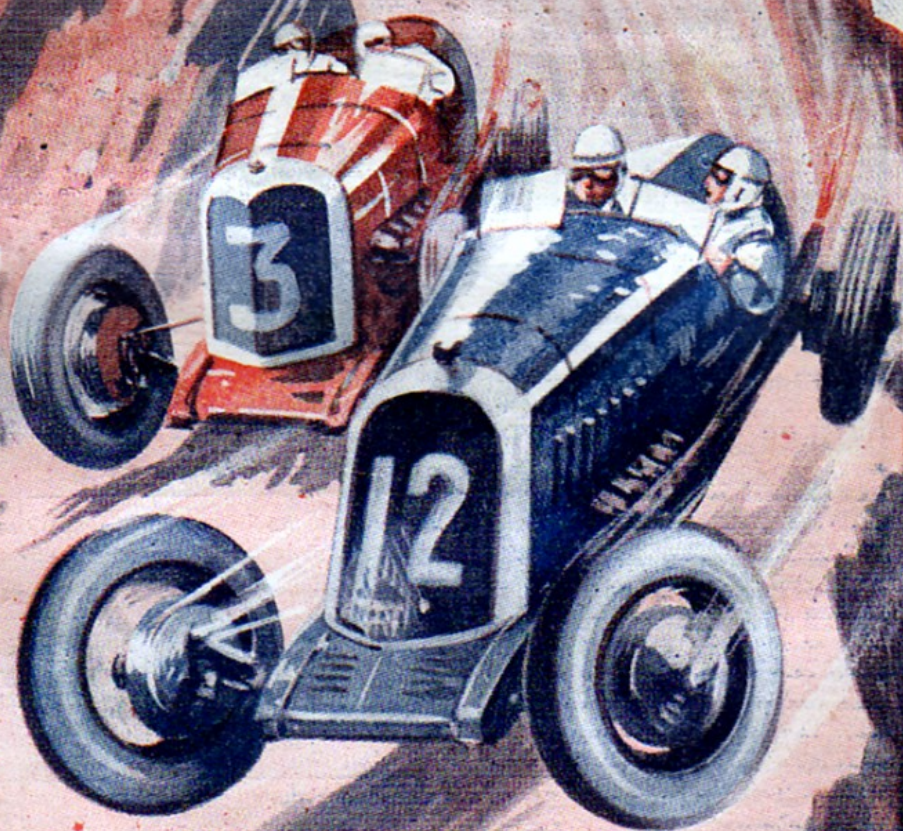


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# The POPULAR



MOTOR-RACING  
OVER MOUNTAINS!



now and in a bad temper. Apparently he had not liked being hog-tied like a steer and carried off on the cattlemen'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—gold-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 loosed cattelman 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 disorlerly 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 splitting, his hand shaking, from the bootleg liquor he had consumed overnight; and on top of that he had been roped in by a cattelman 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 off 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 cattelman 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 point 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 Sassafra 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 Sassafra 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 Sassafra 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.

(Now what's going to happen to the Rio Kid? He looks cornered for keeps now! See next week's roaring Western yarn!)