

THE BLAZING TRAIL OF THE WILD WEST

ACE HIGH

WESTERN COMIC N°7



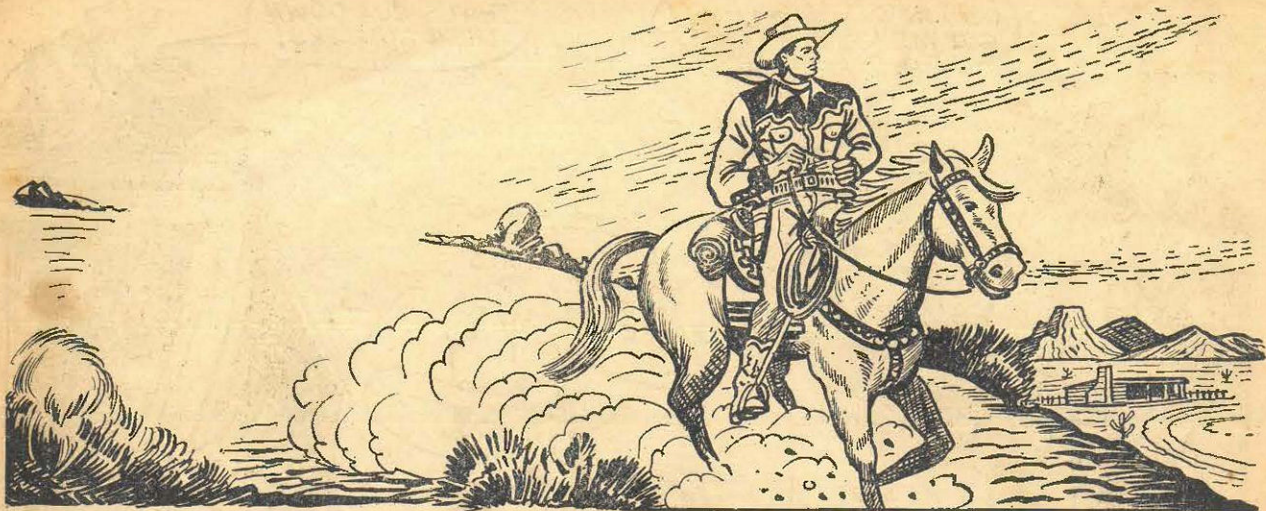
TERRIFIC WESTERN ACTION COMIC

PLUS

A GRAND STORY BY FAMOUS
FRANK RICHARDS



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FROM FOE TO FRIEND

By FRANK RICHARDS.

"WHAT'S the trouble, Barney?" asked Slick Dexter.

The foreman of the Circle-Bar snorted.

"Trouble enough, you young geck!" he answered.

"And you ain't made it no better. I guess it was you put the lid on."

Slick raised his eyebrows, inquiringly.

Every hombre on the Circle-Bar knew that there was trouble in the air that morning. They had seen Barney Cash standing in the verandah of the ranch-house, and Old Man Poindexter talking to him. The boss of the Circle-Bar had a temper, and a raw edge to his tongue; and his foreman had been getting the benefit of both. Barney's brow was dark as he came away. Generally he had a cheery nod for Slick, who, boy as he was, was as good a puncher as any man in the bunch. But now he gave him a black look.

"How come?" asked Slick.

"It's more trouble with them jaspers over at the Lazy-O!" snapped Barney, "Their dog-goned foreman, Yucca Bill, figures that he can feed his cows on our ranges. We've had to drive them off the Pollo range, and now—" Barney snorted again, "Now our cows have been driven. A hundred head of cattle, driven off into the hills, and I guess them rocks don't leave no trail for a guy to follow I'll say the Old Man is horn mad about it."

"Rustled?" asked Slick.

"Aw, forget it," snapped Barney, "They're a rough-neck bunch over at the Lazy-O, but they ain't rustlers. They've jest driven the cows and lost them in the hills for us. There's always been trouble with the Lazy-O about the ranges; and I guess Yucca Bill is on the war-path now, since you lassoed him and ran him on a rope, you young gink."

"He sure begged for it," said Slick.

"Mebbe he did—but there was trouble enough, afore you put a finger in the flapjacks!" growled Barney, "I'm telling you there's a hundred cows been drove, and we all know it was the Lazy-O bunch that did it, though there ain't no proof to put up to a sheriff. Who's going to root them cows out of the hills, with no trail that an Apache or a Yaqui could pick up? The Old Man's been blowing off his mouth some, I'm telling you."

Slick grinned.

He was aware that the Old Man had been "blowing off his mouth" at Barney. Now Barney, in his turn, was "blowing off his mouth," at Slick. Tempers were rather on edge at the Circle-Bar, since the news had come in of the missing herd.

