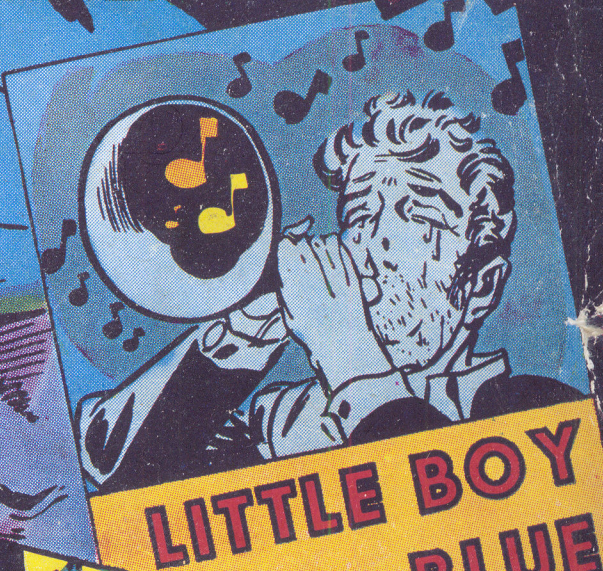


TALES OF THE

Tales of the Mysterious Traveller

MYSTERIOUS TRAVELLER



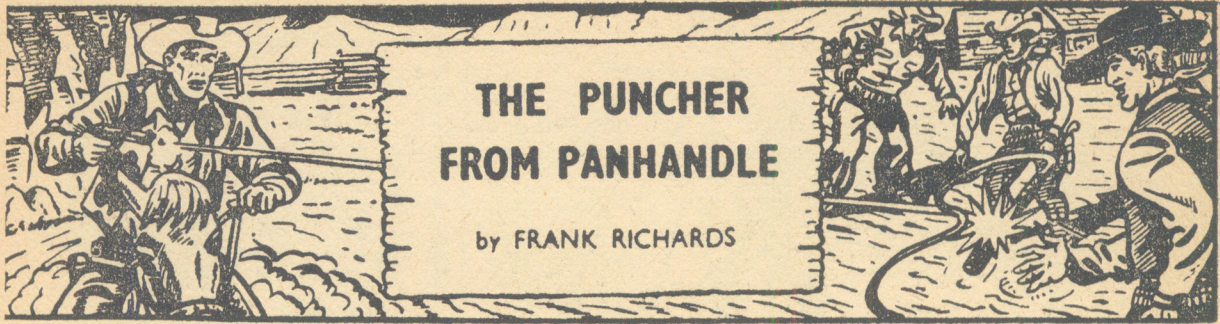
LITTLE BOY
BLUE



THE STATUES
THAT
CAME TO LIFE

2'6

COMIC BUREAU
APPROVAL
SEAL



THE PUNCHER FROM PANHANDLE

by FRANK RICHARDS

I

"PULL in your hoss, pronto!"

The order came in a sharp angry snap.

Slick Dexter drew rein

He was surprised

The sunset was red on the Texas grass-lands. Slick had ridden far that day. The dust of the prairie trails was thick on his goatskin chapareos. Ahead of him the ranch buildings of the Circle-Bar lay a black mass against the sunset.

Slick Dexter had two reasons for hitting the Circle-Bar, as the sun went down to the Rio Grande. One was to inquire whether Rancher Poindexter wanted a new man in his outfit. The other was, to bed down for the night anyway, on which he counted with a cow-puncher's natural reliance on the unbounded hospitality of the cow country. He looked forward to supper with a cheery bunch round the bunk-house stove, with a bunk and blankets to follow, and fodder for his broncho in the corral.

But he noted, as he rode up to the ranch, a group of punchers at the open gateway, who eyed him with grim and far from welcoming looks. Among them was a tall man in store clothes, whom he could guess to be Rancher Poindexter himself. And the rancher's face was the grimmest in the group, his eyes glinting under grizzled brows.

