

STRANGE
SUSPENSE STORIES

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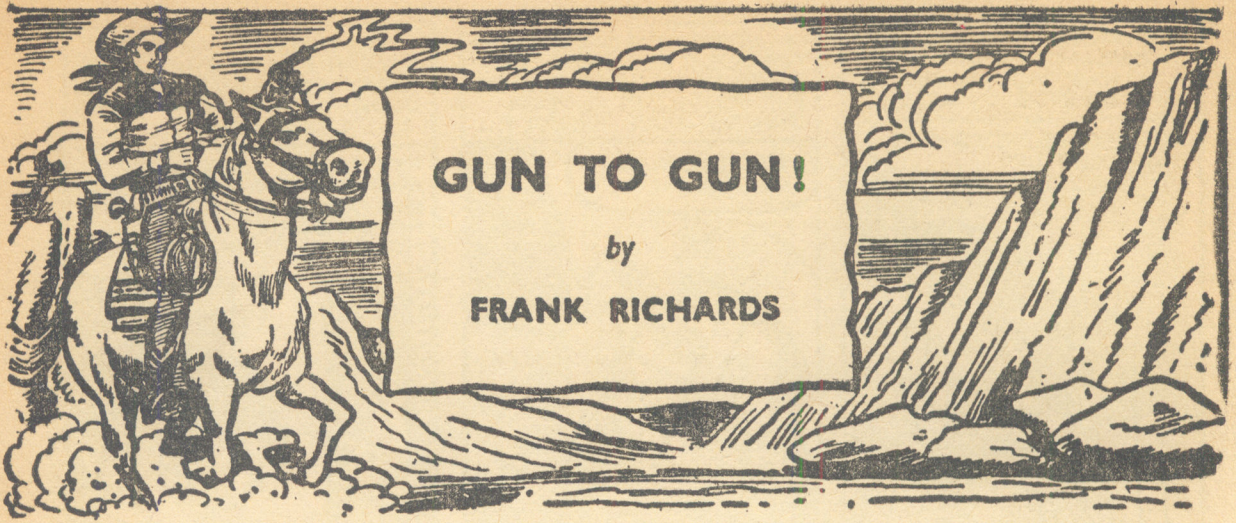


DON'T MISS!!
from the
land of
ancient
Egypt
the
story of

THE
DANCING
CAT!

2'6

COMIC BOOK
APPROVAL
BOARD



GUN TO GUN!

by
FRANK RICHARDS

BANG! bang! bang!

Slick Dexter could not help grinning.

Slick, at sixteen, could shoot fast and shoot straight. There was no quicker or surer hand with a six-gun on the Circle-Bar Ranch. And how any guy in Texas could handle a gun as Red, the horse-wrangler, did, was a puzzle to Slick.

Red was a great guy with horses. But when it came to gunning, Red, had all the ranch on the grin. Barney Cash, the foreman, declared that Red couldn't hit the side of the ranch-house at a range of six feet. And Slick wondered whether Barney had it right, as he stood watching Red at gun-practice.

Red had nailed a flapjack to the massive trunk of a big cottonwood near the corral, to use as a target. He stood only a dozen feet away, with a six-gun in either hand. He blazed-off shot after shot. Bang followed bang after bang. But the lead never went anywhere near the target. Most of the bullets even missed the cottonwood trunk, and whizzed off over the prairie.

"Aw, carry me home to die!" ejaculated Red, in disgust, when he had emptied both guns in vain, "Tain't no use, sure it ain't! It's going to be pie for Two-gun Carter on Saturday, and I guess Mr. Poindexter will be looking for a new horse-wrangler on this ranch."

"Say, what's that?" exclaimed Slick.

Red stared round at him. He had not noticed the boy puncher from Panhandle looking on at his gunnery. He frowned at him. But Slick instantly dismissed the grin from his sunburnt face. He liked Red, who was as good-natured and friendly as any guy on the Circle-Bar. And he was interested, and a little alarmed, by the words he had caught:

"Say, Red, what's this game?" he asked. "You been potting around with a gun for days on end, and it ain't getting you nowhere,—you're one of them hombres that jest can't shoot straight. You stick to hosses, Red, and leave six-guns alone, old-timer."