"You dog-goned, pesky little piecan," roared Barney, evidently irritated by the boy puncher's grin, "You figure it's a joke for the boss to lose a hundred head of cows, and them jaspers at the Lazy-O laughing? You figure it's funny, you pesky little piecan from Panhandle?"

"Sure nix!" said Slick, soothingly, "But—"

"It was you riz their dander to this extent, roping in Yucca like you did!" snorted Barney, "Wall, now you can saddle up, and ride to the Pollo hills, and look for them cows. I guess you'll trail them in about a month of Sundays, and then some, and a few more. But don't come back to this ranch without them cows, young Slick—you hear me shout? Grin as much as you like, you pesky little piecan, but if you come back without them cows, I'll sure take a quirt to you, and mebbe you'll grin some more!"

With that, the angry foreman stamped away, in the worst temper ever. Slick whistled. Trailing mavericks in the rocky recesses of the Pollo hills was no easy task, hardly even a possible one. But it was up to the boy puncher from the Panhandle, if it could be done; and he lost no time in saddling-up Kicker. Barney, from the door of the bunk-house, gave him a glare, as he led out his broncho, and shouted;

"Look out for a quirting, if you come back without them cows." And there was a laugh from half-a-dozen Circle-Bar punchers. Slick grinned, and waved his hand, and rode away at a gallop, heading for the hills that rose against the blue sky of Texas long miles to the west.

II.

CRACK!

"Gee whiz!" breathed Slick.

The bullet that whistled through the sunny air tipped the Stetson on his curly head. With Kicker's reins in his left, Slick shot his right to the six-gun in his holster, and stared round in the blinding sunshine for the enemy.

He was a good fifteen miles from the ranch. On the Pollo range, on the banks of the Rio Pollo, he had easily picked up sign of the herd that had been driven off, until it reached the hills. There, on sun-baked rocky ground as hard as iron, it was wholly lost. Slick now was riding up the steep bank of the Pollo river, where it came surging down from the sierra, in a rugged canyon walled in by steep rocky sides. Deeper in the hills, there were patches of feed for cattle in some of the gulches, and the boy puncher hoped to find traces of the missing herd sooner or later. He was looking for cows, and he was not looking for danger; and the sudden shot that spun the Stetson on his head startled him.

"Yucca Bill, by the great horned toad!" muttered Slick. His eyes picked up three horsemen in the distance up the rocky canyon.—three punchers in chaps and Stetsons. One of them, a burly, brawny six-footer, was Yucca Bill, foreman of the Lazy-O ranch, and there was a smoking six-gun in his hand,—it was he who had fired, pulling his gun and pulling trigger at sight of the boy puncher from the Circle-Bar. And as Slick stared at him, he gave his horse the spur, and came thundering down the rocky canyon at a gallop, firing as he came. Crack! crack! crack! rang the six gun, bullets spattering on the rocks round Slick Dexter. After Yucca rode the other two Lazy-O punchers, but they were not firing. It was only Yucca Bill who had sworn to "shoot on sight" the boy puncher who had roped him like a steer and run him on the rope.

Slick's eyes blazed, and he lifted his gun to return the fire. But he lowered it again. There was bitter blood between the Circle-Bar and the Lazy-O; the dispute about the feeding-ranges had been long and bitter. But it had not yet come to shooting; and Slick did not want to be the first to begin, if he could help it. Neither was it attractive to begin a gun-battle one against three. It went against the grain to turn his back on an enemy; but three guns to one was long odds, and he would have hated to see the Lazy-O punchers, rough-necks as they were, go down under his fire. And he reckoned that Kicker could show a clean pair of heels to any cayuse on the Lazy-O. He set his jaw, as he felt the wind of a bullet by his cheek; tempted to make a gun-battle of it. He checked the impulse, and whirled Kicker towards the bank of the Pollo, rushing deep and rapid down the canyon, and rode into the river. Another bullet grazed his Stetson, as the broncho plunged into deep water.

Few would have cared to ride the Rio Pollo. The river was wide and deep, the current strong, fed by rain in the hills. But Slick Dexter was one of the few. He knew that he could trust Kicker; and he reckoned that with the river between, the Lazy-O gang would give up. And the gallant broncho did not fail him. The rushing water swept over his saddle, drenching him to the waist; and as Kicker struggled in the current, he gave both hands to the reins, and the six-gun slipped from his grasp. He had no time to heed it; for once out in the rushing waters, he had to concentrate on reaching the other bank alive. Three minutes of terrible peril; and then the broncho was scrambling out of the river on the opposite bank; and Slick leaped from the saddle, knee-deep in water, to help the horse ashore on the rocks. Breathless, drenched and dripping, he drew the panting broncho into cover of a mass of boulders, as the Lazy-O riders came thundering to a halt on the other bank.