There was suspicion, if not hostility, in every face. Why, Slick could not surmise. He was a stranger in the Circle-Bar country. It was many a long mile from the old Panhandle, where he had been raised.

But he rode on unconcernedly.

Slick was a boy in years. From his sunburnt face, under the big Stetson hat, his age might have been guessed at sixteen. But he was a man in all else. Back on the old Panhandle, they knew that he could ride the wildest cayuse, jerk a riata, or pull a gun, with any guy of twice his years in all Texas.

As he neared the gateway, Rancher Poindexter left the group of punchers, strode out into the trail, and stood directly in his path, with raised hand, and snapped out the order to stop.

Slick stopped, though a gleam came into his eyes. Slick Dexter did not like jumping to orders. It was chiefly because he disliked jumping to orders that he had been fired, way back on the Panhandle, and was looking to join up in a new ranch outfit. But he pulled in his broncho at the rancher's sharp order, and sat in the saddle, looking at the grim grizzled face with a faint smile on his own.

"You Mr Poindexter?" he asked, pleasantly.

"Sure! Who are you and what do you want here?" rapped the rancher. His manner could hardly have been more hostile.

Slick smiled.

"I guess they call me Slick Dexter back where I was raised," he answered, in a cool drawl. "And what I wanted, when I hit this joint, was to ride with the outfit, if you're looking for a good man to sign on. But now I seen you Mr Poindexter, I reckon you ain't the sorta boss I'm honing to ride for, no-how."

"Keep a civil tongue!" snapped the rancher.

"You sure ain't setting me a good example, feller," drawled Slick. "Say, what's biting you here? They don't meet strangers like this, where I was raised."

One of the punchers at the gateway lounged out, as the rancher stood silent, scanning the boyish sunburnt face of the puncher from Panhandle.

"I guess we ain't keen on strangers here, feller," he said. "Too many cows have been run off'n this ranch. But that kid sure don't look like he was one of the Jadwyn gang, boss," he added. "Looks more like he's jest got away from his schoolmarm."

"How'd we know, Barney Cash?" snapped the rancher. "I guess it would suit Jeff Jadwyn fine, to get one of his crowd into the outfit, if I was bonehead enough to fall for it. The boy's a stranger in this section, and we sure don't want strangers around on this ranch, with steers missing from the herds every day in the week."

"Sure, boss! But..."

"That's enough from you, Barney Cash!" rapped Poindexter. "You're foreman of this bunch, Barney, and I reckon that I'm the boss, and I'm telling you that it's my say-so."

"You said it, boss," answered Barney Cash, with a shrug of his brawny shoulders. Slick guessed that he was accustomed to a sharp tongue from the boss of the Circle-Bar—too sharp a tongue, Slick reckoned, to suit himself. He was not looking for a boss who figured that he could loose off his mouth as he liked.

"I guess I'll ride on, rancher," said Slick, "I can sure bed down in the chapparral, and I won't ask for blankets in the bunk-house, seeing you're so all-fired jumpy of strangers."

"Hold in your horse," rapped Mr. Poindexter, "You'll give an account of yourself before we let you ride. If you're in cahoots with the Jadwyn gang. . ."

"Aw, forget it, feller," snapped the boy puncher, "I never heard of the Jadwyn gang, but they sure do seem to have got on your nerves. Me for the trail!" He shook out his reins.

"I've ordered you to stop!" There was a quirt under the rancher's arm, and now he slipped it down into his hand, and half-raised it. Slick's eyes blazed at him.

"Say what you figure you're going to do with that quirt?" he asked, very quietly.

"I'm going to lay it round you, unless you do like you're told, you young cub!" snapped the rancher, "Now get off that cayuse, and . . . Oh!"

Bang!

