EASY AS PIE—BIG AWARDS—ENTER OUR COMPETITION
TO-DAY!

The POPULAR

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Week Ending September 13th, 1930. EVERY TUESDAY No. 607 (New Series).

THE BOY SHERIFF IN HOT WATER!

Another Ralph Redway Western Thriller.

OUTLAWS K.O'D BY OUTLAW!

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.

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 drawling, 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., air!" 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 the 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.

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Rounding up the Rustlers!

THE Rio Kid led the way in dense darkness. From the fissure in 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 figure 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 bootleg."

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

where he was, and Hall glanced back at him.

"You moseying along, sheriff?" he asked.

"I guess I'll root here, Mister Hall," answered the Kid. "Being sheriff, I ain't used to acting under any other guy's orders; and I guess you don't want to act under mine."

"You've said it," assented Hall, with a short laugh. "I guess this is my funeral now I've taken it in hand. Follow on, boys."

And the Ranger captain led his men down the slope into the locked canyon, and they disappeared into the shadows.

The Kid stood looking from the cavern's mouth, breathing hard. Near him, half-seen in the gloom, were the three Rangers left to watch. They had no suspicion of him; to them he was Texas Brown, Sheriff of Plug Hat. Likely enough they would not have known him even in the light; there were few men in Texas to whom the Kid's handsome face was known. Mule-Kick Hall was one of the few, and he knew the Kid as well as he knew his own face in the glass. But Mule-Kick was gone now—little dreaming that he had left behind him the outlaw whom he would rather have captured than all the cattle-lifters in the Lone Star State.

The Kid had come through the ordeal. He had no further concern about the rustlers and the stolen herd; he knew that that matter could safely be left in the hands of Jim Hall and his Rangers. It was the Kid's game to keep out of Hall's sight; he was done now with Cactus Carter's gang. He stood looking down into the canyon for a few minutes, and then turned.

"Say, sheriff, you beating it?" asked one of the Rangers, peering at him in the gloom.

"Feller," said the Kid, "I guess Jim Hall can handle this funeral, and he don't want any help from this baby. I've been on the trail forty hours, feller, and I guess that what I want most is to crawl into my leetle bunk. Jim Hall can see me agin at Plug Hat any time he wants. So-long!"

"So-long, sheriff!" said the Rangers.

The Kid walked back through the cavern, passed the rock doorway and the fissure, and strode out into the arroyo.

He breathed deep in the fresh open air.

"Say, Kid," he murmured to himself, as he moved down the steep arroyo in the dim starlight—"say, you got to watch out now—you sure got to watch out! Jim Hall is certain sure to ride to Plug Hat to see the sheriff; and it won't be dark then, and if he sees the sheriff—dog-gone my cats, I guess he will open his eyes some!"

The Kid laughed softly.

He strode away down the arroyo to the gulch below. In the gulch were tethered the Rangers' horses, with four men on guard over them. The Kid would have been glad to borrow a horse; but the less he saw of the Rangers, and the less they saw of him, the better he liked it. And he threaded his way silently among the rocks and passed them unseen.

As he tramped away down the gulch towards the prairie there was a sudden burst of rifle-fire in the quiet of the night.

The Kid stopped for a moment or two to listen.

Crack, crack, crack!

There was sudden and heavy firing, and it was evident that the Rangers were now at close quarters with the rustlers in the locked canyon. But the Kid had no doubt of the outcome of the conflict; the rustlers, taken by surprise and outnumbered, had no chance. With the firing still echoing and ringing in his ears, he tramped down the gulch to the prairie and set his face in the direction of the cow town of Plug Hat.

His brow was dark and his thoughts were busy as he neared the cow town. The Kid had plenty of food for thought. Now that Hall and the Rangers were on the spot it looked as if the Kid's game as Sheriff of Plug Hat was up. He had played a good game as sheriff, and he had Plug Hat—once the wildest camp in Texas—feeding from his hand. But that did not alter the fact that he was the Rio Kid, outlaw, with a reward of a thousand dollars on his head.

Prudence urged him to mount the grey mustang as soon as he reached the cow town and hit the horizon and escape the danger that was now close and pressing. But prudence never had weighed heavily with the Rio Kid. And it irked him to think of going back to the outlaw trail, to lonely camps in the chaparral, to the old hunted life. He thought of it, and thought of it again; but he shook his head, his face set and obstinate, and a glint in his eyes. He was no longer the Rio Kid; he was Texas Brown. Sheriff of Plug Hat—and Sheriff of Plug Hat he was going to stay, in spite of Mule-Kick Hall and all the Rangers in Texas!