"Good old hoss!" murmured Slick, caressing the broncho's dripping neck, "Good old cayuse! Kicker, old-timer, I guess we sure put paid to them jaspers."

He peered round a corner of the rocks, and grinned as he watched the Lazy-O trio on the other bank. They had halted there, and were staring across the river. Yucca Bill's enraged voice came to Slick's ears across the Pollo.

"Dog-gone him! I guess he figures that he's beaten us to it, but he ain't, not by a jugful!"

"He sure is no slouch, Yucca—he can sure ride!" said one of the Lazy-O punchers, "I'll say there ain't another guy in this section would ride the Pollo."

"Aw, can it, Colorado!" snapped Yucca, "I guess a Lazy-O man can ride where a Circle-Bar man can ride, and him a kid at that."

"Forget it, Bill!" said the other puncher, "I'm telling you, I ain't riding the Pollo—I sure ain't honing to be washed out dead and drowned at Bullwhacker."

"Count me out!" agreed Colorado.

Yucca Bill spat out an oath.

"I'm telling you, I'm getting that Circle-Bar jasper!"

he roared, "You figure I'm letting that hombre ride free, after he roped me up and ran me like a steer?"

"You sure started the rookus, Bill, and he only gave back what you handed out to him. And I'm telling you, you can't ride the Pollo."

"Forget it!" snarled Yucca Bill. And with that he put his horse to the river, and rode headlong into the Rio Pollo, as Slick had done.

The other two sat in their saddles and watched him, evidently having no intention of following. But the foreman of the Lazy-O was desperately determined to wreck his grudge against the Panhandle puncher, and he did not hesitate. Once, twice, he was almost swept away by the rapid current; but still he struggled on, with set teeth and gleaming eyes; and it looked as if he would make the grade.

"Sho!" murmured Slick, as he watched from his side of the Rio Pollo. And he whistled softly. Watching the burly foreman of the Lazy-O, he reckoned that Yucca Bill would make it. And Slick had lost his gun in the rushing river; and was now unarmed; while Yucca's was safe in his holster, and ready for his hand. Slick whistled again.

"Old hoss," he said, "I guess we got to beat it, and we got to beat it quick. If we don't beat it good and quick, old hoss, that bonehead will be filling this baby full of holes like he was a colander. But he's sure welcome to, old hoss, if he can run us down in the hills."

And Slick remounted the broncho, and dashed away, into a winding gulch that led out of the canyon. The crash of hoof-beats floated back to Yucca Bill, as he struggled out of the river. And Slick, as he rode away into the depths of the wild hills, caught the ring of hoofs on the rocks behind him, and knew that the Lazy-O foreman was in full chase. And Slick rode hard and fast; with only the speed of his horse to save him from the six-gun in the grip of Yucca Bill.

III.

"JUMPIN' catamounts!" gasped Slick Dexter.

He dragged in Kicker, with a wrench on the reins, that almost rolled the broncho over on his haunches. And only just in time.

He was riding at a gallop, along a deep narrow arroyo walled in by high precipitous rocks. What lay ahead of him, he did not know; the Pollo sierra was new country to the puncher from Panhandle. It was what lay behind him that worried Slick; for he could hear the thunder of hoofs on the rocky ground, and knew that Yucca Bill was not far away. Once a bullet hummed by, as the Lazy-O foreman caught a glimpse of his Stetson. Yucca Bill was riding him down to death unless Kicker's speed could save him; and Slick rode hard. With a gun in his hand, he could have turned at bay; but he had no gun, and he could only ride for his life. The winding arroyo made a sudden turn, and as he swept round the bend, he dragged on the reins in wild haste. The ravine ended in a wide yawning barranca—a deep, wide chasm that no horse could leap; and in a moment more, horse and rider would have been plunging down to death on the rocks a hundred feet below.

But he reined in Kicker just in time.

Along the face of the cliff, overhanging the yawning barranca, ran a ledge—not more than three or four feet wide. That was wild riding, for the surest-footed horse; but to stop, was to stop bullets, and Slick pushed his broncho out on the ledge, at a walk. Louder and clearer, from the arroyo he had left behind him, came the thunder of pursuing hoofs.

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"Sho!" ejaculated Slick.

He pulled in Kicker. He did not figure that there was further peril from Yucca Bill. Yucca was coming on at a mad gallop, and the moment he came round the bend of the cliff, the barranca would be in front of him; and unless he reined in with lightning swiftness as Slick had done, he was a lost man. He would not have a split second to drop his six-gun and give both hands to the reins. Grimly, Slick watched the sharp turn of the cliff, knowing well that the furious rider behind him was riding to sudden distraction.