"You figure I'm honing for gun-play, and me handling a Colt like I do?" snorted Red, "But I got to stand for it. I guess I ain't going to have Two-gun Carter shouting it out to all Bullwhacker that I ain't got the sand to stand up to him, with a gat in my grip! No, sir!"

Slick's face became extremely serious. He had seen Two-gun Carter, once or twice, in the cow-town, and heard a good deal about him. Carter was a gun-man and a "killer". He packed two guns, and was like lightning in the use of them. The most reckless hombre in Bullwhacker was wary of Two-gun Carter. The bare idea of Red facing the bully of the cow-town at gun-play was enough, to make any guy laugh, or weep, according to his feelings towards Red.

"Red, you're sure loco," said Slick, earnestly, "You want to ride wide of that lobo-wolf Carter. You aiming to go to your own funeral?"

"I gotta!" grunted Red, "That's why I been practising shooting, though it don't seem to get me anywhere. I'll tell a man, I'm riding into Bullwhacker on Saturday, to see Carter, I'll sure let all the guys know whether I'm scared of that dog-goned gun-slinger."

"You better let a friend ride in with you, then—a friend that can handle a shooting iron!" suggested Slick.

Red gave him a glare. His brows knitted, and his red moustache bristled.

"You figure I'm a boy wants looking after?" he roared.

"Sure nope!" said Slick, pacifically, "But—"

"Aw! Pack it up!" snapped the horse-wrangler, "Beat it, you, and don't be sassy to your elders, you pesky little Panhandle pimple. Git!"

Slick walked away to the bunk-house. Red, evidently much offended by the suggestion that he required a friend to see him through, glared after him and then reloaded his six-guns and resumed practice. And the way he continued to miss the cottonwood, did not look as if he would ride back to the ranch on Saturday after hunting-trouble with the gun-man of Bullwhacker.

"BARNEY, old-timer!" said Slick.

The foreman of the Circle-Bar was sitting on the bench outside the bunk-house, in the sunset, filling his pipe. He thumbed the tobacco into the bowl, and glanced up at the boy puncher from Panhandle.

"Spill it!" he said. His look was inquiring. There was a worried frown on Slick Dexter's boyish brow, which was unusual. Slick, as a rule, had a face as bright as the sunny sky of Texas. But something seemed to be troubling him now, "What's biting you, kid?"

"Sare nix!" said Slick, slowly, "But—you heard about Red and his rookus with that lobo-wolf Carter at Bullwhacker. What's he mixing it with that gun-alinger for?"

Barney shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Aw, that's jest Red!" he answered, "Last time he was in Bullwhacker, there was trouble. That guy Carter had been pushing back the tanglefoot, I guess—anyway he was quirting a cayuse like he'd skin him—"

"The dog-goned scallywag!" muttered Slick, his eyes glinting.

"You savvy what Red is with hosses," said Barney, "Like they was his baby brothers. He jest let out a sockdolager and knocked Two-gun into the middle of the street."

Slick whistled.

"Good for Red!" he said, "But didn't that guy Carter pull on him?"

"He did not!" grinned Barney, "I'll say they had to pick up Two-gun, and carry him into the Blue Blaze, and doctor him to get him round. Red packs a heluva punch, whether he can shoot or not. I've heard that Two-gun is still feelin his head to make sure it ain't knocked off."

Slick chuckled.

"But you can bet it wouldn't end there!" said Barney, shaking his head, "That guy Two-gun is out for blood. It's goin' to be shooting next time Red moseys into Bullwhacker, he won't get no chance to punch Carter agin, Two-gun will meet him with his hardware ready."

"Search me!" said Slick, "If Red had as much sense as a gopher or a blue jay, he wouldn't ride within five miles of Bullwhacker seeing that he can't shoot worth a continental red cent, and that guy Carter can ring the bell every time with a six-gun."