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A Puzzle!

JIM HALL stood by the group of huts in the locked canyon under the big cottonwood as the sunrise glimmered over the buttes. There was a dark, thoughtful frown on the tanned face of the Ranger captain; he seemed like a man wrestling with some mental problem.

The fighting in the locked canyon had been short and sharp; the Sheriff of Plug Hat had delivered the rustlers fairly into the hands of the Rangers. Never dreaming that their secret retreat was known, thinking of anything but an attack, the cow-stealing gang had been drinking, smoking, and gambling at the huts when the Texas Rangers came on them. Three or four of the Rangers had been wounded in the brief resistance; five of the rustlers shot dead; the rest had put up their hands and surrendered. There were nine or ten prisoners on the hands of the Rangers, roped up safely and ready to be taken away to answer to the law. Stolen horses and stolen cows had been recovered; Mohave Dave and Buck Peters were sorting out the Bar-2 cows from the rest now, still busy.

Except for the fact that Cactus Carter was absent, the round-up had been complete; it was a clean wipe-out—and it was due, as Hall was very well aware, to Texas Brown, sheriff. Keen as his eyes were, determined as he was on a trail, Hall knew that he would never have discovered the secret rock door that gave admittance from the fissure into the cavern and opened the way to the hidden canyon. He had scored a complete success, and he owed it to the Plug Hat sheriff. Cactus Carter was still loose; but Hall figured that he would not be loose long. It was a triumph for the Texas Rangers; but it was not the thought of that that was now in Jim Hall's mind. His thoughts were running on the boy sheriff.

"Say, boss"—Austin Red came up to him—"I guess we've cleaned up hyer. We hitting the trail?"

Hall came out of his deep reverie.

"Not yet, Red."

"Mohave sure wants some of us to lend a hand driving his cows back to the Bar-2," said Red.

"When the time comes," answered Hall. "Jest at present the cows stay here, and Mohave along with them."

"Beddin' down here?" asked the Ranger, puzzled.

"We ain't got Cactus Carter yet," answered Hall. "I got it from the sheriff that he'd ridden over to White Pine, and was comin' back next day—that's to-day. I been questioning some of the guys we've roped in, and got it all down fine. We're getting Cactus with the rest—soon!"

"How come?" asked Red.

"Cactus and two more of the gang are 'way," said Hall. "They're expected back to-day. I guess they're going to walk into our hands, hombre."

Red grinned.

"Say, it will be some surprise for them to find us here!" he agreed. "I guess that guy Cactus has got his eyes peeled, though, and he won't walk into an ambush easy."

"They keep a man at the rock door in the cavern yonder on guard," said Hall. "When Cactus comes back he gives a signal outside, and the man opens the rock to let him in. I got it all from these guys. We ain't laying an ambush for Cactus in the arroyo; we're letting him tap on the rock and walk in; and then I guess we cinch him, and no powder burned."

"Some stunt!" agreed Red.

"Give the word to Mohave that the cows ain't to be driven yet; we stay here quiet till we get Cactus," said Jim Hall. "You'll get the hosses in hyer and shut the rock door—and clear up any sign we've left in the arroyo. I guess Cactus ain't going to see anything to frighten him when he comes home—not till we've got a cinch on him."

"You said it!" grinned Red.

"Hold on!" added Hall, as the Ranger was about to move away to carry out his orders. "I want a word with you, Red. You seen that sheriff guy at Plug Hat a week or two ago; I sent you up with a message from Blue Grass."

"I seen him," assented Red.

"It was dark last night; I didn't rightly see the guy," went on Mule-Kick Hall slowly. "I ain't never seen this Texas Brown that I know of, and all I've heard of him shows that he's a white man from the toes up. But——"

The Ranger captain paused.

Red looked at him in surprised inquiry. Like all the Rangers, Austin Red had a high opinion of the Sheriff of Plug Hat—the man who had brought law and order into the wildest cow town in Texas.

"Say, you ain't got anything agin this Mister Texas Brown?" asked Red.

"I guess not! And yet—— Say, he's a stranger to me," said Hall slowly. "But I been thinking. I guess I've struck that galoot some time afore, though I sure can't place him. I want to have a good look at him in the daylight—I surely do. You've seen him plain and clear?"

"Yep."

"What's he like?"

"He sure is a good-looker," said Red. "I'll say he's only a kid in years, but he sure is a full-sized man in everything else. Looks more like a puncher

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."

"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 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.

"Dog-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.

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 get 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. Me 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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