Clatter, clatter, rang the rapid hoofs, as Yucca came thundering on. Horse and rider came in sight, and Slick saw the colour fade in the Lazy-O foreman's tanned face, as the abyss yawned fairly under his horse's muzzle. Only for a second—for the next, horse and rider were over the edge.

It was on impulse that Slick acted then. Yucca was his pitiless enemy, riding him to death. But the boy puncher could not see him plunge down into space, to crash on the sharp rocks far below, if he could help him. There was a chance, if he acted with lightning speed—and it was like lightning that Slick's hand shot to the lasso coiled at his saddle-bow; like lightning that he cast the rope, with the surest hand in Texas.

The riata flew, the noose dropping over Yucca Bill's Stetson, over his broad shoulders, and gripping round his body, even as he went headlong down into space.

The rope tautened, plucking the rider from the saddle. Kicker, accustomed to the sudden jerk of the rope when a steer was roped in, planted his feet firmly to take the strain; the end of the lasso, secured to the saddle, held fast Yucca Bill, at the other end of the rope, swung in space, as his horse went whirling down to the bottom of the gulf.

Held by the riata, the Lazy-O foreman swung against the rocky side of the barranca, earth and sky spinning round him.

"Steady, Kicker, old hoss!" murmured Slick.

And Kicker stood as firm as a rock, on the narrow ledge the rope taut from the saddle, Yucca Bill swinging at the end of it.

Slick dismounted, and grasped the rope on the rocky edge of the chasm. He was strong and sinewy; but he needed all his strength and all his sinew, to draw up the bulky foreman of the Lazy-O. Slowly, but surely, he drew him up, till Yucca Bill, dazed and dizzy and white as chalk, was able to grasp the edge of rock, and drag himself to safety, with the help of Slick's ready hand. And then he lay on the rock, panting and panting and panting, while the boy puncher from Panhandle stood watching him with a whimsical smile.

IV.

"SEARCH me!" muttered Yucca Bill.

He staggered to his feet.

Slick led his broncho back into the arroyo. He had saved the life of the enemy who had been riding him down to death. The danger was over, for Yucca Bill's six-gun lay with his dead horse, a hundred feet down in the barranca. But Yucca was not thinking of his gun now. There was a strange expression on his tanned face; but his look was no longer hostile. He tramped after the boy puncher into the ravine.

"Say, kid!" he called, as Slick put his foot to the stirrup. Slick looked round, "Say, you don't want to burn the wind—I ain't gunning after you no more, you young gink, after what you done. You ain't no call to be afeared."

"I guess I ain't afeared a whole lot, feller," drawled Slick. "But I got to ride, to look for my boss's cows."

"Hold in a piece," said Yucca. "You young geck, you roped me in once, and I swore to shoot you at sight; but, by the great horned toad, I'm powerful glad now that you're no slouch with a rope. I guess no other guy in Texas could have got me as you did. I'll say you learned how to handle a riata, on the Panhandle. You saved my life,—and me gunning after you to make you buzzard's meat."

"You said it!" agreed Slick.

"Wal, I sure ain't gunning after you no more," said Yucca, "and I guess I'm going to tell the Lazy-O boys to clear of Circle-Bar ranges, after this. And—," He paused a moment, and then grinned, "You combing the hills for them cows that's missing from the Pollo range?"

"Sure!" said Slick.

"Mebbe you'd like a pointer where to look for them?"

"Surest thing you know."

"You ride back to the Pollo, and follow the river three-four miles, till you hit a creek, and foller the creek, and mebbe you'll raise that herd in a canyon where there's feed and water," said Yucca Bill, "I got an idea that them cows is around that spot."

Slick chuckled.

"I reckon you'd know!" he agreed, "Heap of thanks, old-timer, So-long." And he mounted Kicker, and, with a wave of the hand to the foe whom he had made a friend, rode away at a gallop.

V.

BARNEY, you grouching old geck—!"

Barney Cash, in the bunk-house at the Circle-Bar, stared round, at a fresh young sunburnt face that looked in at the doorway. He gave Slick a glare.

"You!" he snorted.

"Jest me!" agreed Slick.

The Circle-Bar foreman reached for his quirt.

"You pesky, dog-goned, gol-darned little piecan from Panhandle, didn't I shout out that I'd quirt you if you came back without them cows!" he roared, "Now you got it coming!"

"Aw, forget it, old-timer!" grinned Slick, "Step out, Barney, and I guess you'll see them cows that was drove from the Pollo range—I've sure herded them home."

Barney stared at him, and stepped out. He stared still more blankly at a herd of a hundred cows. He stared at the cows, and stared at Slick, and stared at the cows again. And Slick, grinning, led his broncho to the corral, and left him to stare.

THE END.