

THE BLAZING TRAIL OF THE WILD WEST

FACE HIGH

WESTERN COMIC N°3



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24 PAGES OF COMICS

PLUS

A TERRIFIC GUN-FIGHTING WESTERN STORY
BY THE FAMOUS AUTHOR,

FRANK RICHARDS

(AUTHOR OF BILLY BUNTER and CO.)





THE MAN IN THE FLOUR BAG

by Frank Richards.

"Lur up!"

Slick Dexter rapped out the words, suddenly and sharply.

For ten minutes or more, as he sat on the bench outside the bunk-house at the Circle-Bar, he had heard the squealing of the horse in the corral, to the accompaniment of heavy blows from a quirt. Cactus Pete had a heavy hand with a quirt; and a cruel hand with a horse. Of all the Circle-Bar bunch, there was only one whom Slick did not like, and that was Cactus Pete. A man whose temper was brutal, and who would break it upon an animal, get Slick's goat sorely. More than once, in the few days Slick Dexter had been on the ranch, he had been on the verge of trouble with Cactus.

But the boy puncher from Panhandle was a new hand on the Circle-Bar, and he did not have for trouble with the older hands. And it was against all the laws and customs of the cow country to interfere between a man and his critter. Even now, as he sat at breakfast under the bright morning sun of Texas, Slick tried to close his ears to those painful squeals from the corral. Five or six other punchers round him, shrugged their shoulders, or sneered; but not one of them made a move. A guy's critter was his critter! And perhaps it was not for Slick, a boy of sixteen, to chip in, especially as rancher Poindexter had put him on the pay-roll only a few days ago. He sat tight and chewed his bacon and beans, and sipped his coffee; but there was a flash in his handsome sunburnt face, and his eyes were gleaming; and at length he could stand it no longer, and he rose to his feet and set down his coffee-can. With a set brow he strode across to the gate of the corral, the other punchers staring after him.

Inside the corral fence, a horse, trail-roped to a peg in the earth, backed and reared and squealed. But the trail-rope held it from escape; and it could only back in a circle round the peg; and Cactus Pete, his hard tanned face red with rage, followed it up, lashing with the heavy quirt. A saddle lay on the ground. Cactus, concentrated on savagely punishing the horse, did not observe the slim boyish form that stepped in at the gate, till Slick's voice rapped out sharply: "Let up!"

Then he stared round.

"You talking to me?" he snapped.

"Sure!" answered Slick. "I guess that cayuse of yours has had enough, and some over. Let up with that quirt. If you can't keep off the fire-water, Cactus, and it makes you carry in the morning, you sure can't take it out of your critter that-a-way."

"I guess that critter started back-jumpin' when I was saddling him . . ." snarled Cactus.

"And I guess you started first with the quirt, which ain't the way to get a saddle on a cayuse, nowew," said Slick.

"Just let up!"

"Maybe you'll stop me!" jeered the burly cow-man.

"Maybe I will, if you don't let up!" retorted Slick. "I guess Mr. Poindexter would fire you from the bunch, if he saw you handling a horse that-a-way. Let up with that quirt."

Cactus Pete did not answer in words. His answer was to deal another lark with the quirt, with all the force of his arm; and the broncho yelped rather than squealed under the blow.

That was enough for Slick. He came at Cactus Pete with blazing eyes and clenched fists. Cactus Pete dropped the quirt, and faced up to him with huge knuckly fists clenched. The next moment they were fighting fiercely; while the broncho backing away as far as the trail-rope would allow, stood sweating and trembling.

Cactus Pete was twice Slick's weight and size. But he was heavy and clumsy, and the potent fire-water he had consumed over-night did not help him. Much to his surprise, his big knuckly fists were dashed aside, and a smaller but very hard fist landed between his eyes like the kick of a mule. Back on the old Panhandle, they knew that Slick Dexter, boy as he was, packed a man's punch. That punch almost lifted Cactus Pete, and flung him back with a crash against the corral fence.

He slumped there, staring speechlessly, his hand to a spinning head. Slick's eyes blazed down at him. He was ready for Cactus to get on his feet and carry on. But the burly cow-man stayed slumped where he was. There was a yellow streak in Cactus, as his cruelty showed; and that crashing punch from the Panhandle puncher was all he wanted, and more. He did not stir, and he did not reach for his gun. He sat and stared with evil eyes, his hand to his head.

II

"Slick!"

It was a calling voice, from outside the horse-corral—the voice of Rancher Poindexter, boss of the Circle-Bar. Slick turned from the sprawling cow-man, and hurried along the fence to the gateway, and looked out over the bar. He did not want Mr. Poindexter to come into the corral just then, and learn that there had been trouble between two members of his bunch.

