hat had been shot up before.

They came on at full gallop, banging away with their revolvers in the air, yelling like a bunch of Apaches.

They reached the town, and in a minute more, but for the sheriff's precaution, they would have been career-ing along the street, banging away with their guns at the windows of cabins and shacks, riding down any luckless galoot who was in the way, and generally turning Plug Hat into an imitation of the hot place with the lid off.

The barrier of ropes dawned suddenly on them, so suddenly that some of them had no time to draw rein.

Mohave Dave, riding a little ahead, brandishing a gun in either hand, crashed into the taut ropes, and he and his broncho went rolling over in a sprawling, kicking heap.

"Thunder!" roared the foreman of the Bar-2 as he rolled.

Another puncher crashed into the ropes, and was hurled from his horse. But the rest reined in, barely in time, with the bronchos' muzzles on the stretched riatas.

There was a roar of surprise and wrath from the outfit.

Mohave Dave staggered up dizzily. His bronzed, bearded face was crimson with rage.

"Say!" he roared. "What's this game? What pesky guy's roped the street this-a-way? Say!"

"Hold in your hosses, fellers!" said the Rio Kid calmly. "I guess I want to talk to you guys a piece."

The Bar-2 bunch had been forced to



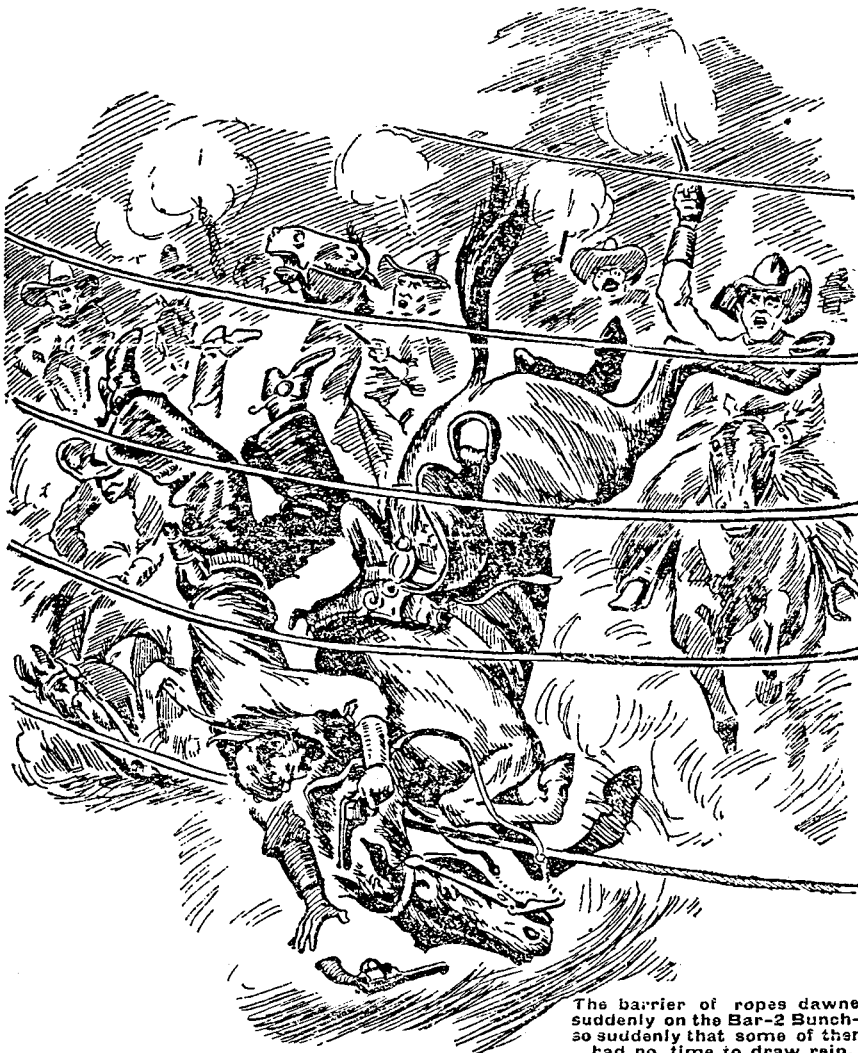
The Kid and his posse watched the newcomers charge down on them.

with his deputies, waiting for the arrival of the Bar-2 bunch—close at hand now.

Holding up the Bunch!

CLATTER, clatter! Thud, thud! The earth seemed to shake under the thundering hoofs as the Bar-2 bunch galloped in from the prairie.

There were more than a dozen punchers in the outfit: burly, bronzed men fresh from the ranges, exuberant at their release from duty, a good deal



The barrier of ropes dawned suddenly on the Bar-2 Bunch—so suddenly that some of them had no time to draw rein.

halt. They sat their trampling bronchos, staring at the Kid and his men behind him.

"You!" roared Mohave Dave. "Who are you? What you got to say?"

"I guess I'm the sheriff."

"You the sheriff!"

"You've got it!" assented the Kid. "Don't be in a hurry with the guns, fellers. I'm packing guns myself, and if you're set on gun-play, I ain't the guy to disappoint you. But I guess I want to talk first."

Mohave Dave glared at him.

His fall had shaken him up considerably, and he had dropped the guns he had been brandishing. Perhaps that was the only reason why he did not pull trigger on the spot.

The Kid had not drawn a weapon. But he stood with his hands on the walnut butts of the guns in his low-slung holsters, and he was ready. Behind him the deputies already had their Colts in their hands.

"You—you—" spluttered Mohave. "You durned pesky little coyote! You the sheriff! Where's your school-warm?"

The Kid smiled.

"I guess I'm the sheriff, elected to keep order in this cow town," he answered. "Gents, I'm powerful sorry to interfere with your fun. It sure does get my goat to chip in. But I'm sheriff, and I got to keep order in this

burg. Shooting up the town ain't allowed any more, not since Cactus Carter was run out of town. You guys keep your guns packed, and you're more than welcome in Plug Hat. But there ain't going to be shooting."

"Who says there ain't?" roared Mohave.

"This galoot!" answered the Kid.

"You pesky little gopher, you figure that this outfit is going to take any notice of you?" bellowed the cowman.

"I sure hope so," said the Kid. "I should hate to spill the juice of a puncher. Fellers, I been a puncher myself, and I sure know what you feel like when you get off the range and get on a bender. But—"

"You fixed up them pesky ropes—"

"Sure! Jest to stop you, so that I could chew the rag with you peaceable," said the Kid amiably.

"By thunder! You figure that you're going to get away with this?" gasped the foreman of the Bar-2.

"You've said it, feller."

Mohave Dave made a dive for a gun that lay at his feet. The Kid's smiling face set hard, and a Colt appeared in his hand as if by magic.

"Let that gun alone, feller!" he rapped out.

The Bar-2 foreman did not heed. He grabbed up the gun from the ground.

Bang!

The gun left his fingers even as they

closed on it. It whirled from his grasp, shot away by the Kid's prompt fire.

Mohave Dave gave a howl as he jerked away his tingling fingers.

There was a shout from the Bar-2 crowd, and guns were handled on all sides. For a moment it seemed that a desperate affray was inevitable; but the Kid's voice rang out sharply:

"Go slow, you galoots!"

His guns were at a level, his eyes gleaming over them through the rope barrier. And the cowpunchers, reckless as they were, paused.

"You dog-goned coyote—"

growled one of the bunch.

"You durned pesky lobo-wolf—"

"Keep it up," said the Kid. "I guess hard words don't break any bones, feller; and I'm sure glad to hear cowboy talk. Fellers, I feel jest as friendly to you as if I was your Dutch uncle; and I'd hate to spill the juice of any guy of you. You want to believe me."

Some of the Bar-2 punchers laughed.

"You've got a heap of gail, anyhow," said a Bar-2 puncher. "You going back to school when you quit playing sheriff?"

The Kid smiled cheerily.

Mohave Dave stood rubbing his tingling hand. He had calmed down a little, perhaps that evidence of the Kid's good shooting having a calming effect on him.

"Now, fellers," said the Kid persuasively, "I'll say I'm sheriff, and I got my duty to do, and that's to stop any shooting in this here cow town. You keep the law, and I ain't the guy to interfere with any man's fun. Say the word, and these ropes'll be cut away, and you can ride in and spread yourselves. Nobody wants any trouble."

"I guess we can cut them ropes ourselves if we want, and then shoot up the pesky town!" growled one of the punchers.

"What's the good of huntin' trouble?" pleaded the Kid. "If you guys begin shootin', there's a lot of guns hyer will go off; for I'm tellin' you square that any guy shooting in this town will be drilled right on the spot. But I'll say I hate having trouble with you punchers."

"Leave it to Dave," said one of the Bar-2 outfit. "What Dave says goes."

Mohave Dave spat out an oath. "Look here, Mister Baby Sheriff," he said. "We've come in for fun, and we're going to have our fun. The faro game's going to be started again at the Red Flare—you hear me?"

"It ain't," said the Kid, shaking his head. "No gambling game is being run in this town. But I guess if you want to throw away your dollars I ain't aiming to stop you. Throw them down the first prairie dog's hole along the trail—I guess it will come to the same thing as a faro game—and no harm done."

There was a laugh from the punchers, and from the gathering crowd of Plug Hat citizens. Somehow the "Baby Sheriff," as Dave called him, seemed to have a placating effect on the wild

oufit. His evident desire to avoid trouble, added to his equally evident readiness for it, it came, had an effect. Moreover, there were two or three score of men gathered behind the Kid now; and the odds were heavy against the Bar-2 if it came to shooting. They wanted to ride around town kicking up a terrific shindy. But they did not want a pitched battle, with a dozen dead men on either side to show for the result. The Kid was holding the Bar-2 outfit. With a mixture of good nature and iron firmness, he had hoped to pull through without bloodshed, and it looked as if he would get by with it.

"You're some sheriff, you are," said Mohave Dave sarcastically. "You're going to turn us all into good little boys, I reckon."

"Feller," said the Kid, "you're good boys already—jest as good boys as ever I want to see, and the kind of guys I'd like to be friends with. If it wasn't in the way of duty I'd sure not stand in your way a dog-goned minute."

"Say, you do talk like a Dutch uncle," grinned one of the punchers. "What's it going to be, Dave?"

Mohave gave a short.

"You can pack away them guns," he said. "We ain't come here to spill juice all over the town. But I ain't taking all that lip from a kid what ought to be at school with his schoolmarm. Mister Baby Sheriff, I'm coming along to wipe up the street with you, if you've got sand enough to put away your gun and stand up to it."

The Kid holstered his guns instantly. "Mister Bonehead you sure do me proud," he answered. "Come along as soon as you like, and if I don't run you into the calaboose for breaking the peace of this town, you can call me a Greaser and a Digger Injun."

"The calaboose!" roared Mohave.

"Jest that!" said the Kid. "Since I been sheriff we got a new gaol built, and I'll say it ain't been left empty a lot. But it's empty now, and if you break the peace, feller, you go in. I'm powerful sorry, but that's how it stands—and I'm sure hoping you'll be peaceable."

The Bar-2 foreman drew a deep breath.

"Dog-gone my boots," he said. "If you can run me into the calaboose, baby, you can keep me there till the cows come home."

"You've said it," answered the Kid.

And the Bar-2 foreman ducked under a rope, put up a pair of brawny fists that looked like legs of mutton, and rushed at the Kid.

But the Kid knew what he was about. He had come through many a desperate rough-and-tumble in his time, and had found coolness and skill and courage hold their own against brawn and muscle.

He jumped back as the big cowman rushed him down, side-stepped swiftly, and greeted Mohave with a rap on the side of his head that made him stagger.

Dave spun round on him, red with rage, and leaped at him like a charging buffalo.

His heavy fists crashed at the Kid, and had they reached the cool, handsome face they would have done terrible damage. But Dave found those crashing fists brushed away as if they had been mosquitoes. And a fist, smaller but quite as solid, hard as a lump of iron, crashed on the cowman's jaw, and he spun over as if a mule had kicked him.

There was a crash as the burly foreman of the Bar-2 landed on his back on the hard earth.

"Say," roared Colorado, in huge delight—"say, wasn't that some sock-dodger? I'll tell the world that was some sockdodger!"

Mohave Dave sat up dazedly.

He blinked dizzily at the Kid and felt his jaw with his hand, as if to ascertain that it was still there.

"Waal," he gasped, "I swow—I surely swow!"

"Wade in, Dave!" yelled the Bar-2 punchers. "Wade in, old-timer! You ain't letting that kid lay you out."

"Say, that kid's got a hit like the kick of a mule!" chuckled Pop Short, an interested spectator from his piazza. "I'll tell a man he's got a hit like the kick of a dog-goned mule."

Mohave slowly staggered up.

The Kid smiled at him cheerily.

"Feller, let it drop!" he urged. "I ain't bearing no malice, and I sure don't want to run you into the calaboose. Forget it, feller."

"If I don't knock you into small pieces, boy, I ain't Mohave Dave, and I wasn't raised on the Panhandle!" gasped the foreman of the Bar-2.

"Well, if you want it, wade in," said the Kid. "But I got to run you in for breaking the peace, if you do. Mesquite, you go and set open the door of the calaboose, all ready for this guy."

"You bet!" grinned Mesquite.

Mohave Dave breathed hard, and set his teeth. His comrades yelled to him to wade in, in great excitement. The Bar-2 crowd were enjoying this rookus even more than a shooting-up of the town.

The foreman came on again with a rush.

The Kid met him with right and left, and Mohave received, without heeding, a couple of hammering blows that few men could have stopped with impunity. Then his powerful arms grasped the Kid. "Now!" he panted.

"I guess Mohave has got him!" yelled a Bar-2 puncher. "Say, Mohave, we're watching you break him up."

The Kid returned grip for grip.

The grasp of the big cowman was like an iron band, and Mohave sought to tear him from his footing—to dash him to the ground. But the Kid's feet seemed glued to the earth, though he rocked in the cowman's grasp.

For a long minute they struggled, and then, to the surprise of all beholders, it was the feet of Mohave that left the ground.

He was swung round the Kid's hip and dropped on the ground with a concussion that knocked every ounce of wind out of him.

He lay spluttering.

"Carry me home to die!" ejaculated Pop Short.

"Wake up, Dave!" roared the Bar-2 crowd. "Get a move on! Say, you ain't going to sleep."

Mohave Dave lay and gasped for breath. The Kid stooped, and touched him on the shoulder.

"It's you for the calaboose," said the Kid gently. "I guess you want to get a move on, feller. I'm waiting."

Dave staggered up. Breathless, feeling himself beaten, but still full of vim, he hurled himself at the sheriff.

The Kid grasped him, swung him round, and fixed a grip of steel in the back of his neck-scarf. Mohave Dave, panting, struggling, and swearing, was run along the street in the Kid's grasp, in the direction of the calaboose.

Twice he rallied and struggled; each time he was whirled on again.

They reached the log-built calaboose, of which Mesquite had placed the door wide open. With a swing of his arms the Kid sent the Bar-2 foreman bundling headlong in.

Mohave Dave landed on the earthen floor with a crash.

The Kid turned quickly. He was ready for gunplay from the rough crowd of punchers, who had seen their leader defeated and run in, and his men were ready. But the Bar-2 outfit were not handling their guns. They were joining in the cheer that the Plug Hat crowd gave for the sheriff.

Mohave Dave sat up on the floor of the calaboose. He made an effort to rise, and sat back again. He was completely knocked out, and could only gasp.

"I guess," said the Kid, almost apologetically, "I got to run you in, feller, jest to show that there's law and order in this hyer barg. But as soon as you make up your mind to keep the peace of the town, jest sing out and I'll be back and let you out in two shakes of a coyote's tail."

And with that the Kid slammed the door of the calaboose, locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

He turned and walked back to the spot where the Bar-2 punchers were gathered in a crowd by the rope barrier.

They eyed him very curiously.

"Take down them ropes, you'uns," said the Kid. "I guess this crowd is going to be peaceable. Ain't that so, fellers?"

"You win, sheriff!" said one of the punchers, with a laugh. And the riatas were removed, and the Bar-2 bunch walked their horses into Plug Hat—as orderly a crowd as any sheriff could have wished to see.

Run In!

"STAND back, you'uns!" rapped the Kid to his followers.

"Sheriff—" began Colorado anxiously.

"Stand back!"

"Waal, it's your say-so," said Colorado Bill. "But I guess our noo sherif is going to be chewed up."

The deputies backed away. They looked on eagerly, and the punchers eyed the scene with keen interest. The Kid, strong and sturdy as he was, looked slim and boyish in comparison with the big cowman who was rushing down on him. Hardly a man in the street of Plug Hat but expected to see the boy sheriff knocked flying by the huge hammering fists of Mohave Dave.

THE POPULAR.—No. 604.

Cactus Carter's Raid!

THE sheriff of Plug Hat sat in his office with an eye on the open doorway and the sunny plaza without.

The Kid was feeling good.

He had upheld law and order in the town, and his authority as sheriff, and at the same time avoided the conflict he disliked with the men from the cattle-ranges.

For the first time since Plug Hat had had a local habitation and a name, a bunch of cowmen from the ranges had been prevented from shooting up the town, and order had been maintained without a drop of blood being spilled—

except that which was exuding from Mohave Dave's nose in the calaboose. That was a cause of great satisfaction to the sheriff and to the citizens of the cow town. For the first time on record, it was unnecessary to shutter the stores and to hunt cover when the Bar-2 bunch came in.

Meanwhile, Mohave Dave was still locked in the calaboose. He had not sung out that he was willing to keep the peace—on which condition the Kid was prepared to let him loose. And some of the Bar-2 punchers gathered at the Prairie Dog Saloon were talking of raiding the gaol and letting him loose, sheriff or no sheriff.

But the calaboose was next door to the sheriff's office, and the sheriff had his eyes open and his guns at hand. And so far the wild talk of the Bar-2 punchers remained only talk. The sun was setting behind the buttes to the west of the cow town, and the Kid wondered whether there would be a rookus after darkness fell. But he was not worrying.

with him—the gang that that pesky sheriff cleared out of town. They've been hiding in the buttes, and I guess Cactus has taken to cow-stealing now. Dog-gone that pesky sheriff!"

"Shucks!" said Colorado Bill. "I figured that that would be Cactus' game when he was run out of town, sheriff. He's wanted for shooting up more'n a dozen guys; and there ain't a town in Texas where he'd dare to show his face, excepting Plug Hat."

The Kid nodded.

He was not surprised by the news. He left the office and walked across to the dusty horseman, surrounded now by an excited crowd. He pushed his way through.

"Say, feller, what's happened at the ranch?" asked the Kid. "I want to know."

Buck Peters stared at him.

"Who the thunder are you, dog-gone you?" he retorted.

"Sheriff of Sassafraz County," answered the Kid quietly.

"You want me to let daylight through you, you pesky jay?"

"Carry me home to die!" gasped Buck Peters.

"Now talk!" snapped the Kid. "This ain't a time for fooling; we got to get after them cattle-lifters. Cut it short!"

"Spill it, Buck!" exclaimed several of the Bar-2 punchers.

"I ain't a lot to spill," gasped Buck. "Cactus and his gang came down on the ranch arter you boys was gone—there was only three of us left—and they ran off the cows to the buttes—"

"Didn't you burn powder, you mutt?"

"I guess we did some," answered Buck. "And Jim White and Kansas Pete was laid out cold. And I guess I got on a cayuse and hit the trail to fetch you boys back, with lead whistling round my ears like a bunch of hornets."

"They shot up two men?" exclaimed the Kid.

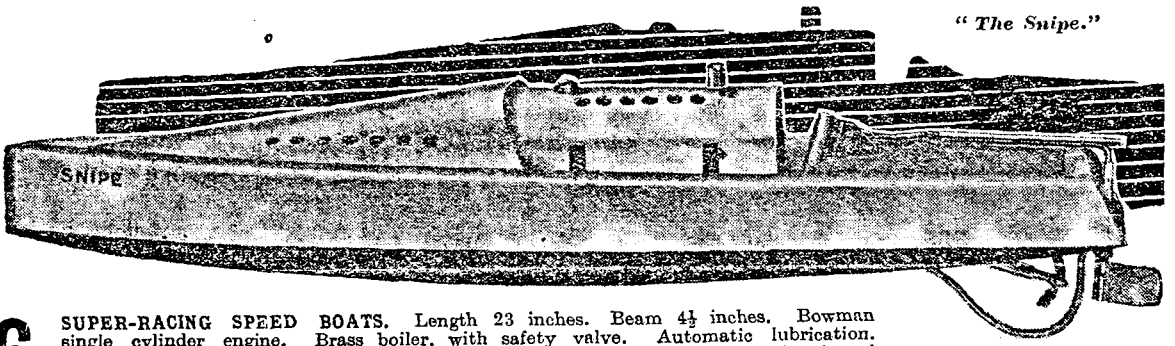
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In the red sunset a horseman dashed into Plug Hat from the prairie.

Colorado Bill looked into the sheriff's office.

"Say, sheriff, that's Buck Peters, from the Bar-2," he drawled. "He's been hitting the trail in a mighty hurry, I guess."

The Kid nodded and watched the dusty rider with interest.

"Bar-2!" the horseman shouted. "Say, are the Bar-2 boys around?"

"What you here for, Buck?" called out two or three voices.

"I guess I've come for you'uns!" gasped the dusty rider. "Say, there's trouble at the Bar-2. I guess them rough-necks was watching and waiting for you boys to ride out. I'm telling you that Cactus Carter and his gang have cleared out the ranch!"

"Cactus Carter!" repeated a dozen voices.

"Sure! And he has a dozen guys

guess this here is my business. There ain't going to be no cow-stealing in this county, feller. Now, put it short."

"Aw-go and chop chips!" said the rider from the Bar-2. "I guess I've come here to call back the boys, and I ain't chewing the rag with no pesky sheriff. Say, you guys, where's Mohave?"

"Mohave's in the calaboose—"

"Oh, great gophers!" gasped the rider. "And who put Mohave in the calaboose?"

"The sheriff."

"And you let him?" roared Buck.

"They sure did let me; and if you don't watch out you'll be in the calaboose, too, afore you can say 'No sugar in mine!'" rapped out the Kid. "I keep on telling you to put me wise to what's happened at the Bar-2. Don't pull that gun, you bonehead!" roared the Kid; and his Colt looked at the horseman as he grasped a weapon.

"And got the cows away?"

"They was driving off five hundred of the best cows in Texas when I started burning the trail," answered Buck.

"They was hitting for the buttes, and I guess they got them cows in the hills by this time."

The Kid turned to Colorado Bill.

"Colorado, you want to call up the boys pronto! We're going after them cow-stealers. We hit the trail in five minutes from now."

"You've said it, sheriff!" answered Colorado, and he hurried away.

The Kid strode across the plaza to the calaboose, Buck Peters staring after him blankly.

"Say, is that baby running this town?" he ejaculated.

"He suro is!" answered Mesquite, with a grin. "And I guess if anybody can get them cows back to the Bar-2, it's our sheriff—and don't you forget it!"

ploughed down half a dozen of the flags marking the inside of the course.

For Sid it was just a mixture of mad skids, flying flags, and the slithering whirling shape of the out-of-control Ace sliding in front of him. Then, by some miracle of fine driving, Jack had left it all behind. They were back on the course, with Sackville a dozen yards ahead of them.

Their Steven-Wills seemed to leap after him. It was almost as though the car had found renewed power out of its narrow escape from disaster. They were on his tail as they slemmed at the last corner.

Jack pulled out and charged straight, it seemed, at the pylon. They skidded faintly, and just escaped it, and were dead level with Sackville as they hit the last half-mile.

Down it they went, Sid yelling in his excitement. Jack was hunched behind the wheel, peering through the screen ahead.

"We're winnin'!" Sid roared, as the Steven-Wills pushed her nose in front of Sackville. "Stick it, Jack! Keep your foot down! Gwan!"

They were leaving Sackville behind. As they passed, Sid saw him muttering viciously to himself when he dropped away.

Ahead an official lifted a black-and-white checked flag, raising it high. They ripped up, then roared past as the winner's flag flashed down; and behind them came Sackville, with the Steven-Wills' thrashing wheels flinging sand triumphantly back at him.

"Done it! Licked him!" Sid yelled exultantly above the whining of the brake-shoes in their drums, as Jack slowed the machine. "Licked him, by gosh! An' we didn't clean an' polish the car!"

THE END.

(Another roaring motor-racing yarn of the Skid Kid next week!)

THE BAR-2 BUNCH!

(Continued from page 23.)

The Rio Kid unlocked the door of the calaboose and threw it open.

Mohave Dave, sitting on a bench in the little gaol, stared at him grimly as he stood in the doorway.

"You!" he growled. "Dog-gone you, if I had a gun I'd let daylight right through you, baby! I sure would!"

"Feller," said the Kid, "you're going to have your guns back, and you're going to git on your cayuse and ride with me."

"How come?" asked the cowman, staring.

"While you was hitting Plug Hat, Cactus Carter was hitting your ranch and running off your cows," said the Kid. "I'm getting after them rustlers; and I guess you want to take a hand."

Mohave leaped up from the bench.

"Say, you giving me the straight goods?" he exclaimed. "Great snakes! The cows run off the ranch, and the boss away at San Antonio—and me fooling around hyer! Dog-gone my cats!"

"I guess I'm taking my posse to look for them," said the Sheriff of Sassafras County. "And I'll say I ain't quitting the trail till I've rounded up Cactus Carter and his gang. If you and your outfit want to ride with us, we're starting pronto."

"Where's my hoss?" gasped Mohave.

The Kid stepped aside, and the forman of the Bar-2 rushed out of the calaboose. The next moment his voice was heard roaring in the plaza to the Bar-2 bunch to mount and ride.

There was a buzzing of voices, a clattering of bridles, a jingling of spurs in the street of Plug Hat. In hot haste

Mohave Dave and his outfit mounted for the ride back to the ranch, breathing vengeance on the rustlers who had raided the herds and shot up two of the outfit.

The Rio Kid rapidly saddled and bridled the grey mustang and rode Side-Kicker down to the Plug Hat Hotel, outside which the posse was gathering.

Ten deputies were mounting there, ready to follow the sheriff on the trail of the cattlo-lifters.

Colorado wavered his Stetson in the air as the Rio Kid came galloping up.

"Hyer we are, sheriff!"

"Ride!" said the Kid.

With a clatter of hoofs the Bar-2 bunch came galloping down the street from the plaza. They were ready to ride as soon as the sheriff's posse. The two parties rode out of Plug Hat together in the red sunset and galloped on the prairie trail southward towards the Bar-2 ranch.

Mohave Dave pulled in his broncho by the side of the Kid as they galloped.

"Say, baby!" he exclaimed.

The Kid glanced round at him. The Bar-2 foreman grinned at him sheepishly.

"Say, I figured that I was coming hunting you, baby, when I got out that dog-goned calaboose," he said. "I reckon I was feeling bad, and my jaw sure does feel as if a pesky mule had kicked it. But I'll say now that I ain't got no kick coming, sheriff. You sure are a white man; and the Bar-2 bunch is backing your play till the cows come home."

"You've said it, feller!" said the Kid.

And then in silence the wild riders dashed on under the falling darkness, the thunder of galloping hoofs ringing far through the night.

THE END.

(There's no peace for the Boy Sheriff. As soon as one trouble blows over, another comes up to blacken his horizon. But the Rio Kid doesn't mind so long as there's plenty of adventure for him. See next week's yarn: "UNDER FIRE!")

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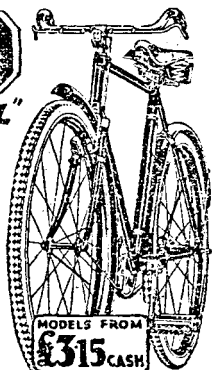
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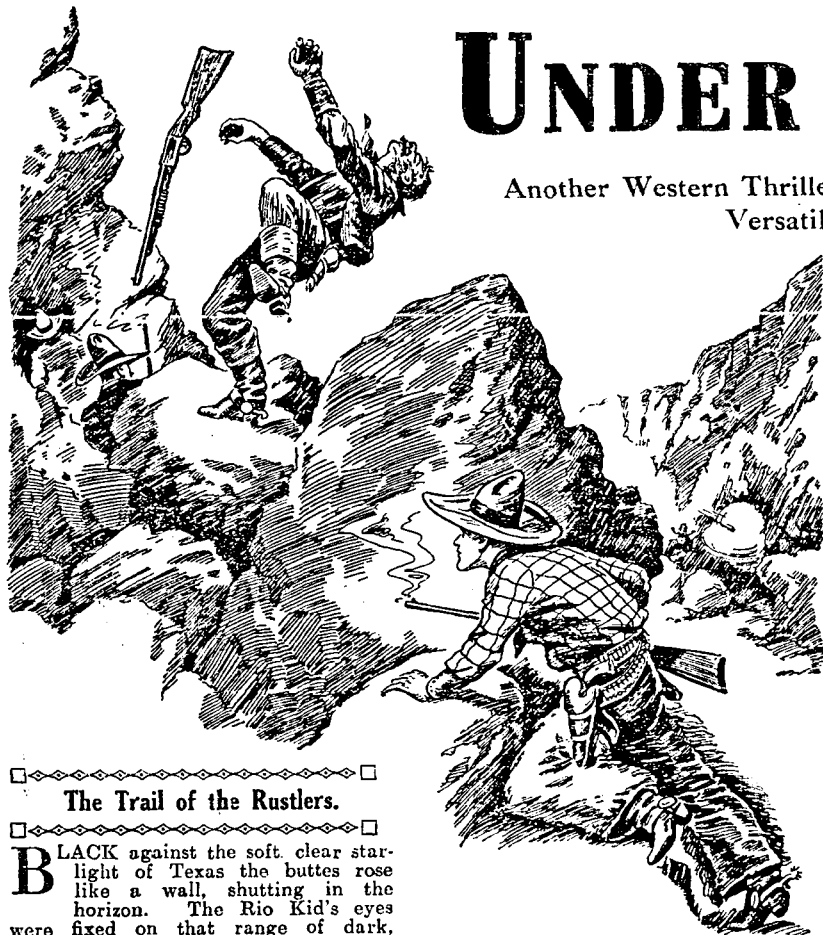


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The Trail of the Rustlers.

BLACK against the soft, clear starlight of Texas the buttes rose like a wall, shutting in the horizon. The Rio Kid's eyes were fixed on that range of dark, stumpy hills as he rode, and his brow was very thoughtful. Somewhere within the dark recesses of the buttes, lurked Cactus Carter and his crowd, and the cows they had run off from the Bar-2 ranch. The Kid was aiming to get back the rustled cows, and to get Cactus, if he could; but he admitted to himself that it was not going to be pie. In the rocky recesses of the buttes there were a hundred places where a few desperate men could hold off pursuit, and take a heavy toll of their pursuers; and the nearer the grey mustang carried him to the buttes the more thoughtful grew the Kid's brow.

The trail, so far, was broad and clear. The track of a herd of cows, and of the horsemen who had driven them off from the ranch, could have been followed by a blind man. The Kid was riding at an easy gallop, hardly needing to glance at the trail as he rode. But when they left the prairie and entered the buttes, he knew that it would be a different matter; "sign" would be hard to seek in the stony waste yonder. And likely enough, the Kid figured, watchful eyes were looking from the dark hills, watching the bunch of riders that swept rapidly across the plain. At any moment the Rio Kid would not have been surprised to hear the crack of a rifle.

And he slackened speed as the dark buttes drew close, and the Plug Hat men who rode with him slackened also.

But with the Plug Hat posse rode the Bar-2 outfit, and the cow-punchers were fiercely eager to get to close quarters with the rustlers, and recklessly regardless of what might lie ahead. Mohave Dave, foreman of the Bar-2, did not slacken rein, and the Bar-2 bunch surged ahead of the Kid and his party.

"Say, you-uns, go slow!" called out the Kid.

Mohave Dave looked round.

"What's biting you?" he demanded, reining his broncho and riding nearer to the Kid. "You want to let them rustlers get clear with the cows?"