The boy puncher's hand moved like lightning to the gun in his low-slung holster. He fired from the hip, but the aim was as accurate as if he had dwelt on it. Rancher Poindexter uttered a yell, as the quirt was shot from his hand. For a moment it seemed to him that his hand had been shot away with the whip. But there was only a trickle of red from a grazed finger. The quirt, shattered by the bullet, lay in the grass at his feet, as he stood staring at a numbed hand, and stuttering with rage.

"I guess you won't lay that dog-goned quirt around a galoot my size!" drawled the boy puncher from Panhandle: and he whirled round his broncho and galloped away up the trail.

"Carry me home to die!" ejaculated Barney Cash, "That kid sure is sudden on the shoot! Say boss

"Ride after him!" roared the rancher, "Ride after that young cow-thief, and rope him in. You hear me?"

"Sure, boss. But . . ."

"Ride, I tell you! Shoot him dead if he resists! Bring him back to the ranch. Get to it."

"It's your say-so, boss."

Barney Cash, and five or six of the Circle-Bar punchers, ran to the corral for their horses. Rancher Poindexter, clasping his numbed right hand with his left, almost foaming with pain and rage, roared to them to burn the wind. But by the time the bunch rode out at the gate, the boy puncher from Panhandle was merely a dot on the distant prairie, which vanished as the sun dipped westward to the Rio Grande. Not till the bitter pain in his numbed hand had faded, could Poindexter mount his own horse and follow.

It was under the stars that the bunch rode back to the ranch, unsuccessful. But the boss of the Circle-Bar did not ride back.

II.

SLICK lifted his head and listened.

It was a starry night on the prairie and the chapparral. Deep amid tangled thickets, under branches laced with Spaniard's-beard, the boy puncher from the Panhandle had unpacked his slicker roll and camped. Many a time, riding long trails in the cow country, had Slick camped out under the stars: it was no new thing to him. His broncho lay sleeping in dark shadow, and the boy puncher had been sleeping, too, rolled in his blanket under the ceiba trees. But he slept lightly, and awakened at a sound. And now he listened to the sound of horsemen close at hand, and a grim smile came over his face in the gloom, and his hand went instinctively to the butt of the six-gun in his holster. If the Circle-Bar bunch had trailed him as far as the chapparral, many miles from the ranch, and ridden him down, he reckoned that they would not find him easy to cinch. Back on the Panhandle, he had been nick-named "Six-gun Slick": and if there was a guy in Texas who could shoot quicker and straighter, Slick had never seen the colour of his hair.

But he was very silent as he shook off his blanket and rose to his feet. He did not hone for trouble with the Circle-Bar bunch. They were a good bunch, he reckoned, and if they were a little on edge and hostile to strangers, because cows had been rustled on the ranges, he could understand it, as a cow-puncher himself, and had no kick coming. It was only the boss of the Circle-Bar that got his goat: that high-handed rancher who would have handled a quirt on him. Silent as a creeping cougar, the boy puncher moved. His solitary camp was pitched a lasso's length from the scarcely-marked trail that ran through the chapparral, and it was on the trail that hoof-beats sounded, and the jingle of bridle and stirrup. From deep cover he looked out into the trail, where starlight fell through openings in the branches above, and revealed the riders.

"Sho!" breathed Slick.

A horseman was passing within two yards of him. But a glance told him that it was no puncher from the Circle-Bar. The rider's face was masked, revealing nothing but his eyes, of which Slick caught

a glint in the starlight. Slick drew a sharp breath. The masked man rode on, evidently unaware of a watcher in the thickets. But he was not alone. Following him came another rider with a masked face, who was leading, with a length of trail-rope, another horse that followed on. Slick wondered, for a moment, why the third horse was led. But the next moment he saw.

The rider of the third horse was not masked. He was roped to his saddle and his hands bound behind his back—a prisoner. The starlight fell on his face, set in bitter anger: a face that Slick knew, though he had never seen it before that day: the hard, imperious, grizzled face of Pynsent Poindexter, boss of the Circle-Bar ranch. Slick stared hard at him as the horse moved past at a walk.

"Sho!" he repeated inaudibly.