"Slick! Where's that dog-goned kid puncher, Barney Cash?" Rancher Poindexter was an impatient man. "Ain't he out of his bunk yet?"

"I guess he's in the corral, sir!" came the foreman's voice.

Slick leaned out over the corral bar.

"Hyer, boss!" he called back.

The tall, grizzled rancher turned from the group at the bunkhouse, and came striding towards the corral gateway. There was a frown on his face; but it faded gay. The rancher had a temper which his bunch sometimes compared to the hot place with the lid off; but he like the boy puncher from the Panhandle, as all the outfit with one exception did.

He gave Slick a nod.

"Say, you finished your eats?" he asked.

"Yup!"

"Then I guess you can saddle up your bronc. I want a guy to ride over to Bullwhacker." The rancher lowered his voice a little. "You got to go to the bank for a roll of dollars to pay the bunch. You don't want to shout it out all over the town that you're riding with a thousand dollars in your rags. I guess there's plenty of holdovers around town, who'd ride after you for it."

Slick grinned.

"I guess I wouldn't shoot off my mouth a whole lot, sir, with a thousand bucks to look after, he said. "I'll sure fight out of Bullwhacker the minute I've cinched the roll at the bank, and burn the wind back to the ranch."

"Here's the draft," Mr. Poindexter handed over an envelope. Slick tacked it into the pocket of his chaps. Then, as the rancher was turning away, he spoke again.

"I take it very kindly of you, sir, that you trust me to ride with a thousand dollars," he said, "I'm a new guy in the bunch, and you ain't known me a week . . ."

"Aw, forget it!" growled the rancher. "You figure I don't know a straight guy when I see one? And I sure figure that if any rustler got after them dollars, the guy that wiped out the Judyva gang is the hombre to see them safe. Get on your cayuse and don't chew the rag foolish."

With that, Mr. Poindexter strode back to the ranch-house. Slick grinned again. Old Man Poindexter had a rough edge to his tongue, as well as to his temper; but like the rest of the bunch, he reckoned that he liked the Old Man a whole lot, rough tongue and temper and all. And as he went to saddle his broncho, his mind was made up that he was going to bring that roll of dollars safe to the ranch, if half the rustlers in Texas got wind of it and laid for him on the lonely trail. He did not give Cactus Pete another glance or another thought, as he saddled up, and rode away from the ranch at a gallop, on the trail to the distant cow-town.

III

HAND!

Slick Dexter, "kid" as he was, was not often taken by surprise. But that sudden shot from the chapparal did surprise him.

He had ridden into Bullwhacker, and collected the roll at the cow-town bank. It was safely stowed in the pocket of his goatskin chaps, when he remounted his broncho and hit the home-trail. He had not been five minutes in Bullwhacker and no guy there was wise in his business, excepting the cashier at the bank. He rode at an easy gallop on the twenty mile trail back to the ranch: by smelt prairie or shady chapparal. He was little more than half-way home, and riding a dinky trail where it wound through a wide stretch of chapparal, when the sudden shot came from a clump of post-oaks, and his broncho pitched forward and fell almost in its tracks.

Taken by surprise as he certainly was, Slick leaped clear, as the horse crashed, and landed on his feet. No one knew—no one could know—what he carried in his chaps; but he had been laid for in the dinky chapparal, and his horse shot dead under him. His hand flew to the six-gun in his low-slung holster, . . . but he did not draw the gun. From the post-oaks whence the shot had come, a man stepped out, and a revolver in his hand bore full on Slick. The puncher from Panhandle was quick on the draw; but he was beaten to it this time.

"Slick 'em up!"

Slowly, reluctantly, savagely, Slick raised his hands above his head. His eyes burned at the trail thief. Who he might be, had Slick guessing; for a four-bag was drawn down over his head, completely hiding his face; only two threatening eyes peering from the eye-holes out in it.

"You dog-goned geek!" said Slick, between his teeth. "You've made it last sickness for my critter . . ."

"I guess it will be last sickness for you, if you kick!" came a snarl from under the four-bag. "Keep them hands up if you don't want yases mighty sudden."

"What'll you be wanting?" snapped Slick. "You figure that a puncher is worth holding up in the trail?"

"Aw, can it! Hand over that roll, pronto."

Slick gave a start. Against all probability, against all possibility as he would have reckoned, the rancher was wise to the roll he had brought from the cow-town bank. It was not for a cow-puncher's pay that he was held up. The man in the four-bag was after the rancher's roll.

The man came closer, the revolver at a level. For a moment, Slick's life hung on a thread—he could scarcely resist the fierce desire to reach for his gun. The boss of the Circle-Bar had trusted him to bring the roll safe to the ranch—trusted him though he knew him so little. And he was failing in his trust. He was held up and robbed on the trail. Like a tenderfoot from Tepehuan. Almost he chanced it, and reached for the gun. But it was sudden death, and he knew it and sudden death would not save the dollars. His eyes burned, but he kept his hands above his head: as the trail-thief, keeping him covered with the six-gun in his right hand, grabbed the roll from the pocket of the chaps with his left. Slick trembled with rage. But his hands remained above his head.