"Aw, forget it!" said the Kid. "I guess now I'm sheriff of Plug Hat there

cow town, when the rustlers came on the ranch and drove off the herd. And they had left two dead punchers behind them when they rustled the cows. Every man in the Bar-2 bunch was burning for vengeance, and in no mood for caution.

"What's the game, then?" demanded Mohave sourly. "I'll tell a man we ain't wasting any time in getting after them guys, sheriff."

The boy sheriff of Plug Hat nodded.

"We surely ain't," he agreed. "But we got to keep our eyes peeled, and I reckon we ain't riding into the buttes before daylight. I guess Cactus is watching out, and if we ride into an ambush, that won't help us none."

"I guess that's hoss-sense," said Colorado Bill, chief deputy in the Plug Hat posse that rode with the Kid. "It sure is asking for bad medicine, to horn into them buttes in the dark."

Mohave Dave let loose a string of swear-words, echoed by the Bar-2 punchers in a chorus. So far, the punchers had followed the lead of the sheriff of Plug Hat. But a break was coming now.

"This bunch ain't beddin' down on the prairie to wait for daylight," said Mohave Dave, with savage emphasis. "They got the cows from the Bar-2, and they done shot up two Bar-2 boys. We're after that crowd, Mister Sheriff Brown."

"We sure are after them," said Buck Peters, "and we ain't hanging back none. If you Plug Hat guys have got cold feet you can hang back till the cows come home; but we're riding after them rustlers."

"Talk sense!" said the Kid sharply.

"I'm telling you—"

"Can it!" interrupted the Bar-2 foreman. "I allow you can shoot, Mister Texas Brown, and you can use your hands; but I guess you ain't no great shakes of a sheriff. You can get back to your schoolmarm, boy, and leave a man's work to growed-up men!"

The Kid's eyes gleamed for a moment. Boy as he was, he was as good a man as any in the outfit—as even Mohave would have admitted had he been wise to it that Mister Texas Brown, sheriff of Plug Hat, had been known in other parts of Texas as the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. But the Kid kept his temper; he had no hunch for trouble with the Bar-2 punchers. There was trouble enough ahead, with Cactus Carter and his crowd, for the whole outfit.

The Kid drew rein.

"Halt, there!" he said crisply. "I tell you, fellers, we got to keep our eyes peeled, and if there ain't an ambush

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FIVE HUNDRED COWS DISAPPEAR INTO THIN AIR!

ain't going to be any rustlers cavorting loose in Sassafras county. We sure are going to rope in Cactus and his crowd. But I guess we ain't going to do it by running our heads into bad trouble. We got to keep our eyes peeled while we're combing the buttes for them rustlers."

Mohave Dave snorted again. The foreman of the Bar-2 was in a fierce and vengeful mood. Most of the bunch had been on a "bender" in the

waiting for us in the buttes, then I guess Caerus don't know enough to go in when it rains. And that guy sure is a jobc-wolf, and has his eyes wide open."

Mohave answered with an oath. "You Plug Hat guys stopping?" he demanded.

"Sure," said Colorado. "Ain't we under the orders of our sheriff? And I'm telling you that there ain't any sheriff in Texas that can lay over the sheriff of Plug Hat."

"Dog-gone you, then, for a crowd of pesky yellow greasers!" roared Mohave. "Stay here if you want, but this bunch ain't staying none. We're going after them rustlers. What about it, boys?"

"You bet!"

There was a roar of assent from the Bar-2 bunch.

"We're with you, Dave!"

And the Bar-2 bunch swept on at full gallop, towards the dark line of the buttes, back against the glimmering stars.

The Kid sat motionless in his saddle. For a moment or two perhaps he hesitated, loth to remain inactive while the reckless punchers dashed on into danger. But he shook his head. The Kid was not an outlaw now, playing a lone hand. He was sheriff; and he was responsible for the lives of the men who stood by him to maintain law and order in the cow country. For some moments he sat in the saddle and watched, with a troubled face, the Bar-2 bunch disappearing in the dusk of the stars, with a thunder of hoofs. Then he quietly dismounted.

The Plug Hat posse looked at him, and looked at one another. They shared the Kid's feelings, unwilling to stay behind while the reckless punchers rode on. But the boy sheriff had his men well in hand, and there was no disputing his orders.

"I guess we stake out the cayuses hyer, fellers, and wait for sun-up," said the Kid quietly. "We sure shan't rope in the rustlers by horning into an ambush in the dark. Light down!"

And the Plug Hat men dismounted and staked out their horses, and lay down in the thick grass to rest till daylight. But there was little sleep for them. In the silence of the night they listened for the expected sound of shooting from the darkness of the buttes. And ere long it came, and the roll of rifle-fire and the sharp cracking of revolvers, borne on the wind from the buttes, told that Mohave Dave and his men had ridden into trouble.

The Ambush in the Buttes!

FROM the open prairie, a narrow gulch split the steep sides of the buttes, and into the opening ran the clearly marked trail of the stolen herd, and the rustlers who had ridden with it. Mohave Dave and his bunch rode into the gulch without drawing rein. Behind them, the prairie shimmered white in the starlight, the long grass waving like shimmering silver. But once in the buttes, the shadows were long and dark. The hoofs of the bronchos rang loudly on stony soil, the sound ringing far through the night. On either side of the Bar-2 bunch rose ragged walls of rock, with here and there a bunch of skinny pines or firs, a trailing patch of juniper or sa-safraz. There was cover for an army

there, and even Mohave Dave, angry and reckless as he was, could not help seeing that the bunch were asking for bad trouble, if the rustlers had halted to watch for pursuers.

But the Bar-2 foreman rode doggedly on, and behind him his men rode, gun in hand, only too eager to get to close quarters with the rustlers.

On the stony ground the trail was fainter, but so far there was only one way the herd could have gone—right up the rocky gulch from the prairie. But at last Mohave had to draw rein and look for a sign. A mile from the prairie the gulch split into many others, and there were a dozen paths the rustlers might have taken with their prey.

But a herd of five hundred cows could not fail to leave sign, even on the hardest ground, and Dave was soon going on again, his men after him. The way led up a stony arroyo—a water-course that was now dry and arid, but which, in the rainy season, was the bed of a torrent that swept down from the higher ground. The arroyo was narrow—between the steep rocky walls there was only room for two horsemen to ride abreast. Yet up that narrow way it was certain that the herd had been driven only a few hours ago.

With all his angry impatience, Mohave could not gallop now. The bronchos had to fall into an easy trot in the steep, rugged arroyo. Some of the punchers glanced up at the steeply sloping sides, patched here and there with dwarf pecans, cumbered with great boulders which looked as if they would roll down at a touch. If there was an ambush, as the sheriff of Plug Hat figured, this was a death-trap. But the stolen herd had passed that way, and the Bar-2 bunch followed.

Mohave Dave drew rein suddenly, with a ringing oath.

The bunch had reached the end of the arroyo.

Before them rose a wall of rock, up which neither horse nor cow could possibly have gone. In the wet season it was a waterfall; now it was dry, but inaccessible. The Bar-2 foreman dragged in his broncho and stared up at a rocky wall ten feet high, and cursed.

"Jumpin' snakes!" said Buck. "The cows never went that way, Mohave."

The foreman gritted his teeth.

"There was sign all the way!" he grated. "There's sign here now, and it'll stop till it's washed away by the next rains. There's been cows in this arroyo. But—" He broke off with another oath.

The bunch, in a jingling, trampling group, stared about them. They had come to the end of a blind alley—a cul-de-sac. Sign of the stolen cows had led them all the way, yet it was impossible that a single cow could have scaled the steep sides of the arroyo. If the herd had been driven there, it had, apparently, been driven back again, and that was a puzzle.

For several long moments, Mohave Dave made the air lurid with his curses. He was quite at a loss.

"They been here!" he snarled. "They been here, for shore. I'll tell a man, this has got me beat."

"We want to beat it outer here, Mohave," said another of the bunch uneasily. "The cows sure ain't here, but I ain't so sure that the rustlers ain't, nohow." And he cast an anxious glance up at the rocky slopes, dim in the glimmer of the stars overhead.

Mohave gave a curt nod and wheeled

his broncho. The bunch swung round to ride down the arroyo again.

Crack!

It was a sharp, ringing rifle-shot, from a bunch of thicket high up the steep side of the arroyo.

"Great gophers!" yelled Buck, as the bullet spun his Stetson on his head. "They're here—and we're in a trap."

As if the shot had been a signal, there was a roar of sudden rifle-fire from a dozen different points on either side of the ravine.

The reports came so swiftly that they were almost blended into one. From a dozen points, high among the rocks and scrub, far out of reach of the horse-men, came the whistling bullets.

Mohave uttered a yell of rage.

The sheriff had been right. Mohave had led his men into a trap—a death-trap! All the way up the arroyo, the rustlers, in their cover, had watched them, waiting for the bunch to be helplessly delivered into their hands. Now they had to ride between rocky walls spotted with rifle-men, before they got out of the narrow ravine.

Crack-ack-ack!

"Ride!" yelled Mohave. "Ride for your lives!"

Three saddles were empty already—three riderless bronchos careered madly, with jingling stirrups. The bunch spurred their horses frantically as they galloped down the steep way. Steep as it was, broken and rugged and rocky, they rode at full pelt, heedless of the dangers underfoot—heedful only of the rifles that flashed and roared from every side. They were helplessly exposed to the fire of the men in cover, and to clamber up the rocks to get at the hidden enemy was impossible—it was only asking for sudden death. Only a rapid gallop and good luck could save even a remnant of the Bar-2 bunch from the death-trap into which they had thoughtlessly ridden.

Crack, crack, crack!

The punchers blazed away desperately with their revolvers as they rode down the arroyo. A yell from a pecan clump told that one chance bullet, at least, had gone home.

Clatter, clatter, clatter rang the rattling hoofs. A broncho lost its footing and went rolling headlong, throwing the rider. The men behind leaped their horses over the sprawling animal barring the way.

"Oh, great snakes!" gasped Mohave Dave. "Oh, great gophers! If a guy could get at the skunks—"

A bullet crashed into his shoulder, and he reeled in the saddle. But he gripped the reins hard and rode on. To fall was death. Death lurked on every side in the shadowy arroyo.

Twelve men had ridden up the steep ravine; five men rode out of it, and they were all wounded. As they came out into the broader gulch at the bottom of the ravine, Mohave Dave gave a haggard look round. Seven of the Bar-2 bunch were left in the arroyo, and every man who had got away was hurt.

The Bar-2 foreman ground his teeth. His right arm was drenched with the blood that streamed down from the wound in his shoulder. With his left hand he dragged in his broncho.

But the other punchers did not stop. They rode on wildly, heading down the gulch for the open plain. And Mohave, after a moment's pause, cursed luridly, and followed them.

The game was up, and nothing remained but to ride for life. He rode after his bunch, panting with rage. Five men, wounded, reeling in their saddles, rode out of the buttes into the

starlit prairie; but in the rocky arroyo there were seven men who would never ride again.

The Kid Gets to Business!

THE stars were paling in the sky; there was a hint of dawn in the East. The Rio Kid, lying on his blanket beside the grey mustang, watched the shadowed prairie towards the dark mass of the buttes with a clouded brow. Some of his men were sleeping, others watched and listened. Faint in the distance, but un-

tured to ride into the winding recesses of the buttes, where death lurked in every ravine and behind every boulder. The sheriff of Plug Hat intended to venture when day came, but not without feeling every inch of the way.

As the glimmering of dawn strengthened in the eastern sky, there came a beating of wild and hurried hoofs on the prairie. The Kid threw his blanket aside and rose, bending his head to listen more intently. Colorado Bill drew to his side, gun in hand.

"They're coming from the buttes, sheriff," he said.

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"I guess it's Mohave's bunch on the run."

made the last sickness for nine or ten of the guys. Yep!"

"I guess I've heard of that man, too," grinned Colorado. "It was the firebug, they call the Rio Kid, sheriff. He sure did lead the Rangers a low dance in the Mal Pais, and it was talked of in all the cow camps after."

The Kid started a little. It was an episode from his own wild past that he had referred to. He bit his lip, and changed the topic quickly.

"Here come the punchers, and they all look like they was hurt," he said. "I guess they've had a heluva time in them buttes!"

"I'll tell the world!" agreed Colorado.



The Bar-2 bunch dismounted and the Kid and his posse bound up their many wounds.

mistakable, the Plug Hat posse had heard the firing in the hills, and knew that the punchers were at close grips with the rustlers. But the firing had died away into silence, and what had chanced they did not know, though they could guess. For it was only too clear that the head-strong punchers had ridden into the ambush from which the boy sheriff's sagacity had saved his own men.

It had been bitter enough to the Kid to hear the sound of distant shooting coming down the wind, and to lie idle. But there was nothing he could do to help—nothing that his men could do. If the punchers were fighting, the fight would be over long before he could reach the buttes and join in. But he doubted whether they were fighting. He was assured that they were being shot from cover, and that the same fate awaited his own men if they rode into the trackless hills in the dark. The temptation to mount and ride was strong; but the Kid threw it aside. It was futile to throw away more lives. It was not a wild charge, like that of an angry bull at a matador, that would defeat the rustlers. It was a trail that called for all the Kid's caution and sagacity. Few sheriffs ven-

"I surely guess so," said the Kid. "I'd sure be powerful glad if it was Cactus Carter and the rustlers. But it ain't. It's them boneheads, and I guess they found that they bit off more'n they could chew in one piece."

The thunder of hoofs came nearer and nearer, back along the cattle trail that had led the bunch into the hills. Dim figures of horsemen loomed up in the twilight of dawn. The Kid counted them as they drew nearer, and his brow was sombre.

"Five galoots," he said. "There's Mohave and Peters and three more. I guess they've left seven guys behind."

"It sure has been a wipe out for the Bar-2," said Colorado grimly. "Say, sheriff, if we'd rode on with them—" He hesitated.

The Kid grunted.

"Aw, forget it!" he growled. "We'd have rode into the same ambush. And I guess we'd be lying about with holes through us, like the guys Mohave has left behind him. I'll tell a man it ain't easy work trailing a crowd of rustlers in the buttes. I've knowed of a single man that dodged a whole outfit in the buttes down San Juan way once, and never was got, though he

The Plug Hat posse were all on their feet when Mohave and his surviving men rode up and halted. They sagged in their saddles, and turned ghastly faces to the Kid's men.

Mohave cursed huskily.

"They've wiped us out!" he gritted, between his teeth. "Seven men down, an' left every guy here with lead in him, sheriff." He glared at the Kid. "I'm telling you them rustlers was ambushed in an arroyo in the buttes, and they opened on us from cover, and never give us a chance. I got a kick left in me, if you'll ride back with me, and bring your outfit."

"Dog-gone you, and ride into the same fix!" exclaimed the Kid. "How deep in the buttes is that pesky arroyo."

"Jest about a mile."

"You was lucky to get a man away alive, if you've been a mile into the buttes in the dark," said the Kid. "I guess I'm going to do that mile to slow music when I get going. These Plug Hat guys ain't going to ride under the rifles of a crowd of rustlers perched in the rocks."

Mohave cursed again. Wounded as he was, his outfit almost wiped out by

his own headstrong recklessness, he was eager to ride back into the buttes and seek the outlaws again. His fury and desire for vengeance had banished what little prudence there might have been in him.

"You ain't taking a hand?" he bawled.

"Not till broad light, and then, I guess, we're going to feel our way arter them bull-dozers like we was walking on thin ice," assured the Kid. "There ain't going to be another wipe-out in the programme, feller."

"Dog-gone you, then!" roared Mohave. "I guess there's men that will be glad to ride. I've heard that Jim Hall and his Rangers are down to Blue Grass. I'm riding to call in the Rangers."

The Kid's face changed.

Less than any other guy in Texas did he want Jim Hall, the Ranger captain, on the scene. For Mule-Kick Hall knew the Rio Kid by sight, knew his face as well as the back of his own hand. And the Kid knew what would happen if Hall got a sight of Texas Brown, sheriff of Plug Hat. Hitherto, no man in Sassafras County had suspected the Kid's identity; but once the Ranger captain saw him, the game was up.

"Hold on, feller!" said the Kid, breathing hard, but speaking quietly. "I guess we don't want the Rangers to put a spoon in this soup. I guess this outfit can handle the rustlers without help from the Rangers."

"Dog-gone you, I'm riding to Blue Grass!" snarled the Bar-2 foreman. "Seven of the boys is wiped out, and they got the cows. I guess the Rangers will jump to their cayuses when they get the news. Me for Blue Grass!"

And, without another word, the Bar-2 foreman put spurs to his broncho, and dashed away at a mad gallop across the prairie.

The Kid shrugged his shoulders.

"After all, it's a long ride to Blue Grass," said the Kid. "I guess this hyer circus may be over afore the Rangers horn in."

"Say, sheriff, the Rangers are good men, and they'd be useful in rounding up Cactus' crowd," hinted Mesquite.

"This hyer posse can round up Cactus Carter," answered the Kid. "If I can't put paid to that bush-whacker, I'm sure going to resign being sheriff. Forget it."

The Bar-2 dismounted, and some of the posse bound up their wounds. Three of them were hard hit, and when their hurts had been attended to they rode on to the ranch. But Buck Peters had got off with a flesh wound, and he elected to stay with the Kid's party. The outcome of Mohave's reckless adventure had taught the cowman respect for the sheriff's judgment.

It was not till the sun was high above the horizon that the sheriff gave the word to mount.

Then the Plug Hat posse rode on at a trot towards the buttes.

The Kid rode beside Buck, and drew from him a detailed account of the ambush and its location. The Kid listened very thoughtfully.

"You sure the cows was driven up that arroyo?" he asked.

"There was sign," answered Buck. "I guess some of them was drove up to get us follering, anyhow. But there wasn't cows there when we got there. I figure they was drove out again."

"They'd have left sign," said the Kid. "But seems you didn't pick up any other sign."

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"You've said it. But then, Mohave was in a durned hurry to get at them guys," said Buck ruefully. "I guess there was other signs if we'd looked long enough."

The Kid nodded thoughtfully, and they rode on in silence. They entered the gulch that led up into the buttes from the prairie.

But they did not enter it as the Bar-2 bunch had done. The Kid strung out his men, and they walked their horses, scanning the rocks and bushes, searching for sign of an enemy at every step, watchful as cats as they advanced into the hills.

It was a mile of rough going to reach the arroyo, but the Bar-2 bunch had covered the distance in a matter of minutes. The Plug Hat outfit spent two long hours over the same ground.

The Kid had no doubt that the rustlers were on the watch, and he was prepared for a surprise every foot of the way. The sheriff of Plug Hat did not aim to meet the same fate as Mohave Dave and his bunch.

Many times, as the posse slowly worked their way onward, the Kid clambered to a high rock to survey the ground, or sent a bullet whizzing into a tangled bush that might have concealed an enemy.

It was slow and wearisome work under a hot sun that made the rocks hot to touch; but the defeat of the Bar-2 bunch had been an object-lesson, and, impatient as the Plug Hat men were, they carried out the sheriff's orders to the very letter.

They reached, at last, the end of the gulch—an open, almost circular space, like a basin in the midst of the hills, from which a dozen or more gulches and arroyos and rifts opened.

Buck Peters pointed out the narrow arroyo, into which Mohave had led his men the previous night. The Kid surveyed it keenly.

There was plenty of sign of the cattle that had passed that way the previous day. Hard and dry as the rocks were, a herd of five hundred cows had left a heap of sign.

The sign of the herd passed up into the narrow arroyo, where the cows must have been driven almost in single file—not more than two abreast at the most.

The Kid stared into the arroyo, with puzzled eyes.

Evidently the stolen herd had been driven up that narrow, steep ravine. Yet Buck had told him that, some distance up it ended in a sheer wall of rock that was a waterfall in the rainy season.

Up and down and round about the Kid hunted for other signs. But there was no other sign to be picked up.

The cattle had gone up the ravine, and they had not been driven out again. In the wide radius that the Kid searched there was not the track of a single hoof.

"Say, this sure gets my goat!" said the Kid, after a long silence. "You, Buck, there ain't nary doubt that the cows was driven up that arroyo. The sign leads there, and nowhere else. And they never came out again, unless they walked in the pesky air, without a hoof touchin' the ground."

"I allow it looks like it, sheriff!" answered the Bar-2 puncher. "But there ain't nowhere in that arroyo to hide a dozen cows, let alone five hundred. And they sure never went out at the other end, unless they got wings."

The Kid grunted,

"I guess there's suthin' you didn't see in the dark," he said. "I surely reckon there's a way out of that ravine somewhere, and it leads to where Cactus Carter has hidden the cows."

He stared up the arroyo again.

Narrow, tortuous, steep, it lay silent in the burning sunshine, to all appearance lifeless and deserted. But the Kid was well aware that appearances were deceptive.

He had no doubt that if the Plug Hat outfit rode up the arroyo, as the Bar-2 men had done, the same fate would befall them. Farther up the arroyo, he had no doubt, the cow thieves were watching and waiting. They knew that pursuers were in the buttes, and they were not likely to be off their guard.

"That's the way the cows went, and the rustlers with them, sheriff!" said Colorado Bill, at last. "We got to get after the guys."

The Kid nodded.

"We sure got to get after them, feller!" he assented.

The sheriff gave his orders quietly. The horses were tethered in a bunch, and left in the lower gulch with one man on guard. The rest of the Plug Hat outfit followed the Kid.

The Kid dropped on hands and knees as he entered the ravine, crawling in the cover of rocks and scrubs, with all the caution he had learned in Indian warfare. He was well assured that, farther up, some of the rustlers at least were on the watch, looking for pursuit—and the Kid did not aim to stop a bullet. In the rugged arroyo, piled wildly with boulders of all shapes and sizes, there was ample cover for a cautious trailer, and the Kid was as patient as an Apache or a Comanche. He was content to win his way up the ravine inch by inch, crawling from rock to rock, from scrub to scrub, crouching in cover, waiting whole minutes to listen, cautious as a panther. Behind him, his men followed his example, though there were impatient mutterings and oaths from some of them. Not a sound, not a sign of stirring life, greeted them; and to most of the outfit it seemed that the arroyo was deserted; that the rustlers were gone, and that this slow and weary work was a waste of time. Yuma Dan rose heedlessly to his feet to look about him.

Crack!

From a point high up the arroyo came the sudden crack of a rifle. Yuma Dan spun over and rolled on the earth. He lay groaning with a bullet in his shoulder.

"Thunder!" ejaculated Colorado Bill.

The Kid gave a snort.

"Keep in cover, you 'uns!" he snapped. "You aiming to stop lead with your bone heads? Keep in cover, dog-gone you!"

A yell from the rustlers followed the shot. The Plug Hat outfit knew the voice of Cactus Carter.

"I guess we're ready for you, Mister Sheriff Texas Brown! Are you there, you durned coyote?"

"I guess I'm here, Cactus, and I'm coming a-shooting!" called back the Kid from behind a boulder.

A bullet crashed on the rock the next moment. The reports of six or seven rifles followed. But the Plug Hat outfit were keeping carefully to cover now. Yuma Dan crawled away, groaning. The rest of the outfit crept on, inch by inch, foot by foot, warned now beyond doubt that the rustlers were watching

(Continued on page 28.)

UNDER FIRE!

(Continued from page 6.)

The End of the Trail!

THE Rio Kid had disappeared from the sight of his followers. The Kid was an old hand at this game. He crept among the boulders and patches of scrub, silent as a snake, watchful as a panther. To show so much as a finger was to invite a bullet, but the Kid did not show so much as a finger-nail.

The Kid won on his way, foot by foot, gliding and crawling stealthily from rock to rock. He knew that he was drawing near to the rustlers, and his caution redoubled. And he smiled grimly as he heard a sound of muttering voices among the rocks near at hand.

"I guess we'd wipe out that crowd as easy as the Bar-2 boys if it wasn't for that dog-goned sheriff!" It was the voice of Sandy Tutt. "Say, Cactus, I'm sure getting rattled."

A curse from Cactus Carter followed. "I guess we want to beat it out of this, Cactus!" muttered the voice of Yellow Dick. "That dog-goned sheriff—"

Cactus spat out another oath. "Aw, can it!" he growled. "We can beat it when we want, and by a way they'll never follow. But I guess I want to get that sheriff! I been banking upon him trailing us in the buttes to give him his ticket for soup, and I ain't losing this chance."

The Kid listened quietly. He was not more than a dozen feet from the three desperadoes, who were muttering behind a great boulder on the steep side of the arroyo. The sheriff of Plug

Hat was closer than the rustlers dreamed.

Silently the Kid crawled round the great rock that hid the three. He glimpsed a Stetson hat, and fired, and there was a startled yell from Yellow Dick as the hat spun from his head.

"Thunder! They're on us!"

There was a sound of running feet and scrambling among the rocks. The Kid had drawn back instantly into cover after pulling trigger; but the smoke of his rifle told the rustlers that an enemy was within a few feet of them. The three rough-necks scrambled hurriedly away. In their haste, one of them forgot caution and rose into the view of the Plug Hat outfit lower down the ravine. Colorado Bill's rifle rang out, and Yellow Dick spun over like a rabbit and dropped.

Cactus Carter and Sandy Tutt vanished among the rocks higher up the arroyo. There was a sound of cursing and hurried scrambling. The rustlers were "rattled" now, and evidently in retreat.

The Kid crept on. Two or three bullets whizzed, flattening on the rocks close by him. Then the firing ceased, and the sound of scrambling footsteps and cursing voices died away.

Slowly and cautiously the Plug Hat outfit worked their way up the arroyo. But no shot greeted them; no enemy was to be seen. They reached the head of the ravine at last, but the rustlers had vanished. Of the gang that had lain in ambush in the arroyo, only one remained—Yellow Dick, lying where he had fallen, with Colorado's bullet in his brain.

The Kid gritted his teeth.

How the rustlers had vanished from the ravine was a mystery—but it was a mystery that the sheriff of Plug Hat was going to solve.

THE END.

("THE HIDDEN CANYON!" is the title of next week's fine Western yarn.)

King o' the Speedways!

(Continued from page 9.)

Jack got a glimpse of the crack driver's distorted features and his waving hand; then Sackville's car hit a bump and leaped bodily towards them.

Jack pulled out, felt the tail of his car begin to skid, and straightened up. From the corner of his eye he saw Sackville's machine slowly broadside to the course. He had lost control!

Round it went, sliding in mad half-circles towards the inside of the track, until the car plunged sideways over the bank into a water-filled ditch.

Jack took the rest of the race steadily, but those hours of mad chasing at the pace which Sackville had set had given the machine an unassailable lead. They finished with the black-and-white winner's flag waving madly above their number.

Jack didn't see Sackville until some time after the race. The speedman had lost his monocle, and he was still combing mud out of his hair, but was not injured.

"It was rank bad driving!" Sackville hooted as they met. "It was a choice between hitting you or pilin' myself up—so I crashed."

"Yes," said Jack; and he nodded coolly ere he added: "Squirts are all right, especially little ones, so long as you handle 'em the right way."

He turned; and the speedman stared after him with wide-open eyes and 'dropped jaw. He was still staring when Jack had disappeared from sight—but he knew what Jack meant!

THE END.

(Don't miss next week's roaring motor-racing yarn, entitled: "SOME KID, SKID KID!")

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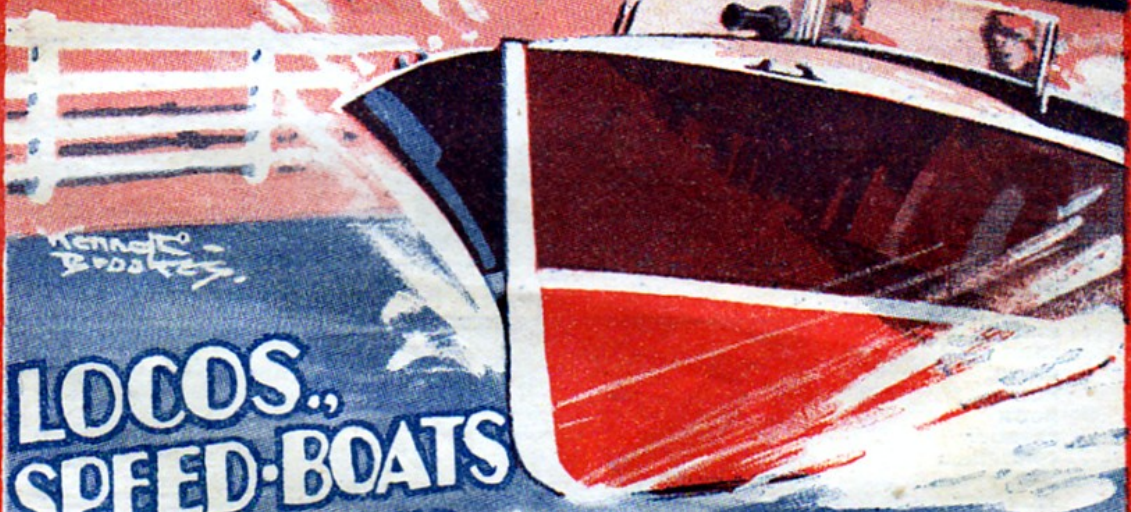
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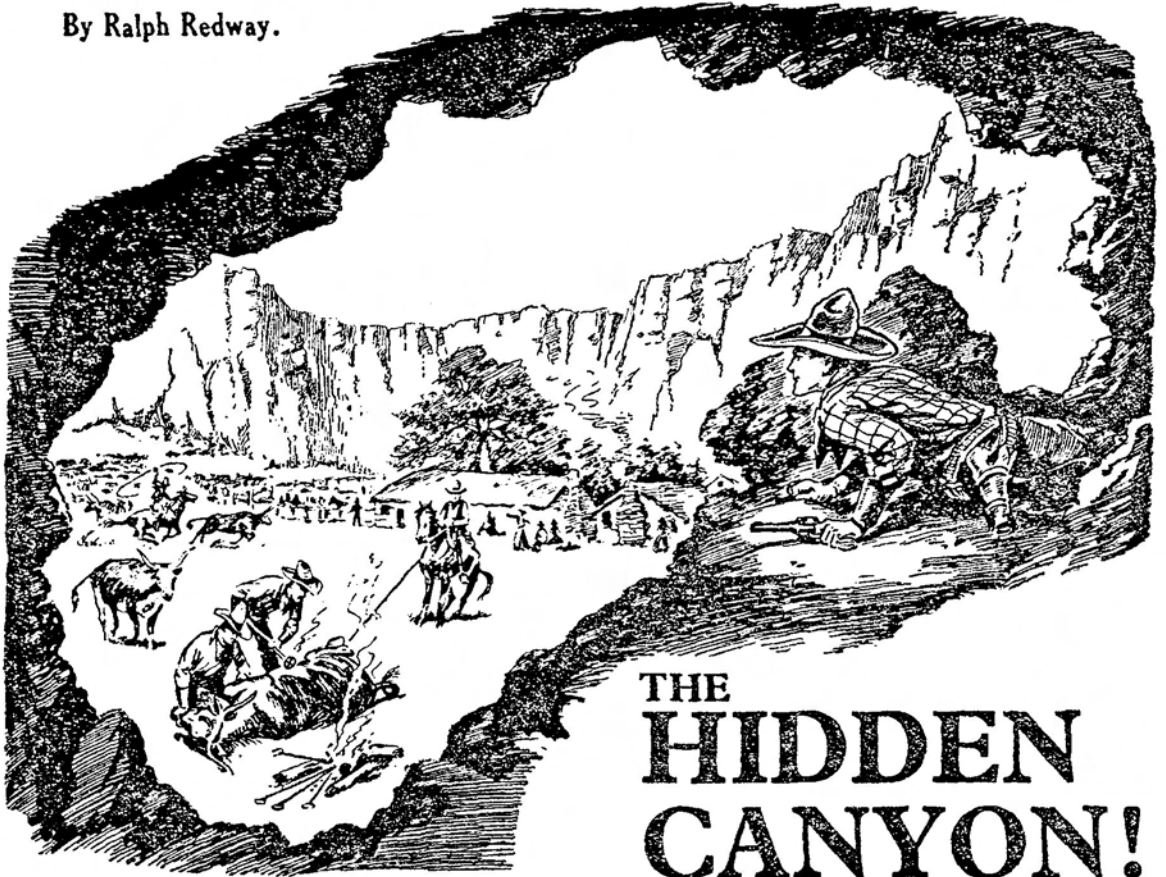


LOCOS.,
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MUST BE WON!

