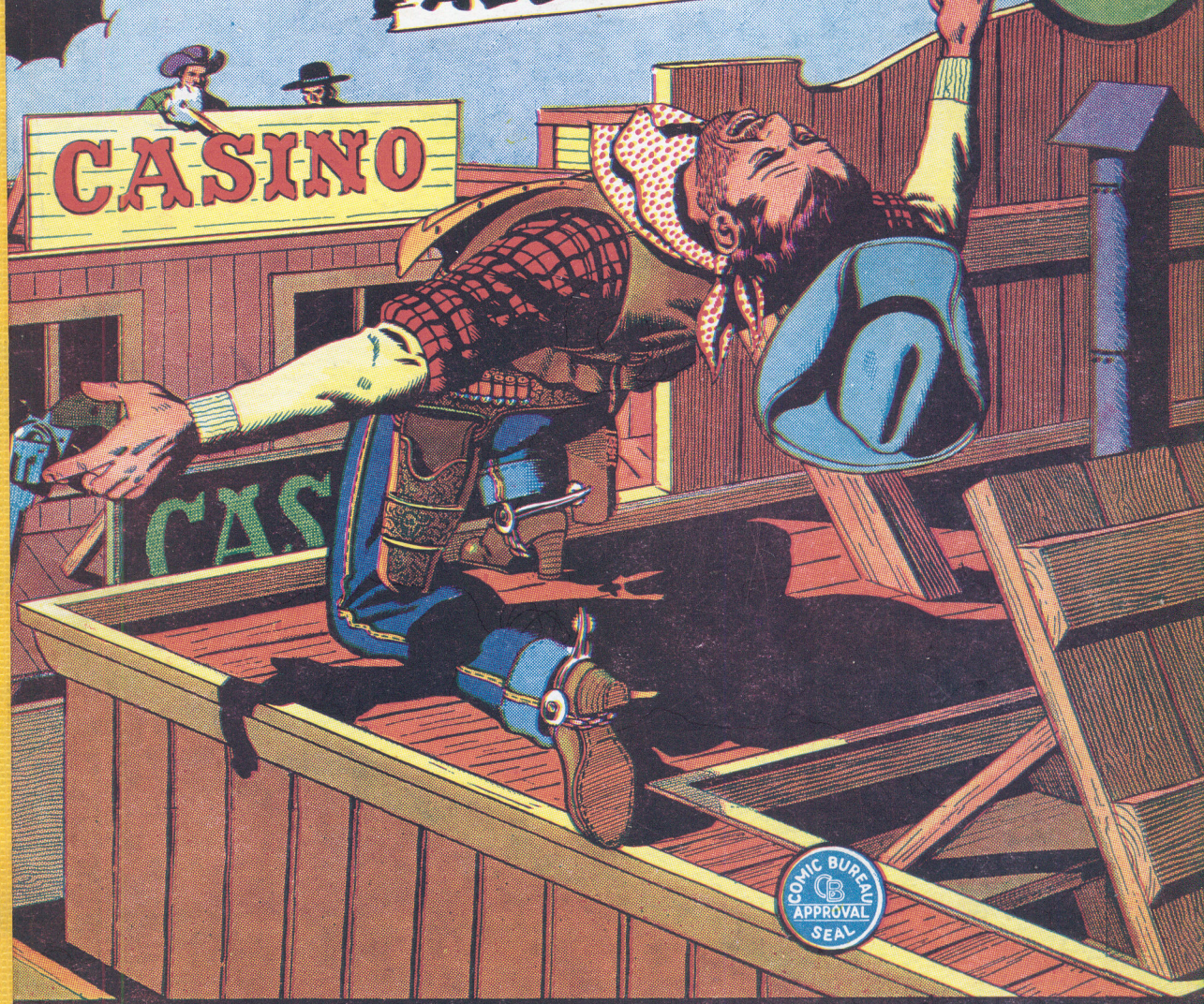


# Sharp-Shooter WESTERN

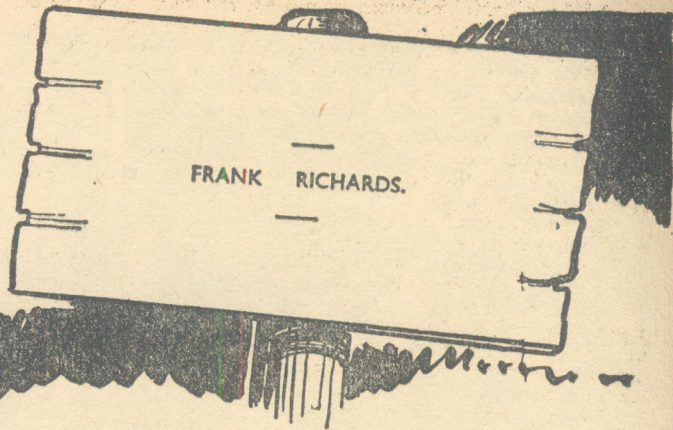
ALBUM

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ACTION PACKED SHARP-SHOOTING TALES





## RUN ON THE ROPE

"Say, Slick!"