A faint grin dawned on his sunburnt face. Rancher Poindexter, dictatorial boss of ten thousand acres, was a prisoner in the hands of this gang, hog-tied like a steer: he did not look much like handling a quirt now! The boy puncher was a little amused.

The leading rider had almost disappeared in the shadows. But a sharp call came from him:

"Don't lag there, Rube."

"Coming, Jeff! called back the man who led the rancher's horse.

"Jeff Jadwyn, you scoundrel . . .!" It was the rancher speaking, his voice hoarse with rage.

"Aw, can it, you!" snapped Rube, and he gave a jerk at the trail-rope. The rancher's horse stumbled, and Poindexter sagged in the saddle, helpless as a sack of alfalfa. Rube a chuckle. Then he, in his turn, called back along the trail, to a rider Slick had not yet seen.

"Hump it, you Buck, or you'll get left."

"My critter's sure gone lame," came an answering call, far back along the trail.

Rube grunted and rode on. He disappeared with his prisoner from Slick's sight. The boy puncher did not stir. The few words he had heard had told him who the masked men were—it was into the hands of the Jadwyn gang that the boss of the Circle-Bar had fallen. What they were going to do with him, Slick could not know: unless he had been roped in for ransom. But . . .

The boy puncher stood in the shadows undecided. He told himself that it was no funeral of his. The man who was taken a prisoner into the depths of the trackless chapparrel had suspected him of being in cahoots with this very gang of rustlers, and would have handled a quirt on him. It was no business of Slick's: and he could take what was coming to him. But . . .

Slick shrugged his shoulders. He reckoned that he was a bonehead to horn in, with desperate shooting ahead if he did. But he knew that that was what he was going to do: and he was ready, when the third member of the gang came slowly along the trail on his limping horse, and the starlight glimmered on his masked face. Until the masked rider was close at hand, Slick made no sound, no move: but when he did move, he was swift as the leaping panther.

Buck Jadwyn never knew what struck him: but if he had known, it was the heavy butt of Slick's six-gun, that crashed from the shadows. A stunned man rolled from his saddle into the grass of the trail; and the horse, with a startled squeal, backed away, and ran limping back the way it had come. Slick did not heed it. He bent over the stunned rustler. The man lay senseless, safe for hours Slick reckoned: Buck Jadwyn was out of the game. From the rustler's face Slick drew the mask and adjusted it over his own.

He called to his broncho and mounted in the trail. There was a grin on his face under the mask, as he pushed on after the outlaws and their prisoner. If they looked back and saw him they would see a masked man, and take him for their lagging comrade, he reckoned. He was taking his chance of that, as he followed on the trail of the Jadwyn gang; to trail them to their lair, and save the man who would have handled a quirt on him!

III.

"LIGHT down!"

Dawn was in the sky, when Jeff Jadwyn rapped out the gruff order. The birds were waking in the chapparal, in the glimmer of the rising sun. Rancher Poindexter, sagging wearily in his saddle, looked round him with heavy eyes, as his captors came to a halt, in a glade: many a long mile from the ranch and the open prairie, far beyond the hope of tracking. Perhaps he repented that he had ridden out in hot anger to hunt for the boy puncher who had defied him and shot the quirt from his hand. It had led him to this!

Rube Jadwyn loosened the rope that bound him to his horse, and dragged him from the saddle. He stood, his hands secured behind him, leaning wearily on the trunk of a tall ceiba. But weary as he was, hopeless as he was of rescue, his face was hard and indomitable: he was still the grim, unyielding boss of the Circle Bar, though he was in wild and lawless hands, and knew himself to be in the very shadow of death.

"I guess we camp here, rancher!" said Jeff Jadwyn, his eyes gleaming at Poindexter through the eye-holes of his mask. "We're fur enough from the Circle-Bar now, I reckon. We've got you by the short hairs. . . ."