ANOTHER WESTERN THRILLER.

By Ralph Redway.



THE HIDDEN CANYON!

Baffled!

"DOG-GONE it!" growled the Rio Kid. The Kid hated to be beaten. But it looked, this time, as if Cactus Carter and his crowd had beaten him to it.

The Kid stared round him, in the lonely, rocky arroyo in the heart of the buttes, with exasperated eyes.

The shadows were lengthening in the sunset; in the golden west the sun was sinking behind the buttes. For long, long, hot hours the Kid and the Plug Hat outfit had searched up and down the rocky ravine for the rustlers they sought.

But Cactus Carter and his crowd had vanished—vanished as completely as if the rocks had swallowed them up. And the secret way of escape from the arroyo was so secret that even the Kid's eyes could not penetrate it.

Yet it was there! Only the day before five hundred cows had been driven off the Bar-2 ranch, and the trail of the herd was clearly written in the gulches and up the narrow ravine.

There they had vanished as if into the air. And the rustlers, whom the Kid and his outfit had exchanged shots with in the arroyo, had vanished also, leaving no clue behind. It got the Kid's goat, and it got it sorely. He had led his posse from Plug Hat to

recover the stolen cattle and round-up the rustlers; and at the very moment when he had looked for success he had been beaten to it. It was enough to get the Kid's goat.

"I guess that guy Cactus has got his eye-teeth cut," he said, to Colorado Bill. "He knows these buttes like a book. I guess he knew where to hide them cows when he rustled them off the Bar-2!"

"You've said it, sheriff!" grunted Colorado. "I sure did calculate we'd got that crowd, when we got near enough for burning powder. But they done give us the slip."

"They ain't fur away!" grunted the Kid.

you're a whole heap of a sheriff," said the Bar-2 puncher. "They surely allow that you're a whole team, and a cross-dog under the wagon. But you ain't cinched them cows yet."

"Not yet," allowed the Kid. "You figure that you're going to?" asked Buck.

"Sure!" "Search me!" said the puncher, shrugging his shoulders. "It don't look like it to me. I guess you'll still be foolin' around when Mohave Dave gets here with the Texas Rangers!"

The Kid knitted his brows. "I guess Mohave has hit Blue Grass afore this," went on Buck, "and I allow that Mule-Kick Hall won't let a lot of grass grow under his feet afore he hits these buttes with his Rangers. He surely is the man to put paid to Cactus Carter!"

The Kid made no answer. For reasons of his own—which would have surprised the Plug Hat posse had they known them—he was extremely unwilling for the

Texas Rangers to come on the scene. For Mule-Kick Hall would have needed only one glance at the Sheriff of Plug Hat to recognise him as the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

"Say," went on Buck, grinning at the Kid's clouded face, "I guess you want to slide out, and leave a man's job to growed-up men, feller! This here job is some sizes too large for you!"

A Hole in the Mountain-Side

Leads the Boy Sheriff to an amazing discovery.

"Nope! But—" Colorado stared round at the rocks and the patches of scrub, and shook his head. "I guess I'm beat to a frazzle!"

Buck Peters, the Bar-2 puncher, lounged over to the Kid, as he stood talking to his chief deputy. There was a mocking grin on Buck's face.

"Say, Mister Sheriff Texas Brown!" he drawled.

The Kid gave him a look.

"I guess they say in Plug Hat that

"You durned, pesky bonehead!" growled the Kid. "What sort of a hand did your bunch make of it? Didn't Mohave run his bunch right under the guns of the rustlers and get half of them wiped out, and didn't the rest of you hit the horizon, hell-for-leather? You was riding, when I saw you agin, as if you was riding for a prize in a rodeo."

Colorado chuckled and Buck Peters scowled. His hand moved towards the gun in his belt.

But he did not touch the gun. Whether the boy sheriff could handle the rustlers or not, all Plug Hat knew how swift he was on the draw. The Bar-2 puncher thought better of it in time.

"Waal, I guess I ain't fooling around no more," he grunted. "I'm hittin' the trail, to meet Mohave and bring the Rangers here. I guess we'll find you moseying around like a bunch of rubes—if the rustlers ain't chawed you up afore we get here!"

And the Bar-2 puncher tramped down the arroyo, mounted his horse in the gulch below, and rode away for the prairie.

The Kid gave him no heed.

Once more he moved along the steep arroyo, scanning the rocks, the fissures, the sign of men and horses and cattle. The sun sank lower behind the buttes, and the shadows deepened.

Darkness was falling; and what had not been found in the daylight was not likely to be found in the dark.

The sheriff of Plug Hat rejoined his men at last.

"I guess there ain't nothing to it!" he growled. "But we ain't beat yet. I guess I'm on this trail till I get Cactus Carter and get them cows back for the Bar-2! There ain't going to be no cattle-rustling in Sassafras county so long's I'm sheriff! You'uns are going to ride back to town."

"And you—"

"I ain't quitting," said the Kid. "I guess I'm bedding down in these buttes till I hit the trail of Cactus Carter. Mebbe the guys will show up agin when they figure that the coast is clear. I'm going to keep doggo, and watch out; and when I want you I guess I'll get you word. Take my cayuse with you, and hit the trail. So long as there's a crowd hyer you can bet them rustlers will lie as close as fleas in a Mexican dog!"

Ten minutes later the Rio Kid was alone in the darkness that was now thick in the arroyo.

At the bottom of the ravine there was a trampling of hoofs, a jingling of spur and bridle, as the Plug Hat posse mounted and rode away, taking the Kid's mustang with them.

The clatter and the jingle died into the night, and silence fell on the lonely buttes.

Hands Up!

MORNING dawned on the buttes, and a long, sunny day drew towards its close.

In that wilderness of rock and stone and stunted scrub and cactus there was no sign of life, save the lizards that crawled on the rocks, and sometimes a gaunt, hungry coyote that crept and whined.

The lonely arroyo lay silent, lifeless, baking with heat as the sun rose higher in the blue sky, passed the zenith, and sank to the west.

THE POPULAR—No. 606.

From the gulch below a coyote crept up the rocky ravine; a wolfish-looking beast, with flaming, greenish eyes, sniffing.

It stopped at the spot where Yellow Dick, the rustler, had fallen in the fight the day before, and sniffed and whined. But the Plug Hat men had "planted" the slain rustler decently, and the scavenger of the buttes scratched and whined in vain. Then it crept from rock to rock, from bush to bush, sniffing; and finally thrust its pointed head and sniffing nose into a clump of pecan and juniper and wild vine that grew in the cleft of the rocks.

To all appearance that clump was as lifeless and deserted as any spot in the buttes; but the coyote gave a sudden angry and scared snarl, and withdrew his sniffing nose, as if it scented a foe there. And the Rio Kid, hidden in the tangled scrub, cursed the coyote under his breath, and longed to draw a six-gun and loose a bullet on the brute; but he dared not. For the Kid's game was silence and caution.

The coyote snarled and sniffed round the clump. Fluently, but silently, the Kid cursed the sniffing brute.

For a night and a burning day the Kid had lain in that close cover; silent, patient as an Apache watching for an enemy. He had food in his wallet and water in his can; and he waited and watched, heedless of the long hours that rolled slowly.

Under cover of darkness he had hidden himself there; and in the daylight he was invisible—watchful and wary. Sooner or later, the Kid figured, the rustlers would show up; and when they showed up the keenest eye in Texas would be upon them. If it was a weary task the Kid had set himself, it was no new game. Many a time had the boy outlaw lain deep in cover for a whole day, while the Rangers hunted and passed within a few paces of him. And now that he was a sheriff he had not forgotten his old patience and cunning.

But the coyote sniffed and sniffed, and whined, lurking round the clump where the Kid lay in cover. A shout, even a shout, would have sent the hungry brute scuttling away in fear; but the Kid could not venture to utter a sound, for he knew that at any moment there might be ears to hear. And he cursed the sniffing brute whose hungry curiosity brought him danger of discovery.

Suddenly from the sniffing animal came a shrieking howl. The Kid started. The next second the report of a revolver echoed through the arroyo.

The Kid caught his breath.

Through the interstices of the clump of thicket he could see the coyote rolling over on the rocks.

"Search me!" murmured the Kid and his eyes glinted.

He was no longer alone in the arroyo. Someone had seen the coyote, and shot the brute down. In a few moments the wolfish brute stretched out, still and silent. There was a sound of footsteps and voices. The Kid lay close, watching, listening.

"Say, what's that, Sandy?" called out a voice the Kid knew—the voice of Cactus Carter, once the king-pin of Plug Hat, now the cattle-lifter of the buttes. "Say, what you burning powder for, you jay?"

"I guess it's a coyote, Cactus."

"You durned bonehead, guess you gave me the jumps!" growled Cactus, with an oath.

"Aw, forget it!" said Sandy Tutt. "The coast's clear, you mutt; the Plug Hat bunch was home in town afore

dawn. There ain't hide nor hair of them left in the buttes."

The speakers were within a dozen feet of the Kid. He scarcely breathed as he lay and listened, and peered through the leafy screen that hid him.

There was a trample of hoofs, a jingle of a bridle. Cactus Carter was leading a horse out of a fissure in the rocky side of the arroyo. The Kid watched him with glinting eyes.

The fissure was not more than four or five feet wide, seven or eight high—a natural split in the rock, left by volcanic action from distant ages. It was one of dozens that rived the rocky sides of the ravine; and it opened like a tunnel in the cliff. It had been searched by the sheriff and his men the day before, along with every other nook and cranny; and they had found only an impenetrable wall of rock within.

But the Kid knew now the way the rustlers had gone. At the back of the fissure was some outlet that was carefully hidden from sight.

There could be no doubt about it, as Cactus Carter led his horse from the opening. Another man followed, and another, each leading a horse. It was a strange enough sight to see man after man emerging from the apparently solid cliff that rose to a height of a hundred feet over the fissure.

The Kid lay silent in the thicket and watched.

Cactus Carter mounted his broncho, and the two men who had led horses out after him mounted also.

"Keep the rock shut, Sandy," said Cactus, "and keep your eyes peeled while I'm away to White Pine."

"You bet!"

"I'll tell a man that dog-goned sheriff ain't through yet, and I'll be powerful glad when we get the cows off our hands!" said Cactus. "I guess I can fix it up with the cattle-buyer at White Pine. He don't ask a lot of questions about cows when he can buy them cheap. And I guess when they're turned into beef the Bar-2 boys can hunt for them all they want."

"You've said it!" chuckled Sandy.

Cactus Carter and his two companions rode down the arroyo, with a clatter of hoofs and a jingle of spurs.

Sandy Tutt stood looking after them, lighting a cigarette as he watched the horsemen disappear down the ravine.

He threw away the match, blew out a cloud of smoke, and turned back into the fissure from which the rustlers had emerged; and as he did so the Rio Kid drew himself, softly and silently, from his cover.

Silent as he was, Sandy Tutt perhaps heard some faint rustle, for he turned round, his hand, from habitual caution, falling on a gun. And he gave a convulsive start as he found himself looking into the barrel of a levelled six-gun.

"Hands up," said the Rio Kid quietly, "and jest you give one yaup, Mister Sandy Tutt, and it's the last yaup you'll give this side of Jordan! Hands up, you geck, and keep your bully-beef trap shut!"

The Rustlers' Secret.

SANDY TUTT stared blankly, almost unbelievably, at the sheriff of Plug Hat. The ghost of the Rio Kid could not have startled him more.

For an instant his hand closed convulsively on the butt of a gun. The

Kid's eyes, over his levelled Colt, glinted.

"Don't!" he said softly.

And Tutt did not draw the gun. There was death in the grim, levelled tube only three or four feet from him; death in the clear, steady eyes that glinted over it.

Had the gun left his holster the red-haired rustler would have fallen a dead man before he could lift it, and Sandy Tutt knew it. Slowly, his eyes burning with rage, he relinquished the gun and lifted his hands above his head.

"That's hoss-sense!" said the Kid approvingly.

"Dog-gone you!" muttered the rustler, his voice thick with rage. "Dog-gone your hide, you pesky lobo-wolf! What you doing here?"

The Kid smiled.

"I guess I'm holding up a gol-darned bush-whacker!" he answered. "And I guess I'm sure going to give him his ticket for soup if he speaks above a whisper! You give one yaup, you pesky gink, and it's you for the coyotes and the buzzards!"

The rustler panted with rage; but he kept his hands above his head; and he did not venture to call out. His life hung on a thread, and well the rustler was aware of it.

The clattering hoof-beats of the riders had died away in the distance. Little dreaming of what was happening in the arroyo, Cactus Carter and his companions were riding by lonely gulches and mountain paths, for the distant camp of White Pine. But how close at hand the rest of the gang might be, the Kid did not know—all he knew was the fissure under the cliff led into the secret den of the rustlers.

He drew nearer to Sandy Tutt, keeping him covered, and jerked the revolver and knife from his belt, and dropped them into a deep crevice of the rocks. Tutt did not venture to resist, though his eyes burned at the Kid.

"I guess you're better without your hardware, feller," said the Kid amiably. "Keep them paws in the air. I ain't honing to spill your juice; but if you got a kick coming you're a dead lobo-wolf, and you don't want to forget it!"

The Kid jerked off the rustler's neck-scarf.

"Now turn round, you geek, and put your paws behind you!" he said.

"I guess—"

"I'm waiting!" said the Kid, and he made a significant gesture with the Colt. "If you'd rather be left here cold meat you only got to kick. I ain't pertickler; I guess I'd blow your roof off as soon as not!"

Cursing under his breath, Sandy Tutt turned his hands behind him, and the Kid bound his wrists securely together with the scarf. The rustler was a helpless prisoner now, and the Kid holstered his gun.

"You sure are a good little man, and know how to do as you're told," said

the Kid amiably. "I reckon you'll live to be banged yet, if you keep on being careful! Now I guess you're going on a leetle pasear with this baby."

Tutt faced him again, gritting his teeth.

"You figure you're getting me to Plug Hat?" he hissed.

"Not in your lifetime, old-timer! I ain't taking you anywhere—you're taking me!"

"I guess I don't savvy!" muttered Tutt.

The Kid laughed.

"We're going into the locked canyon, feller," he answered; "the shebang that you and Cactus was talking of.

tently as he moved along the rugged fissure, holding the rustler by the arm. Whether the retreat of the rustlers was near at hand, or at a distance, he did not know; but he was ready for a foe at every step.

He peered about him in the gloom, with a grip on the rustler's arm. He felt a quiver run through Sandy Tutt, and knew that he was thinking of tearing loose and making a sudden break in the darkness. And suddenly Tutt felt a sharp point pressed to his ribs. It was the point of the Kid's bowie-knife.

"You want to be good, feller!" murmured the Kid.



The Kid bound up the rustler, and then gagged him with strips of his own clothing. "I guess this'll keep you from yapping and giving the alarm!" grinned the young sheriff.

And I guess this is the way to the front door!" added the Kid, with a nod towards the fissure in the cliff.

"You're missing your guess!" muttered Tutt. "I shore don't know a thing about any locked canyon—"

"Why, you pesky gink," said the Kid, "ain't I wise to it that you've got a secret way out of this arroyo, and ain't I been watching from cover ever since I sent the boys home to Plug Hat last night? I guess I'd have found it without your help now that I know where to look; but I reckon it will save time if you guide me. Get a move on!"

"I'll tell a man—"

"Quit chewing the rag and get a move on, feller!"

The Kid grasped the rustler's arm and moved him on into the fissure. At the opening there was a glimmer of light from the sunshine that streamed down into the arroyo; but, farther on, the fissure was gloomy and shadowy. When the Kid had searched it the day before, he had found only solid rock at the end of it, as in a score of other fissures that rived the rugged sides of the arroyo. But the Kid knew now that there must be a way through.

The Kid watched and listened in-

Tutt shuddered.

"I guess it's your say-so, sheriff!" he muttered hoarsely.

"Keep chewing on that!" advised the Kid.

The Kid's eyes gradually became accustomed to the dim twilight that reigned in the rocky fissure under the cliff. He moved on slowly with the rustler in the gloom.

When the Kid had explored the fissure the previous day it had extended about fifteen feet into the cliff, and there ended, to all appearance, in solid rock. But now, when the Kid had paced that distance the way ahead was no longer closed.

The fissure narrowed more and more, till there was scarce space for a horse to be led through, or a cow driven. Then it suddenly widened into a cavern hollowed in the heart of the mountain. Far in the distance the Kid caught a glimmer of daylight, where the great cavern evidently had another outlet.

"Say, this sure is cute!" said the Kid.

Sandy Tutt grunted savagely. "I sure guessed you might have left the door open, as you was going back,"

smiled the Kid. "That's sure why I jumped on you sudden, feller. I guess you've saved me the trouble of hunting it."

Where the fissure ran into the cavern a great rock had barred the way; but it was now rolled aside.

The Kid examined it curiously.

It was a huge mass, far beyond the strength of one man to move. A couple of stout pine saplings stood leaning on it, and the Kid guessed that they were used as levers for shifting the big rock.

"I'll say this is cute!" said the Kid admiringly. "I guess a galoot might hunt around for a week and never get wise to it that that rock would shift! I allow that Cactus Carter has got his eye-teeth cut, feller."

A muttered curse answered him.

The secret of the rustlers' retreat was plain to the Kid now. Evidently Cactus Carter had hit on the fissure leading into the cavern, and had figured that it would make the safest hiding-place in the buttes, with a rock to close it against pursuit. And when the rock was closed it made an immovable barrier.

"I guess," said the Kid, "that I'd have had to blast that rock with giant powder if I'd found it shut, feller. But I guess I'd have done it, once I knowed this was the way into your den. But you sure have saved me a heap of trouble."

"You goin' on?" muttered Tutt.

"Sure!"

The Kid caught the glitter in the rustler's eyes, and laughed softly.

"I'm sure goin' on," he said; "but I guess your pards ain't going to shoot me up, Sandy; not if this baby knows it. Say, when Cactus comes back I guess he gives a signal to be let in. That rock can't be moved from outside. If it could, I'd sure have found it out yesterday. Say, what's the signal?"

"Three taps on the rock with the butt of a gun!" grunted Sandy Tutt.

The Kid looked round. The farther opening of the cavern, where the daylight gleamed, was at least three hundred yards away.

"Then I guess you keep a man on guard here," he said. "A tap wouldn't be heard from the canyon yonder."

"You've said it," grunted Tutt. "There's always a man on guard in the cavern; we done take it in turns to keep watch here, when any of the bunch are out of the shebang."

"There ain't a guy here now, I reckon, only you. I figure you was going to keep watch?"

"Yep!"

"Waal, I guess I'm leaving you here, and you can keep watch all you want," said the Kid cheerily. "I'll leave the rock open, because I might want to quit sudden; but I reckon the guys yonder won't know; they'll sure figure you're keeping tabs here. You're going to take a rest, hombre."

Sandy Tutt cursed, softly but luridly, as the Kid, with strips of the rustler's own clothing, bound his legs, and laid him down on the rocky floor of the cavern. But his cursing ceased as the Kid gagged him, carefully and scientifically.

Leaving the rustler lying on the rocky floor, the Kid, gun in hand, went forward through the great cavern, heading for the gleam of daylight far ahead.

A Surprise for the Kid!

"HOT!" murmured the Kid.

He had reached the opening of the cavern and, keeping in cover, looked out at what lay beyond.

What the Kid saw was a "locked" canyon; that is, a canyon surrounded entirely by high cliffs, shut in by inaccessible rocks. It was, perhaps, a dozen acres in extent; and the cliffs rose round it almost like walls.

Down one cliff came leaping a stream from the uplands high above, in a mist of spray, forming a pool where it fell, and flowing away across the canyon. Along it grew trees, pecan, and cottonwood, and over almost the whole extent of the locked canyon the grass was thick and rich. It was one of those fertile spots, of which there were many, hidden away in the remote recesses of the arid buttes.

The Kid watched the scene before him with keen, interested eyes. There were cattle feeding in the hidden canyon, or lying at rest in the grass—hundreds of them; and some of the cows were near enough for the Kid to discern the brand of the Bar-2 on them. He was looking at the herd that had been run off from the Bar-2 ranch a couple of days ago.

"Sho!" repeated the Kid.

At a short distance from the cavern's mouth was a group of huts, under the wide-spreading branches of a huge cottonwood-tree, evidently the quarters of the rustlers.

Three or four men were in sight, sitting on a log, playing poker with a deck of greasy cards. Another could be seen among the horses in a roughly-built corral. Others, doubtless, were in the huts. From one of these—probably used as a cook-house—smoke was rising. The Kid's eye followed the thin spiral of smoke as it rose.

Before it reached the height of the towering cliffs that surrounded the canyon it was dispersed by the wind; there was no danger of the smoke betraying the hidden den of the rustlers.

"I'll say Cactus knows his business, from A to izzard!" the Rio Kid murmured to himself.

Lying at the mouth of the cavern, from which the ground sloped gently down into the canyon, the Kid watched, unseen. His eyes ran over the herds that fed or lolled in the grass.

Five hundred cows had been driven off the Bar-2; but there were at least a thousand head of cattle in the canyon. The Kid's keen eyes picked out several brands—the White Star, the Lazy Nine, the Flying-O, and several others, as well as the Bar-2.

There had been many raids on the ranches in Sassafras county and the stolen cattle had disappeared without leaving a trace behind. The sheriff of Plug Hat knew now how and why.

But the cows, the Kid figured, did not remain long there—there was not feed enough for a large herd for a long time. He figured that the brands were blotted, and the cows driven away by secret paths through the buttes, to be disposed of at a distance to dealers who bought cheap and asked no questions.

A fire was burning near the huts, and occasionally one of the rustlers threw a handful of fuel on it. A cowman like the Kid was not perplexed to know why a fire was burning on a sultry afternoon. Presently, while he watched, a man came out of one of the huts, with a running-iron in his hand. He

glanced towards the group of poker players, and called, and his voice came clearly to the Kid from the distance.

"Say, you'uns, you get your ropes." Ho stooped, and thrust the iron into the red heart of the fire.

"Aw, can it, Missouri!" answered one of the poker-players. "There sure ain't no durned hury!"

"I guess if them cows ain't ready when Cactus comes back to-morrow there will be trouble!" said Missouri. "Quit that game, you gecks, and get in the cows! We got a lot to brand yet, and there ain't a lot of daylight left."

Unwillingly, the ruffians left their cards. Several more men came out of the huts and joined them. There were more than a dozen of the rustlers in the Kid's sight now, and probably more out of his sight. He lay still and watched.

He had seen brand-blotting done before, and it was nothing new to him. A cow was lassoed, and dragged, struggling and bellowing, to the fire, where it was thrown down and held.

Missouri drew the hot iron from the fire, and proceeded to alter the brand on the thick hide, to an accompaniment of frantic bellowing from the cow.

It was a Bar-2 cow, and across the horizontal bar of the brand Missouri marked an upright, turning it into a cross. After the "2" he branded a round "O." The Kid watched with a grim interest. The brand-blotter was slick at his work, and evidently an old hand.

In a few minutes the Bar-2 cow was branded Cross-20, and allowed to run loose on the grass again; and Mohave Dave himself, had he seen it, could not have said that it was a Bar-2 animal now.

Another cow took its place, roped in, and held for the running-iron. This was a White Star cow; and the running-iron drew a circle round the star, changing the brand to Circle Star. Cow after cow passed under the running-iron, keeping the rustlers busy, while the sun sank lower over the buttes and shadows lengthened in the locked canyon.

The Kid was thinking as he watched.

He knew the secret of the rustlers' den now. For a night and a long day he had remained in cover in the arroyo, and his patience had been rewarded. Now he had to get out and hit Plug Hat, and bring the posse back to round up the rustlers.

It was four hours, at least, on foot to the cow town; but the ride back would be swift. Night was falling, and he would be back with his men soon after midnight. Bur in the interval he reckoned that the guard would be changed. It was likely, at the moving rock—which meant giving the alarm to the rustlers. And the Kid, thinking it out, waited.

The brand-blotting ceased at last, as the shadows deepened. The fire died down, and lights gleamed from some of the huts. The stars came out overhead, and in their glimmer the Kid watched the rustlers gather to a meal outside the cookhouse.

And then came what he was waiting for—one of the gang left the rest, and came tramping up the sloping ground towards the cavern. And the Kid drew back into the darkness. It was the man whom the others had called Missouri who was coming; and the Kid figured that he was to relieve Sandy Tutt at the entrance.

(Continued on page 23.)

THE HIDDEN CANYON!

(Continued from page 6.)

Missouri came tramping into the cavern. The canyon was deep in shadow now, and the interior of the cavern, was blackness itself. But the burly rustler straddled on like one who knew the way well. His heavy boots clumped noisily on the rocky floor, and he did not hear the faintest sound as the Rio Kid followed him through the cavern.

The burly ruffian reached the end of the cavern, where the fissure led out into the arroyo. There he stopped, and stared about him in the deep gloom.

"Say, Sandy!" he called out. "You all-fired geek, you gone to sleep, and left the rock open, you bouthead. Say—Thunder!"

He broke off, gasping, as a hand was gripped on the back of his neck, and the muzzle of a revolver pressed to his side.

"Quiet!" whispered the Rio Kid. "Dog-gone my cats!" gasped Missouri. "If that's you fooling, Sandy—"

"I guess it ain't Sandy," murmured the Kid. "It's the sheriff of Plug Hat, you gink, and if you touch a gun or give a yaup, you get yours!"

"Carry me home to die!" gasped Missouri.

"Keep your mouth shut, you gink!" The muzzle of the Colt, grinding into the rustler's ribs, emphasised the order. Missouri made no movement. The Kid heard him gasping.

"Say, you win, sheriff!" he muttered. "Dog-gone my cats—"

"That's the lot!" said the Kid.

And the rustler was silent. Quietly, deftly, the Kid relieved him of his gun and jerked off his greasy neck-scarf.

"Put your paws together—here!" The Kid's voice came from the gloom. "You want to act just like a pet lamb, feller, or you go over the range so quick it will make your head swim."

In a few minutes Missouri was bound and gagged. From the darkness, the eyes of Sandy Tutt were gleaming up like a cat's.

The Kid chuckled softly.

The rustlers, he figured, if they heeded that Sandy Tutt did not come to the locked canyon, would naturally reckon that he was remaining with Missouri. Anyhow, he had to take the chance. It was for the Kid now to light out, burn the wind for Plug Hat, and get back with the posse.

Likely enough he would find the rock door still open when he came; but if the rustlers, in the meantime, found it open, and shut it they would not know what had happened, for Sandy Tutt and Missouri would not be there to tell them. And a charge of giant powder would open the rock from the outside.

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The Kid dragged Sandy Tutt to his feet, freeing his legs from the bonds. He bound his right arm to Missouri's left.

"Now you want to move!" murmured the Kid; and the two rustlers stumbled before him, out of the rock doorway, into the fissure that led into the arroyo. "I ain't walking you to town, you guys; I guess I'll walk you to a safe place and leave you tied to a tree, and you'll sure have time to chew on it that it's a poor game to rustle coats while this baby is sheriff of Plug Hat!"

They emerged from the fissure into the open ravine.

To take the two prisoners to a safe distance, leave them safe and silent, and then hit for Plug Hat, was the Kid's intention: But that intention was never carried out.

The arroyo lay silent under the dim light of the stars. But as the Kid emerged from the fissure into the open air, there was a sudden sound and a movement. His hand flew to a gun, but at the same moment the muzzle of a rifle was clamped to his chest.

"Hands up!" came a cold, hard voice. "Hands up, you durned rustler!"

And a quiver ran through the Rio Kid. For he knew that voice; every hard, metallic tone in it was familiar to his ears. It was the voice of Mule-Kick Hall, the captain of the Texas Rangers!

The Rio Kid, alias Texas Brown, sheriff of Plug Hat, was in the hands of the enemies who had so long hunted him!

THE END.

(Life's getting exciting for the Boy Sheriff. He can't turn without running into fresh troubles. See next week's yarn of Texan adventure, entitled, "OUTLAWS K.O'D. BY OUTLAW!")

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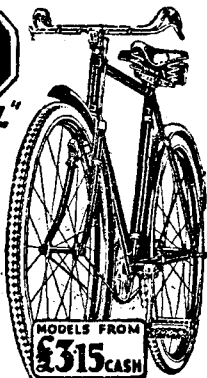
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Unknown!

THE Rio Kid stood quite still. Seldom or never was the Kid "rattled." Long had danger dogged the footsteps of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. But it had found him always cool as ice, with a nerve of iron. Death in many forms had menaced him, but it had never made the colour waver in the Kid's sunburnt cheeks.

But now, he knew, it wavered—if his face could have been seen in the dim starlight and under the shadow of his Stetson hat. The cold, hard, steely voice of Mule-Kick Hall falling unexpectedly on his ears had sent a chill to the Kid's very heart. It was the voice of the Ranger captain, not the pressure of a rifle-muzzle to his breast, that sent the chill through the Kid. It was said all through Texas that Jim Hall, the Ranger, never failed in the long run to get his man; and the Rio Kid, who had beaten him, mocked him, eluded him, and derided him, sometimes had wondered whether, after all, the Ranger was destined to get him. And so, for the moment, it seemed as if the coils of Fate were closing round the boy outlaw when a rifle was clamped to his breast and the steely voice of the Ranger ordered him to put his hands up.

"Pronto!" rapped out Jim Hall.

THE POPULAR.—No. 607.

OUTLAWS K.O'D BY OUTLAW!

It was not Hall who held the rifle. A burly Ranger held it, jammed at the Kid's breast, finger on trigger; and by him were several other shadowy figures, with rifles or six-guns bearing on the Kid—ready to riddle him with bullets if he ventured to touch a weapon. Mule-Kick Hall—slight, spare, with his hard sun-dried face like a mask—stood nearest the Kid; there was a revolver in his hand, but he had not lifted it.

Following Hall's sharp word there was a second's pause; and then the Rio Kid lifted his hands above his Stetson hat.

But the Kid had recovered from the surprise now. If he had been "rattled," it was only for a second or two. He knew that in the dimness of the lonely arroyo in the heart of the buttes it was

impossible for any man in the Rangers to recognise him; it flashed into his mind after the first shock that Jim Hall did not know that he was the Rio Kid. Jim Hall evidently was there to hunt for Cactus Carter and his gang of rustlers, and coming on the Kid in the gloom, he had taken him for one of the gang. Only a few seconds were needed to make that clear to the Kid's quick wits.

He drew a long, deep breath.

He was not cinched yet! Hall did not know him—could not know him unless he saw his face in the light—and he was not dreaming at that moment of the Rio Kid. And it was the Kid's game to leave him in the dark. It was long since the Kid had followed an outlaw trail; and now—for the nonce, at least—he was "Texas Brown," Sheriff of Plug Hat; and he figured that there were some in Hall's outfit who knew him as the Plug Hat sheriff. The game was not up yet for the Kid—not by long chalks.

"Say, fellers!" The Kid's voice was cool and drawing, but not wholly like his usual tones—for the Kid was an adept at disguising the tones of his voice, as he had often had need to do in his wild days as an outlaw. "Say, you'uns, what's this game? Texas Rangers holding up a sheriff!"

Mule-Kick Hall started.

"Sheriff be boiled!" he snapped. "I guess the hot place is full of such sheriffs, you durned rustler!"

"Forget it, feller!" said the Kid. "I guess there's guys along with your outfit that know the Sheriff of Plug Hat."