Slick Dexter was saddling-up his broncho, Kicker, in the corral at the Circle-Bar, when Barney Cash looked in over the rail, and called.

Slick's boyish face was bright and cheery. He was booked to ride over to the Lazy-O that morning, with a message from the boss, which was a change from punching cows on the ranges. He glanced round at the foreman's call.

"Shoot!" he said.

"I guess you want to watch out, at the Lazy-O, Slick!" said Barney, "They're a rough crowd—rough and tough—and Yucca Bill their foreman, is the roughest and toughest in the bunch. You being a kid, and looking a tenderfoot, I allow that crowd might figure on having some fun with you."

Slick laughed.

"Sure I'm rising sixteen, Barney, which ain't exactly a kid," he answered, "And if I look tender, I guess I'd be tough to chew."

"Mebbe," said Barney, with a shake of the head, "But I savvy that Lazy-O bunch, Slick. You walk careful and speak soft when you see Yucca Bill. We've had trouble with that bunch, feeding their cattle on our ranges, and they don't love us a whole lot. Mebbe you'd like to ask Mr. Poindexter to send a growed man over, Slick, instead of you."

Slick Dexter's smiling face set grimly.

"Forget it," he said, "If I ain't a growed man, I guess I can keep my end up with any growed man in Texas. I've seen that guy Yucca on Main Street at Bullwhacker, and I allow he looks some bulldozer. But he ain't got me scared, Barney."

"You got to see him," said the Circle-Bar foreman, "His boss is away most times at Austin, and Yucca runs that ranch like it was his own. And I'll say that Mr. Poindexter's letter won't please him any, seeing that it's a warning to keep his herds off'n our ranges. I guess his dander will be riz. Why, I wouldn't put it past that guy to take a quirt to a kid like you."

Slick's jaw squared.

"If that guy takes a quirt to me, Barney, I guess he will find out sudden that I pack a punch that will hurt him a few," he said, "Don't you worry any, old-timer; I'll tell a man, they won't eat me alive on the Lazy-O."

Barney Cash nodded, and said no more. But he shook his head, as Slick led out his broncho at the corral gate, and mounted to ride. As the boy puncher from Panhandle cantered away on the ten-mile trail to the Lazy-O ranch, Barney, and Red, and half-a-dozen other Circle-Bar punchers, watched him go, till his Stetson disappeared beyond the waving grass. But if Barney was worried, Slick was not; his sunburnt face was cheery as he rode under the Texas sun-blaze.

### II

SLICK DEXTER rode up to the Lazy-O, stared at by three or four cow-men lounging by the door of the bunk-house. He made a handsome figure, in his blue shirt, goatskin chaps, and neckscarf fixed with a gold pin, clean and neat from head to foot; a contrast to the Lazy-O men who were watching him ride up. Slick's keen eyes ran over them, and he guessed that he had never seen a rougher bunch in all Texas. But rough looks had no terrors for the boy puncher. He drew rein, and swept off his Stetson in polite salute.

"Say, you'uns, is the boss around?" he asked.

"Who'd you be, and how come your schoolmarm let you out?" asked one of the Lazy-O punchers, and there was a laugh from the others. Slick's sunburnt face remained good-humoured.



"I'll say I'm Slick Dexter, from the Circle-Bar," he answered, "And I got a note from Mr. Poindexter to your boss, if he's around, and if he ain't, I'm asking to see your foreman."

There was a lowering of brows, at the mention of the Circle-Bar.

"Wal, I guess you'll have to ride as fur as Austin, if you want to see the boss, but Yucca sure is around," said the Lazy-O puncher. He put his head in at the bunkhouse doorway, and called, "Say, Yucca, hyer's a baby puncher from the Circle-Bar with a billy-doo from Old Man Poindexter. I guess its some more from him about the ranges."

A deep growling voice answered from within.

"I'll say I've heard enough from him about that, Colorado. Tell the guy to take it back to Old Man Poindexter, and tell him, from me, that he can go to the hot place and shake himself. I got to ride over to Mesquite, and I ain't got no time to burn, chewing the rag with a Circle-Bar gink."

Colorado grinned at Slick.

"You heard that?" he said.

"I sure ain't deaf!" assented Slick, "But I got to hand over this hyer note, and I'll wait till your foreman comes out."

"You better ride while you're in one piece!" grinned Colorado.

"I guess I'll stay in one piece anyhow," said Slick; and he sat in the saddle, waiting for the foreman of the Lazy-O to appear. He did not figure that he would have to wait long, if the foreman was about to start for Mesquite; and neither had he. There was a tramp of heavy boots, and a big, brawny cow-man came out at the doorway. His beetling brows were contracted in a frown. He stared at Slick, no doubt surprised by his boyish looks. Slick gave him a cheery nod, and held out the rancher's letter.

"I got to take an answer," he said.

Yucca Bill had a lasso swinging over his arm. He looked, for the moment, more disposed to give the boy puncher a lash with it, than to take the letter. Slick's eyes narrowed, and he was warily on his guard. However, the Lazy-O foreman stretched out a hand and took the note.

He tore it open, and glanced at the contents. The frown deepened on his rugged brow. He stared at Slick again.