The trail-thief, with a grunt of satisfaction, thrust the roll into a pocket. The leveled revolver never wavered. He jerked away Slick's gun, and tossed it into the foliage of the chapparal. Then there was a hoarse chuckle under the four-bag.

"I guess you can head it to the ranch, puncher," With that, and still keeping the boy puncher covered, he backed into the thickets and disappeared.

Slick, breathing rage, lowered his hands. From beyond the trees, came a beat of horse's hoofs. The trail-thief had a cayuse at hand: and he was gone. Slick, with gritting teeth, searched in the thicket for his gun. But it was long before he found it: and the hoof-beats had long died away. His horse was black, as he set out, at last, on the long weary tramp on foot back to the ranch—with the news for Rancher Poindexter that he had failed in his trust, and lost him a thousand dollars.

IV

RANCHER POINDEXTER sat in his verandah, tilting his rocker, and smoking a Mexican cigar. His eyes were on the trail that wound away across the prairie towards the distant cow-town of Bullwhacker. He had expected Slick back from town before this; but the boy puncher had not yet returned. But far off on the rolling prairie, the rancher's keen eyes, under his grizzled brows picked up an unusual sight—the nodding Stetson of a man tramping alone. It was so unusual, or rather unknown, for a guy to be seen on foot on a Texas prairie, that the Old Man stared hard: and he stared harder as the weary wayfarer came nearer, and he recognised Slick Dexter, the new hand in the bunch. It looked as if Slick had lost his cayuse on the trail home from Bullwhacker; and the rancher wondered, for he knew that the puncher from Panhandle had a master's hand with a horse.

But his attention was drawn from the weary puncher on the trail, by the sound of voices under the verandah rail. One was that of Barney Cash, foreman of the ranch: the other, the sulky tones of Cactus Pete.

"You dog-goned gink!" the foreman was saying. "You go riding around promiscuous, jest to please yourself, and leave other hands to do your work. You was wanted to drive cross to Mesquite Creek, and I've had to send Yuba Hill. I guess you're asking to be tread off this ranch."

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"I'll say I'm ready to ask the Old Man for my time, if I ain't wanted!" asserted Cactus Pete. "And I'll tell a man, Barney Cash, that I've had all I want of your chin, and of the Old Man's box, and I'm sure ready to tell him so."

Up from his rocker rose Rancher Poindexter, his grizzled brows contracted, his eyes glancing like steel under them. Less than that, from a guy in the bunch, was needed to rouse his ire. He leaned over the verandah rail, glared down at Cactus Pete, and shouted:

"Say, what's that, you dog-goned, all-fired, pie-faced geck? You won't have to ask for your time, you ornery s allywag. You'll take your time, now, you Pete, and you'll beat it off'n this ranch pronto, or I'll straddle you a few with a squirt and set you going. You Barney Cash!" He shouted to the foreman, "You pay off that pesky gink here and now."

"Sure boss!" answered Barney.

Cactus Pete stood smiling and sneering under the rancher's glare. But there was a cunning gleam in his narrow eyes. Rancher Poindexter turned his glare from him, to a dusty figure that came tramping up, almost limping from the long trail. Tramping over rugged prairie in a cow-puncher's high-heeled boots was hard going, and Slick was feeling it. And the rough edge of the rancher's tongue was ready for him.

"You Slick! You lost your cayuse?" snorted the rancher, "Search me! Didn't they teach you how to ride, back on the Panhandle, where you was raised?"

Slick breathed hard.

"They sure did boss!" he answered, quietly. "But I got to tell you that a darned rafter shot my cayuse under me, on the home-trail, and hold me up for the dollars!"

The rancher's eyes glittered under his bushy grey brows.

"What you giving me?" he snapped, "Nobody knowed you was carrying that roll — not even a man in the corral here. How'd a rafter know?"

Slick shook his head.

"That 's got me guessing sir!" he answered, "But he knowed, and he held me up with a gun, and cinched the roll, sir. And I'm powerful sorry I've lost it for you, sir."

Poindexter stood staring at him down over the rail. Barney Cash stared at him, perhaps with a glimmer of doubt. The red flashed into Slick's face. Did they — could they figure that he had cinched that roll of bills, and returned to the ranch with a lie on his lips? There came a sneering laugh from Cactus Pete.

"How! You want to think up a better tale than that, Slick Dexter. I reckon if I was Mr. Poindexter, I'd make you cough up that roll of bills, pronto."