"What do you mean?" snapped Hall. "Speak low; I guess the rest of the gang ain't fur away, and if you give them a call, it's the last thing you'll ever do, Mister Rustler-Sheriff!"

Hall stooped his head under the brim of the Kid's Stetson and stared at him. The Kid did not move a muscle. He knew that it was too dark for recognition, sharp as Hall's eyes were.

And in the vicinity of the rustlers, with danger of a sniping shot from behind every rock, Hall was not likely to scratch a match.

The Kid gave a low laugh with a sound of sheer amusement.

"I guess it's O.K., feller," he said. "I'll prove it up to you that I'm Sheriff of Plug Hat. I got two of the rustlers prisoners; I was bringing them out with me. I guess if you use your eyes you'll see that they're tied together like a pair of turkeys—"

"That's so," said another voice. "These hyer two guys are tied up and gagged, Captain Hall."

Hall turned from the Kid to look at the two bound men, whom the Kid had been walking out of the fissure in the steep side of the ravine when he was seized by the Rangers.

"Keep your hands up, hombre," said Hall. "I guess we want to be satisfied."

"Jest as long as you like, feller," said the Kid amiably. "But as soon as you're durned well satisfied I'll show you the way to the rustlers and to the herd they run off from the Bar-2."

"Say, you located them?" exclaimed an eager voice—the voice of Mohave Dave, foreman of the Bar-2. The burly foreman moved forward. "Say, Hall, I guess this galoot is the Sheriff of Plug Hat—the kid sheriff they've elected since the last two was shot up by the rough-necks."

"You've said it," smiled the Kid. "And I sure did tell you, Mohave, that you'd no call to fetch in the Rangers,

and that me and my posse would put paid to the rustlers."

"You sure did!" grunted Mohave. "But I guess this hyer is a man's work, Mister Texas Brown."

"Aw—can it!" snapped the Kid. "You sure have been like a dog with a burnt tail since you run your bunch into an ambush in this arroyo, and the rustlers wiped you out. I guess I've located them cows, and found out where the rustlers hide themselves; and I was jest hitting for Plug Hat to fetch my men when you'uns dropped on me. But I reckon I'll let you act, Hall, now that you're on the spot, and save time. And I'm ready to guide you as soon as you give the word."

Mule-Kick Hall did not reply for a moment. He was giving his attention to Missouri and Sandy Tutt, the two rustlers whom the Kid had captured.

"They sure are tied up and gagged," he said, and the suspicion was gone from his voice now. "These two guys belong to Cactus Carter's crowd, Mister Brown?"

"Sure!" answered the Kid. "They're called Missouri and Sandy Tutt—and they was good enough to let me rope them up like lambs. You don't want to let them yaup; the rustlers would hear a yell from here, and there's more than a dozen of the gang—gunmen, the whole crowd of them."

Hall spoke a muttered word or two, and the two bound rustlers were led away in the arroyo by one of his men. He made a sign, and the rifle was removed from the Kid's breast; weapons were all lowered. It was clear to Hall and his men that the man they had seized was Texas Brown, Sheriff of Plug Hat, and it did not enter their minds that at other times and in other places he had had another name that was well known to them.

"Sorry, Mister Brown!" said Hall gruffly. "I guess you know that a guy's got to be on his guard. Mohave Dave fetched us up from Blue Grass to hunt for the rustlers and the cows they've stolen from the Bar-2, and we hit this arroyo after sundown. We was combing it in the dark, when he spotted you coming out of that hole, and I guess we had to make sure. I surely reckoned you was one of the gang in the dark—"

"O.K., sir!" said the Kid cheerily. "There ain't no harm done; and I'm sure glad to meet up with you boys. I'd have had to hoof it to Plug Hat to fetch my men, and I guess that's a good four hours on the hoof. Now you're here you can handle the gang."

"Sure!" said Hall. "But Buck Peters, of the Bar-2, who's along with us, allowed that there wasn't a sign of how the cows had been driven out of this arroyo. The trail comes up this ravine, but there ain't no way out—that's what Buck allows."

"It's a cinch," came the voice of the Bar-2 puncher. "I'll tell a man, it's a dog-goned mystery what become of them cows—and the rustlers, too!"

"Mister Brown says he's located them," grunted Mohave.

"Sure!" said the Kid. "And I'm waiting for you'uns. I guess," went on the Kid innocently, "that you'll be Jim Hall. I heard that you was down to Blue Grass hunting for some fire-bug from the Rio Grande."

"I'm Jim Hall. I guess I'm pleased to meet up with you, sheriff!" said the Ranger captain in a more friendly tone. "I've heard a whole heap about how you've cleaned up the town of Plug Hat, that was tie wildest hole in

Texas. They say that the rough-necks will feed out of your hand now."

"I allow that Plug Hat has changed some since I been sheriff," answered the Kid.

"Where's the cows?" muttered the Bar-2 foreman. "You allow that you've located the herd, sheriff?"

"You've said it," "It's got me beat," said Hall. "We've been combing this arroyo, and I guess I ain't wise to any way they could drive the cows out, unless they got wings."

The Kid made a gesture towards the fissure from which he had emerged.

"That's the way," he said. "That hole leads into a cavern, and on the other side of the cavern is a locked canyon. There's a big rock they use to shut the entrance, but it's open now."

"You been through?" "Sure! And seen the Bar-2 cows and a heap more," said the Kid.

"They been blotting the brands, all ready to drive them out of the buttes and sell them. I sure watched them at work."

"The gol-darned skunks!" breathed Mohave. "Say, is Cactus Carter to home, sheriff?"

"Nope! He's ridden over to White Pine with two of his bunch. But the rest of the crowd are there."

"You have sure got posted," said Hall.

"I guess I been keeping tabs on them," said the Kid. "Ain't I Sheriff of Plug Hat? And ain't it my business to round up the rustlers? Say, if you're ready I guess I'm the guy to lead you."

"Get on," said Hall.

"This-a-way!" said the Kid, and he turned back into the fissure under the high cliff.

Mule-Kick Hall followed him, and after him came the rest of the Rangers—twenty men, gun in hand.

And, dim as it was in the open arroyo, the Sheriff of Plug Hat was glad to get into the darkness of the cavern under the buttes. He was with friends—so long as they could not see the face of the Rio Kid. But if discovery came—and at any chance moment it might come—if Mule-Kick Hall learned that the boy Sheriff of Plug Hat was the Rio Kid, the outlaw he was hunting—

The Kid's nerve was of iron, but as he went with the Rangers he knew that he was walking with death.

- - -

Rounding up the Rustlers!

THE Rio Kid led the way in dense darkness. From the fissure on the rocky side of the arroyo the Rangers entered the great cavern. One of the men stumbled and cursed.

"I guess we want a light here!" grunted Mohave Dave.

"You'll sure get a bullet as soon as you get a light, feller," said the Kid. "This cavern is open to the locked canyon, and I guess the rustlers ain't asleep yet. Keep close, you'uns; I know the way like a book."

"Lead on!" came Hall's quiet voice. "Sure! Keep close."

The rock door was open, as the Kid had left it. The Rangers filed through the narrow aperture into the cavern, and the Kid led the way onward in darkness so dense that the Rangers could not see one another. But faintly,

far ahead, showed a patch that was less dark; it was the opening of the cavern in the canyon-side.

The Rangers tramped through the cavern after their guide. They reached the end of the great cavern at last and stood looking down the slope from the opening into the locked canyon.

There was a glimmer of stars in the sky, showing the canyon surrounded by steep, inaccessible cliffs, glimmering on the winding stream, revealing here and there the form of a sleeping cow in the thick grass.

The group of huts under the big cottonwood were invisible; but two or three lights twinkling through the darkness showed where they were located.

"That's the lay-out?" asked Mule-Kick Hall. He was close to the side of the Kid.

"Sure!" answered the Kid. "And the rustlers figurs that the rock's closed, and one of the gang on the watch there. I guess they're going to get a surprise."

"They sure are!" said Hall grimly. "Say, this is going to be pie!" murmured Mohave Dave. "I take back all I've said about you being a bone-head, sheriff; you sure have done trailed down that cow-stealin' bunch!"

Mule-Kick Hall stood staring hard down into the canyon in the dim glimmer of starlight. The Kid kept a little back from the opening; dim as the starlight was, he did not want it to fall on his face.

"You see them lights under the big cottonwood?" said the Kid. "That's where the huts are. I reckon I've done sized up this location by daylight. There's nigh a thousand head of cattle in this canyon—and the Bar-2 herd among them. I guess you'll find the rustlers in a bunch at the huts, Mister Hall—playing poker and soaking boot-leg."

Hall nodded.

"I reckon it's a clean-up!" he said. "You sure are some sheriff, Mister Texas Brown; and I guess I'll be glad of your help after we've rounded up this bunch."

"How come?" asked the Kid.

"I guess we're in this country looking for a fire-bug called the Rio Kid," answered Hall. "You've heard of that guy?"

The Kid smiled in the dark.

"I guess all Texas has heard of him," he answered. "You reckon that that all-fired guy has located in Sassafras county?"

"We've traced him as far as Blue Grass," answered Hall; "and I guess Plug Hat was jest the kind of burg he would make for. Mebbe he's one of the gang we're going to round up now."

"Mebbe!" murmured the Kid.

"I allow that the Kid never was a cow-stealer, boss," said one of the Rangers. "I sure shall be surprised if we find the Rio Kid in cahoots with a cow-stealin' bunch."

Hall made no reply to that. His long and unsuccessful hunt for the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had embittered him. The Kid had given him the first defeat he had known since he had been a captain of the Rangers. His ears did not welcome good words concerning the Kid.

"Three of you stop here and keep tabs, in case any of the gang make a break this way," he said. "The rest of you follow me."

He picked out the three who were to remain on guard in the cavern, and the rest followed him down the slope into the canyon. The Kid remained

than a sheriff, I allow. They think whole heaps of him in Plug Hat."

"Looks like a puncher?"

"I reckon. I heard that he generally dresses like a puncher, too—goatskin chaps an' spurs and the whole bag of tricks—and packs two guns," said Red. "Say, boss, I guess that guy is straight goods."

"I guess so," assented Hall. "But it keeps on hitting me that I've struck him somewhere before; and p'r'aps his name wasn't Texas Brown then. He allowed that I was a stranger to him when we met up last night. I guess it gets my goat a few! I sure am curious about that Texas Brown. You never seen him afore you rode into Plug Hat?"

"Nope."

"Well, I reckon I'll be riding into Plug Hat soon, and then I'll sure get a good look at the hombre," said Hall. He nodded to Red and turned away, and the Ranger left him.

Hall paced under the trees in the locked canyon thinking. It was strange how the thought of Texas Brown haunted his mind—a baffling sense of familiarity with a guy who was a stranger to him. Some elusive thought was at the back of the Ranger's mind that seemed to refuse to take definite shape. It worried him, and made him eager to see the Sheriff of Plug Hat and satisfy himself, by a plain view of the man in clear daylight, as to whether he had ever seen him before.

While the captain of the Rangers was buried in troubled thoughts his orders were carried out. The Rangers' horses were brought through the fissure and the cavern into the locked canyon, and skilful hands cleared away any sign that had been left in the arroyo. Nothing was left to excite the slightest suspicion in the mind of Cactus Carter when he rode back from White Pine to his hidden retreat in the buttes.

Then the Rangers camped down in the canyon to wait.

Mohave Dave and Buck Peters were eager to get the Bar-2 cows back to the ranch; but they were keen, too, to lay the leader of the rustlers by the heels, and they waited with the Rangers. They had, indeed, no choice in the matter; Mule-Kick Hall was in command, and his orders were not to be disputed.

The rock door had been closed, and on the inner side, in the shadowy cavern, Austin Red and Pecos Pete and several other Rangers waited and watched, listening for the signal that would show that the chief of the rustlers had returned.

The morning passed—slowly enough to the waiting Rangers, slowest of all to their captain. That elusive thought at the back of Jim Hall's mind was worrying him more and more.

Soon after noon Hall entered the cavern and went along to the spot where the rock door closed the way into the fissure. There was scarcely a glimmer of twilight so far from the

opening of the cavern, and the watching Rangers were only dusky shadows to his eyes.

"You here, Red?" muttered Hall.

"Sure!"

"I guess I been thinking about that sheriff guy. Say, when you saw him in Plug Hat—"

He paused.

"You surely do seem interested in that sheriff galoot!" said Red in wonder. "Seems he's getting your goat."

working now in the brain of Mule-Kick Hall would have startled the Sheriff of Plug Hat had he known.

Hall stirred at last impatiently.

"Dög-gone it! If that guy Cactus keeps us waiting much longer I guess I'll leave him to you boys and—"

"Hark!" muttered Pecos Pete.

Hall broke off abruptly.

Through the silent cavern came a sharp sound; it was a tapping on the outer side of the rock door.

Tap, tap, tap!



Cactus Carter gave a startled yell as a revolver was pressed to his chest and hands grasped him on all sides. "Hands up!" It was the voice of Mule-Kick Hall, the Texas Ranger.

"Did you notice the colour of his eyes?"

"I disremember," answered Red. "I noticed that he was a good-looker, and his eyes sure was keen—sharp as a bowie-knife. Come to think of it, I reckon they was—"

"Blue?" asked Hall, with a quick breath.

"You've said it, sir; but I reckon you didn't pipe the colour of his eyes in the dark last night," said Red, puzzled.

"Nope!" answered Hall. "You sure they was blue?"

"Sure!" answered Red.

Hall moved a little away and stood leaning on the rocky wall of the cavern, a shadow in the deep dusk. But the Rangers, looking at him, could see the gleam in his deep-set eyes. They wondered what was worrying their captain, and why he was so strangely interested in the boy Sheriff of Plug Hat. Darker and darker grew the brow of Mule-Kick Hall as he stood in silence, thinking.

"It ain't possible!" he said at last, unconsciously aloud. "I guess I'm sure dreaming; for it ain't possible nohow!"

"Say, what ain't possible, boss?" asked Red.

But Hall did not answer. He was plunged in deepest reflection, the subject of his thoughts a mystery to the Rangers. But the gleam in his eyes was more intense, and his lips were set in a hard line. The thoughts that were

Cinched!

CACTUS CARTER rode up the steep, rocky arroyo in the burning sun of noonday, followed by two other horsemen. In the blaze of the sun it was hot and dusty in the buttes. Few rode abroad at that hour if they could help it. But when few were abroad was the time Cactus chose for returning to his secret haunt in the heart of the buttes.

By hidden mountain trails Cactus had returned from White Pine, and he had ridden long and hard; but there was satisfaction in his hard, tanned face.

He had fixed up matters with the cattle-buyer at White Pine, and by this time, if his orders had been carried out, the brands on the rustled cows had been blotted, and they could be driven away in safety.

He dismounted from his broncho at the fissure in the steep side of the arroyo. His followers dismounted also, and they led their horses into the fissure on the heels of their leader.

At the end of the fissure Cactus felt over the great rock that barred further passage. It was closed, and he tapped on it thrice with the butt of his quirt.

Always when any of the rustlers were out of the retreat a man was kept within the rock door to open it at the signal.

Following the tapping of Cactus' quirt on the rock there was a sound from within—the sound of the great rock being shifted aside by a lever.

It rolled back, and the way was open. Cactus Carter strode through into the darkness of the cavern, followed by his horse and by his two companions leading their horses.

He peered round in the deep shadows, glimpsing a shadowy figure in the gloom.

"Say, that you, Sandy Tutt?" he asked. "I guess we've fixed it up about the cows, hombre; we drive them to-night. What—"

He broke off with a sudden startled yell as a revolver was pressed to his chest, and two or three hands from the darkness grasped him.

"Hands up!" said the quiet, steely voice of Mule-Kick Hall.

Cactus Carter reeled in his amazement. In his own hidden retreat he was in the hands of foes!

"Jumping gophers!" he gasped. "What—who— Dog-gone my cats! Is that Texas Brown?"

"I guess it's Jim Hall!" came the quiet voice. "But Texas Brown sure put us on to it, hombre. Hands up!"

Cactus Carter panted with rage; but he did not attempt to draw a gun.

His two followers were already grasped, with six-guns pressed to their breasts, and they made no resistance, only staring and stuttering in surprise.

Slowly the rustler lifted his hands above his head. His eyes burned with rage at the shadowy figures round him.

"Mule-Kick Hall?" he breathed.

"Sure!" "Dog-gone you!" Cactus was trembling with fury as the Rangers disarmed him, dragged his hands together, and bound them behind him with a trail-

rope. "Dog-gone you, Jim Hall! How'd you get here?"

"I guess the Sheriff of Plug Hat put us wise," answered Hall quietly. "I reckon the credit goes to him. Show a light here, Red! I guess we've got Cactus Carter!"

"Sure!" grinned Austin Red, as he turned the flickering light of a match on the rustler's furious face.

"Bring them along!"

The three rustlers were walked along the cavern and taken down into the canyon.

Cactus Carter stared about him with eyes burning with rage. His secret retreat, his men, the stolen herds, and himself were all in the hands of the Texas Rangers. The game was up for Cactus Carter with a vengeance. But he had hardly needed telling that it was due to the Sheriff of Plug Hat.

"I guess we've got the whole crowd now!" said Jim Hall. "Mohave, you can drive them cows as soon as you like, and take a couple of my men to help."

"You bet!" said Mohave Dave. The foreman of the Bar-2 dropped his hand on a gun as he looked at Cactus Carter, but he withdrew it. "You got the durned skunk that wiped out the Bar-2 bunch—dog-gone him! Cactus, you pesky polecat, I guess you won't run off any more cows in Sassafras county, or shoot up any more punchers. You sure have got to the end of your rope, feller!"

Cactus answered with an oath. "You boneheaded puncher, I guess you'd never have got them cows back!" he said bitterly. "Nor yet them dog-gone Rangers! I guess it's Texas Brown that's put paid to me! And if I got a chance at that all-fired sheriff, I'll—"

"I reckon the sheriff won't go over the range any the sooner for anything

you can do!" grunted the Bar-2 foreman. "I been agin that sheriff; but I guess I'm standing for him now like a man and a brother. I guess that any guy that bucks agin the Sheriff of Plug Hat will sure come out at the little end of the horn!"

Hall gave him a rather strange look. "You reckon?" he said.

"Sure! I'll say that kid sheriff is a whole team, and a cross dog under the wagon!" said Mohave.

Jim Hall turned away without replying. He called to a Ranger to bring his horse.

"You hitting the trail, sir?" asked Austin Red.

Hall nodded. "I guess I can leave this caboodle in your hands now, Red. Mo for Plug Hat?"

"You're in a powerful hurry to see the sheriff, I guess."

"You've said it," answered Hall.

He led his horse away through the cavern and the fissure, and in the arroyo he mounted. With a dark and thoughtful shade on his face, the captain of the Rangers rode down to the lower gulch and followed it to the open prairie. Once on the plains he gave his horse the spur and galloped away in the direction of Plug Hat.

With strange thoughts working in his mind, Mule-Kick Hall was riding to the cow town to see the sheriff. Once or twice as he rode his hand slid to his revolver, as if to make sure that it was ready to his grasp. It looked as if Jim Hall figured that trouble might follow when he met the Sheriff of Plug Hat.

THE END.

(—And he gets it. So does the Rio Kid. But how and why you will find out in: "THE 'HOT STUFF' SHERIFF!")

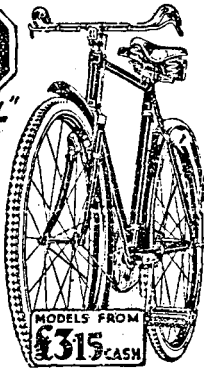
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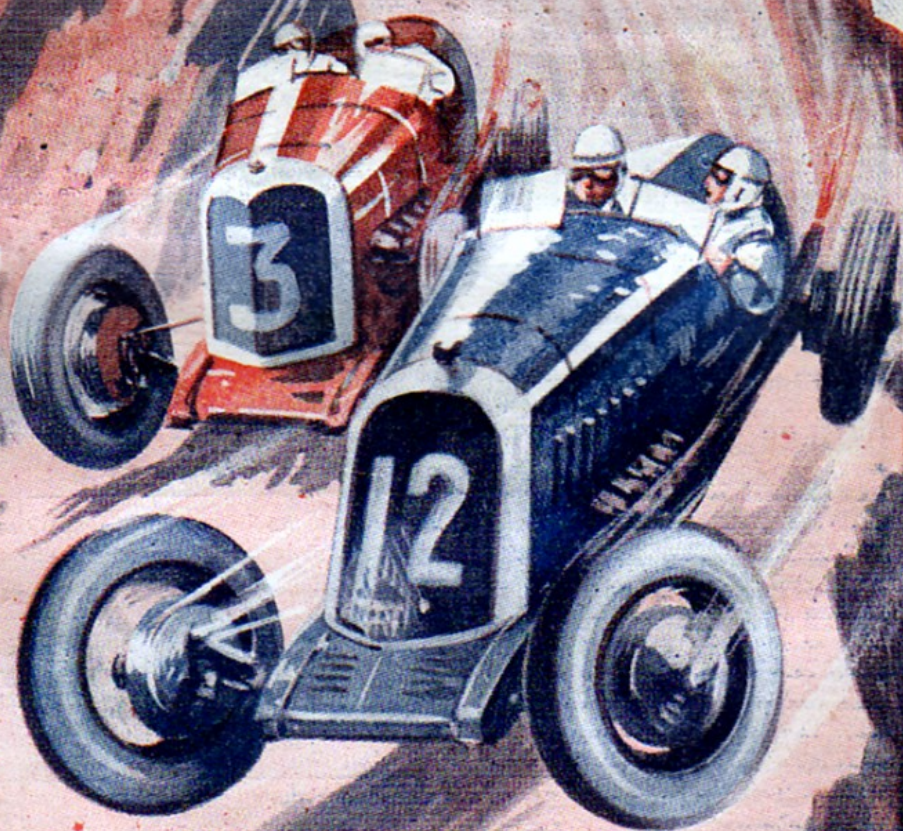
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now and in a bad temper. Apparently he had not liked being hog-tied like a steer and carried off on the cattleman's broncho.

The Kid breathed rather hard.

Colorado, in the innocence of his heart, had not the slightest suspicion that the bandage on the sheriff's face was there to hide his features. He felt—and looked—proud of his bright idea of getting Doc Sharp over from White Pine to see to it. But the Kid figured that he couldn't afford to take the bandage off and show a face without a mark on it. The Kid was in a difficult position.

"Say, I'm powerful glad to see you, Doc," he remarked amiably. "It's sure good of you to come all this way to see a man!"

Doc Sharp gave a snort.

"I guess you wouldn't have seed hide nor hair of me, Mister Texas Brown, if that rube hadn't roped me in like I was an ornery steer!" he snapped. "And I guess if my hand didn't shake too much I'd go for that guy with a gat!"

Colorado chuckled.

"Quit chewing the rag, and doctor up the sheriff," he said. "Mister Texas Brown is sure expecting a visitor to-day, and you don't want to fool around."

"I got a darn good mind," said the doc, "to walk outer this shebang and dog-gone the sheriff. Toting a guy ten miles to look at a scratch on a face—gol-darn you—"

"Say, doc," interrupted the Rio Kid, "if I'd been wise to Colorado's game I sure wouldn't have let him worry you. I ain't wanting a doc. You can hit White Pine as soon's you want."

Colorado stared.

"Say, sheriff, ain't you going to use this hyer guy arter I've took the trouble to hog-tie him and ride him over from White Pine?" he exclaimed.

"You boneheaded puncher," answered the Kid, "ain't I sheriff, and standing for law and order? You can't hog-tie a doctor guy and take him for a ride! You're forgetting that we've cleared the roughnecks out of Plug Hat and made it the quietest town in Texas."

"Sure! But—"

"You jest beat it, doc," said the Kid kindly. "I ain't standing for this—Colorado means well, but he's a bone-head. You jest beat it."

Doc Sharp grunted.

"Beat it without any fee—arter I've been rode over here by a locoed cattleman on a bronc!" he demanded.

"Feller, you gave it a name, and I'll surely pony up," said the Kid. "What's the figure?"

"You won't get away under ten dollars."

The Sheriff of Plug Hat flicked a ten-dollar bill on to the table.

"That goes," he agreed.

"I'll say you're a white man, Mister Texas Brown," said the doc, more amiably, "and seeing as I'm here and you've paid up like a little man, I ain't the galoot to take a guy's dollar for nothing. No, sir! You might corral lockjaw. And I guess it's bad, and you with your face tied up like that! Let's see it."

And the doc forgetting that he was a disorderly rough-neck most of the time, came towards the Kid with a professional manner. And the Kid breathed very hard.

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No Patient!

DOC SHARP extended a hand towards the bandages that hid most of the face of the Sheriff of Plug Hat.

But the Kid waved him back.

It was awkward for the Kid; but he could not have those bandages taken off, and an undamaged face revealed; especially as Mule-Kick Hall might ride into the town any minute and stop at the office.

"Say, what's gct you?" demanded the surprised doctor. "Don't you want them cuts seen to?"

The Kid shook his head.

"I guess I've tended that damage myself, doc," he answered. "I been a puncher, and I guess I know how. I ain't worrying you any."

Doc Sharp scowled at him blackly. The doc was in the last stage of disrepute; but he had his professional pride.

"Say, this surely gets my goat!" he exclaimed. "I been hog-tied and ridden ten miles in a sun you could bake flapjacks in, and now you allow you don't want me. I take back what I said about you being a white man!"

The Kid laughed.

"Yep! You can snigger!" exclaimed the angry doc. "You dog-goned, pesky boneheaded son of a gun! I guess I've doctored men, and doctored cows, for twenty years in Sassafras County, and there ain't been any guy yet that allowed that I wasn't on the top grade. You figure that I can't doctor a man because I ain't on the water-wagon? Forget it! Drunk or sober, I'll say I can doctor any guy in Texas!"

"I guess you could, doc," said the Kid pacifically. "I allow that when it comes to doctoring, you're a whole team, and a cross dog under the wagon. But I ain't wanting a doc."

"And why ain't you wanting a doc, when you got your face tied up like a mule had kicked you?" demanded the man from White Pine. "You figure I can't doctor you because my hand shakes a few? Forget it."

"It ain't that er-tall," said the Kid. "I jest ain't wanting a doc. No offence to you, mister."

But it was useless to tell Doc Sharp that there was no offence.

He was not only offended, but deeply exasperated. His head was spitting, his hand shaking, from the bootleg liquor he had consumed overnight; and on top of that he had been roped in by a cattleman and ridden ten miles in a hot sun, cursing every step of the way and threatening vengeance.

Now he had arrived he was told that his services were not required; and he had not the slightest doubt that it was because this Mister Texas Brown did not trust to his skill. He could imagine no other reason. And on the point of his professional skill the drunken doctor of White Pine was touchy.

He came closer to the Kid, his purple cheeks flushed and his eyes glinting, and shook a clenched, unsteady fist at him.

"You letting me get them bandages off?" he bawled.

The Kid rose to his feet.

"Doc, you got your fee, and you want to beat it," he said. "I'm saying good-bye to you!"

"You dog-goned piccan! You—"

"Quit!" said the Kid impatiently.

"If my hand was steady enough to hold a gun I'd sure make you, want some doctoring!" hooted the man from

White Pine. "Yes, sir, I surely would! Throwing down a guy this-a-way after—"

"Doc, you'll wake up all the cows in Sassafras County," said the Kid. "You want to travel. There's a joint across the plaza where you can wash the alkali dust out of your throttle. Hit it, pronto!"

Doc Sharp glared at him, deeply incensed. He grabbed up the ten-dollar bill and jammed it into his pocket, and turned to the door. There he paused to hurl back several choice expressions at the Kid, and then tramped out into the sun-splashed plaza.

Across the plaza were several saloons, and the man from White Pine made a bee-line for the nearest. The doc was thirsty after his ride; and his anger gave an edge to a thirst that was always potent. The doc was fixed now to consume bootleg up to the exact value of ten dollars.

The Kid felt worried. Colorado Bill was looking at him sheepishly and a little sulkily. The good-natured cattleman felt rather sore at the rejection of the medical guy's services, after he had taken so much trouble to get him to Plug Hat. It wasn't every galoot, Colorado figured, who would have ridden ten miles, hog-tied a doctor, and brought him swearing to town, for the sheriff's sake.

"Say, you don't want to go off on your ear, feller," said the Kid, as Colorado turned to the door. "I guess I don't want that boozy soaker messing around my bandages."

"He's a good doc," said Colorado sulkily. "But I guess it's your say-so, sheriff."

And he lounged out of the sheriff's office. There was a clatter of beating hoofs in the street of Plug Hat, and a horseman drew rein outside as Colorado emerged.

"Say, is this the sheriff's office?" asked the rider.

"Right in once, Mr. Hall," answered Colorado. "And the sheriff is inside, and I reckon he's expecting you."

The lean, brown-faced Ranger alighted and hitched his horse to the post. He gave Colorado a curt nod and passed him and walked into the lumber office with jingling spurs.

And the Rio Kid, as he heard Mule-Kick's voice outside, was glad that he had got rid of the doc before the arrival of the Ranger captain. And he rose to his feet as Jim Hall came striding in.

"I guess I told you I'd drop along, sheriff," said Hall.

"You're sure welcome, Mister Hall," said the Kid amiably.

Mule-Kick Hall came to a dead stop, his eyes fixed on the bandaged face of the sheriff.

And into his eyes leaped a sudden gleam; and the Rio Kid, with a quick beat at his heart, knew that he was suspected.

Face to Face!

JIM HALL did not speak again for a moment.

He had ridden from the buttes to the cow town, his thoughts working hard on one subject—the Sheriff of Plug Hat.

Only in the dark had he seen the sheriff, and only once; yet the strange sense of familiarity had haunted him and given him no rest.

Now he saw him.

And he saw him with his face covered with bandages, less recognisable than he had been that dark night in the buttes.

Suspicion had been latent in Hall's mind. Now it leaped into a flame.

For a long moment he stood, his eyes glinting, his breath coming thick and fast. And the Kid, sensing his hostility, was warily on his guard. If it came to gun-play the Kid would not be slow.

Yet he wondered. He had figured that Hall suspected nothing; that he was coming to see the Sheriff of Plug Hat without any hidden thought at the back of his mind. Had that been the case, a bandaged face would not have awakened suspicion.

But suspicion fairly flamed in Hall's eyes now.

And so the Kid knew that some familiarity must have struck him that dark night in the buttes; that he had come to Plug Hat to dispel or verify a suspicion; and that the sight of a bandaged, hidden face struck him—and struck him hard.

The Kid was the first to speak. He swung a chair towards the captain of the Rangers.

"You'll sit down, captain?"

Hall pulled himself together swiftly. He was not sure yet—not sure. That the Sheriff of Plug Hat could be the boy outlaw still seemed wildly impossible. But suspicion was strong and searching. He was not sure yet—but he was going to be sure.

"Thanks!" he said.

He sat down. His eyes were fixed, as if mesmerised, on the bandaged face.

The eyes that showed over the bandage were blue, and the Rio Kid's eyes were blue; and in build and shape the sheriff might have been the Kid. But without seeing his face the Ranger could not be sure. Was the bandage a trick—a mask? That question hammered in his mind as he watched the sheriff.

"You handled them rustlers, sir?" asked the Kid with an air of easy politeness.

Hall nodded.

"Yes—thanks to you, sheriff! We've rounded up the whole gang, and got Cactus Carter himself when he came in. I guess rustling in the buttes is a finished game now."

"That's good!" said the Kid.

"You've sure had an accident, sheriff?" said Hall. "Your face wasn't bandaged when I saw you last night in the buttes."

"Nope," agreed the Kid. "I guess I got horned into a bunch of cactus."

"Cut it bad?" asked Hall.

"Waal, I guess you know what cactus is like if you drop into it unexpectedly," said the Kid.

"Sure! How'd it happen? Cayuse took a tumble?"

Hall's manner was casual. He seemed to be merely making a polite inquiry concerning the sheriff's apparent injury. But the Kid sensed a searching mind behind the casual questions.