"Mebbe you know what's in this!" he snapped.

"The boss sure ain't told me," answered Slick.

"I'll tell you, then!" growled Yucca Bill, "Your dog-goned boss is grousing agin about the feeding ranges. If he wants an answer, hyer it is; tell him we don't give a continental red cent for him, and that if he sends a guy over here agin, we'll sure quit that guy back to the Circle-Bar."

Slick breathed hard. But he controlled the hot words that rose to his lips. He had come to the ranch as a messenger, not to hunt trouble. He answered quietly;

"Feller, if you want that kinda answer to go to my boss, I guess you got to take it yourself; I ain't repeating your sass to Mr. Poindexter."

"That's all from you!" growled the Lazy-O foreman, "Ride, you young gink, afore I lift you off'n that bronc, and spank you like you was back with your schoolmarm."

Slick's eyes flashed. But again he kept his temper in control. Without a word more he wheeled Kicker to ride away.

Whiz!

There was a roar of laughter from the Lazy-O rough-necks, as Yucca Bill's arm rose, and his lasso uncurled in the air. The next instant the noose had dropped over Slick Dexter's shoulders from behind, and he was struggling at the end of a fifty-foot rope.

"Oh, shucks!" gasped Slick.

Not often was the Panhandle puncher taken by surprise. But he had not guessed that Yucca was only waiting for him to turn his back, before he handled the riata. He remembered,—too late!—Barney's warning that the rough crowd at the Lazy-O might figure on having fun with a kid tenderfoot. He gave a fierce wrench at the tightening noose but he had no chance. A rough drag on the rope from Yucca Bill's end hooked him bodily out of the saddle, over his broncho's tail, and he crashed heavily on the earth.

He sprawled there on his back, breathless and shaken. Kicker whirled round, and stood looking down at him. The punchers at the bunk-house yelled with laughter.

Slick struggled to his feet, wrenching savagely at the gripping noose that pinned his arms. But as he sturggled, another jerk on the rope hooked him off his feet, and he crashed again, amid fresh yells of merriment from the Lazy-O crowd.

Again, and again, he struggled up; and each time, the rope toppled him over, sprawling and panting. Yucca Bill was grinning from ear to ear, as he gave jerk after jerk at the riata. This was fun to the Lazy-O rough necks, and they were enjoying it.

"Run him on the rope, Yucca!" chuckled Colorado.

"I'll sure run him, like he was a dog-goned fish in the Rio Pollo!" grinned Yucca, "I guess I'll make them jaspers at the Circle-Bar saavy that it ain't healthy to tote Old Man Poindexter's grouches to this ranch. Sure thing!"

Up struggled Slick again, and again the rope jerked him over, and he rolled headlong on the ground. The noose, tightened by the jerking, almost bit into his aching arms. He was utterly at the mercy of the Lazy-O foreman, so long as he chose to carry on with the rough game. He was breathless, dizzy, and had an ache in every bone in his body. Could he have got a hand loose, he would have pulled his gun; but he had no chance of getting a hand loose. He could only grit his teeth, and endure it so long as it lasted.

It was just as well for Slick, that Yucca Bill was scheduled to ride over to Mesquite that morning. Otherwise the rough game might have lasted longer. The Lazy-O foreman remembered that he had no time to burn. Grinning, he coiled in the riata, dragging the boy puncher along the ground. Then Slick was released from the rope. He lay breathless and dizzy, too utterly spent to lift a finger. Yucca Bill grinned down at him.

"Git on your cayuse, and beat it!" he snapped, "Stir him with your quirts, boys."

Somehow, Slick scrambled up, and scrambled on his broncho, as the quirts cracked round him. He dashed away at a gallop, followed by a roar of laughter from the Lazy-O. For a couple of miles, Kicker galloped on the trail to Circle-Bar. But by that time, Slick had recovered a little. And instead of keeping on for the Circle-Bar, he turned from the home-trail, and dashed away at a gallop in the direction of the cow-town of Mesquite. Yucca Bill had no doubt that he was through with the boy puncher. But he was not quite through with Slick Dexter yet.

"WHOA, KICKER!" murmured Slick.

III

The broncho came to a halt.

For six or seven miles, Slick Dexter had ridden as fast as Kicker could gallop. Now he pulled the broncho to a halt, in a thicket of post-oaks and mesquite that bordered a trail marked by hoofs and wheel-ruts. It was the trail that led to the cow-town of Mesquite, several miles further on. Hidden in the thicket, on the edge of the trail, Slick uncoiled the riata that hung looped at his saddle-bow. He was still aching sorely from the rough usage at the Lazy-O, but the boy puncher from Panhandle was as tough as hickory, and he was ready for action now. And there was a grim look on his sunburnt face, as he sat his broncho in the post-oaks, and watched the trail.

He knew that the Lazy-O foreman was riding to Mesquite that morning; and he knew that he was ahead of him; well ahead, from the pace at which he had covered the ground. Now he was in ambush for Yucca Bill, when he came riding up the trail. The Lazy-O foreman had had his fun with a rope. There was some more fun waiting for him, on the Mesquite



trail; and he was going to learn that a Panhandle puncher could handle a riata as effectively as any hombre on the Lazy-O. Lasso in hand, Slick Dexter waited and watched.