"Carter's telling all the world that Red's afraid to ride into town agin, and face up to him!" said Barney, shrugging his shoulders, "And you know Red! He wouldn't let a guy say he was scared, if he was going to be filled as full of holes as a colander. He's sure riding into town on Saturday to ask for it." Barney grinned, "He's putting in some practice with a six-gun! I guess it won't help him a whole lot. That guy Red jest don't begin to know nothing about shooting. Hosses is his line. I've talked to him—but it cuts no ice! He's goin on Saturday to call at the Blue Blaze, and he's goin' to pack a gun—but I guess he might jest as well leave it here in the bunk-house."

"He ought to be kept back!" said Slick, frowning, "I'm telling you, Barney, Red is a good man, and worth a whole remuda of Carters! but he won't have a dog's chance. That guy Carter is a killer."

"You said it!" agreed Barney, "But I guess any guy trying to keep Red back, would get a sockdolager like he gave Two-gun. Nothing doing, Slick."

Slick Dexter walked away, with a frowning thoughtful brow. From a distance came a sound of industrious banging. Red was still at gun-practice, and missing the cottonwood nearly every shot. Slick's frown intensified. He liked Red, every guy on the Circle-Bar liked Red, and liked him all the more for his tenderness to the animals under his care. And that kind-hearted, honest hombre was going to face certain death at the hands of a cold-hearted, ruthless killer, rather than be called a coward. It was not good enough, Slick reckoned, not by a whole lot and the boy puncher from Panhandle cudgelled his brains to think of a way out. And Slick Dexter seldom cudgelled his brains without result.

He was still listening to Red's erratic pot-shots when the solution came. And he grinned. But he said nothing of what was in his mind, and when, on Friday, he asked Rancher Poindexter for leave, and mounted his broncho and rode away from the Circle-Bar, nobody on the ranch knew where he was riding, or why.

III

THERE was a flare of naphtha lamps outside the Blue Blaze saloon in Main Street at Bullwhacker. The sun was still red in the west but they started early at the Blue Blaze. The saloon was already getting crowded, when a youthful puncher rode in from the prairie trails, dismounted, and hitched his broncho to the rail. Having hitched his horse, Slick Dexter gave a hitch to his gun-holster, to make sure that it was within easy reach, and strolled into the saloon, and then, leaning his elbows on the bar, looked over the crowded room. The bar-tender was busy, spinning glasses across to thirsty customers but Slick did not glance at him, he had no use for the potent tangle-foot. He scanned the crowd, looking for Two-gun Carter. In the middle of the big room, a faro-table was crowded, and at other tables poker-players sat, but among them he did not pick up the man he was looking for. Every evening, as regularly as clock-work, Two-gun Carter turned up at the Blue Blaze, for faro or poker, or both, Slick had only to wait. And at length, a glimmer came into his eyes, at the sight of a slim, lithe man in "store" clothes stepping in at the doorway wide-open on the rugged street of Bullwhacker.

Slick eyed him keenly—the hard, cold face, the eyes that seemed as cold as ice, and keen as steel, the face of a "killer." He noted how civilly the rough habitues of the Blue Blaze greeted the gun-man, or moved hastily out of his way, as he crossed the crowded room with his light, panther-like tread. Carter was coming towards the bar, and the bar-tender's nod and grin were almost fawning. Two-gun Carter was a feared man in the cow-town. But there was one present, at least, for whom the gun-man had no terrors. Slick looked round at the bar-tender, and drawled, loud enough for many ears to hear.

"Say, bo, is that guy the hombre they call Two-gun Carter? The dog-goned scallywag that was knocked silly by a galoot from the Circle-Bar, for mis-handling a hoss! He sure does look pizen?"

The bar-tender fairly gaped at him. Among all the rough and touch crowd in the Blue Blaze, there was not one that would have ventured to utter such words in the hearing of the gun-man. And Two-gun Carter had heard every word. His hard, cold eyes turned on the boy puncher from Panhandle, and there was a glint in them that every man in the blue Blaze knew. Such words, in the Blue Blaze at Bullwhacker, could have only one outcome.

Two-gun Carter halted, his glinting eyes fixed on Slick. The boy puncher, still leaning back on the bar, made no move, but his hand was very near the butt of the six-gun in his low-slung holster. His smiling blue eyes met those of the gun-man equably.