"Nope; I wasn't riding last night," said the Kid. "I reckon I can't put it on the cayuse."

Behind an unconscious brow the Kid was amused. He knew that Hall wanted to turn the talk to horses; to learn whether the Sheriff of Plug Hat rode a grey mustang—for the Rio Kid's mustang was as well known as his master.

"You want a good cayuse in this country," said Hall.

eye at it, Mister Hall, while you're on the spot."

The Kid rose, opened the door that led through his bed-room to the shed behind the building, and opened the door into the shed.

Hall followed him, his eyes glinting.

His interest was not in the stable, but in the horse it might contain. If he saw a grey mustang there he would know at a glance whether it was Side-Kicker or not; and if he saw Side-Kicker his gun would be out the next moment, covering the Sheriff of Plug Hat.

With all his coolness and iron self-control, the Ranger's heart beat a little faster as he followed Mister Texas Brown into the shed that served as a stable.



Taking the doctor by the back of his shirt and the slack of his trousers, the Kid shot him across the street.

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

Hall did not pursue the subject directly; he glanced round the timber office.

"I heard down to Blue Grass that the sheriff's office in this burg had been burnt out by a crowd of rough-necks," he remarked.

"You said it," agreed the Kid. "This hyer shebang stands where the old shack did."

"I guess you ain't got the room to put a guy up?" said Hall.

"You aiming to stay in Plug Hat a piece?"

"I guess I'm staying round a while."

"I'd sure be proud to put you up, Mr Hall," said the Kid. "But, jest as you say, there ain't room in this shebang; there's jest this office and a little room for my bunk and the stable. But you'll get all you want at Pop Short's hotel. That's where I go to eat."

Hall smiled with his lips, but his eyes were like steel.

"I've bedded down in a stable afore now," he said.

The Kid smiled, too.

"It's jest a shed, and it wouldn't suit you," he said. "But throw an

A horse was there at the single stall, and it lifted a brown head as the two entered.

Hall was conscious of a sharp pang of disappointment.

It was a chestnut broncho that was stalled in the shed behind the sheriff's office.

But the captain of the Rangers knew all about disguised horses, and he was well aware that the Kid had often turned Side-Kicker into a chestnut, or a pinto, so far as looks went. He approached the horse.

"That's a good cayuse," he remarked.

"You've said it," smiled the Kid.

Hall's examination of the horse was brief. There was no paint about it; it was what it looked—a chestnut broncho.

Not a sign in the Ranger's tanned face betrayed his disappointment. His glance turned from the horse, to rove round the shed.

"Nope, I reckon I couldn't bed down here," he remarked. "I guess I'll worry the hotel."

They returned to the office.

"Say, I'm watching out for some horses for my troop," went on Hall.

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"I've heard they got plenty of critters to sell in this town."

The sheriff laughed.

"Not so many as they had," he replied. "Afore I hit Plug Hat it was the worst hoss-stealing burg in Texas; and they'd sure take a guy's hoss off'n him and sell it by auction the same day. Since I've run the rule over them there ain't been nary cayuse lifted. Still, I reckon you'll find all the hoss-flesh you want; and Pop Short at the hotel is the guy to put you wise."

"You ain't selling that bronco?"

"I guess I'd have to buy another if I did."

"I reckoned you might have another horse."

"I had a Injun mustang," said the Kid; "but I done sold him to a guy. But he wasn't a good-tempered cayuse, he wasn't. But if you want hosses, you say the word to Pop Short; he'll suit you."

Hall nodded.

Somehow the suspicion was getting less keen in his mind. It was still there—it was not likely to leave him till he had proof, one way or the other.

But the manner of the Plug Hat sheriff was so natural, so unconcerned, that it could not fail to impress the Ranger. But for the bandaged face he felt that he had little to "go" on—only a sort of trick of familiarity about this young guy's voice and bearing, and that very vague and elusive. But was it a coincidence that the sheriff's face was hidden under bandages, when Hall had ridden into town specially to look at it? His suspicion was less sharp, but it was there.

They talked for some minutes, casually and carelessly. Sheriff Texas Brown mentioned early days in Panhandle; and Hall was well aware that it was in the Frio country that the Kid had been raised. He had a baffled feeling, and he told himself that the Rio Kid was getting on his nerves, and that he was prepared to see the Kid in every guy that crossed his trail.

He rose to go at last.

"I guess I'll see you agin, if you eat at the hotel," he remarked.

"Sure," assented the Kid. "And I'm bound to say that I'm pleased to have met up with you, Mister Hall. I guess you know you're the best-talked-of guy in Texas."

"I reckon there's a guy they talk of more," said Hall, "and that's the guy I'm trailing."

The Kid's eyes narrowed a trifle.

"Some fire-bug?" he asked.

"The durndest fire-bug in Texas—the Rio Kid!"

Hall shot a swift glance at Mister Texas Brown as he spoke the name.

But the Sheriff of Plug Hat only nodded, without the slightest change in the section of his face that Hall could see.

"I remember your man Austin Red allowed you was at Blue Grass looking for that guy," said the Kid. "You ain't cinched him yet?"

"Not yet," said Hall. "But I aim to cinch him. You ain't heard anything of him in this section?"

"Not a thing," answered the Kid regretfully. "But when I got word that you was so near as Blue Grass hunting him I sure had a look-see around. But I don't reckon you'll put salt on his tail in Sassafras County."

Hall set his lips.

"Mebbe—mebbe not!" he said. "I want you to give me all the help you can, sheriff, in rounding up that firebug."

"That's right where I live," answered

the Kid amiably. "You call on me any time to horn in, and you'll find me right there, Mr. Hall. But I do reckon that the Rio Kid will never show up in Plug Hat while I'm around."

Hall looked at him quickly, wondering whether he detected a note of mockery in the sheriff's voice. But the clear blue eyes met his with friendly calm.

"Waal, I guess I'm staying around a piece to see if I can pick up any news of the Rio Kid," said the Ranger. "So-long, sheriff!"

And with a nod the Ranger walked out of the office, mounted his horse, and rode up the street towards the Plug Hat Hotel.

The Kid, lounging in the doorway, looked after him. There was a gleam like cold steel in his eyes.

Mule-Kick Hall suspected. He knew that. He had hoped to see Side-Kicker in the stable; and Side-Kicker was camped out in the chaparral two miles from Plug Hat, to stay there till the Rangers were gone. Hall was going to stay around—long enough to give the sheriff no further excuse for keeping his face bandaged? The Kid wondered.

"Hombre," he said to himself, "you sure want to watch out, and your best guess is to saddle up and hit the trail. That's your best guess, hombre, but you ain't hitting any old trail. You're Sheriff of Plug Hat—and you're staying sheriff!"

And the Kid, with a shrug of the shoulders, turned back into the office.

Hands Up!

DOC SHARP, of White Pine, staggered out of the Gold Brick saloon, followed by a laughing crowd of punchers. The sun had set, and it was a cool light evening in Plug Hat. Stars were coming out in the sky, their lustre dimmed by the flare of naphtha lamps from the saloons that lined the plaza. Quite a little army poured out of the Gold Brick along with the disreputable medical man from White Pine. Doc Sharp was on the warpath; but as he found it difficult to get his legs, with ten dollars' worth of bootleg whisky inside him, he did not look to be very dangerous.

He held on to a post outside the Gold Brick, and stared and glared round at a hilarious crowd.

"If you boys want to see that sheriff guy soaked, you want to keep an eye on me!" boasted the man from White Pine.

And he started reeling across the plaza towards the sheriff's office.

With a roar of hilarity the crowd from the Gold Brick followed him. Two or three kindly disposed guys tried to persuade the doc to give it a miss; but they tried in vain. The doc had started with a sense of injury; and ten dollars' worth of bootleg had inspired him with a desire for vengeance. Full of whisky and wrath the doc headed for Sheriff Brown's office, and half Plug Hat followed him to see the fun.

Outside the timber office the doc stood unsteadily, and at the top of his voice invited the sheriff to "come out!"

"You dog-goned jay!" exclaimed Colorado. "If he does I guess it will be the last thing that will happen to you."

"Give him his head, Colorado!" shouted a dozen voices. "Let's see him beat up Texas Brown."

"Say, you ornery, slab-sided, pie-faced son of a gun!" roared the doc.

"Mister Sheriff Texas Brown—it's you, I mean! Come out, you pesky polecat, and see me wipe up Plug Hat with you! Come out, you skunk! You hear me yaup?"

Among the grinning spectators was one man with a cold, grave face and contempt in his eyes as he glanced at the wretched doc. But Mule-Kick Hall was interested—in anything that had to do with the Sheriff of Sassafras County.

A bandaged face looked from the sheriff's door at last.

"Aw, go away quiet and sleep it off, feller," said the Kid. "You make all that row and it's you for the calaboose."

"Who'll put me in the calaboose?" roared the doc.

"This baby," answered the Kid.

Mule-Kick Hall stepped forward and dropped a hand on the intoxicated man's shoulder. Doc Sharp glared round at him.

"Say, you're making a heap row, hombre," said the Ranger. "What you got agin the sheriff of this town?"

"Ain't he told me I can't doctor him?" hooted the man from White Pine.

"Me, I come ten miles, riding with a a bone-headed puncher, to doctor that guy—and he stands me off! I've doctored men and cows in Sassafras County for twenty years, and that guy allows I can't doctor him for a cactus scratch. I'm telling you I ain't standing for it!"

Hall's glance shot towards the sheriff. Suspicion, which had died down in his mind, blazed fiercely up.

Colorado had brought the doctor ten miles to tend the sheriff's cut face, and the sheriff had refused his services. Why?

There was only one answer to that question in Hall's mind. It was not to cover cactus cuts, but the features of the Rio Kid, that the Sheriff of Plug Hat had bandaged his face.

Doc Sharp pushed him aside and lurched towards the sheriff. He brandished an unsteady fist at the bandaged face.

"I'm coming for you!" he snorted. "I'm sure going to beat you up, Mister Texas Brown, and when I'm through you'll want some more bandages! I'll tell a man!"

And Doc Sharp fairly hurled himself at the sheriff.

There was a roar of laughter from the Plug Hat crowd as the sheriff grasped him, spun him round, and then, taking him by the back of his shirt and the slack of his trousers, threw him away.

Doc Sharp collapsed at a dozen feet distance, and rolled over with a breathless grunt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Colorado, you run that guy into the calaboose," said the sheriff. "Let him sober up there out of trouble."

"Sure!" grinned Colorado.

Mule-Kick Hall had paused. But it was only for a moment. Suspicion, in his mind, had become certainty. His hand was on a gun, as the Kid turned away from tossing the White Pine doctor across the plaza.

Hall made one stride towards him and his gun leaped out.

"Hands up!" Hall's voice came grating through his teeth. "Hands up, Kid! Touch a gun and I'll sure plug you for keeps! I've trailed you long and hard, and by thunder I've got you now! Hands up, Kid!"

THE END.

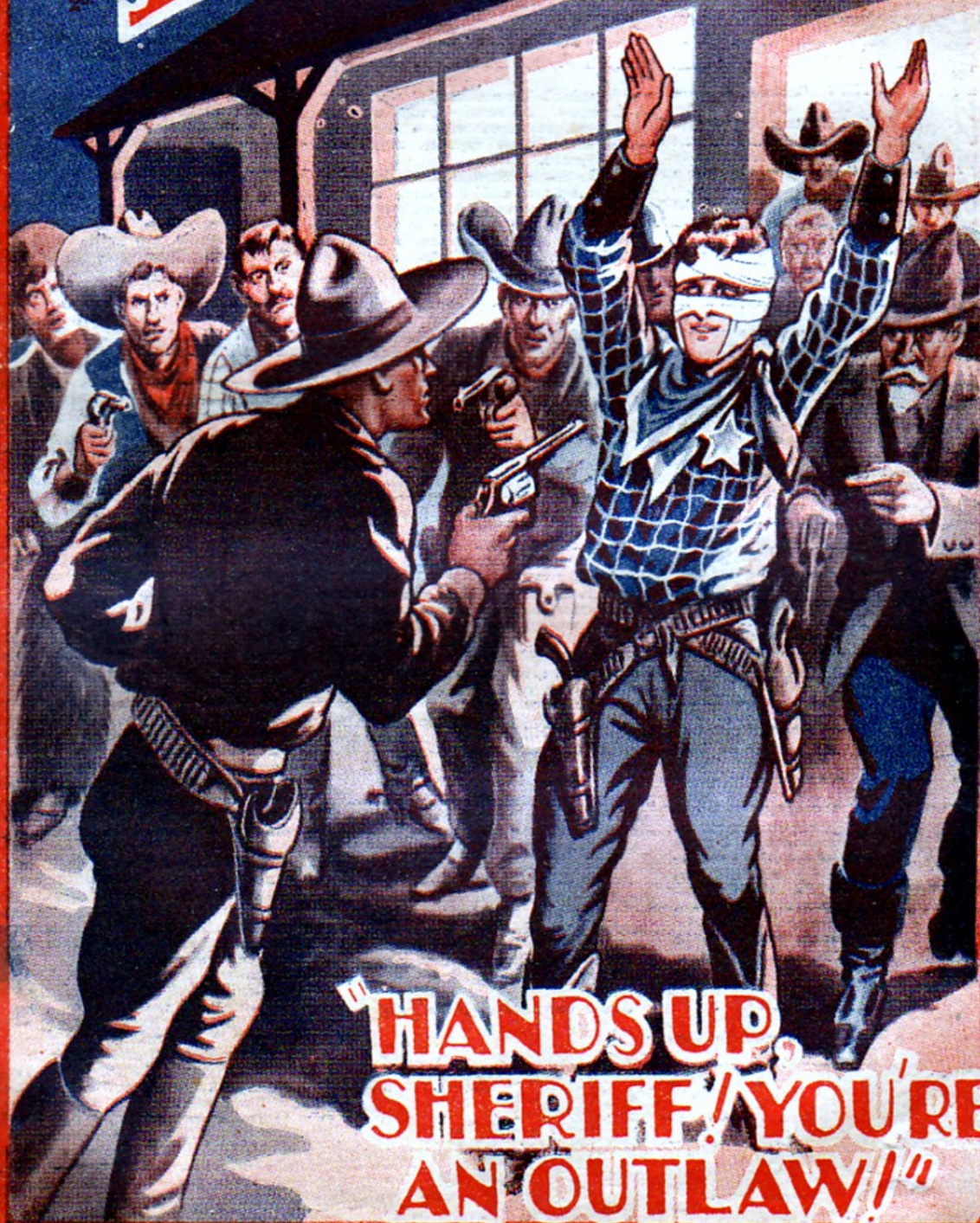
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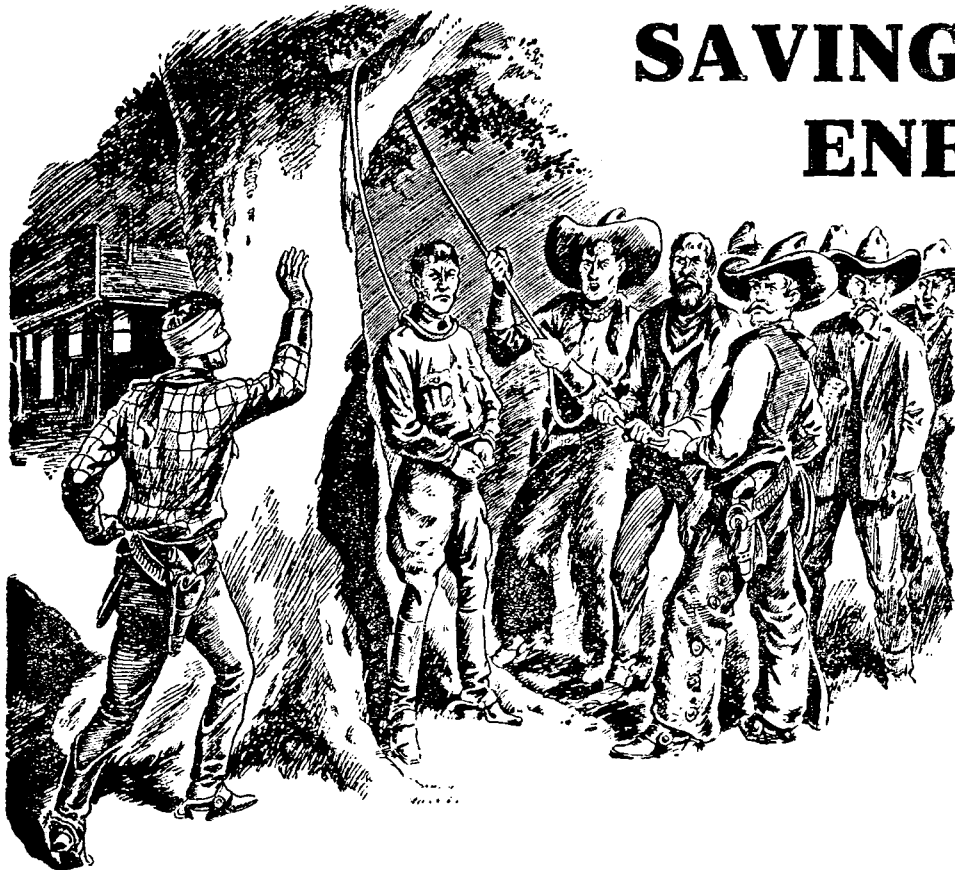
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have you been shoving back too much fire-water?" Hall gritted his teeth.

"Keep 'em up!" he said quietly.

"Feller," drawled the Kid, "I never was the guy to argue with a six-gun, when it was lookin' me in the eye. What you say goes—so long's you're holdin' the gun!"

The crowd surged round them. Colorado had a gun in his hand now, and several other of the sheriff's deputies. Every eye was on the Ranger, and every eye was hostile.

"You want to be careful with that gun, Hall!" said Colorado grimly. "I got you covered."

"Me, too!" grinned Mesquite. "And if you pull trigger on our sheriff, Jim Hall, you won't live long enough to write home about it."

Hall breathed hard.

His Rangers were far from Plug Hat. He was alone in a town that was in Texas Brown's pocket. He realised that if he fired on the Rio Kid he would fall the next moment, riddled with bullets. But the grim-faced Ranger did not falter.

With a steady hand he kept the Kid covered. And the Kid stood with his hands up—smiling.

"Listen to me, you Plug Hat guys!" said Hall.

"I've been after that fire-bug for a dog's age, and now I've got him. I'm telling you that the man you call Texas Brown, the man you've elected sheriff of Sassafrass county is the Rio Kid!"

"Aw, forget it!" scoffed Colorado. "You're jest loco—plumb loco!"

"Take those bandages off his face!" said Hall. "He allows that he's got them bandages on because of a cactus scratch. I'm telling you he's got them bandages on because he knows I'd know him at sight if I saw his face."

"Oh, guff!" jeered Mesquite. "I'll bring a dozen guys along to

Accused!

"HANDS up, the Rio Kid!"

The words came grating between Jim Hall's teeth. The muzzle of his Colt was almost jaunted in the face of "Texas Brown," sheriff of Plug Hat. The Ranger's eyes glinted like steel over the levelled revolver.

The Kid stood quite still.

He did not raise his hands at the Ranger's order. But he did not reach for a gun. The slightest move in that direction would have drawn the Ranger's fire, and a ball crashing through the brain would have ended the wild career of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande—and the career of the new sheriff of Plug Hat. Jim Hall, captain of the Texas Rangers, knew him now—knew that the bandages on the face of the sheriff hid the features of the Rio Kid. He had doubted; but now knew. And Jim Hall's finger was on the trigger, ready to speed the death-shot if the Kid resisted. By long and weary trails the Ranger had hunted the boy outlaw; and now they stood face to face, and the Ranger had the upper hand.

The Kid did not speak. But from the crowd round them, in the plaza, came a roar of astonishment, incredulity, and anger. Mule-Kick Hall, of the Texas Rangers, was known

there—known, and respected, and feared. Plenty of men in Plug Hat would willingly have helped him in trailing down the outlaw whose name was on every tongue in Texas. But they were not likely to believe that Texas Brown, the sheriff, was the famous "fire-bug" whose wild adventures were the favourite theme in every cow camp and every bunk-house in the Lone Star State.

"The Rio Kid!" repeated Colorado Bill. "Say, Jim Hall, you're loco—plumb loco! Our sheriff the Rio Kid!"

"The Rio Kid!" repeated Hall. "Hands up, Kid! I ain't waiting. You're my mutton, and I've got you dead to rights at last. Put up your paws, or it's you for the long jump!"

Boy Sheriff Puts Noose Round His Own Neck!

Slowly the Kid put up his hands.

But his eyes, over the bandages that smothered his handsome face, were smiling. The Kid's nerve was of iron; and it did not shake now. He was face to face with the man who had so long hunted him—under cover of his Colt. But the Kid did not figure that the game was up. Outlaw or no outlaw, the Kid was sheriff of Plug Hat, and in the cow-town all were his friends and supporters. And the Ranger was alone. The Kid was very far from figuring that he had reached the end of his trail.

"Say, feller!" drawled the Kid, and his voice had a mocking note. "Say, is this sunstroke?" He laughed. "Or

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Plug Hat to identify him, once he's safe with the irons on," said Hall.

"You figure you're putting the irons on our sheriff!" roared Colorado. "Forget it, you locoed gink!" "You know me," said Hall. "Jim Hall, of the Texas Rangers! I call on you men to help me secure that outlaw!"

There was a laugh.

"Say, ain't you got the wrong coyote by the tail, Hall?" asked the Kid softly. "I guess you been after the Rio Kid so long you've got that fire-bug on your nerves. You sure you ain't dreaming?"

"I guess you've got this town fooled, Kid, but you can't fool me," said Hall. "You're my prisoner!"

"You reckon?" smiled the Kid. "Alive or dead," said Mule-Kick Hall.

"Fellers," said the Kid, looking round, "you don't want to get mad with this guy. He sure thinks he's got hold of the Rio Kid. The Kid sure has worried him a whole lot, and I guess it's got him a piece loco. I reckon he's ready to see the Kid in every guy he meets. But, dog-gone my cats, it surely does surprise me that he figures that he's found the Kid in a sheriff! Mister Hall, you want to look further than Plug Hat to find the Rio Kid."

"I guess I've got him under my gun," said Hall grimly. "And I guess I'm not letting him loose again."

"You got me under your gun," agreed the Kid, "and I'm letting you get by with it because you're a good little man, and I don't want to hurt you. But you want to remember that I'm sheriff of this burg, and since I bin sheriff gun-play ain't allowed in Plug Hat. You're a captain of the Rangers, and I respect you a whole lot, but I got to put you in the calaboose for pulling a gun."

Hall's eyes glittered. "Keep your hands up!" he said. "They're up," said the Kid cheerfully. "But if you burn powder, Jim Hall, it's the last thing you'll do on this side of Jordan. I guess my friends here will see you fixed for the cemetery."

"You bet your life!" roared Colorado. "Hall, you geck, put down that gun!"

Five or six guns were trained on the Ranger now. There was no doubt whatever that if he fired he would be shot down the next instant. If he had hoped that his name, his authority, would gain him support in the crowd he was disappointed. Not a man believed that the sheriff was the celebrated outlaw, and every man there was backing up the sheriff.

"Let up, you gink!" shouted Mesquite.

The crowd surged closer round the Ranger and the sheriff. A deadly gleam came into Mule-Kick Hall's eyes. He could never get his prisoner away, that was clear. And it was in his mind to make sure of him, even at the cost of his own life.

"Dead or alive, Kid!" he said between his gritted teeth. "You're my game, and I've got you dead to rights."

A hand reached from behind the Ranger and struck up his arm. The instant the gun was no longer covering him the Kid acted—with lightning swiftness. In one second Hall would have had the gun bearing on him again—and this time he would have fired, instantly, ruthlessly. But one second was enough for the Kid. He sprang

like a tiger, and his fist drove into the Ranger's face, knocking him backwards. A moment more, and a dozen hands were laid on Jim Hall, his revolver was wrenched away, and he stood writhing in the grasp of the Men of Plug Hat.

By Order of the Sheriff!

"LYNCH him!" "String him up!" "Get a rope, you guys!" roared Colorado.

Jim Hall struggled. But six or seven pairs of hands were on him, grasping him fiercely, and he was helpless.

His face was white with rage. Already the angry crowd were dragging him towards the big cotton-wood tree that stood near the sheriff's office. Mesquite ran for a lasso.

"Lynch him!" It was a deafening roar. The excited cowmen forgot, or did not care, that Hall was a Ranger—captain of the Texas Rangers. He had come near to shooting down their sheriff under their eyes, and that was enough for them. They wrenched and hustled and dragged him towards the tree.

"Lynch him!" Hall's eyes, as he went, turned back on the Kid with a glare of rage, and hate, and bitterness.

"You've beaten me, Kid!" he panted chokingly. "You've beaten me to it. But my men will get you—"

"That's enough from you!" shouted Colorado. "Where's that rope? Get a riata, dog-gone you!"

"Hyer you are!" yelled Mesquite. He came speeding back with a lasso in his hands.

Hall was under the tree now. The rope was flung over a high branch. A dozen men grasped the end of it, while Colorado fitted the loop round Jim Hall's neck.

The Rio Kid looked on. He was not smiling now. He looked on, while the wings of the Angel of Death rustled in the ears of Jim Hall.

The only man the Kid had ever feared—if ever he had feared living man—was at his mercy now. He had only to stand idle while the men of Plug Hat strung up the man who had threatened him, who would have shot him dead in a second more. No man in Texas, save Jim Hall, knew that the sheriff was the Rio Kid. When death closed his lips for ever, the Kid was safe—safe from the long hunt that had given him no rest; safe to live as sheriff of Sassafras county, and to throw behind him for ever the wild life of an outlaw.

Only Jim Hall stood between the Kid and all that the Kid wanted; and Jim Hall, with a rope round his neck, stood on the verge of eternity.

But—! The Kid could not do it! The man was his enemy, his bitter enemy, and while he lived there was no safety for the Kid. But in his own grim, sour way the man was doing his duty; and he was a brave man, and the Kid respected him. And the Kid was sheriff, and a lawless lynching it was a sheriff's duty to prevent. The Kid sighed. A minute more, and all that was left of Jim Hall would be swinging from the branch of the cotton-wood. But the Kid could not stand for it.

He strode forward. "Hold in your hosses, fellers," said

the Kid quietly. "Lynch law ain't the law of Plug Hat! Go slow."

"Dog-gone you, Texas Brown!" hooted Colorado. "I'll tell all Texas we're going to hang him."

"Up with him!" roared a score of voices.

"Lynch him!" The Kid shook his head.

"Fellers, this ain't good enough for Plug Hat," he said. "That guy surely came near to giving me my ticket for soup; but we ain't hanging a man, for all that. Forget it!"

"I'll tell a man—"

"Aw, forget it, I'm telling you," said the Kid.

And he threw the noose of the lasso from the neck of the Ranger.

Hard and grim the face of Jim Hall looked. The Kid was saving his life, but that cut no ice with the Ranger. The Kid was his game, to be hunted down like a wolf. And if the Ranger lived, he lived to hunt him down. The Kid was wise to it, but it made no difference. The temptation was strong, but there would be no lynching in Plug Hat so long as Texas Brown was sheriff.

There was a roar of discontent from the excited cowmen. But the word of the sheriff was law. Slowly and reluctantly the Plug Hat men gave in.

"I guess it's you that's loco, sheriff!" grunted Colorado.

"Mebbe," smiled the Kid. "But we ran Cactus Carter and his bunch out of town to keep law and order in Plug Hat. There ain't going to be no lynchings in this burg."

"You letting him call you an outlaw and a fire-bug, and pull a gun on you!" snorted Colorado indignantly.

The Kid smiled. "I guess he ain't done a whole lot of harm," he answered. "He's sure crazy about the Rio Kid. But jest like I told him, no guy is allowed to pull a gun in Plug Hat. This hyer is a law-abiding town since I been sheriff, and I guess gun-play don't go any more. Take him to the calaboose."

"I guess I'd rather string him up." "Hombre, you wouldn't like to string that guy up so much as I would," said the Kid. "But a sheriff has got to stand for law and order. And we ain't hanging a guy for making a mistake."

Hall gritted his teeth. "Nary mistake!" he said. "You're the Rio Kid!"

"Aw, save your breath!" said the Kid disdainfully. "Take him along to the calaboose, you guys. I guess he'll cool down there and feel better in the morning."

Hall's lips set with savage anger. The Kid had saved his life, he knew that. But it got the Ranger's goat to see the outlaw, the hunted man, still playing sheriff, although he knew that Hall knew who he was. The captain of the Rangers was condemned to the town gaol, like a disorderly rough-neck—at the order of the Rio Kid! He ground his teeth with rage as he was hustled roughly along.

There was already one occupant in the calaboose—Doc Sharp, of White Pine, who had imbibed the potent fire-water not wisely, but too well. But Doc Sharp was kicked out, and the one-roomed prison left vacant for the new occupant.

Mule-Kick Hall, captain of the Texas Rangers, white with rage, was marched into the timber gaol.

At the Kid's order, he was searched for weapons. Then he was released.

The Plug Hat men crowded out, THE POPULAR.—No. 609.

lid last. From the doorway he looked back at the Ranger.

Hall's eyes met his, with a glare of deadly animosity. The Kid regarded him thoughtfully.

"You're getting by with it, Kid," said the Ranger, his voice suffocated with rage. "You've beaten me to it. But—"

"You want to take it quiet, hombre," said the Kid. "I keep on telling you that guys ain't allowed to pull guns in Plug Hat now this baby is sheriff."

"I know you. You know I'm wise to you," hissed Hall. "You got the gall to go on playing sheriff, when I know you're the Kid—the durned fire-bug that's wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas!"

"I guess I'm a sheriff myself, feller," said the Kid. "I guess what I say goes in this cow-town. You're in the calaboose for three days, and when you're let out you'll be run out of town."

"Three days! When my men hear of this they'll raise thunder in this burg," snarled Hall. "I guess your rough-necks won't argue with the Texas Rangers."

"Aw, go to bed and sleep it off!" advised the Kid. And he shut the door of the calaboose, locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

He walked back slowly to his office. The crowd dispersed, excitedly discussing the affair. Colorado Bill joined the Kid.

"Say, sheriff!"

"Shoot!" said the Kid.

"I guess that galoot is sure loco," said Colorado. "But what the thunder, sheriff, put it into his cabeza that you was the Rio Kid?"

The sheriff laughed.

"That guy is jest crazy about the Kid," he answered.

"I ain't never seed the Kid," said Colorado musingly. "But I seen his picture stuck up at Packsaddle, with a reward of a thousand dollars. He ain't unlike you, sheriff."

"No?" asked the Kid.

"I mean jest about your age, and build, and so on," said Colorado thoughtfully. "Now I come to think of it I reckon you're like him some."

The Kid looked at him curiously.

"I guess punchers look a lot alike," he said, "and from what I've heard, the Kid was a puncher. I guess Mule-Kick Hall can't go around roping in every puncher that looks like the Rio Kid."

"He sure can't," agreed Colorado. "But I'm sure surprised at Hall. He ain't no gink, sheriff, and he ain't the guy to go off on his ear about nothing. He's got some reason, I reckon, for thinking that the Rio Kid is around in Sassafras county. But he sure did make one big mistake in figuring that our sheriff was that durned fire-bug. But it beats me, sheriff, for any guy in Texas will tell you that Jim Hall ain't the man to make fool mistakes." Colorado shook his head. "I allow it's got me beat!"

The Kid nodded and went into his office.

Plug Hat did not keep early hours, and it was late when the last shack closed and the last voice died away. But, late as it was, the sheriff was not in his bunk. While Plug Hat slept and the captured Ranger raged in the timber gaol the sheriff was pacing his office, thinking of anything but sleep. What the outlaw sheriff had feared had come at last, and the Rio Kid had some hard thinking to do.

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Face to Face!

MULE-KICK HALL cursed, not loud, but deep.

There was no sleep for him that night, any more than for the sheriff.