There was a sound of hoof-beats at last. In the distance, a Stetson hat bobbed against the blue of the Texas sky. Slick, with a gleam in his eyes, watched the ten-gallon hat as it drew nearer and nearer, and a few minutes later he made out the rugged features of Yucca Bill under it. The Lazy-O foreman came riding on at a trot, never dreaming of what awaited him in the thicket bordering the trail. Slick watched him, in silence, till he was well within a lasso-cast.

Then, suddenly, he pushed out from the thicket, and his riata flew. Before Yucca Bill even saw him, the noose settled down over the Stetson hat, over the broad shoulders, and a sharp jerk tightened it, pinning the cow-man's brawny arms to his sides, as Slick's had been pinned at the Lazy-O. A startled yell came from Yucca Bill. The next moment, the drag of the rope hooked him headlong out of the saddle, and he crashed.

His startled horse squealed, whirled round, and dashed away, with an empty saddle. Slick gave it no heed. He leaped down from his broncho, and ran towards the sprawling cow-man, rapidly coiling in the rope as he ran. Yucca Bill, struggling in the lasso, stared up at him with blazing eyes.

"You!" he gasped, "You! Why, you dog-goned tenderfoot, if I don't make coyotes' meat of you—!" He struggled to get a hand to his gun. If Yucca Bill could have pulled a six-gun at that moment, the Circle-Bar bunch would never have seen the boy puncher from Panhandle again. But Yucca had no chance of pulling a gun. The taut rope held him like iron manacles. Slick stooped over him, and jerked the six-gun from its holster.

"I guess you won't be wanting your hardware, feller!" drawled Slick, and he tossed the revolver away among the mesquite.

Yucca Bill writhed in the gripping rope.

"You dog-goned young geck!" he said, hoarsely, "You figure you can rope me in like I was a steer? I'll sure break you up when I get loose."

"You ain't getting loose yet a piece!" said Slick, "You've had your fun with me, Yucca, and now I reckon I'm having mine with you. You're coming on a little paseo with this baby, Yucca. Any objections?"

Yucca Bill was not in a position to raise objections. He wrenched and wrenched at the gripping rope, but he wrenched in vain. Stooping over the infuriated roughness, Slick knotted the rope, and knotted it again; after which even Yucca realised that there was no escape for him, and he ceased his struggles. His eyes burned at Slick.

"Dog-gone you!" he breathed, "I'll sure get you, for this."

"Mebbe!" said Slick, "Jest at present, I've got you, feller, and I'll tell a man, you got to dance to my tune. You're coming back to the Circle-Bar with me, to give that message of yours to Mr. Poindexter, if you want him to get it."

"You pesky bonehead, how'd I ride to the Circle-Bar, and my cayuse a mile away by this time!" spluttered the Lazy-O foreman.

"I ain't said you're going to ride! What's the matter with hoofing it?" smiled Slick. "I'm sure giving you a run on the rope, like you did me, Yucca."

"Hoof it more'n ten miles!" yelled Yucca.

"Surest thing you know."

"Dog-gone you! I——!"

"You've spilled enough, feller, and I ain't burning time, listening to you chewing the rag," said Slick; and he walked back to his waiting broncho, and fastened the end of the riata to Kicker's saddle. Then he mounted.

"Get on your feet, feller," he called out. "You gotta walk."

"You gol-darned young scallywag——!"

"You gettin on them hoofs of yours!"

"Nup!" yelled Yucca Bill.

"Suit yourself!" answered Slick, and he set the broncho in motion. The rope tautened, and as Kicker moved off, the burly cow-man was dragged headlong along the rough trail.

"Let up!" yelled Yucca, "I'm telling you, let up!"

Slick did not even turn his head. And Yucca Bill, as he had either to walk or be dragged, scrambled to his feet, and walked. The walk had to quicken to a run, as Kicker trotted. Slick rode out of the thickets, turning his back on the Mesquite trail, and headed across the open prairie in the direction of the Circle-Bar. The enraged foreman of the Lazy-O panted on behind him.

He panted, he sweated, he stumbled, and he swore luridly. No cow-man goes a furlong on foot if he can help it; and ten miles of rugged prairie lay ahead of Yucca Bill. He stumbled and staggered and panted on in his high-heeled boots, streaming with sweat, spitting oaths; till at length fatigue drove him to save his breath. He had given Slick a "run on the rope" at the Lazy-O; and now it was his own turn; but it was a longer run for Yucca, and by the time they reached the Circle-Bar, the brawny rough-neck was fairly doubled up and almost crawling.

#### IV

"Sav, what's this game?" gasped Barney Cash. Circle-Bar punchers came running from all quarters, as Slick rode in, with the foreman of the Lazy-O tottering behind his broncho. Mr. Poindexter came striding down from the ranch-house. Slick pulled in, and dismounted; and Yucca Bill stumbled and fell in a heap.