(Continued from Page 11)

There was a backward surge of the crowd near the bar. Every guy there knew what was coming, and was anxious to get out of the line of fire. Quite an ample space was left round the puncher and the gun-man.

"I guess I heard what you said, puncher!" said Two-gun Carter, in low, quiet tones of deadly menace.

Slick nodded.

"I sure meant you to!" he answered, "I'm mentioning that I horned in here this evening, jest to tell you what I think of you, Mr. Carter. I've heard about you beating up a cayuse, like the dog-goned, dirty, cowardly skunk you are, Mr. Carter, and a Circle-Bar guy soiling his hands on you, and I'm telling you that if I'd been around, I'd have lammed you a few myself. I've been jest honing to tell you what a pizen polecat you are, Mr. Carter."

There was a dead silence in the Blue Blaze. The hum of voices had died into stillness. Even at the fare table, they had forgotten the game and dealer and players were all staring round. In the sudden silence, every word uttered by the boy puncher reached every ear in the crowded saloon, and every eye was on Slick Dexter and the gun-man. Every man there expected to see Carter reach for his gun, and the next moment to see that cool young puncher roll in the sawdust under the gun-man's Colt. Two-gun Carter had pulled his gun for much less offence than this. But Slick was still smiling.

"I guess you've learned to shoot off your mouth early, puncher!" said Two-gun Carter, his voice quiet and even, "Your best guess would have been to stay on your ranch, punching cows. You got to back that up with your gun."

"Sure!" assented Slick, carelessly, "You seem to have got all Bullwhacker scared stiff, Mr. Carter, but you don't scare me worth a red cent. Why, you big stiff, I'd take a quirt to you as soon as look at you, you pesky, pie-faced, pizen skunk."

The gun-man's hand made a sudden movement. Two-gun Carter was well known to be lightning on the draw, and his hand moved almost too swiftly for the eye to follow it. But if the two-gun man was swift, the puncher from Panhandle was swifter by a split second. Even as Carter's Colt whipped from its holster, Slick's was in his hand.

Bang!

In the silent room, the Colt roared almost like thunder. Carter's shot came the next second, but a bullet had ripped his arm, cracking the elbow, and his shot flew wild. The bar-tender dodged under the bar, just in time. The bullet crashed into bottles at the back of the bar, and Carter's right arm dropped to his side, shattered and helpless.

The gun-man, suddenly white, swayed on his feet. But his white face was set in desperate fury. His left hand snatched at his other gun, and all the cow-town knew that Carter could shoot as straight with his left as with his right.

But Slick was watching him like a cat. His six-gun roared again, as the killer's left arm lifted and that arm dropped like the other, shot through the wrist. The gun clattered on the floor.

Slick stood, with his smoking Colt in his hand, alert. But Two-gun Carter was through. He swayed, and staggered, and fell heavily into the sawdust on the floor of the Blue Blaze.

Slick's eyes shot over the crowd. He was watchful, if any side-kicker of the gun-man chose to horn in. But the roughest rough-neck in Bullwhacker was not likely to pull on the puncher who had beaten Two-gun Carter to the draw, and beaten him at gun-play. Two or three men gathered round the fallen gun-man, to give him the help he badly needed. Slick holstered his gun. He smiled at the bar-tender, who was eyeing him like a man in a dream.

"I guess that guy won't be handling his hardware promiscuous, till the cows come home!" drawled Slick, and he sauntered out of the Blue Blaze, leaving the saloon in a wild buzz of excitement behind him.

There was a smile on his sunburnt face, as he unhitched Kicker, and mounted, and rode out on the prairie trail. Two-gun Carter was worth a dozen dead men he would pull round. But his career as a "killer" was at an end; he would never be a terror to any cow-town again. And when Red rode into Bullwhacker on Saturday, he would not ride in to sudden death! Slick smiled, and hummed the tune of a Mexican fandango, as he rode out of the cow-town, and hit the trail for the Circle-Bar.

IV

"FORGET it, you geck!"

"Git off'n that hoss!"

"You ornery bonehead, rub it out!"

Those remarks, and many more, were addressed to Red, the horse-wrangler, the following day. Barney Cash, and a crowd of punchers, gathered round, as Red mounted his pinto to ride to Bullwhacker. Slick Dexter was among the crowd, but he did not speak, he only smiled. Only Slick knew of the unexpected news that awaited Red in the cow-town.