He walked to and fro within the narrow limits of the gaol, and sat on the rough bench, that was almost all the furniture, stretched himself there once or twice, but rose again.

His face was black and bitter. He cursed the Rio Kid, and he cursed himself and his stars. It was the Rio Kid. He knew it! He would have staked his life that Sheriff Brown was the Rio Kid. Even in saving him from the lynchers, the sheriff had acted like the Kid. It was not the first time the outlaw had spared his life when he held it in the hollow of his hand. It was like the Kid!

But there was no gratitude, no compunction in Jim Hall's breast. He was not an ungenerous man. Men had found him a staunch and loyal friend. But that long and bitter trouble with the Rio Kid had soured him. In a long life on the trail, only one man had ever beaten him, ever held him at bay for any length of time. And that was the Kid!

It was unlike Hall, for generally he was as indifferent as Fate to the evildoers whom he roped in, in the way of duty. But somehow the cool, careless, disdainful Kid got his goat. Bitterness had crept in—bitterness that seemed likely to poison Hall's life till he succeeded in getting the Kid. His own life he counted as nothing—less than nothing—if he could get the Kid.

And, at long last, he had hunted him down, and had found him hiding under a new name and a sheriff's star—Sheriff Brown, of Plug Hat! And, fairly under his gun, the Kid had escaped him again. Escaped him—and boosted him into the town calaboose like a drunken rough-neck. Hall ground his teeth to think of it.

He was glad to live, if only to get after the Kid again; but it would have been less a wound to his pride if the Kid had let the rope finish his career. Contemptuously, like a real sheriff dealing with a "tough," the Kid had treated him, and he—Hall, captain of the Texas Rangers—was passing the night in the calaboose from which the drunken Doc Sharp had been ejected to make room for him. What would folks say when they knew? Captain Jim Hall cooling his heels in a cow-town gaol, at the order of an outlaw masquerading as a sheriff! His cheeks burned, his heart throbbled with rage at the thought of it.

And he cursed his own haste, his own keenness to cinch the Kid, which had landed him in this—landed him in a gaol, while the outlaw mounted and rode. For Hall had no doubt that the Kid would escape that night, and that Sassafras county would never see him again. Hall was so accustomed to command, so used to men jumping to obey his orders, that he had not realized that in Plug Hat he was one against a crowd—that the force was on the side of the outlaw. He had taken it for granted that when he denounced the Rio Kid the cowmen would take it from him, that his word was good enough for Plug Hat, as it was good enough for any crowd in Texas. But the Kid had got away with it, and here

was he—gaoled! If he had foreseen it, if he had not been so keen, if he had waited—waited, and left the outlaw in a fool's security till he could have called his troop of Rangers to his aid—it would have been a different tale then.

He cursed as he moved restlessly about his prison.

There was no chance of getting out. The walls were strong, of thick and heavy timber, the window small and barred, the door heavy, and safely locked. The calaboose had been built under the Kid's supervision, to hold any rough-necks who were too fresh to submit to the new sheriff's rule, and the Kid had seen the work done well. Jim Hall had examined the walls, the window, and the door, and knew that there was no escape. And while he was cooped up the Rio Kid was escaping—already, doubtless, on his famous grey mustang, burning the wind. For, of course, the Kid could not hope to keep up the sheriff game, now that Hall knew. His men would be in town the next day, and if they found him gaoled they would kick the calaboose to pieces if all Plug Hat stood in the way. They would arrest Sheriff Texas Brown if the whole cow-town turned out to stop them. Yes; the Kid was escaping. On the morrow he would be gone, without leaving a trail. He knew where he had to get off, and he was getting off.

Hall raged at the thought. To run his old enemy down and see him escape—ride away, laughing, care free! The mental picture of the Kid, galloping through the starry Texas night, maddened Hall.

There was a click at the door, and he spun round towards it and stood still. The key was turned back.

Hope leaped up in his heart. Had some of the dog-goned geeks realised how matters stood, realised that they had roped in the man who stood for the law and allowed an outlaw to escape, and come there to release him? He caught his breath.

The door swung outward.

In the clear, bright, starlight a puncher, in Stetson and goatskin chaps, stood there. Hall stared grimly at him. It was the Kid.

There were no bandages on his face now. They had ceased to serve their purpose and were gone. The cool, handsome, sunburnt face, with its steady blue eyes, was revealed in the glimmer of the stars. Hall's eyes devoured that handsome face. If there had been any doubt before it was gone now. He knew the Kid when he saw him.

His hands clenched convulsively. A quiver ran through him, as through a tiger about to spring. The starlight glimmered on a Colt.

"Hold in your hosses, feller," said the Kid quietly. "Don't make me spill your juice. Don't make it easy for me. By the great horned toad, Jim Hall, I'm powerful tempted to drive cold lead through your cabeza. I guess I'm a durned geek not to. Give me a whisper of trouble, dog-gone you, and you get yours, pronto."

Hall stood quite still. Well he knew that his life hung on the merest thread. Why the Kid did not kill him he did not understand. But with all the Rio Kid's wild reputation, it never had been his way to kill, unless he was crowded so bad that he had to. Jim Hall realised that he had better not crowd the Kid now.

"What do you want?" he hissed. "You denying that you're the Kid now—now that I can see your face, dog-gone you?"

The Kid smiled softly.

"I guess not, Hall. Not now that we're alone here. You got it right—and I'm here to talk to you."

He stepped inside and closed the door. The only light in the room was the shaft of starlight that fell in at the unglazed window. It lighted the calaboose dimly, and across the floor lay the black shadow of the bars of the window. In the dimness Hall's eyes gleamed like a cat's. He was calculating the chances of a leap—of the Kid missing in the dim light. He checked the impulse. The Rio Kid never missed, and Hall knew in his bones that the boy outlaw, who would not shoot him down unresisting, would shoot him without compunction if he attacked—that he would welcome the chance. He heard the low laugh of the Kid. His thoughts had been read.

"Guess again, hombre," said the Kid. "I've warned you not to make it easy for me."

Hall controlled himself.

"What do you want?" he hissed.

"Jest a pow-wow," said the Kid. "I'm sure going to talk to you like a Dutch uncle, Hall. You'll sit on that bench and keep quiet while I talk turkey to you."

Hall shrugged his broad shoulders and sat down on the bench. Across the dim room he eyed the Kid with fierce eyes, under lowering brows.

The Kid leaned on the door, facing him.

"You've nosed me out, Hall," he went on, in the same quiet voice. "You've trailed me down and found me to home. But you ain't cinched me yet—not by a whole jugful. Jest at present I've cinched you."

"How long you figure you can keep it up?" snarled Hall. "My men will be here to-morrow. I left them word to come on here when they was through with the rustlers in the buttes. Even the god-darned cowmen who've stood for your play, darn you, will be doing some thinking. Plug Hat won't be backing you to-morrow, like it did. Once my men are here—"

"You want to listen to a guy," said the Kid. "I've said that I'm here to talk turkey. Listen to me like a white man, and forget that I'm the Rio Kid. You've found me here, a sheriff! Ask any guy in Plug Hat, and he'll tell you that there ain't a cow-town in Texas with a better sheriff. I guess you've heard how I've cleaned up Plug Hat and turned it, from the wildest hole in Texas into a decent town. I guess afore I was sheriff a Texas Ranger couldn't have rode into this burg without getting shot on sight. Jim Hall, they made me an outlaw, and you kept me one; but I got a chance of making good, and I've taken it. And here I am—sheriff of Sassafras county. You stand for the law, and I stand for the law—now. Do you want to drive me back into outlawry?"

"I want to cinch you and see you strung up!" said Hall, between his teeth.

"You ain't giving a guy a chance to make good?"

Hall laughed scoffingly.

"I gave you a chance once," he said, "when you was a rancher. I took your word and gave you a chance. And what was the end of it?"

"I was driven off that ranch," said the Kid quietly. "I was hunted off'n

that ranch, Hall, and hunted back into an outlaw trail."

"And you figure you wouldn't be driven out of Plug Hat when the galoots get wise to you? You reckon your safe in Plug Hat for keeps, even if I let up on you?"

"I guess I'll try hard to make the grade."

Hall shrugged his shoulders. "Give a guy a chance," said the Kid. "I got you dead to rights. I could keep you quiet if I wanted. The boys would have strung you up if I hadn't horned in. Give me a chance to make good without that. Keep your teeth shut on what you know. Quit Plug Hat, and

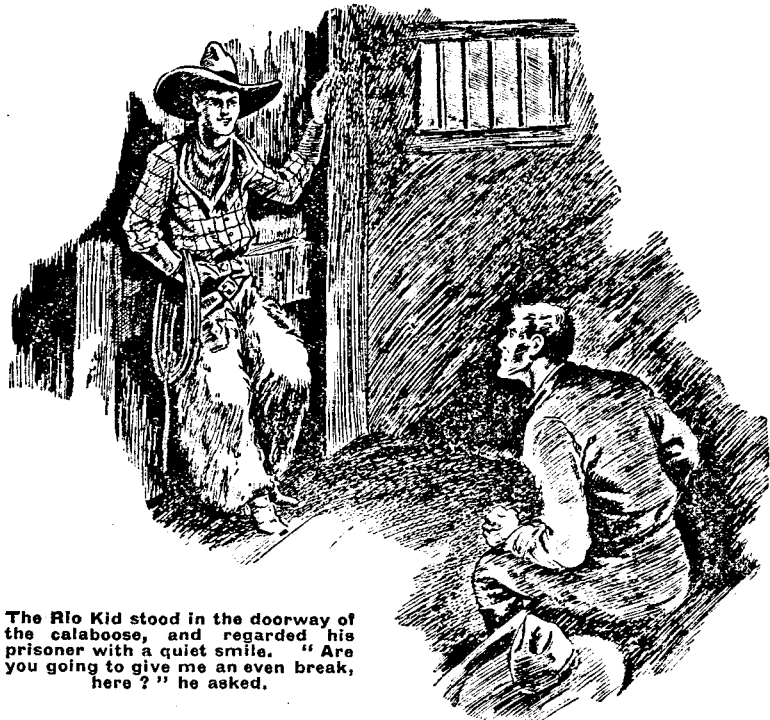
The Kid laughed—a hard laugh.

"You figure I'm leaving you here, to talk to Plug Hat men to-morrow and put them wise, and to wait for your Rangers to ride in? Forget it! I guess I'm toting you to a safe place."

Hall breathed hard and quick.

"I guess not," he said, between his teeth. "I guess I ain't standing for that, Kid!"

"You figure that I'm asking you?" sneered the Kid. "Why, you dog-goned geck, I'm jest honing for an excuse to blow your brains out over that wall. You lift a finger, you let out one yalp, and you're a dead Ranger—and I'll be durned glad of the chance!"



The Rio Kid stood in the doorway of the calaboose, and regarded his prisoner with a quiet smile. "Are you going to give me an even break, here?" he asked.

leave its sheriff alone, and forget that you ever knew him as the Rio Kid."

"And when you're tired of playing sheriff you go back to the outlaw trail, same as you did after your ranching stunt?" sneered Hall. "Forget it, Kid. I've got to stand for the law, and I got to do my duty, if you chewed the rag from now till sun-up."

The Kid was silent, looking at him, his face a little pale. He had hoped little from an appeal to that man of iron; and he had no hope now. Hall watched his eyes and read his thoughts there. It was in the Kid's mind to shoot him like a dog. Those moments were big with fate for the captain of the Texas Rangers. His life was at the mercy of the boy outlaw, whom he defied and threatened, whose appeal he rejected. But not for an instant did Hall think of yielding. Whether he lived or died, he was the enemy and implacable pursuer of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

"I guess I'm a dog-goned gink, Hall," said the Kid at last, with a sigh. "But I can't spill your juice, though I sure never heard a guy beg for it so hard." He stepped away from the door. Hall noticed now that a lasso was looped over his arm. "Stand up!"

Hall rose from the bench.

"What's this game?" he muttered huskily.

There was deadly menace in the Kid's quiet voice. There was death in his glinting eyes. He meant every word, and something like a chill came into even the iron heart of the Ranger. And Hall made no resistance as the Kid bound his arms behind his back and fastened a gag in his mouth. With the Kid's grasp on him, he stepped out of the calaboose into the brightness of the stars.

The Kid Means Business!

THE hoofs of the cow-pony rang on hard rock and loose stones. They had left the prairie behind, and the Kid was leading the cow-pony into the hills, by rugged paths and perilous ravines. The man who sat bound in the saddle wondered where they were going—wondered what the outlaw's ultimate intention was. Rage burned him like a fire; it gleamed and blazed from his eyes. But Jim Hall was helpless, bound to the cow-pony, led whither the Kid listed. The gag in his mouth choked back his curses.

The Kid tramped on in silence. He did not even glance at his prisoner; he gave Hall no heed. Plug Hat town was THE POPULAR.—No. 609.

far behind, across the wide stretch of prairie that separated the cow-town from the sierra. It was not to the buttes that the Kid had taken his prisoner; there were Rangers in the buttes. Five miles from Plug Hat, to the north, was a rugged sierra—arid, stony, desolate, scarce ever trodden by the foot of man or horse. And into the sierra the Kid led the bound Ranger, in silence, only the thud of the cow pony's hoofs waking the echoes of the night.

It was new country to Jim Hall; but he could see that it was familiar to the Kid. Only a few short weeks ago the Kid had ridden into Sassafras county, a stranger; but Hall bitterly reflected that the Kid was the galoot to learn at once the lie of the land—especially of rugged and solitary tracts where, in case of need, a hunted man might hide from his foes.

What was his intention? In spite of his courage—that had never failed him—in spite of the iron nerve that no peril had ever shaken, Hall was feeling a chill in his heart.

The Kid stopped at last.

Hall stared round him, in the bright starlight. Not a sound of life; not a sign; not even a coyote slinking among the rocks. They had stopped in a canyon, where a torrent cascaded down a steep acclivity, from the high uplands, forming a stream that flowed down the canyon to the prairie. The Kid unbound the lasso that fastened Hall to the horse's back and lifted him down. He removed the gag from the Ranger's mouth now.

Hall panted.

"Dog-gone you!" he hissed, his lips white with rage. "What's your game? What's your game, you durned scallawag?"

"I guess you'll soon be wise to it."

Taking the Ranger by one bound arm, the Kid led him forward on foot. He pressed close to the canyon wall, where the torrent tumbled down, and the spray dashed into their faces. To Hall's amazement, the Kid plunged into the waterfall, dragging the Ranger after him.

But he understood the next moment. There was a deep cavern in the cliff, behind the fall, the opening completely screened by the falling water.

Hall found himself standing in deep darkness. The Kid had released him, and he heard the outlaw fumbling. A light gleamed out. The Kid had lighted a candle, and he set it on a ledge of rock. Hall looked about him. It was a narrow cavern, but it bit deep into the cliff. How far it extended Hall could not tell; the interior was wrapped in gloom. Out of reach of the spray of the fall, several blankets lay on the rugged floor, and other things that told of a camp.

"Yep!" The Kid nodded. "I guess I found this shebang a piece ago, Hall, and fixed it up for lying doggo, in case I wanted it. I reckoned I knowed I might have to lie doggo when I heard that the Texas Rangers were around. You've guessed it."

"And what—" Hall hissed.

But he did not need to ask now. He knew.

"Them's your blankets," said the Kid, "I guess your bedding down in this place, Hall. I fixed it up for this baby in case of need; but I reckon it will serve your turn. You can yell all you want; no galoot ever rides these hills, and I guess if one did he wouldn't hear you through the noise of the waterfall. You're bedding down here, Hall."

"You're leaving me here?"

"You've said it."

Hall's eyes gleamed, and the Kid laughed.

"I guess I'm leaving you safe," he said. "You'll see me again, Hall; and every time you see me you'll have a chance of talking turkey. You're a durned hard man, Jim Hall, but all Texas knows that your word is your bond, and I guess I'll take your word, when you give it."

From the pocket of his chaps the Kid drew a long, thin steel chain. There was a staple at one end, a padlock at the other. With a chunk of rock the Kid drove the iron staple deep into the wall of the cavern—drove it in hard and deep, till it almost disappeared.

"I guess a team of hosses wouldn't pull that out, Hall," said the Kid. "If you pull loose, feller, you're sure welcome."

He unbound the Ranger's arms. Round his left wrist the padlock snapped shut. It fitted closer than a handcuff. Hall stood trembling with rage. The Kid stepped back.

"I guess that fixes you, Hall," said the Kid. "I'm leaving you food, and I guess there's plenty to drink just at your doorway." He stepped towards the screen of falling water, paused, and turned. "Jim Hall, I've asked you to give me a chance to make good at Plug Hat. I'm asking you again."

A curse was the Ranger's only answer.

The Kid shrugged his shoulders and stepped away through the falling water and vanished from the Ranger's sight.

THE END.

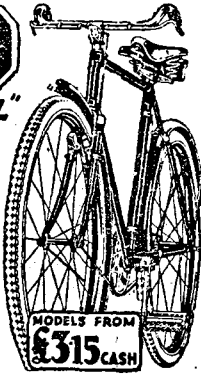
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THE MISSING RANGER!

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Vamoosed.

"SHERIFF!"

The Rio Kid yawned. It was yet early in the cow town of Plug Hat.

Generally the Kid was an early riser. Seldom was the Rio Kid asleep after the sun had risen over the rim of the prairie and flocked the waving grass with gold. But this morning the Kid was loth to leave his bunk. The night had been a busy one to the Kid, though no man in Plug Hat knew it; and the sheriff of Plug Hat—once the outlaw of the Rio Grande—was still in his blankets when Colorado Bill thumped at the door and shouted.

"Sheriff! Say, sheriff!" roared Colorado. "You want to wake up, sheriff! I'll tell a man!"

Colorado was thumping at the door of the sheriff's office, which was between the Kid's bed-room and the street. But as the Kid was in no hurry to answer, the big cowman came round to the window of the bed-room and thumped on the pinewood shutter.

"Say, sheriff!" he bawled.

"Aw, what's got you?" yawned the

Kid, sitting up in his bunk. "What's biting you so bad, feller?"

"It's burning daylight, sheriff!" answered Colorado, through the pine shutter. "And I guess I got news. The calaboose is empty."

"Sho!"

"That guy has levanted, sheriff. That galoot, Mule-Kick Hall, the Ranger, that we locked up in the calaboose last night, after he pulled a gun on you, sheriff—ho's absquatulated."

The pine shutter at the window hid the Kid from the man outside, and hid the smile on the Kid's face.

Colorado Bill had no doubt that his news would startle the sheriff of Plug Hat. But the Kid was not startled a whole lot. He had no call to be surprised, as he had himself taken Jim Hall out of the cow town gaol the previous night, under cover of darkness, and marched him off into the sierra for safe and secret keeping.

But that was the Kid's own secret. Plug Hat would have been more than a little astonished, had it known; and the Kid did not figure on letting the cow town know.

"Say, what you giving me, Colorado?" yawned the Kid. "Wasn't the calaboose locked up safe, with that Ranger guy inside!"

"Sure! I see you lock it on him, sheriff, with my own two eyes," said Colorado. "But he's gone. And the calaboose ain't been broke, neither. The door was jest unlocked."

"By the great horned toad!" said the Kid. "Mean to say some guy's got a key to the calaboose?"

"It sure looks like it, sheriff!" said Colorado. "Unless you dropped the key around after locking in that Ranger guy."

"I guess not," said the Kid. "But I reckon there's a whole lot of keys would shift that lock, come to think of it. I guess I'll send as far as Pack-saddle for a new one. But you sure the guy has vamoosed!"

"There ain't hide nor hair of him left in Plug Hat, sheriff. I reckoned I'd put you wise to once. The boys is sure mad about it," said Colorado. "If them Rangers figure that they can buck agin the law in Plug Hat, they got another guess coming. You say the word, sheriff, and we'll saddle up and run that guy down, and bring him back to serve his three days in the calaboose, with a riata tied around him."

"I guess I'll be out in two shakes of a coyote's tail!" answered the Kid; and he turned out of his bunk.

Colorado Bill tramped away to the calaboose, round which a number of Plug Hat citizens were gathered.

The door stood wide open; and some of the Plug Hat men were looking into the timber gaol, where Jim Hall, captain of the Texas Rangers, had been locked the previous night.

It was empty; there was no sign of the Ranger. And there was wrath in the faces of the Plug Hat citizens.

Plug Hat was no longer the wild and whirling cow town it had been in the time when Cactus Carter and his crowd ruled the roost. It was no longer the hottest place in Texas. Under the rule of the new sheriff it had become the most law-abiding town in the section. Many of the rough-necks had been run out of town; others had left in disgust; gun-play and horse-lifting were things of the past. Respect for the law was firmly established now. So this defiance of the sheriff and his sentence, on the part of the prisoner in the calaboose, got the goat of Plug Hat.

It was not very long ago that gun-play in the saloons and the street had been rather the rule than the exception. But all that had been changed by the new sheriff; and three days in the calaboose was the punishment for pulling a gun in Plug Hat. The rough-necks—what were left of them in the cow town—ropined; but peaceful citizens found it good. And they were ready to adorn a branch of the cottonwood with any guy who, having

been duly sentenced, broke out of gaol before his sentence was served.

Jim Hall was a captain of the Texas Rangers; but that cut no ice in Plug Hat. He had accused the sheriff of being no other than the Rio Kid, the celebrated outlaw and fire-bug, whose exploits were the talk of every cow camp between the Rio Grande and the Colorado river. He had pulled a gun to back up that amazing accusation. He had been pitched into the calaboose, according to law. And now he was gone—defying the sheriff and defying Plug Hat! And the citizens were wrathful.

The sheriff was not long in emerging from his shack and joining the indignant crowd at the calaboose. He looked into the empty timber gaol, and shook his head.

"He's sure pulled out!" he remarked.

"Some dog-goned scallywag let him out!" hooted Mesquite.

The Kid nodded.

"I guess he was let out!" he agreed. Nobody, in fact, knew that better than Mister Texas Brown, the sheriff.

"Say, sheriff," exclaimed Pop Short, "I guess you want to rope him in again! I guess we want to show them Rangers that they can't run Plug Hat."

"I should smile!" hooted Colorado Bill.

The sheriff shook his head.

"I guess we ain't hunting trouble with the Rangers, fellers!" he said. "The galoot's beat it, that's a cinch! Let him hit the trail all he wants. I reckon he won't worry Plug Hat again."

Colorado gave a grunt of disgust. "And that guy allowed that you was the Rio Kid, and pulled a gun on you!" he snorted.

The Kid smiled.

"I'd sure get after him, and rope him in, if he had all the Rangers in Texas at his back!" growled Mesquite.

"Feller," said the Kid, "what's the good of hunting trouble? He's gone, and that's enough of him. Forget it!"

Clatter! Clatter! Clatter!

The excited discussion was interrupted by the thunder of galloping hoofs. From the prairie trail a horseman rode into Plug Hat at full speed, and up the ragged street to the plaza. All eyes were turned on him; and many faces were grim. For the horseman was a Texas Ranger—Austin Red, a member of Jim Hall's troop.

He dragged in his foaming broncho on the edge of the crowd gathered in front of the calaboose.

"Say, you guys," he panted, "where's Jim Hall? Cactus Carter has got away from us, and I guess I want to put Jim Hall wise. Where is he?"

when he left us in the buttes yesterday. Ain't he here?"

"He sure ain't!" drawled the Kid. The Ranger's glance turned on the sheriff. He grinned, for a moment, as he looked at him.

"Say, you been in trouble with a wildcat?" he asked.

The sheriff's face was criss-crossed with sticking-plaster. It rather spoiled his good looks. But the Kid did not mind that, so long as it changed them. The Kid did not want to look his usual self while Texas Rangers were around.

"Nope!" said the Kid. "Just a cactus scratch, feller! I sure got a tumble in the buttes. But what's that about Cactus Carter? You let him get away?"

"I guess he didn't ask for any leave," grunted Austin Red. "But he's sure made his get-away."

"I reckon you Rangers want to give up the trail and open a shop and sell candy," said the Sheriff of Plug Hat, in great disgust. "Me, I trailed down them rustlers in the buttes, and handed the job over to you Rangers to cinch them; and left it all as easy as pie for you. And you can't keep a rustler when you got him! You sure want to take off them spurs and put on an apron and sell candy."

Red glared at him.

"You dog-goned cowpuncher—" he began hotly.

"Aw, cut it out!" interrupted the Kid. "I made you a present of that bunch of rustlers, and you muss it up this-a-way! You want me to pat you on the back and say you're a good little man!"

"We got the rustlers, the whole bunch!" snarled Red. "We got them along to Blue Grass, after Hall left us to hit Plug Hat. We got the whole bunch safe now—cepting Cactus Carter. He got away in the dark—and I guess nobody knows how—"

"If you knowed your business, you'd know how—and he wouldn't have got away!" retorted the Kid. "Me, I was trailing that fire-bug like a Comanche Injun, and I left him to you'uns. Now you allow he's got away; and it sure does get my goat!"

"I ain't asking you to trail him for us!" snapped Red. "I come here to put Jim Hall wise. Ain't he along to Plug Hat?"

"He sure ain't!" said the sheriff coolly. "Jim Hall forgot that he was in a law-abiding town, and he figured that he could run this show, and pulled a gun to make it good. So we cinched him in the calaboose."

Red jumped in his saddle.

"You cinched a captain of the Texas Rangers in the calaboose!" he roared.

"We sure did; and we'd cinch the governor of the State in the calaboose if he pulled a gun in this burg!" answered the Kid.

"I should smile!" said Colorado Bill.

"But he's made his get-away, jest like Cactus Carter!" grinned the Kid. "He didn't seem to be honing for three days in the calaboose; and he's gone. You want to look for him outside Plug Hat."

The Ranger's eyes gleamed at him.

"If he was in your durned calaboose now, I'd fetch the boys along, and we wouldn't leave one board sticking to another!" he shouted.

"I guess you'd find your hands full!" said the sheriff. "You want to know that Mister Texas Brown—that's me—runs the show in this hyer burg,

and I don't give a continental red cent for all the Rangers in Texas. I'm telling you that you're a crowd of rubes and green jaspers, and you can't keep a bolt on a rustler after I make you a present of him. Jim Hall's gone; and I guess you better go after him. You dog-goned pesky jays get my goat."

"Where's he gone?" demanded Red, choking with rage.

"Any guy know where Jim Hall's gone?" asked the sheriff, looking round. "If any guy knows, put this galoot wise, and let him ride. Plug Hat sure hasn't any use for these boobies."

"Aw, look for him on the prairie, feller!" jeered Colorado. "He left this town running, and I guess you'll find him still running if you pick up his trail."

"And tell him," said the Kid, "that if he shows up in Plug Hat agin he goes back into the calaboose; and any Ranger that bucks agin the law in this town goes along with him. You guys reckon you can ride into a cow town and run it as if it belonged to you! Forget it, feller! Go and lose some more rustlers, after I've trailed them down for you. But don't you figure that you can bulldoze Plug Hat! You can't get by with it."

"Not by a jugful!" hooted Colorado.

The Ranger, crimson with anger, glared at the sheriff and the Plug Hat men. His hand had dropped on the gun in his belt.

The Kid laughed contemptuously.

"Let go that gun!" he said. "You pull a gun in this burg, feller, and you go into the calaboose, jest like Mule-Kick Hall. And I reckon you want to get busy looking for Cactus Carter, now you've let him get loose. You figure that I'm going to do your work for you over agin?"

Austin Red half-drew the gun. There was a growl from the men round him. It was not fear, however, but the remembrance that he was a Ranger that caused Red to shove the gun back into the holster.

He sat in his saddle, uncertain. And the Kid, who had his own reasons—good reasons—for desiring to keep the Texas Rangers clear of Plug Hat, went on in a vein of cheerful insult.

"Best it, feller! I'm telling you that this town has no use for boobies! That guy Carter is loose agin, and I guess he'll be rustling cows, and all the ranchers in Sassafras County hooting out to me to rope him in and get back their beasts. Next time I get the rustlers fixed I ain't letting any Rangers take a hand in the game. No, sir! You can't handle rustlers. You take my advice and give up ranging, and open a store and sell candy. That's your long suit."

There was a jeering laugh from the Plug Hat men. Plug Hat seemed to relish the way its sheriff was talking to the Ranger.

Austin Red jerked fiercely at his reins.

"If I wasn't a Ranger, and under orders, I'd get down off'n this cayuse and muss you up so's you wouldn't know yourself agin for a month of Sundays!" he hissed.

"Get down, anyhow, and see if you can get by with it!" invited the sheriff.

"I ain't any objection."

Austin Red looked disposed to take him at his word. But duty called, and the Ranger restrained his rage. He wheeled his horse.

Rough on the Ranger.

THE Kid looked curiously at the Ranger. Austin Red had evidently ridden hard; rider and horse were thick with alkali dust. Evidently, too, he knew nothing of what had happened in the cow town.

There was no answer to his question, and Austin Red stared at the Plug Hat crowd, puzzled.

"You hear me foot?" he exclaimed impatiently. "Where's Jim Hall? He allowed he was riding into Plug Hat

"I got to find Mule-Kick Hall!" he said savagely. "I ain't no use for you, Mister Texas Brown."

A yell of derision followed the Ranger, as he rode for the prairie. He half-turned in his saddle, his hand on a gun. But he restrained himself, and galloped away, hoots and yells ringing in his ears as he went. With a thunder of hoofs, the Ranger vanished into the prairie.

Cactus Carter's Hold-Up!

BUD JENKINS, who drove the two-horse hack up from Blue Grass to Plug Hat, tightened his grasp on the ribbons, and drew in his team, as a horseman pushed out of the chaparral beside the trail. The six-gun in the rider's hand

This was the first time the stage had run past Blue Grass in that particular direction. In the rough days at Plug Hat the stage company had not cared to run it there. But Plug Hat was now a peaceable town, under the new sheriff's rule; and the stage-line had been extended at last, and Bud drove up the hack on its first trip. Evidently Cactus Carter was wise to it. Gunman and bully in Plug Hat, he had been run out by the sheriff, and had taken to rustling cows in the buttes. Rounded up there by the sheriff, cinched by the Rangers, Cactus had escaped—but he had lost his bunch, lost his plunder, lost all he had. Now he was on a new trail; and he had held up the stage on its first trip to Plug Hat.

His eyes gleamed at Pop Short. Pop had been Mister Texas Brown's most enthusiastic backer in the election for sheriff; and it was the new sheriff who had beaten Cactus to a frazzle. The road-agent half-lifted his Colt as he looked at the fat hotel-keeper. And Mr. Short felt his plump heart sink almost into his boots.

"You durn geck!" said Cactus. "I guess I'm glad to meet up with you, Mr. Short, just a few. Your dog-goned sheriff ain't here now, hombre."

"Cactus, old-timer," said Mr. Short, in a quivering voice, "you ain't no call to get mad with me. I got five hundred dollars in my rags that I've jest drawn out of the bank to Blue Grass."

Cactus laughed shortly. "You ain't worth powder an' shot!" he said. "Pony up, you fat gink! Drop it in the trail!"

A roll of bills dropped in the trail, and Pop Short breathed more freely. Never had a galoot felt so pleased that he was not worth powder and shot.

The other three passengers waited their turn, with their hands up. All of them packed guns; but not one was disposed to pull a gun on Cactus Carter. The desperate gunman was too sudden with the Colt. The Sheriff of Plug Hat had beaten him; but no other man in Sassafras County had ever beaten Cactus Carter.

"Shell out, you 'uns!" grunted the road-agent.

And the passengers promptly shelled out. The horseman eyed them evilly.

"That the lot?" he asked.

"Yep!"

"I guess I'm goin' through you," said Cactus, "and if I find anythin' more you won't live long enough to want it."

Whereupon each of the passengers discovered that he had overlooked something, and promptly added it to the little pile in the trail. Cactus chuckled with grim amusement.

"Stand back and keep your hands up!" he snapped.