"You was right, Barney!" said Slick, "They sure figured on having a piece fun with me at the Lazy-O, and they gave me a run on the rope, and I'm telling you I did not like it a whole lot. I sure did not! But I guess I liked it more'n Yucca liked the run I've given him back."

"Search me!" gasped Barney.

Slick stooped, and released the foreman of the Lazy-O from the rope. Yucca sat up, dizzily, breathing in gulps. Grinnings faces surrounded him. Even the stern face of Rancher Poindexter melted into a smile.

"You young gink, Slick!" he said, "You've run that hombre all the way here on the rope——!"

"Sure, sir," answered Slick, "He gave me an answer to your letter, sir, that was too sassy for me to carry; so I've run him here to hand it out himself. But he sure don't look so sassy now as he did at the Lazy-O" added Slick. "Here, you piecan, if you got anything to spill to Mr. Poindexter, spill it."

But Yucca Bill had nothing to "spill". He was too far gone even to utter a "cuss-word". He could only sprawl and pant for breath.

The rancher laughed.

"Lend him a cayuse to get home on, Barney!" he said, "He sure looks all in." And he went back to the ranch-house, laughing.

But it was quite some time before Yucca Bill was even able to clamber on a lent horse to ride home. And when at length he went, he sagged in the saddle like a sack of alfalfa. Barney Cash grinned after him; but his tanned face became serious as he turned to Slick Dexter.

"That guy will sure get you, for this, Slick, if you don't watch out," he said. "He will sure be looking for you with a gun."

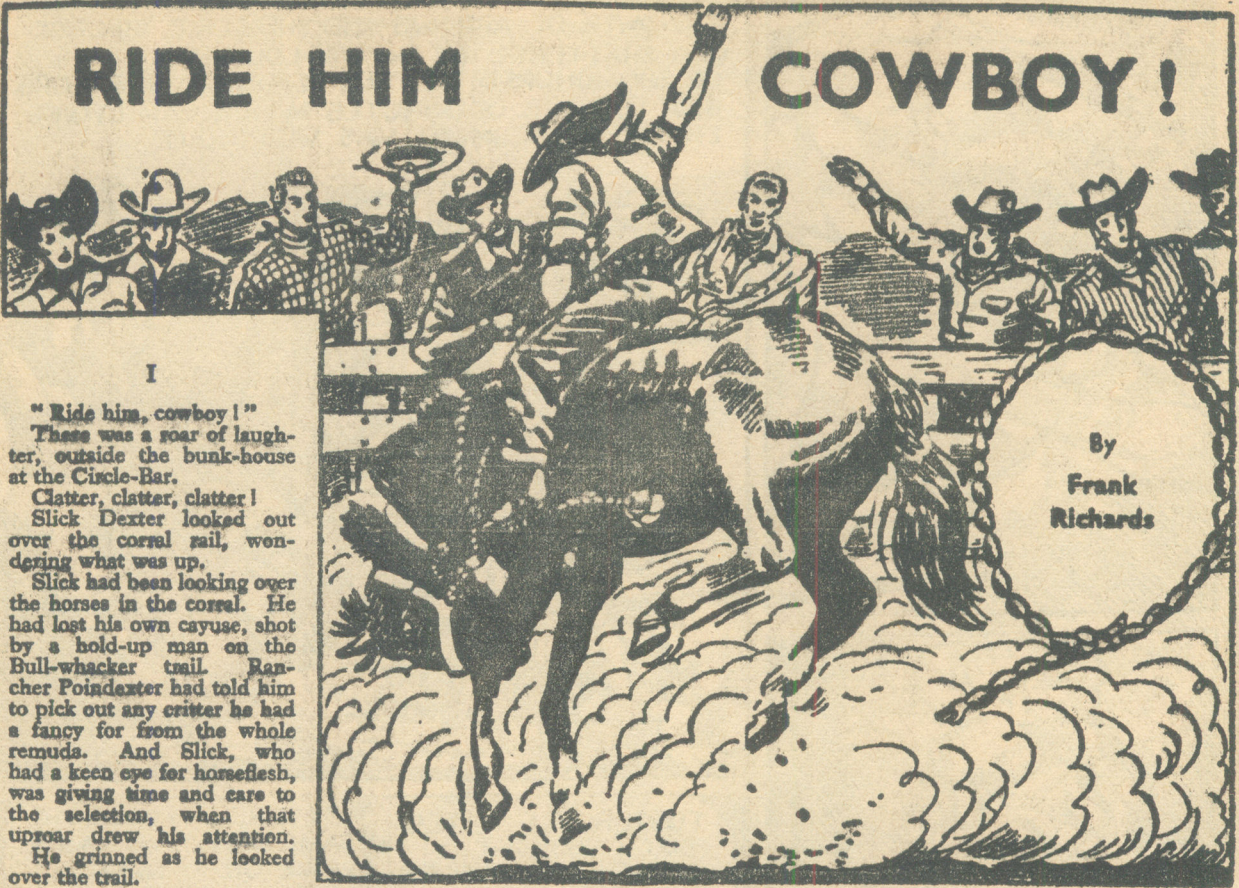
"Mebbe!" said Slick, carelessly.