Slick's eyes blazed at him. The mark of his knuckles was on the cow-man's tanned face: bitter malice in the narrow eyes. This was Cactus's chance to blacken the boy puncher who had given him the K.O. in the corral that morning. Cactus was not losing that chance. Perhaps it might have been better if he had.

Only for a moment Slick's eyes blazed at him. Then he turned to the rancher.

"Mr. Poindexter, sir, you wouldn't believe . . . " he faltered.

"Aw, pack it up!" snapped Mr. Poindexter, "Ain't I told you I know a straight guy when I see one? You Cactus, you quit chewing the rag—you're fired from this ranch, and nothing's wanted from you. Say, you Slick, what was the guy like that cinched the roll? I guess he can be hunted."

"I wouldn't know, sir," said Slick. "He had a four-bag over his face, and I wouldn't know him from Adam. He took care of that, sir."

"It's a queer story, Slick, seeing that nobody was willing to that roll, but I believe every word of it," said Mr. Poindexter.

"That's kind of you, sir," said Slick. "It beats me to a frazzle, sir, how any guy knowed about that roll, but he knowed all right. But if you trust me, sir . . ."

"Sure!" snapped the rancher.

Another jeering laugh came from Cactus Pete. Again Slick's eyes turned on him. And then, suddenly, in a flash he knew! Back into his mind it came, that Cactus Pete had been sprawling inside the corral fence, while the rancher was speaking to him at the gate that morning. He had heard—Nobody else knew that Slick was riding to Bullwhacker for a roll of a thousand dollars, but Cactus Pete knew! It came to Slick in a flash of certainty: and his hand shot to his six-gun.

The next second, that six-gun was looking Cactus Pete in the face, with the boy puncher's eyes glancing over the leveled barrel.

"Hands up, you!" said Slick: "Hands up, Cactus Pete, or I'll drop you in your tracks."

The cow-man stared at him: but his hands went up. There was deadly menace in the eyes that glared over the gun.

"Say Slick . . . " began Barney Cash. The rancher interrupted him.

"You Slick, what's this circus? Put up that gun you young geck!" rapped Mr. Poindexter, "Cactus is fired, and he's going . . ."

"Yep! I guess he's all set to quit, with a thousand dollars stacked in his shirt," said Slick, savagely. "That guy in the chapparral sure was about his size, and I'm telling you he knowed I was riding to town for the dollars, and no other horse knowed. You keep them paws up, Cactus Pete!" he added, grimly, as the cow-man made a movement. "You got your sides if you reach for a gun, you god-darned coyote. You Barney Cash, you go through his rag! I'm telling you that that's the galoot that held me up in the chapparral and cinched the roll."

"It's a darned lie!" yelled Cactus, furiously, "and I ain't staying here to hear no more from you, you dog-goned Panhandle geck. I'm going for my cayuse . . ."

"You take a step and you'll drop where you stand!" said Slick, "You ain't walking off with Mr. Poindexter's roll, you trail thief!"

"Say, Slick, that guy was sure out riding on his own today," said Barney Cash, "You figure . . . !"

"I'm telling you that's the guy!" snapped Slick.

"Search him, Barney!" snapped Mr. Poindexter, from the verandah. "I guess it looks like it, him asking for his time just after the hold-up. Maybe he's honing to travel with a thousand dollars in his name. Search him."

Cactus Pete breathed fury and alarm, as the burly foreman of the Circle-Bar stepped up to him. In sheer desperation he reached for the Colt in his belt. Bang!

The roar of Slick's six-gun was followed by a wild yell from Cactus. His hand was almost on his Colt when Slick pulled trigger, and the bullet tore a strip of skin from his trigger-finger. He clasped his right-hand with his left, yelling with pain.

"Aw, pack up the howls!" snapped Slick, contemptuously. "You ain't hurt a whole lot, Cactus, though I guess you won't pull a trigger agin for a month of Sundays. You get that roll Barney."

There was no more resistance from Cactus Pete. The Circle-Bar foreman groped and from the cow-man's inner pocket, drew a roll of bills. He passed it up to Mr. Poindexter, who examined it and nodded.

"That's sure the roll!" said the rancher, "You going to tell me that this here roll of a thousand bucks is yours, Cactus?" Cactus replied only with a groan and a curse.

"Barney," rapped the rancher, "Call the boys, and see that dog-goned thief off'n the ranch. I guess you want to take your quirts to him."

"Sure, boss!" grinned Barney.

Slick Dexter walked away to the bunk-house. He was in need of rest and oats, after that weary trail on feet across the prairie. But his sunburnt face was cheery and contented. He had lost that roll for his boss, but he had found it again: and Cactus Pete, the horse who had worn the four-bag, was gone, fleeing with half-a-dozen tracking quirts behind him. The boy puncher from panhandle was through with his enemy on the Circle-Bar.

THE END