The flames caught the dry woodwork of the hack, and soon it was a blazing furnace. The road-agent looked on, his revolver ready for any attempt to save the vehicle.

"I guess," said Colorado, with a grin, "that them Rangers will get wise to it that Plug Hat ain't a healthy spot for them, nohow."

"I reckon!" assented the Kid, with a smile.

And he sauntered cheerfully down the street to the Plug Hat hotel for breakfast.

The escape of Cactus Carter did not worry the Kid a whole lot, though he figured that it meant more trouble with his old enemy. It gave him a pretext for a break with the Rangers; and that was what the Kid wanted. He had cause for a grouch, for he had run down the rustlers in their secret den in the buttes, and left the Rangers to corral them. And the Kid meant to make the most of that grouch. He did not want Rangers in Plug Hat; he did not want them to learn, if he could help it, that Jim Hall had accused him of being the Rio Kid. The less that was said about the Rio Kid the better, so long as "Texas Brown" was sheriff of Plug Hat. And Jim Hall was in a safe place, and could not talk.

The Kid ate his breakfast with a cheery, smiling face.

He was not going back to an outlaw trail, if he could help it. He was sheriff of Plug Hat, and he was staying sheriff. It was not easy, and he knew it; but for the present, at least, it looked as if the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande would get by with it.

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was not lifted; and Budd reckoned that he did not want to see it lifted. He did not wait for the man with the tanned face and evil eyes to rap out "Halt!" He drew in his horses with praiseworthy promptitude as soon as he saw the face of Cactus Carter.

The horseman rode closer to the hack. Four inside passengers blinked at him from the windows, in alarm. One of them was Pop Short, the hotel-keeper of Plug Hat; and Pop changed colour as he recognised the gunman who had once ruled the cow town with an iron hand, till he was run out by the new sheriff.

"Search me!" muttered Mr. Short. "It's sure Cactus Carter that them dog-goned Rangers lost when they had him cinched; and he's sure turned road-agent since the sheriff put paid to his rustling cows. Search me!"

"Morning, Mister Carter!" said Bud Jenkins politely, from his box. "You want anything with this hyer hearsie, sir?"

"I guess so!" answered Cactus grimly. "How many you got on board?"

"Four!"

"Tell 'em to light down."

"Sure!" said Bud.

He called to his passengers, and they unwillingly stepped down into the trail. Bud Jenkins sat and chewed tobacco, skilfully ejecting the juice past the ears of his team. And the four passengers, putting up their hands without waiting to be told, eyed Cactus Carter uneasily.

The four obeyed, lining up beside the trail. Cactus turned to the driver, sitting chewing tobacco on the box.

"Light down, Bud!" he said.

"Say, you ain't going through a stage-driver, Cactus?" exclaimed Bud. "I guess—"

"Light down, dog-gone you!"

Bud Jenkins climbed down into the trail.

"Cut them traces!"

"Wha-a-t?" ejaculated Bud.

Cactus Carter eyed him evilly over the revolver.

"I guess you don't want to make me talk twice!" he said. "I ain't got a lot of time to waste on you, Bud. I said cut them traces."

The stage-driver drew a deep breath.

"What you says goes!" he answered.

Bud loosed a knife from his boot, and sawed through the leather traces of his team with a grim face.

The traces were cut, and the team stood free. Cactus Carter lifted his quirt with his left hand and lashed cruelly at the horses. They scampered away into the prairie with loose traces swinging.

"Now you want to fire that hack, Bud," said Cactus.

Bud started.

"Aw, forget it, Cactus!" he exclaimed. "What the thunder do you want to fire the hack for?"

"Carry me home to die!" murmured Pop Short.

Cactus laughed disagreeably.

"I guess it was your dog-goned new sheriff that got the stage company to run this hyer hack up to Plug Hat," he said, "and I guess I don't stand for it! Plug Hat was good enough for me as it was afore Mister Texas Brown horned in; and I guess Plug Hat is going to be jest like it was afore it's much older. You get me? There ain't no darned stage going to run to Plug Hat."

"I'll tell a man—"

"Quit chewing the rag!" interrupted the gunman. "You want to get hold of a few armfuls of dry bush an' stack it in the hack, and set it going with a match. And you want to do it quick! If I have to get down and do it, your eyes won't be open to watch me."

Bud Jenkins breathed hard. But the road-agent's revolver was looking at him, and Bud had no choice in the matter.

Under the staring eyes of his passengers, still standing with their hands above their heads, Bud gathered armfuls of dry wood and bush from the chaparral and stacked it inside the hack. He struck a match and set fire to it, and flames licked out of the doors and windows. Smoke rose in a dense column above the trail.

The flames rapidly spread to the vehicle, and it was soon a burning, smoking mass. Bud Jenkins eyed it with sorrowful eyes. He had driven that hack up from the Rio Grande camps to Blue Grass for fifteen years; and he was sorry to see it go. And it was going up in smoke, on its very first trip beyond Blue Grass. Dense smoke floated away over the chaparral, while the fire crackled and burned fiercely.

Cactus Carter laughed.

"I guess the stage company won't be in a hurry to run another hack up to Plug Hat, Bud!" he grinned.

"I guess you've said it!" agreed Bud. "And if they do I reckon they'll want to scare up a new driver. Me,

I've no hunch for driving on Plug Hat trails, I'll tell a man."

The flames soared up from the burning hack, and died down. It was sinking into a smouldering mass of wreckage.

"Now I guess you guys can hoof it to Plug Hat!" said Cactus, with a gesture of his gun towards the four passengers. "You want to tell the sheriff what you've seen; and you want to tell him that I ain't done with him yet; and next time he sees me I'm coming a-shooting. You got that, Pop Short?"

"I'll sure tell him, Cactus!" said Mr. Short submissively.

"Beat it!" snapped Cactus.

And Pop Short and his companions, dismayed by the prospect of a five-mile tramp across rough prairie, but glad to get out of range of the road-agent's revolver, started up the trail.

"Me for Blue Grass!" remarked Bud Jenkins. "I guess I got to report to the company."

"You for Blue Grass!" assented Cactus. "And when you hit Blue Grass, tell Mule-Kick Hall that I don't give a continental red cent for him and his god-darned Rangers. I guess they'd never have rounded up my bunch if that dog-goned sheriff hadn't put them wise. Tell Mule-Kick that I'll be glad if he'll follow my trail into the Los Pinos sierra."

Bud stared at him curiously.

"Say, what you giving me?" he asked. "I guess you know that Jim Hall ain't going to Blue Grass any more."

"Have the Rangers quit?" asked Cactus. "I heard they was bedded down at Blue Grass, looking for that fire-bug they call the Rio Kid."

"The Rangers ain't quit, and they ain't likely to till they're wise to what's happened to Jim Hall!" answered Bud.

Cactus stared at him.

"What's happened to the guy, then?" he demanded.

"I guess nobody knows if you don't," answered Bud, with a grin. "It's nigh a week now since Hall had a rookus with the sheriff at Plug Hat, and was cinched in the calaboose, and got away after dark. Since then no galoot's seed hide nor hair of him."

"Sho!" ejaculated Cactus, in astonishment. "Jim Hall lost?"

"Yep—if you ain't found him!" grinned Bud. "But the Rangers sure allow that you've met up with him somewhere on the prairie and plugged him, Cactus."

Cactus Carter whistled.

"They got another guess coming," he said. "I never knowed the guy was missing. I'd sure make it last sickness for him if I met up with him; but I ain't seed him since the time he cinched me in the buttes."

Then the road-agent wheeled his horse and dashed away across the prairie.

"Search me!" gasped Bud.

Away across the rugged prairie, riding like the wind, Cactus Carter vanished from sight.

Up to the Sheriff!

"SHERIFF!" roared Colorado Bill. "Aw, what's biting you now?" drawled the Rio Kid.

The Sheriff of Plug Hat was reclining at his ease, in a rocker, in the doorway of his office on the plaza.

It was a hot afternoon—hot even for the South of Texas—and the Kid reckoned that he wanted a rest. Now the sheriff was taking a deserved rest when Colorado came pounding up in great excitement.

The Kid sat up in the rocker.

"Sheriff!" gasped Colorado.

"Shoot!" said the Kid. "What's biting you? Some pesky bunch of cow-punchers riding in to shoot up the town?"

"Nope!" gasped Colorado. "Cactus Carter—"

The Kid was out of the rocker in a twinkling. A walnut-butted gun gleamed in his hand.

"Cactus Carter—hyer?" he ejaculated.

Colorado grinned.

"Not on your life!" he answered. "I guess Cactus knows that Plug Hat ain't healthy for him with our sheriff around. No, sir! But he's sure done held up the new stage from Blue Grass."

"Sho!" The Kid holstered his gun. "That pesky scallywag took to trail-riding, has he?"

"Yep! There's four guys hoofed it in, and they're turning the air blue at the Plug Hat hotel," grinned Colorado. "Pop Short's one of 'em—and I'll tell a man that he's cussing some, and then a few more. Cactus has done held up the hack, cleaned them out, burned the hack; and he allows that

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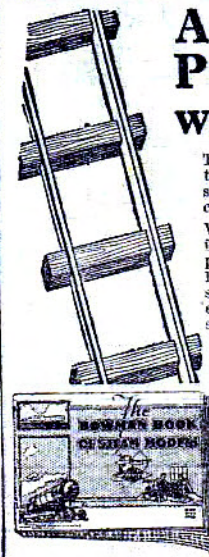
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he won't allow a stage to be run to Plug Hat now."

The Kid's eyes gleamed like cold steel.

"I guess I'll get along and see them guys!" drawled the Kid. "The Rangers won't rope in Cactus; and I reckon this baby will have to take him in hand again."

The Kid strolled down the rugged street to the Plug Hat Hotel. A crowd had gathered there, where the four hapless passengers of the hack from Blue Grass were telling their story, over and over again. The Kid heard the voice of Pop Short as he came up to the piazza, and he grinned. Mr. Short was cursing with great fluency; and Mr. Short had a flow of language that was hardly equalled anywhere in the cow country. The stream of cuss-words was only interrupted when Mr. Short stopped to take breath; and his stops were few and brief.

He turned on the sheriff as the Kid came in, and glared at him. Pop Short had been the sheriff's keenest backer; but he was feeling sore and savage now.

"You, Texas Brown!" roared Pop. "You dog-goned gink! You call yourself a sheriff! Yep! And the hack burned out, five miles out of town, and the bunch of us cleaned out! Say, what sort of a god-darned sheriff do you call yourself, anyhow? Search me! I'm telling you that Cactus Carter has burned out the stage and gone through all of us down to the skin! Yep! I should smile! And you loafing around and letting him get away with it! Say, I guess you better go back to your school-marm, Mister Texas Brown, and leave a man's job to a man! Say!"

The Kid smiled. "Can it, old-timer!" he said. "I sure rounded up Cactus once, and the

Rangers let him vamoose again. I guess next time I'll sure see that he don't get loose a lot. He won't hold up a stage again in Sassafras County."

"Talk's cheap!" snorted Mr. Short. "What are you going to do? I'm telling you, he cleaned me out of five hundred dollars! I guess I'd rather see Cactus back in Plug Hat, like he was afore you horned in, rather than holding up the stage and cleaning a guy out of five hundred dollars! Yep!"

"Forget it old-timer!" said the Kid. "I guess even a sheriff can't be everywhere in the dog-goned country at once. I tell you I'm going gunning after Cactus, and if I don't get him I'll sure resign and go back to punching cows."

"Waal, I reckon you'll get him, if any guy can, sheriff!" said Pop, calming down a little. "But this sure does get a galoot's goat, and I'm telling you so! Five hundred dollars and—"

"Colorado allows that some Rangers was after him," said the Kid. "Mebbe they'll rope him in."

Mr. Short grunted.

"Not in your life-time! There was three of them, and he shot up one afore he lit out. I saw that red-headed guy from Austin after him, and another guy! They won't get him in a dog's age."

There was a clatter of hoofs coming in from the prairie trail. The Kid turned to look; and every other head turned. From the prairie a dusty horseman, with a blood-stained neckerchief bound round his head under his Stetson, rode into the cow town. He was wounded; and on his horse before him held another man, still more sorely wounded. The rider was Austin Red, the Ranger.

"Great gophers!" said Colorado Tim with a whistle. "Is them the guys that was after Cactus, Mr. Short?"

"Them's the guys!" grunted Pop Short.

"It sure don't look as if they got him!"

The tired and dusty horseman rode up to the lumber hotel. Many willing hands relieved him of his burden, and the insensible Ranger was carried into the hotel. Austin Red, with a streak of crimson running down under the bandage round his head, reeled in his saddle from fatigue. The Rio Kid, with a gentle hand, helped him to alight, and Red leaned heavily on the sheriff's arm.

"You got Cactus?" asked several voices.

Red spat out a curse.

"Nope! He got us! We followed him into the Los Pinos sierra, and he sure got us from behind a rock. Dog-gone him! Jest two cracks from his Colt and he rode away and left us!" The Ranger cursed again. "We'll get him yet—we'll sure get him—"

He lurched, and the Kid's strong arm held him as he fell. The sheriff of Plug Hat half-carried him into the lumber hotel.

The sheriff walked back to his office with a thoughtful brow. Cactus Carter was on the trail again; and it was up to the sheriff of Plug Hat to rope him in. And the Kid meant to do it; but he figured that he had a hard trail to follow before he put a cinch on Cactus Carter.

THE END.

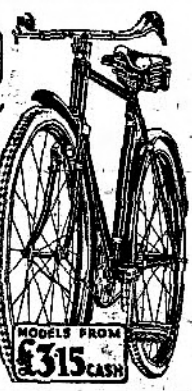
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left that you're taking money from the bank to-day and hitting the trail for Plug Hat. I guess there ain't a guy in the county that don't know it."

"It is no secret, senior."

Red laughed.

"You figure you'll get through with a bag of dollars on the Plug Hat trail?" he demanded. "I'm telling you you'll wake up Cactus Carter long before you hit that cow town."

"Who is Cactus Carter, senior?" asked the Kid innocently.

"Aw, you sure don't know enough to go in when it rains!" said Austin Red. "Cactus Carter is the fire-bug who used to run Plug Hat, and was run out by the new sheriff, Texas Brown, and has taken to rustling and hold-ups. And I guess if Cactus ain't blind and deaf he knows all about you, Mister Mex, and he will be looking for you between Blue Grass and Plug Hat."

The Kid smiled.

"I think I can take care of myself, senior."

"The thunder you can!" grunted Red. "I'm telling you you're hunting trouble if you ride the loneliest trail in Texas with a bag of dollars. You'll sure meet up with Cactus Carter, and I guess a greaser won't give that guy much trouble. You want to stay where you're safe."

The Mexican shook his head.

"I have business at Plug Hat, senior, and I do not fear a hold-up man," he answered. "It is kind of you to warn me, but I am riding to the cow town this afternoon."

"I'll tell a man!" grunted Red. "You've let on right and left that you're riding to Plug Hat to-day with a bag of dollars to buy a ranch. Leave it till to-morrow or the next day and you might get through."

"But if this bandolero, this Cactus, is so dangerous, why do you not rope him in?" asked the Mexican.

"I guess we're after him, but we ain't got him yet," growled Red.

"But your captain, Jim Hall, whom they call Mule-Kick Hall," said the Mexican—"cannot he put salt, as you say, on the tail of this Cactus Carter?"

"Jim Hall ain't here," grunted Red. "He ain't been seen since he was at Plug Hat weeks ago. I reckon that fire-bug Carter has got him and laid him out somewhere in the prairie; or else perhaps the Rio Kid has got him. He ain't been seen for a long while, and we're sure still hunting for him."

"The Rio Kid? Who is he?"

"A durrnder fire-bug than Cactus Carter," said Red. "And I reckon he's hiding somewhere in this country—though I reckon nobody ain't seed him."

"In my country we should soon put an end to these bandoleros, senior."

"The thunder you would!" growled Red.

"Si, senior. Oh, very soon!"

Austin Red glared at the Mexican as he mounted his horse.

"Adios, senior!" said the Mexican cheerily, and he touched the pinto with

THE POPULAR.—No. 611.

The Man from Mexico!

ANYONE who had seen the Rio Kid step out of Dixon's Bank at Blue Grass that sunny afternoon would never have dreamed of recognizing the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. Even Jim Hall, captain of the Texas Rangers, who knew the Kid's looks better than any other man in Texas, would have passed him by without a second glance. Neither would any Plug Hat man, had any such been on hand, have fancied for a moment that this was Mister Texas Brown, Sheriff of Plug Hat. The Kid, indeed, would not have known himself had he seen his reflection in a glass.

His skin was darkened, his hair was raven-black, his eyebrows black and bushy; and he was dressed in Mexican garb, with velvet cazoneros, a short velvet jacket, a gaudy sash, huge spurs, and an enormous sombrero. The keenest eyes in Texas would never have taken the Kid for anything but a prosperous young Mexican ranchero.

Outside the bank three or four Texas Rangers were standing, and they glanced at the young Mexican as he came out. His horse, a handsome pinto, was hitched to the post, and the Rangers had been looking at it. Now they looked at the Kid; and he smiled.

The Texas Rangers were in Blue Grass to hunt for the Rio Kid, but the Kid guessed that they did not figure how near he was to them.

"Say, Mex!" drawled one of the Rangers, as the Kid put his hand to the pinto.

The Kid glanced round.

The Ranger detached himself from the group and came towards the Mexican. The Kid knew him by sight;

TROUBLE CLOUDS BANKING ON KID SHERIFF'S HORIZON

it was the red-haired man from Austin—Austin Red—whom the Kid had last seen riding, wounded, into Plug Hat, after a chase of Cactus Carter, the road-agent.

"You hitting the trail, mister?" asked Red.

"Si, senior!" answered the Kid in soft Spanish.

"I guess all Blue Grass knows your business here," said Red. "You ain't made any secret of it. You been around Blue Grass nearly a week, and you been talking of buying a ranch in the Plug Hat country. You've let on right and

the spur and went at a gallop down the street of Blue Grass.

Red glared at the disappearing horseman.

"Dog-gone my cats!" he growled.

His hand went to a gun. But the Mexican was vanishing in a cloud of dust in the distance, and Austin Red had to content himself with a string of lurid cuss-words.

Trapped!

THE Rio Kid laughed lightly as he galloped out of Blue Grass on the dusty trail northward to Plug Hat. Austin Red had warned him that he was likely, if not certain, to "meet up" with Cactus Carter on the trail—and the Ranger had little guessed that that was exactly the object of the pseudo Mexican rancher.

Texas Brown, Sheriff of Plug Hat, was expected to rope in the bandit who was making all the trails round the cow town dangerous. Since the Kid had been sheriff, galoots who bucked against the law had had a thin time in Plug Hat.

Every citizen of the cow town, every rancher in the surrounding cow country, looked to him to wind up the lawless career of Cactus Carter. And the Kid was going to do it.

Blue Grass dropped out of sight behind the Kid, and he slackened pace.

It was a lonely trail, in places scarcely marked, that wound among the folds of the prairie. Near the town the Kid passed some cowpunchers; after that he had the trail to himself. He rode on at a cantor, smiling under the black moustache that was gummed to his lip. It would not have suited his book for the Rangers to ride with him to see him safe through. It was not a ride safe through that the Sheriff of Plug Hat wanted.

Ten miles on the trail the Kid, whose eyes were keenly about him under the shadow of the big sombrero, grew more keenly watchful. Here the trail was bordered by thickets of pecan and mesquite and dwarf oak—just the cover that a road-agent would look for. And the Kid smiled as he saw a blue jay, evidently disturbed from a nest, fluttering over the mesquite. Something—or somebody—in the mesquite had startled the blue jay, and the Kid figured that that "something" was very likely called Cactus Carter.

He centered on; and suddenly a horseman pushed out of the thickets with a gun half-lifted in his hand.

"Halt!"

The Kid pulled in his pinto.

"Buenas dias, senior!" he said politely.

Cactus Carter stared at him.

There was a jeering grin on the hard, tanned face of the gunman.

"I guess you'll be the greaser, Alvarez," he said.

"Si, senior."

"I'm sure wise to you," said Cactus. "Why, you durned dog-goned boob, you've told all Texas that you're riding this trail to-day with a grip stacked with greenbacks! I guess I wish there was a few more like you, greaser. This is pie!"

"And you ain't even bected!" said Cactus, staring at him and seeing no sign of a weapon. "I've sure met up with some boob in my time; but you are the prize boob of America, I'll tell you."

a man! Get down off'n that cayuse and pony up your roll!"

The swarthy face of the Mexican rancher wore a smile. The Kid had reckoned that his stunt would work—and it had worked like a charm. If there was a boob on the trail at that moment, the Kid did not figure that he was the boob. Cactus Carter had fallen into the trap like a tenderfoot from Tondertown.

The disguised Kid alighted from the pinto; he stood in the trail beside the halted horse. The gunman made a threatening motion with his Colt.

"Pony up!" he snapped.

"It is in for you to order, senior, as you hold the gun," said the Mexican meekly, and he dropped his hand into a wallet that hung by his side.

Bang!

Cactus Carter gave a sudden yell.

Inside that harmless-looking wallet was a walnut-butted gun; and the Kid had fired, without drawing it out, through the leather of the wallet.

The Colt spun from Cactus' hand and flew across the trail.

The Kid had shot the gun from his grasp.

The next instant the Kid's smoking gun flashed to a level and looked the horseman in the face.

"Hands up!" said the Kid quietly, and his voice had no trace now of the soft Spanish accent.

Cactus Carter stared at him blankly.

But the levelled revolver, the gleaming eyes over it, enforced obedience, and the road-agent lifted his hands above his head. His face was convulsed with rage.

"Beat!" he muttered hoarsely. "Beaten to it by a dog-goned greaser! Carry me home to die!"

"I guess not," drawled the Kid. "I guess there ain't no more greaser about me, feller, than is stuck on outside. There's a white Texan underneath."

The gunman gave a convulsive start. He knew that cool, drawling voice.

"Texas Brown!" he panted.

"You've said it!"

"The Sheriff of Plug Hat—got up like a dog-goned greaser!" hissed Cactus Carter through his grinding teeth.

"Just that!" smiled the Kid. "I reckoned you'd fall for this, Cactus, and you're sure fallen for it! And now I've got you! And if you don't keep them paws over your cabeza you'll get yours so sudden you won't know what booted you over Jordan!"

The gunman was lowering his hands, but they went up again. He sat his horse quivering with rage.

"You've had a long run, Cactus," said the Kid quietly. "I sure handed you over to the Rangers and you got away from them. I guess you ain't getting away any more. You're riding into Plug Hat with this baby!"

Cactus Carter's eyes gleamed desperately. It was death to ride into Plug Hat with the sheriff, and death was no worse by a bullet on the trail. With a pressure of his knee he suddenly swung his horse away and dashed from the trail across the prairie.

Bang!

The Kid's Colt roared. The bullet tore through the Stetson on the gunman's head and clipped a lock of hair from his head.

"Halt!" shouted the Kid.

Cactus rode on desperately. He had the reins in his grip again now, and urged his horse frantically. Every moment he expected a bullet to crash through him, tearing through flesh and bone. But he was taking the chance of it; and he reckoned, too, that the

Sheriff of Plug Hat wanted to take him alive if he could.

But it was not that that held the Kid from shooting him dead from the saddle; the Rio Kid hated to fire on a fleeing man, and it went sorely against the grain to drive a bullet through the gunman's back. He spurred his pinto in pursuit and swept across the grassy prairie on the track of the gunman.

The pinto was a good cayuse; not so good as the Kid's own grey mustang, but a good and swift horse. The Kid reckoned he would ride down the fleeing road-agent, and not unless Cactus' escape seemed too likely would he send a bullet through him.

Clatter, clatter! Thud, thud! Cactus Carter was riding like the wind. But as swift the Kid rode after him, gun in hand; and when Cactus turned his head he could see the disguised Sheriff of Plug Hat close behind. With quiet and spur he urged on his horse to desperate speed, and still, when he looked back again, the Sheriff of Plug Hat was gaining.

And then for a second Cactus checked his wild career, as he saw ahead of him in the gleaming grass a dark line that stretched across the prairie.

It was a barranca, wide and deep.

The Kid had discerned it at the same moment, and he smiled grimly. The barranca was wide—too wide for the leap of the best jumping horse in Texas, unless it was the Kid's own Side-Kicker.

"I reckon," murmured the Kid, "that I've got that dog-goned galoot now, and without spilling his juice! And it sure would get my goat to put a bullet in any guy's back!"

It was only for a moment that Cactus Carter checked his wild career. Behind him was certain capture or death; before him was the yawning gulf that was too wide for his horse. But he set his teeth desperately and rode at it. Whip and spur drove on the straining horse, and from the edge of the barranca Cactus drove it to the desperate leap.

"Thunder!"

The Kid reined in his pinto. He stared after the leaping horseman, fascinated. The forefoot of Cactus' horse crashed on the opposite side of the barranca.

But they found no hold. The hind legs slipped down; there was a sharp squeal of terror from the horse, a gasping cry of despair from the rider; then horse and rider vanished into the black depths of the barranca.

"Sho!" murmured the Kid soberly. And the Sheriff of Plug Hat whooled his horse and rode away. He was done with Cactus Carter now.

The Sheriff's Secret!

COLORADO BILL lounged into the sheriff's office at Plug Hat.

"Say, sheriff!"

The Kid looked up.

"Shoot!" he said.

"The Rangers have quit Blue Grass," said Colorado.

The Sheriff of Plug Hat looked interested at that. Blue Grass was fifteen miles from Plug Hat, but the outlaw who had become a sheriff had never liked the Texas Rangers so near as that. Colorado, watching him curiously, grinned.

"Say, you're pleased about it, sheriff?" he said.

"I guess we ain't got a lot of use for

Rangers in this county," answered the Kid. "We can run things in Sasasfras County without help from Jim Hall and his boneheads."

"You said it!" agreed Colorado. "But they ain't found Jim Hall yet, sheriff. They are sure wild about it; and they ain't any too pleased at you wiping out Cactus Carter. They figured that Cactus could have told them what had happened to Mule-Kick Hall if they'd got him."

"It was sure queer, Jim Hall vanishing like that," said Colorado slowly. "You ain't forgotten, sheriff, that he accused you of being that fire-bug from the Rio Grande, the Rio Kid."

The Kid laughed, but his eyes were very keen on the face of the big cowman.

"I ain't forgotten," he said. "I guess Jim Hall had been after the Kid so long he was ready to see him in every guy he met."

"I guess it was a likely mistake," said Colorado in the same slow way; "for you sure are powerful like the Kid to look at, sheriff."

"You reckon?"

"I've seed his picture posted up at Packsaddle, and I reckon it's a cinch," said Colorado. "I guess I never thought of it till Jim Hall let on that he figured you was the Kid. But you sure are a dead ringer for the Kid, sheriff."

"I guess I'll grow me some whiskers," said the Sheriff of Plug Hat. "It sure is bad medicine for a guy to be mistaken for a fire-bug like the Rio Kid."

"Sure!" said Colorado slowly. His eyes were strangely on the sheriff's face. "I guess you're glad to hear that the Rangers are quitting. They reckon that Hall is gone up, and it ain't no use sitting around and waiting for him any longer. They're getting after the Rio Kid again without him."

The sheriff smiled.

"I sure wish them a whole lot of luck," he said.

"From what I heered in Blue Grass, they're going to comb the Los Pinos sierra for the Kid."

The sheriff started slightly.

"The Los Pinos sierra?" he repeated. "Yep! They reckon the Kid may have found a hide-out there."

"I guess they might as well go home and grow alfalfa," said the sheriff. "If Jim Hall couldn't get the Kid, I don't reckon his bunch will do it. But I wish them a heap of luck."

Colorado nodded and lounged out of the office again. The Kid sat very still. He had read the big cowman's thoughts like a book. Colorado was standing by him, true as steel; yet there was a half-formed suspicion in his mind that Jim Hall's startling accusation had not been unfounded.

The Kid wondered whether the same thought was in other minds in the town of Plug Hat.

It was hard luck for the Kid that Hall and the Rangers had come that way in their quest of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. The Kid had made good as sheriff. He asked nothing more than to live a quiet and peaceable life, doing his duty as Sheriff of Plug Hat. Only Mule-Kick Hall had stood in the way—and Mule-Kick Hall had mysteriously disappeared. And as plainly as if Colorado had said it, the Kid knew that the cowman was wondering how much the sheriff knew about that disappear-

And Hall was still on the Kid's hands. The Kid was not the man to shoot him out of hand. He was safe in the hiding-place the Kid had found for him in the hills. But was he safe, with the Rangers combing the Los Pinos sierra for the Kid? They were not likely to find the Rio Kid there. The Sheriff of Plug Hat grinned at the thought. But it was on the cards that they might find Jim Hall.

The Kid's jaw set squarely. Mule-Kick Hall was in his hands—at his mercy—and yet the Ranger refused

would have guessed that it screened a hiding-place. It was by chance that the Kid himself had discovered it. Looking at it, the Kid figured that it was unlikely enough that the Rangers would ever horn into the hidden cave, if they searched Los Pinos for weeks and months.

He plunged under the curtain of falling water, and disappeared. A moment later he was standing in the cave under the cliff where the torrent fell.

Through the falling water that screened the narrow entrance, came a



The Kid stared after the leaping horseman, fascinated. The foremost of Cactus' horses crashed on the opposite side of the rocky wall—and then slipped back!

glimmer of the sunset. But it was very dusky in the cave.

A man stretched on a bed of rough blankets rose to his feet, and there was a clink of a chain. Mule-Kick Hall, haggard from his long imprisonment, looked at the Kid with savage eyes. The chain locked to his wrist held him fast to the staple driven high in the rock wall of the cavern; he could move about freely and use his limbs, but he had long ago given up hope of escape. Yet his rugged, tanned, haggard face was defiant and even threatening, as he fixed his eyes on the Rio Kid.

The Sheriff of Plug Hat regarded him thoughtfully. His hand rested on a gun as he did so.

A bitter sneer curved Hall's lips. "You come here to handle your gun, you dog-goned trail-thief!" he said, between his teeth.

"I never was a trail-thief, as you know, Jim Hall," answered the Kid quietly, "and I ain't handling my gun any. I'd sure like to let daylight through your carcass, but I can't do it. I've brought you grub again; but ain't you getting tired of bully beef and biscuit and cold water?"

"I guess I ain't asking you for that, or anything else."

"Nope! You was always a hard cuss, Jim Hall!" said the Kid. "Hard as hickory you always was; and why I don't blow a hole right through your cabern, leaves me guessing."

"Shoot, if you like."

"I guess not!" said the Kid. "Nope! You ain't coming to terms?"

"Never!"

"I'm jest asking you to ride away and forget that the Sheriff of Plug Hat is the Rio Kid. That's all."

(Continued on page 16.)

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to come to terms. The Kid called himself a gink for hesitating to drive lead through the man who would not hesitate to hand him over to the rope. And yet he knew that he could not do it.

"Dog-gone it!" growled the Kid.

He rose at last and went through the house to the stable and saddled the pinto. While the Rangers were in the locality the Kid's own grey mustang was kept carefully out of sight.

The Kid mounted the pinto and rode away towards the prairie trail.

His thoughts were bitter enough as he rode into the sierra.

Why couldn't that god-darned bloodhound, Hall, leave him in peace to lead the peaceful life he wanted to lead? Why couldn't the man give him a chance to make good?

The Kid's face was hard as he rode.

He threaded his way through the lonely gulches and canyons of the Los Pinos sierra, his eyes keenly open for sign of the Rangers. Once or twice he came on sign of horsemen who had ridden that way, and his caution redoubled. But he was sure that no eye was upon him when he reached the solitary canyon where the waterfall dashed down the steep rocks. He dismounted, and concealed his horse in a thicket, and approached the torrent that fell in clouds of spray with a ceaseless roar of waters.

None, looking at the falling water,

The Sheriff's Secret!

(Continued from page 13.)

"Never!"

The Kid sighed.