And with that he went to the chuck-house for his dinner, wasting no more thought on the rough-neck he had run on the rope.



# RIDE HIM

# COWBOY!



By  
Frank  
Richards

I

"Ride him, cowboy!"

These was a roar of laughter, outside the bunk-house at the Circle-Bar.

Clatter, clatter, clatter!

Slick Dexter looked out over the corral rail, wondering what was up.

Slick had been looking over the horses in the corral. He had lost his own cayuse, shot by a hold-up man on the Bull-whacker trail. Rancher Poindexter had told him to pick out any critter he had a fancy for from the whole remuda. And Slick, who had a keen eye for horseflesh, was giving time and care to the selection, when that uproar drew his attention.

He grinned as he looked over the trail.

A dozen punchers, gathered by the bunk-house, were shouting with laughter. Only Barney Cash, the foreman of the ranch was not laughing. Barney was mounted upon the broncho that was rearing, prancing, kicking, and snapping with white gleaming teeth, its hoofs crashing and thundering on the hard earth. It was no laughing matter for Barney Cash.

Barney was a good man with a horse, as good as any man in the Circle-Bar bunch, and better than most. But Slick, as he looked on, grinning, guessed that Barney had more than he could handle in that buck-jumping bronc.

Barney's Stetson had fallen off. His hair blew in the wind. He had lost his stirrups, that lashed the broncho's flanks as he buck-jumped. But he was gripping with his knees, determined not to go out of the saddle if he could help it. His rugged face was crimson, and the sweat rolled down it. Barney was fighting it out with that bronc: but it looked, to Slick, as if the bronc was getting the upper hand of the deal.

Clatter! clatter! crash! crash! The wild hoofs beat an incessant tattoo. Barney rocked, and swayed, but still clung on somehow. Shouts of laughing encouragement came from the punchers. They were a good bunch on the Circle-Bar, but they were rough and steady, and this was fun to them. And Slick could not help grinning. Slick was only sixteen, but back on the old Paahandle, where he had been raised, he had never seen the cayuse that he could not ride. Slick figured that in Barney's place he would not have been rocking about like a sack of alfalfa. He came out of the corral, and joined the crowd of punchers.

"Say, that's a good cayuse," he remarked to Red, the horse-wrangler of the Circle-Bar. "That Mex horse-dealer sold the boss a good horse."

"I'll say it is," agreed Red. "But I'll tell a man, there ain't a guy on this ranch, nor in all Texas neither, that could ride him. That critter's a born buck-jumper, as I reckon that Mexican breed knowed when he sold him to the boss, and I'll say that Mr. Poindexter has thrown away his dollars."

Clatter! crash! clatter!

Slick watched the broncho, with an appraising eye. It was a handsome animal, as handsome as Slick had ever seen: in colour a dark grey, with a white muzzle; sound as a bell in wind and limb. Slick liked his looks a whole lot. And savage as his temper was, Slick reckoned that he could ride him.

But it stuck out a lasso's length that Barney Cash could not. Suddenly the grey broncho reared up on its hind legs, rearing and rearing till it looked like falling backwards, and Barney shot off over its tail. There was another shout of laughter from the punchers as the foreman sprawled on the ground. The buck-jumper turned on him, with gleaming eyes and gnashing teeth. Like an arrow from an Apache bow, Slick Dexter darted forward, and grasped the dangling reins. He whirled the savage bronc round from the fallen foreman, and held him.

Barney staggered to his feet. He leaned against the bunk-house wall, panting and panting for breath. Grinning faces surrounded him.

"Hyer comes the boss!" exclaimed Red.

Rancher Poindexter came striding down from the ranch-house. There was a frown on his tanned, grizzled face.

"Say, you forgotten how to sit a horse, Barney?" he exclaimed.

The foreman knitted his brows as he panted.

"That critter ain't a horse—he's a demon from the hot place. You been played for a sucker, buying that horse, sir. I guess that Mex knowed his business, selling him cheap—I'll say there ain't nothing for it but to shoot him, sir."

The rancher gave an angry grunt.

"He sure looked the goods," he said, "and I reckoned my outfit could ride. Ain't there a guy here who'll ride him?"



There was no answer from the punchers. They were all hard riders: but no guy there wanted to handle the bronc that Barney Cash could not handle. The rancher glared at Red.

"Ain't you riding him—and you a horse-wrangler?" he demanded.

Red shook a red head.

"Nup!" he answered, "I'll say that critter ain't rideable, boss—and I'll say too that that Mex knowed it when he sold him to you."

"Like me to try, sir?"

It was Slick who asked the question.

The rancher stared at him.

"You!" he snapped, "He's thrown Barney! No guy here wants to ride him. I'll say you picked up a durned good opinion of yourself, Slick Dexter, when you was on the Panhandle. Nope! You ain't riding him! I ain't going to see a boy killed by that ornery cayuse. Forget it!"

There was a laugh from the Circle-Bar crowd. They were not likely to figure that the boy puncher could ride the bronc that had thrown Barney Cash. Slick coloured.

"I'd sure like to try, sir, if you'll let me!" he said, "If I go off like Barney, I guess it won't hurt me a whole lot."