Red did not heed remonstrances. He did not heed, even when Rancher Poindexter called to him from the verandah of the ranch-house. Red's face was set and obstinate. He was going to ride into Bullwhacker, and show up at the Blue Blaze, to let all the cow-town see that he had the sand to face up to the most desperate and ruthless killer in the section. And turning a deaf ear to his comrades, Red cracked his quirt, and dashed away at a gallop.

Barney Cash gave an angry grunt.

"That's the last we'll see of Red!" he growled, "I guess they'll plant him at Bullwhacker, when Two-gun's through."

"Mebbe not!" smiled Slick.

"Aw, you young bonehead, I'll bet you a month's pay to a cold flapjack, that Red don't ride back to this ranch!" snapped the foreman, "I'm telling you he's a dead guy."

Slick laughed.

"I won't take that bet, Barney! I sorta suspicion we'll see Red again."

And later in the evening, it proved that Slick had it right. A clatter of hoofs drew the punchers from the bunk-house to see Red riding in, under the stars. They watched him, in wonder, as he leaped from his pinto.

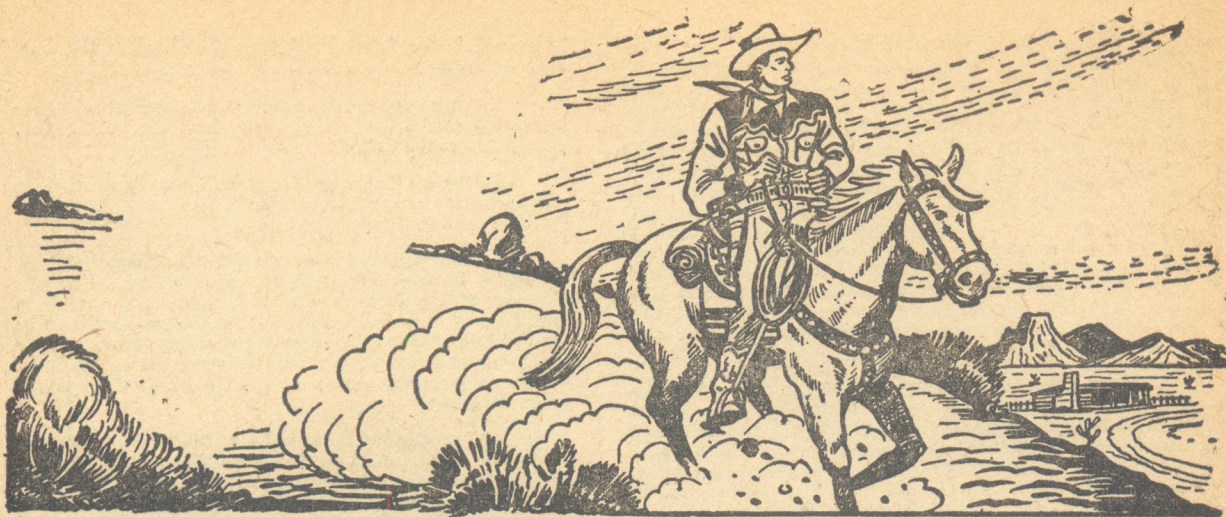
"Wal, carry me home to die!" ejaculated Barney Cash, "It's Red! It's sure Red, alive an' kicking. Red, you gink, mean to say that you've got back alive, after meeting up with that killer Two-gun!"

Snort, from Red.

"Meet up nix!" he grunted, "That guy Carter ain't cavorting around with two guns any more, he was shot up in a rookus in the Blue Blaze yesterday, and the doc's handling him, and they sure allow that he'll never handle a gun agin, which I reckon is good news for most folks. And I'll say," added Red, with a grin, "that it was good news for me too! They say it was a kid puncher shot him up, and I'd sure like to meet up with that kid puncher. Say, what you grinning at, Slick, you peaky little pimple from the Panhandle?"

But Slick only grinned.

THE END



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 geck."

"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 tiz 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.

" 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, 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 piccan 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.