"Well, you surely are the orneriest guy ever!" he said. "Any guy but me, I reckon, would leave you here with your mouth shut so hard that you couldn't tell tales. I guess I got a soft streak somewhere." He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, there's your grub, and I guess you won't see me again for three days more. Adios!"

Without another word the Kid slipped through the screen of falling water, and vanished. He remounted his horse, and rode away, from the solitary canyon—and the captain of the Rangers was left once more to solitude.

The Ranger's Luck!

CRACK!

Austin Red fired a second time, and followed up the shot with an oath. Twice the antelope had escaped, though it was wounded, and the Ranger spat out oaths as he followed on.

The sun was setting over the sierra los Pinos. The Rangers were camped in a valley in the hills; and the red-headed man from Austin was shooting his supper. But his supper was wary, and had led the Ranger far from the valley where his comrades were camped. Up and down, by gulch and arroyo, Red had followed the elusive antelope; and still the antelope was beating him to it.

More than once Red would have lost him, but for the trail of crimson drops on the stony earth. And to that trail the Ranger stuck doggedly, determined not to go back to camp and own up to his comrades that the antelope had beaten him.

And now, the Ranger reckoned, he had got the brute. He had trailed him into a narrow rugged canyon, where a torrent came tumbling and splashing down the rocky wall, forming a stream that flowed away to lower levels. But his shot missed by a hair's breadth; and then the hunted animal vanished from his sight, plunging into the torrent.

Red ran on, his rifle ready.

He reached the edge of the torrent, and watched for the antelope.

He expected to see the animal struggling in the water, or dragging itself out on the other side.

But to his amazement the antelope had completely disappeared.

The stream below the torrent was too shallow to hide the animal if it had sunk. Yet it was not to be seen in the water, and it had not scrambled out on either side.

For some moments the Texas Ranger wondered whether he had been trailing a spook antelope that had vanished into thin air. But Red did not figure that that was the case. There was only one explanation of the brute's strange disappearance after plunging into the torrent, and that was some hollow under the cliff behind the screen of falling water. Looking at it, Red would have supposed that the cascade was tumbling down a solid cliff, as solid as the rest of the rocky walls of the

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canyon. But the antelope's disappearance told another tale.

"I guess there's a'uthin' back of that fall!" the Ranger scolloquised, "and I guess the critter's dodged into it, and I reckon I've got him dead to rights now."

And, leaving his rifle on the rocks, Red drew his knife, and plunged into the falling water, nothing doubting that he would find a hollow in the cliff it covered.

For a moment he was drenched, then he was through the fall, and standing within a dusky cave.

From the dark depths where it extended deep into the cliff, a frightened antelope leaped, and rushed past Red, and plunged once more into the screen of water to escape.

It would not have escaped had not Red's attention been fixed on something else.

But Austin Red had no eyes for his escaping supper now. Standing rooted to the rocky floor in blank amazement

HOW TO COLLECT OUR COLOURED PICTURES!

On the cover of this week's issue you will find the first of our unique series of Coloured Pictures of Famous Footballers.

By the side of the picture appears a frame, in which is a description of the subject of the coloured picture—this week, it is Syd Puddefoot, of Blackburn Rovers.

Now, all you have to do to make our coloured pictures just like a cigarette card, is to cut out the whole tablet containing the picture and the frame. Then fold this piece of paper so that the frame backs on to the coloured picture, paste a thin piece of card between the two, and you have a coloured card that you can put in your album of cigarette cards.

NEXT WEEK:

FRED KEAN

(BOLTON WANDERERS)

and bewilderment, Austin Red stared at a haggard man who stood before him—a man who was held prisoner by a steel chain locked to his wrist.

"This hyer is a dream!" gasped Red. "I sure am dreaming that you're Jim Hall!"

Mulo-Kick Hall breathed hard and deep. His eyes were blazing.

"You, Red!" he said.

"Say, is it you or your ghost, Jim Hall?" gasped the astounded Ranger.

"I guess it's me, Red!" said Hall. "I guess I been here long enough, and I'm powerful glad to see you. How'd you come?"

"I was after that peaky antelope—"

"Are the boys on hand?"

"Camped a mile from here," said Red. "Say, Hall, this surely does get my goat! We figured that you'd been shot up by Cactus Carter."

"Cactus Carter nothing! I was rounded up by the Rio Kid!" said Hall bitterly.

Red jumped.

"The Rio Kid!"

"Sure!"

"Then he's in this sierra!"

"He's at Plug Hat; and by the great horned toad, we're going to get him now, dead to rights! You got to get me loose, Red." The steel chain clinked. "You got to get me loose pronto."

"But I don't get you, Hall!" stammered Red. "Mean to say the Rio Kid fixed you up this-a-way?"

"He sure did! You been hunting me?"

"Yep; but I guess we'd never have looked for you here, but for that antelope," said Red. "We figured you was gone up. Cactus Carter was the guy we reckoned had given you your ticket for soup. We was hunting him, but we never got him. The Sheriff of Plug Hat has wiped out that scally-wag."

Red was startled by the fury that blazed in Hall's face at the mention of the sheriff of Plug Hat.

"Dog-gone him!" said Hall, gritting his teeth. "I'll give him sheriff! Dog-gone him! You bonthead, do you know what that sheriff called himself afore he called himself Texas Brown?"

"Search me!" answered Red.

"The Rio Kid!" snarled Hall.

"Aw! You're dreaming, Jim Hall!" Hall answered with a curse.

"Don't stand there chowing the rag! Get me loose, you guik! We got to get the Kid before he gets wise to it that I'm found! Give him a chance, and he'll be burning the wind on that cursed mustang of his'n. Get me loose, dog-gone you!"

"Sure!" gasped Red.

It was not easy to release Hall. Red hacked at the rocky wall where the staple was driven in with his knife. The rock came away in chips, and the knife broke at last. With the broken blade he went on hacking, his arm aching, sweat rolling down his face. But if he paused for a moment, the raucous voice of Mulo-Kick Hall drove him on. And at last, after more than a weary hour, the staple was loosened, and the chain fell free. It was still locked to Hall's wrist; but with the lock Red could not deal; and Hall wound the chain round his arm. He was a free man now; and that was enough.

"Got a cayuse with you?" he snapped.

"Nope. I followed the antelope on foot."

Hall cursed.

"Come, then; there's no time to lose."

He plunged through the torrent from the cave. Red followed him. In the open canyon, under the stars, for night had fallen now, Mulo-Kick Hall breathed deeply the fresh mountain air. Austin Red led the way, and the captain of the Rangers followed him.

Mulo-Kick Hall was haggard, worn, weary. But his deep-set eyes were glinting bright, the blood was dancing in his veins as he strode rapidly away. He smiled, a deadly smile, as he sighted the camp-fire of the Rangers, glowing red through the night. He was free, free to lead the Rangers to the capture of the Rio Kid, still playing sheriff at Plug Hat, and never dreaming that his deadly enemy was loose again, and on the trail of vengeance. Plug Hat was to lose its sheriff now; and the end of his long trail had come for the Rio Kid.

THE END.

(More thrills in next week's roaring Western tale of the Rio Kid.)

BACK TO THE OUTLAW TRAILS—FAREWELL TO THE RIO KID!

The Kid's Last Blow!



Danger!

THE Rio Kid stirred restlessly in his sleep.

It was a calm, quiet night. A full round moon sailed over the cow town of Plug Hat. Every building, every cabin and shack was picked out with black distinctness. The hour was late, and the last festive cowman had rolled home and slammed his door. All was still, and Plug Hat slept the sleep of the just.

But the sheriff of Plug Hat was restless.

Generally, the Rio Kid slept soundly enough. In lonely camps on the prairie, in deep coverts in the chaparral, in hidden arroyos in the sierra, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had been wont to slumber as peacefully as an infant. But in his cabin on the plaza of Plug Hat his sleep was broken, and he stirred and stirred, and at last awoke.

It was as if some mysterious sense warned the Kid of danger that still moonlight night.

He sat up in his bunk in the darkness of the room. The window was shuttered and hardly a glimmer of light came in.

"Sho!" murmured the Kid. He listened, sitting in his blankets, as often he had listened in the silence of the night, in some solitary camp in the wilderness. "Say, you gink, what's the

matter with you? What's biling you, you pesky geek?"

All was still. No sound came to his ears save the faint *souga* of the wind from the prairie, the distant whine of a coyote.

Yet the Kid was uneasy.

He tried to reason it out, to still the nerves that were warning him of danger. He was not the Rio Kid now, lurking in hidden camps; he was "Texas Brown," Sheriff of Plug Hat! Nobody knew that he was the hunted outlaw except Jim Hall, captain of the Rangers; and

THE KID SHERIFF QUILTS!

Jim Hall was shut up, a prisoner, in the hidden cave under the waterfall in the Los Pinos hills. The Texas Rangers were at Los Pinos; but only by the most unlikely chance could they possibly light on the man who knew the sheriff's secret. And in Plug Hat town, the Kid was monarch of all he surveyed.

But reason was useless against instinct. The Rio Kid could not sleep, and his eyes did not close again. He reached out to the bench beside the bed to make sure that the walnut-butted guns were there, and ready to his hand.

Suddenly he started and listened more intently. Through the silence of the

night came a sound, faint at first, growing louder and more distinct. The Kid's keen ears picked it up on the instant. It was the distant galloping of a horse—distant, but approaching Plug Hat.

Who was galloping through the night? The galloping of a horse was not an unusual sound, even in the middle of the night, in the cow country. Yet the Kid felt his heart beating faster as he listened to the approaching tread of rapid hoofs.

If it spelled danger—

Gallop! Gallop!

Sharper came the sound through the night—the sound, as the Kid's keen ear told him, of a horse driven to its hardest speed. Whoever was riding through the moonlight to Plug Hat was riding hard, with quiet and spur. It was not a cowman riding in late—it was some galoot who rode as if a bunch of Apaches rode after him.

"Nothin' to worry me!" grunted the Kid.

But he knew in his bones that there was danger. He rose from the bunk, and dressed himself quickly. He fastened on his gun-belt, with the two guns that had often served him well.

Gallop! Gallop!

The unknown horseman was in the street of Plug Hat now, the rapid hoof-beats sending echoes among the shacks. Now he was in the plaza, and now, with a crash of hoofs and a jingle of bridle and spurs, he had dragged in his horse outside the sheriff's office. And the Kid knew that he had expected the horseman to halt right there—his instinct had told him true.

There was a blow on the outer door.

"Sheriff!"

A hoarse voice, hoarse with breathless haste, called. The Kid, in surprise, recognized the voice—it was that of Colorado Bill. Colorado had been over at White Pine, on the other side of the Los Pinos sierra, and the Kid had not figured on seeing him again till the morning. Colorado had come back. But why had he come in such breathless haste?

The Kid passed through the outer room, and threw open the door that gave on the plaza.

Colorado stood there, panting, beside his broncho, that was covered with dust and foam.

"Say, Colorado, here I am!"

The Kid's cool drawl was as serene as usual.

Colorado staggered into the sheriff's office. His tanned face was red and perspiring, his chaps thick with dust. He leaned on the sheriff's desk and panted.

"I guess you been burning the wind," said the Kid.

"You said it!" gasped Colorado.

"What's the trouble?"

The burly cowman did not answer immediately. He had come in wild haste to tell the sheriff something; yet now he was here he seemed to hesitate.

The Kid drew a deep breath. He turned sharply to the cowman.

"Spill it!" he snapped.
 "Sheriff—" panted Colorado.
 "Spill it, pronto."
 "Sheriff, Mule-Kick Hall's headin' for Plug Hat, with his whole troop of Texas Rangers!"

Facing the Music!

THE Rio Kid stood very still. His face did not change; the glance of his eyes was steady. But a slow cold chill crept into his heart.

Colorado, panting, looked at him. Colorado hardly knew what effect he expected from his words. So far as appearances went, they had no effect whatever on the sheriff of Plug Hat.

But it was a long moment before the Kid spoke.

"Mule-Kick Hall!" he drawled. How had the Ranger escaped, was the thought hammering in the Kid's mind. He had hit him safe enough. Yet what did it matter now? If Colorado had seen him with his Rangers, it was clear that he had escaped; he, the only man in Texas who knew that the sheriff of Plug Hat was in reality the boy outlaw who had mysteriously disappeared from all knowledge. Mule-Kick Hall and the Texas Rangers, riding through the night to Plug Hat! The Kid's instinct had served him well. Danger and death were at the heels of the hunted Kid!

Colorado made a step towards him. "Sheriff! I don't give a continental red cent who you are, and what you was—Texas Brown is good enough for me! But is it good enough for Hall and the Rangers?"

The Kid smiled. "You ain't forgotten, sheriff, that that gink, Hall, accused you of being the Rio Kid—"

"I remember."
 "And he jest vanished the same night, and folks reckoned that he'd been shot up by Cactus Carter."

"Sure!"
 "But he wasn't shot up, sheriff! I seen him."

"You've seen him?"
 "Like thunder I have!"
 "Sure it was Hall?"

"Don't I know his leathery face, and his eyes like two chunks of cold steel! It was Mule-Kick Hall! They're coming!" Colorado paused, and bent his head to listen. "They won't be here yet! I guess I left 'em well back of me. But they're coming."

The Kid knut that. An almost inaudible sound in the far distance was already growing clearer.

"Bein' clear and moonlight, I reckoned I'd hit the trail home to-night, sheriff, from White Pine," said Colorado. "You know where the trail runs through the valley in the Los Pinos Sierra—"

The Kid nodded. "I seed a camp fire there, and the Rangers round it. I knowed they was coming Los Pinos for the Rio Kid—all Sassafras county knows that—and I figured I'd drop in and ask them if they'd put salt on his tail. Jest as I was coming up to the camp, I seed Mule-Kick Hall. There he was, squatting on a log before the fire, lookin' as if he'd been through it, sheriff! He was telling the Rangers to—"

Colorado paused again, and shot a quick look at the sheriff.
 "Spill it!" drawled the Kid.

"Say, sheriff, you don't want to get mad; I'm standing by you, Rio Kid or not!" said Colorado. "And I guessed that I wouldn't ride into their camp like I meant, arter I seed Hall! I jest left my cayuse in a thicket, and loped around and gave them a look-see. And I heard Hall telling them that the Rio Kid had cached him safe in a cave in the Los Pinos, and left him fixed there, and that guy Austin Red had jest dropped on him by accident, goin' after an autelopo for his supper."

"Sho!" murmured the Kid.
 "And the order was boot and saddle!" went on Colorado. "The Rangers were saddling up when I quit. And after that, sheriff, I reckon I burned the wind to hit Plug Hat."

"To warn me?"
 "You got it."

The Kid laughed.
 "What you reckon, Colorado? You figure that I'm that fire-bug from the Rio Grande that Hall's been after so long?"

Colorado shifted uneasily. "I ain't saying so," he answered. "But Jim Hall believes it, and he's as mad as a hornet to get the Rio Kid. I guessed it was up to me to put you wise, sheriff, jest as fast as I knew how."

"I guess it was good of you, old-timer," said the Kid gratefully. "You sure are a good little man."

"I ain't asking you to tell me anything, sheriff—"

"I guess I couldn't tell you more than you've suspicioned already!" murmured the Kid.

"But you're our sheriff; you're Texas Brown, and Texas Brown goes! You've made Plug Hat! There ain't a guy in town that won't stand for you! If you was the Rio Kid before you hit Plug Hat, I don't care a continental red cent, and I guess the boys won't care either! You're sheriff of Plug Hat, and we're standing for you!"

Faintly, through the night, came the beat of hoofs. The riding Rangers were drawing nearer to the cow town. Fifty men the Kid figured, were riding in that bunch—fifty of the hardest-trained guys, fifty of the best shots in Texas—not a man of whom would dream of turning back from the path of duty, if death with a thousand terrors stood in the way! Fifty hard-bitten Rangers, led by a man of ice and iron; a man who would have led them down the slopes of the burning pit rather than lose his quarry! And that bunch was riding into Plug Hat to seize the Rio Kid!

The Kid's eyes glittered.
 A hundred men would grasp their Colts and stand by him at a word! Five hundred punchers would ride in from the ranches to stand by him, if the call came! What had he to fear?

The gleam in the Kid's eyes was reflected in Colorado's. He grasped the sheriff's arm.
 "We're standing for you, sheriff! Let me go round and rouse out the boys—I guess there ain't one hombre that won't stand for you! Them Texas Rangers ain't runnin' things in Plug Hat! I guess we don't want Jim Hall to horn into our affairs. Let them ride in; and if it comes to shooting—and I reckon it will—there's enough guys in this town to wipe out all the Rangers in Texas! Say the word, sheriff, and this is Mule-Kick Hall's last trail!"

The Kid's lips set hard.
 "Old-timer, I've given that man a square deal," he said slowly. "I offered to let him ride free, if he'd keep clear of Plug Hat, and leave a

galoot to make good! I could have shot him up easy; but I gave him his chance. Stand by me, and we'll run the Rangers out of Plug Hat, like we run out the rough-necks."

"You've said it, sheriff!"

Colorado Bill tramped out of the sheriff's office. A moment more, and the silent street of Plug Hat rang and echoed with knocking and shouting. Plug Hat was awakening; men turned out of their bunks and buckled on revolvers. And the sheriff of Plug Hat was carefully examining the walnut-butted guns that never failed in the hands of the Rio Kid. He was going to need them now; and he had never needed them more!

The Sheriff's Last Order!

MULE-KICK HALL had a grim face as he rode down the trail from Los Pinos to the cow town. Behind him rode his men, equally grim and determined. Under the glimmering moonlight they rode in a dark bunch, with a jingle of spurs, a rattle of stirrups.

The captain of the rangers looked at the dark, silent stack of buildings ahead. Plug Hat showed no sign of life; none was to be expected at that hour.

Hall reckoned on this ride taking the sheriff by surprise; the man would be asleep, the town sleeping. Texas Brown, alias the Rio Kid, would be seized and secured before the cow town could turn out to his help—if, indeed, they stood by him at all.

Whether the Plug Hat men stood by the sheriff or not, whether there was bloodshed or not, Hall's fixed purpose was the same; if the cow town flowed deep with blood, he was going to cinch the Rio Kid.

His plans were already cut and dried, all his men understood. They were to ride into the cow town, surround the sheriff's office, and keep off any intervention, while Hall and a few picked men forced their way into the building and secured Texas Brown.

There was no escape for the Rio Kid who had escaped so often—Hall's hand touched the butt of his gun as he thought of that. He was going to arrest the Kid, but he would almost rather have shot him dead; and he would shoot him dead at sight if he lifted a finger in self-defence!

The clattering hoofs started the echoes in the rugged, unpaved street of the cow town.

Not a sound from the clustered cabins and shanties and shacks save for the echoing of the many hoofs. Not a light from a single window, not a stirring foot from the doorway.

The sheriff's office was in the plaza—the square in the centre of the town. Right through the rugged street the Rangers rode as far as the plaza, under the moonlight that was almost as clear as day. And there they came to a sudden halt.

For in the midst of the square, where it opened into the square, was a barricade—scores of strong riatas taut across the street, stopping any further advance.

And behind the rope barrier a hundred men or more, with the moonlight glinting on rifle and revolver.

The Rangers, riding down the irregular street, had not seen them till they came fairly on the rope barrier.

They had not doubted for a second

that Plug Hat was sleeping; they had no reason to suspect that the Kid had been warned.

But they reckoned now that he had been warned, for it was clear that he was ready for them.

Jim Hall ground his teeth as he pulled in his horse. He told himself bitterly that he might as well have expected to catch a weasel asleep as the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

"Say, I guess they're wise to us!" murmured Austin Red.

see him, though Hall figured that he had been surprised when he got the news that his enemy was loose. How had he got the news? Who had warned him in time? Somehow, fortune always seemed to favour the Kid.

"Say, Hall, you're riding late!" said the Kid affably. "Or is it early? The whole bunch of you, I see, with your guns packed? I guess a galoot, looking at you-uns, would figure that you was on the warpath! What you want?"

"We want you!" said Hall curtly.

stood by its sheriff. Yet the sheriff had not denied that he was the Kid; and many of the armed crowd, at least, must have suspected that Hall's accusation was a true one. But they were standing for the Kid.

"Say, you dog-goned gacks, you want to beat it!" shouted Mesquite. "You Rangers ain't running this town!"

"That's a cinch!" declared Pop Short, the fat landlord of the Plug Hat hotel. Even the fat Pop had turned out with a shotgun. "Sheriff Texas Brown is good enough for us, and you Rangers can ride home and can yourselves."

Hall sat motionless in his saddle.

Grim and determined as he was, not setting his own life at a pin's fee, he hesitated to begin a conflict that would have been terrible. At such close range, face to face, gun to gun, hardly a Ranger could have escaped; but every one would have killed his man before he went down. And the thought of a hundred men weltering in blood under the scorching moon gave even the iron-hearted Ranger pause.

And it gave the Kid pause, too. For in his heart of hearts the Kid knew that he never could see death and destruction fall on the brave and loyal men who were backing him—his life, he reckoned, was not worth so many lives. He had resolved to fight—he was ready to fight—and yet he knew that he would rather yield himself a prisoner to the Rangers than see these faithful friends falling round him. Against a bunch of rustlers, or a mob of Redskins loose from the reservation, he would have led them without a second thought. But plunging them into a terrible conflict with the Texas Rangers was a different proposition. He had reckoned that he would do it; yet in his heart of hearts he knew that he never could.

The Rangers sat their horses, silent, waiting for orders. Looking certain death in the face, not a man thought of retreat.

Hall broke his silence at last.

"You Plug Hat galoots standing by that outlaw?"

"We're standing by our sheriff!" snorted Colorado, "and we ain't waiting for you to beat it, Jim Hall! You better git!"

"Not without my prisoner."

"You figure you can cinch our sheriff, with us standing by him?" jeered Colorado. "You want to forget that, Jim Hall! I reckon it won't take us a thunder of a time to wipe your bunch right out."

Hall's lip curled.

"I ain't saying no to that," he answered calmly. "I guess we'll make Plug Hat swim with blood before we're wiped out, if you draw trigger on us. But I ain't saying that you mayn't get away with it. But what's the use? I've sent messengers away with the news—to-morrow all Texas will know that the Rio Kid is playing sheriff in this town, and I guess the law is strong enough in this State to get him."

"You've sure spilled a mouthful, Hall," said the Kid. "I reckon I made a mistake in not letting the boys string you up when they wanted."

Hall's eyes gleamed at him like cold steel.

"I'm coming for you, Kid!" he said. "If you choose to drench this cow town with blood, I guess you've got the power; but dead or alive, you're my game, so long as I'm a living man. And I'm telling you to hand yourself



The Kid fired and back from his saddle went the captain of the Rangers, over his broncho's tail; back, with a crash into the grass of the prairie.

"It cuts no ice!" said Hall coldly. "We're here for the Rio Kid, and we're getting him."

"You bet!" agreed Red.

A flame seemed to shoot from Hall's eyes as a lithe, handsome figure, in Stetson, and goatskin chaps, and silver spurs, stepped out before the silent crowd that stood beyond the ropes.

It was Texas Brown, Sheriff of Plug Hat—known to the captain of the Rangers as the Rio Kid.

Hall's hand was convulsive on the butt of a gun. But he did not draw the gun—yet! Beyond the stretched lasso, a hundred firearms were raised or half-raised, and the whole bunch of Rangers were openly exposed to the volley that might roar at any instant. And if triggers were once pulled there would be many empty saddles in Hall's bunch—few, if any, of the Rangers would be sitting their horses when powder was once burned. And it was clear in Hall's bitter mind that instead of leading his men to an easy and certain capture, in the dead of night, he had led them into a deathtrap from which hardly a man would ride alive except at the word of the Rio Kid.

The Kid was not touching a weapon. He doffed his Stetson to Mule-Kick Hall, with the politeness for which the Sheriff of the Rio Grande was well known. He did not look surprised to

"Say, you know that the sheriff's office is always open for business in the daytime," said the Kid. "But if it's pressin' you can spill it now. I'm an obliging galoot! What you want with the sheriff?"

"Nothing with any sheriff," said Hall. "We want the Rio Kid—the outlaw whom we've hunted all over Texas—and by thunder we're going to have him!"

"You reckon that guy is around here?"

"You're the Rio Kid, dog-gone you!"

"You said that before, Jim Hall, and I wasn't any too pleased," said the Sheriff of Plug Hat. "If you ain't got a new tune to sing, I guess you better close up that bully-beef trap of yours and get home to bed."

Hall glanced past the Kid, at the throng of his followers.

"Men of Plug Hat!" His voice rang sharp and clear. "I've told you before, and I tell you again, that that man is the Rio Kid, with a thousand dollars reward on his head—outlaw, and frebug, and hold-up man! I've got the warrant for his arrest, and I call on you to stand by me in taking him!"

"Aw, forget it!" booted Colorado. "Rio Kid or not, he's our sheriff, and we're standing by him till the cows come home! And I've got two Colts byer what says the same!"

A shout followed—a shout that told Hall plainly enough, that Plug Hat

over now, or the rookus begins, to once."

There was a roar from Plug Hat. Weapons were raised on all sides. But the Kid lifted his hand.

"Fellers," he said, and all eyes were upon him, "I been your sheriff, and I guess I made a pretty good sheriff! But what that hard-faced cuss says is the truth—I'm the Rio Kid! They made me an outlaw—and I guess there ain't a chance of getting back. I figured on sticking on byer as sheriff, and never riding an outlaw trail again; but the cards have gone agin me! There ain't going to be no rookus—my life ain't worth any man's life here. Fellers, this is the last order I'll ever give you as your sheriff, and I want you to stand for it—put up your guns!"

There was a deep murmur. Colorado Bill swore a lurid oath. "Sheriff, you ain't being cinched by them scallywags! I'll tell a man you ain't! Plug Hat won't stand for that!"

The Kid smiled faintly. "They ain't cinched me yet!" he said. "But the jig is up for me in Plug Hat, old-timer, and I got to ride! I guess I'll remember you boys, and how you stood for me! But I ain't letting you spill your juices for me—not by long chalks! I reckoned I'd make a fight for it—but I can't do it! I surely can't. I guess I wouldn't want to live, if it cost a bunch of lives to save me! Put up your guns!"

It was the last order of the Sheriff of Plug Hat, and it was obeyed. The Kid turned back to the Rangers.

"You hear me, Jim Hall! Not a man here is goin' to handle a gun. You want me, dog-gone you! Get me if you can!"

He stepped back towards the sheriff's office. Mule-Kick Hall's hand fastened on a gun. Austin Red grasped his arm. The Plug Hat men had put up their guns; but if the Ranger captain had fired on the Kid then, every gun would have leaped out to avenge him. Hall gave his follower a fierce look, for a second; then he nodded. The Rio Kid disappeared into the building.

"We'll get him yet!" breathed Hall. "Ride round to cut him off from the prairie! Ride, damn you!"

With lowering faces the Plug Hat crowd watched the Rangers ride. They looked at the sheriff's office. From behind the building, behind the street, came a thudding of hoofs. The Rio Kid was riding.



Back to the Outlaw Trail!



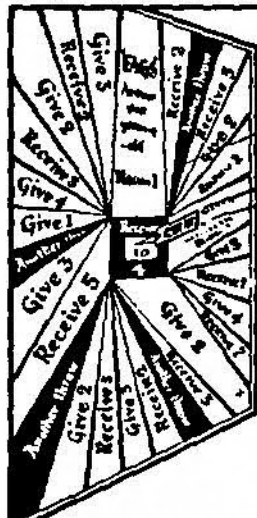
THE Kid was riding. Sheriff of Plug Hat no longer. He had sworn that he would stick to Plug Hat; that he was sheriff, and would stay sheriff; that never more would he ride an outlaw trail! But when it came to the test, when it was a question of seeing blood flow like water for his sake, lives spent in his cause, he could not stand for it! Better an outlaw trail than that!

He had a few minutes. The Rangers could not ride on through the plaza to the sheriff's office; they had to ride back, and round the shacks and cabins, to get to the rear of the building from the prairie. Plug Hat had obeyed the Kid's order, and guns had been holstered; but the atmosphere was

electric. Had the Rangers fired, had they attempted to ride through the crowd, there would have been an outbreak instantly. It was with sour and heavy hearts that the Kid's friends had obeyed him, and their looks at the Rangers were black and lowering. And Mule-Kick Hall was not looking for a rookus that could only have ended in the massacre of his troop. He wanted the Kid—and a desperate battle with Plug Hat was not the way to get him. Hall, bitter and inflexible as he was, was not the man to ask for trouble that he could do without. He rode away with his Rangers, leaving the Plug Hat men muttering and scowling by the rope barrier. They clattered back down the rugged street, and rode round the stragghing buildings, to get to the back of the sheriff's office. For there was no doubt that the Kid would ride now—and when he rode, it would be with the Rangers close behind. And he was not backing his faithful, swift-footed Side-Kicker now. Hall had little doubt of the outcome. And he was glad to get his men out of the cow town without a shot being fired.

The Kid, mounted on his pinto, rode for the prairie. Little heart had the Kid in the ride. He was in a mood to stand up to the Rangers, and go down in a last fight against odds. But he knew that if the fight began, Plug Hat would join in it—they would never keep out of it. It was for the sake of the town where he had been sheriff, for the sake of the men who had stood by him, and whose lives he would not spend, that the Rio Kid urged his pinto to a gallop across the prairie in the clear moonlight.

His face was set; his heart bitter. (Continued overleaf.)



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Fast behind him rode the Rangers. He rode on, going now at a fierce gallop, the Rangers stretching all out behind, and Plug Hat town dropped behind in the moonlight, out of sight under the rim of the prairie, and the Kid was alone with his comrades. Some of the Rangers, less well mounted than the rest, failed off; but Mule-Kick Hall and a dozen of them kept pace with the Kid riding with whip and spur. And Hall rode with set face and glinting eyes.

He had his man on the run again! He was close behind him with overwhelming force. At long last, after many bitter defeats, he was going to catch the outlaw of the Rio Grande.

Then the Kid swung his horse round, gun in hand, and faced the Rangers. His Colt flashed up to a level; the weapon that never missed was aimed at Mule-Kick Hall; the eye that never failed glanced along the barrel. And Jim Hall knew what was coming, and a cold, bitter smile curved his lips, and he fired even as the bullet sped from the walnut-butted gun. His bullet struck the Kid's Stetson.

The Kid laughed. His aim was truer. The Rangers reined in round him. Back from his saddle went Jim Hall. The Kid galloped off.

Hall, white as chalk, sprawling in the grass, cursed.

"After him! Ride him down! Leave me, you durned ginks! Get the Kid—get him!"

He choked with blood.

The Rangers dashed on, all but Austin Red, who stayed beside the fallen man. Hard they rode, after the setting figure in the moonlight.

The Rangers rode hard, but they did not run down the Rio Kid. In a belt of chaparral at the foot of the sierra, they lost him. They found the pinto, wandering loose. But that told them that the Kid had reached the place where he had hidden the grey mustang. Hard they rode and hunted for the man who had been sheriff of Plug Hat, and was now once more the Rio Kid, hunted for his life. But they found him not; and when later the news reached Plug Hat that the Kid had won out, and that Mule-Kick Hall lay in the Rangers' camp sore stricken, there was rejoicing in the cow town. Outlaw or no outlaw, the Rio Kid was still "Texas Brown" to the men of Plug Hat, and they did not forget their sheriff.

Far away from Plug Hat, by a lonely trail, the Rio Kid rode the grey mustang. Sheriff no longer; it had been a good game while it lasted, but it was over. But the Kid still had his guns and his mustang, and a high heart, and the world was before him.

THE END.

(Grand new series of sea-adventure yarns starts in next week's issue. You'll find "FIGHTING FISHER OF THE FISHERIES" a boy after your own heart!)

Three Chums A-Wheel!

(Continued from page 6.)

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The chums did. They bought a motor, van of their own. And their push and go was to be called into play many times before they were much older.

THE END.

(More about the "THREE CHUMS A-WHEEL!" in next week's issue.)

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