"You dog-goned young gink, that cayuse would kill you!" hooted Barney. "Let him try, sir; mebbe it'll be a lesson to him not to shoot off his mouth so much."

The rancher hesitated.

"The kid can ride," he said, slowly, "I seen him with hosses—you figure you could make the grade, Slick?"

"Yup!"

"Get to it, then."

Slick needed no more. The next moment he was in the saddle from which Barney had been flung, and his feet in the stirrups. The grey broncho had been quiet, while he was held. But a rider in the saddle was the instant signal for fireworks. Slick was barely seated before the broncho was rearing and cavorting frantically. Up he went on his hind legs: but Slick did not slip over the tossing tail as the foreman had done. He clung on, half-buried in the wild mane: and as the fore-feet crashed down again, he was still in the saddle.

Up in the air went the hind legs, and every watcher expected Slick to shoot over the lowered head. But he leaned far back, and an iron grip on the reins dragged the bronc's head up again.

"I'll tell a man!" gasped Red, "That kid can sure ride!"

Clatter! clatter! crash! crash! For long minutes it went on. There was no laughter among the punchers now: they gazed on breathlessly, at the wild and desperate struggle between the boy and the bronc. There had been many buck-jumpers on the Circle-Bar: but never had the outfit seen such buck-jumping as this. Slick's face was set hard: his eyes gleaming: his hands like iron on the reins. He was going to beat that bronc. And the Circle-Bar bunch could hardly believe their eyes, when, at long last, the broncho, as if realising that it felt a master's hand, gave up the struggle, and ceased to rear and leap and cavort: and stood trembling and subdued.

"Carry me home to die!" murmured Barney, "He's rode him!"

Slick slipped from the saddle. Barney Cash, with an oath, strode forward, and grabbed the reins from him.

"By the great horned toad, if you can ride him, I guess I can!" he snarled: "Stand clear, you Slick."

Slick Dexter stood clear: and Barney fairly hurled himself into the saddle.

"Watch out, Barney!" gasped the rancher.

"Ride him, cowboy!" grinned Red.

The broncho reared and came down on its forefeet, with lowered head: and Barney shot over its neck: once more landing on Texas with a crash. The grey broncho tossed up its head, and dashed away: Slick, leaping forward, made a catch at the tossing reins too late. At a wild gallop, a speed that no other cayuse on the Circle-Bar could have equalled, the buck-jumper raced away across the prairie, and vanished in the long grass.

Barney Cash sat up dizzily.

"Say, where's that dog-goned cayuse?" he gasped.

There was a roar of laughter.

"I guess that cayuse has hit the horizon, Barney!" chuckled Red, "I'll tell a man, we won't be seeing that cayuse agin afore the cows come home. You've lost the dollars you give for that cayuse, Mr. Poindexter, sir."

"You Slick!" rapped the rancher, "You get on a cayuse, and go look for that bronc. I guess you're the only guy in the bunch that can handle him, if he can be roped in."

"Yup!" Slick ran to the corral for a horse.

## II

SLICK DEXTER came suddenly on the camp in the chapparral.

He was many long miles from the Circle-Bar. It was nearly noon, and the semi-tropical sun of Texas blazed down on the prairie with fierce heat. It was time for man and beast to seek rest and shade. But Slick was not thinking of either.

Boy as he was, Slick had an eye as keen as an Apache's for a trail. The grey broncho had vanished from sight: but again and again Slick had picked up sign of the thudding hoofs. But he was puzzled. He figured that the wildest buck-jumper would slow down at last, and crop the grass, or seek a water-hole: and all he wanted was to sight the broncho, and get within a riata's cast. But when he found the sign of another horse, and picked up a double trail, he guessed he knew why the grey bronc had vanished so completely. Slick reckoned that another rider had roped him in, and led him away on a rope: and the double-trail led towards a dark belt of leafy, tangled chapparral that barred the burning sky to the westward. Slick's jaw set grimly as he followed that sign. Whoever had roped in the bronc, had led him long miles away from the ranch: and the boy puncher from Panhandle reckoned that he had to deal with a horse-thief. And he loosened his six-gun in the holster, as he rode out of the sun-blaze into the shadowy chapparral.

Deep in the tangled thickets, he caught a glimmer of water, where a spring bubbled. The next moment he saw the camp, close by the creek.

Two horses were tied up to a post-oak. One of them was a pinto. The other was a grey broncho with a white muzzle, and Slick's eyes snapped as he recognised it. On a log, under a shady tree, leaning back against the trunk and smoking cigarettes, was a burly Mexican half-breed, in a shabby red serape and immense sombrero. Slick, for a moment or two, watched him from a distance: and then dismounted and advanced on foot, his hand very near the butt on his low-slung gun.

He knew who that Mexican was: the half-breed who had sold the buck-jumper to Rancher Poindexter, only six hours ago. And he figured that the Mexican knew that the buck-jumping broncho was likely to show a clean pair of heels to his new owner, and had been on the look-out to rope him in again.

Slick grinned. The Mexican had pushed on a good ten miles from the ranch, with the broncho he had sold and recaptured. Had he kept on the trail, he would have been out of reach of pursuit. But no Mexican could carry on without his "siesta" in the heat of noon. No doubt he reckoned that he was far enough from the Circle-Bar to be safe, hidden in the thick chapparral. If so, he was not so safe as he reckoned.



"Say, feller!" drawled Slick.

The Mexican gave a sudden jump. He had not heard the boy puncher's approach: but at the sound of his voice, he leaped to his feet, his black eyes scintillating at Slick, under the shadow of the sombrero, and his hand shooting to the haft of a knife in his belt. But he seemed reassured the next moment, as he saw that the newcomer was but a boy. He stood staring at Slick.

Slick gave him a nod and a grin.

"I'll say that's a good cayuse you got there, hombre," he said, with a gesture towards the grey broncho, "You wouldn't be selling that cayuse, feller?"

The Mexican nodded. A grin dawned on his swarthy face.

"Si, si, senior!" he answered, at once, "I am riding that broncho to the Sunset Ranch, west of here, to sell him. If you have the money to buy, little senior, he is yours."

Slick chuckled.

"Say, feller, you sure are some horse-dealer," he said, "How often you figure you've sold that bronc, and roped him in again when he got loose? I'll say it's a dandy of a game. Why, you dog-goned Greaser, that's the bronc you sold to my boss on the Circle-Bat only this morning, and I guess Mr. Poindexter wasn't the first buyer neither. You figure on selling him agin at the Sunset ranch, and roping him in agin afore sun-down when he kicks his way out and runs loose?"

The Mexican's black eyes snapped.

"You'd sell him to me, if I had the durocks," went on Slick, banteringly, "And you figure he'd sure throw me, and run loose agin, and him the wildest buck-jumper in Texas, and you'd have the riata ready for him again! How often have you sold that bronc, you dog-goned scallywag?"

The Mexican did not answer: but his dusky hand moved again towards the haft of his knife. Slick did not seem to notice it.

"Wal, I ain't buying that cayuse, Greaser!" he said. "I guess I'm taking him on a rope to lead back to the Circle-Bar, where he belongs now you sold him to my boss. You won't play that game agin with that bronc, feller."

Slick stepped towards the grey broncho.

There was a sudden flash of steel, in the sunlight that filtered through the foliage overhead. The Mexican was springing, knife in hand.

Bang!

Slick Dexter's hand moved like lightning. He fired from the hip: and the roar of the six-gun was followed by a frantic yell from the Mexican. He staggered back, the knife falling from the dusky hand, and a strip of skin along with it. He yelled, and yelled again, as he clasped his right hand with his left, the blood oozing between the dusky fingers.

Slick grinned over the smoking gun.

"Feller," he said, "You sure ain't quick enough to handle a guy that was raised on the old Panhandle. I guess that paw of yours will want something doctoring afore you grip that rib-tickler agin. Say, hombre, you raising any more objections to a guy toting that bronc back where he belongs?"

A stream of Spanish oaths, mingled with groans, was the only reply, from the Mexican horse-dealer who had sold the buck-jumper more than once, but had now sold him for the last time. He did not lift a finger as Slick Dexter unhitched the grey broncho and led him away.

### III

BARNEY CASH shaded his eyes with his Stetson, and stared across the plain, red in the sinking sun.

"Search me!" he muttered.

He stared at a horseman, riding at a gallop for the ranch: a boyish rider, riding a grey broncho with a white muzzle, leading another cayuse on a rope.

"That kid Slick!" he said, "and he's sure cinched that buck-jumper."

"He sure has!" grinned Red, "I'll say that kid from the Panhandle is no slouch, Barney. He's cinched him, and he's riding him."

Slick, coming on at a gallop, waved a hand, with a cheery grin. He was riding the recaptured broncho, leading on his riata the horse on which he had ridden out in search of it. And the broncho was not buck-jumping now. A master's hand was on the rein, and the white-muzzled broncho knew it. They came up to the gateway with a clatter of hoofs, in a cloud of dust.

"You got him!" exclaimed Barney.

"Surest thing you know!" grinned Slick, "Here, you Red, take that critter—I guess Mr. Poindexter will want to see the bronc."

He left the led horse to the horse-wrangler, and rode on to the ranch-house on the grey broncho. Rancher Poindexter was staring at him from the verandah. There was a smile on his tanned face, as Slick clattered to a halt.

"So you roped him in, Slick?" he said, over the rail.

"Sure, sir!" He grinned, "I guess that Mex who sold him to you, sir, had roped him in, and was toting him off to sell agin, sir: I'll say he was no slouch of a horse-dealer. I sure had to sheet a rib-tickler outer his hand, sir, afore he would stand pat: but I got the cayuse back, sir."

"And you sure can ride him!" said the rancher.

"Sorta, sir."

"You ain't afeared he'll break your neck?"

Slick chuckled.

"Not so's you'd notice it, sir! He sure is like a lamb with me. I'll tell a man, I'd rather ride him than any cayuse in Texas."

"He's yours!" said the rancher.

And Slick Dexter's eyes were dancing as he led the grey bronche to the corral.

THE END