"I guess you wouldn't have got me easy, if my hand hadn't been too numb to handle a six-gun!" muttered the rancher. "And now you got me, what do you want, you cow-thief? That mask on your face cuts no ice—I know you, Jeff Jadwyn, and you'll go up on a branch for this. . . ."

"Mebbe!" drawled the rustler, "But I'll tell a man, it's you that nearer to going up on a branch, rancher, and that's the branch, over your cabeza."

Poindexter started.

"You'd never dare, you lobo-wolf . . ."

"Aw, cut it out!" jeered Jadwyn, "What you figure we roped you in for? You want to see the Circle-Bar agin, you sign a draft on the bank at Bullwhacker for five thousand dollars . . ."

"Never!"

"That's a long word!" said the ruffian, in the same jeering tone, "Fix up the riata, Rube." His eyes glinted at the rancher, "I'd sure almost as soon leave you swinging, as handle your dollars—but you got your choice. You've hunted us hard, rancher, and you gotto pay for it. Pay or go up, that's your choice."

Rube Jadwyn threw a riata over a branch above the rancher's head. He placed the noose round Poindexter's neck. In the glimmer of the rising sun, the rancher's face was deadly pale. But it was hard and grim as ever. There was no sign of yielding in his look. Even with the rope round his neck, the boss of the Circle Bar was not the man to take orders.

"Chew on it, rancher!" grinned Rube Jadwyn, "You got a few minutes"

Under the dim branches, on the edge of the glade, a horseman was pushing into view from the dense chapparral. Neither Jeff nor Rube Jadwyn doubted that it was Buck; the masked face was enough for them. Several times they had glimpsed him behind them on the trail and had had no doubts. And they had no doubts now, as he slowly pushed out from the trees. They gave him hardly a glance.

"Five thousand dollars, rancher!" said Jeff Jadwyn.

Poindexter gritted his teeth.

"Not a cent!" he said, "Not a red cent!"

"A draft on the Bullwhacker bank, and you ride back to the Circle-Bar when we've cashed it

"Never!"

"Last time of asking!" said Jeff Jadwyn, between his teeth.

"Never!"

"Pull on that rope, Rube!" hissed the leader of the Jadwyn gang; and the next moment, the rancher's feet were dragged off the ground.

Bang! It was the sudden roar of a six-gun. The rope snapped by the bullet, parted, and the rancher crashed heavily on the earth. Jeff Jadwyn swung round with a savage oath. That sudden shot had come from the masked horseman who had pushed out into the glade.

But he was no longer masked. With his left hand he tore aside the mask, as he galloped up with his right he aimed the six-gun. The rustlers stared at him in blank amazement for a second, and then their hands flew to their revolvers.

"Put 'em up!" shouted Slick, "Put 'em up or

But the guns were already out and he fired without completing the sentence. Jeff Jadwyn, with his finger on the trigger, rolled over in the grass, and did not stir after he fell. Rube Jadwyn blazed away in haste, and a bullet spun the Stetson on Slick's head. The next moment his six-gun roared again and Rube Jadwyn went down. Slick pulled in his broncho and leaped from the saddle.

He grinned, as he bent over the rancher, who stared up at him like a man in a dream.

"We've met up again, rancher!" grinned Slick, "and I sure reckon you're gladder to see me than you was at the ranch, feller."

IV

RANCHER POINDEXTER stood by his horse, a free man; free to ride back to the distant ranch, which he had never hoped to see again. But he did not mount. He stood looking at the boy puncher from the Panhandle, and there was a strange expression on his face. Slick was in the saddle again.

"I guess you can ride, rancher," he said, "Me for the trail"

"Stop!"

Slick checked his broncho and looked back, laughing.

"You still figure that you can give a guy orders?" he asked, banteringly. "Forget it, rancher! You sure ain't the all-fired big noise you reckon you are!"

Poindexter's eyes gleamed for a moment. But only for a moment.

"You've saved my life!" he said, quietly.

"Sure!" agreed Slick.

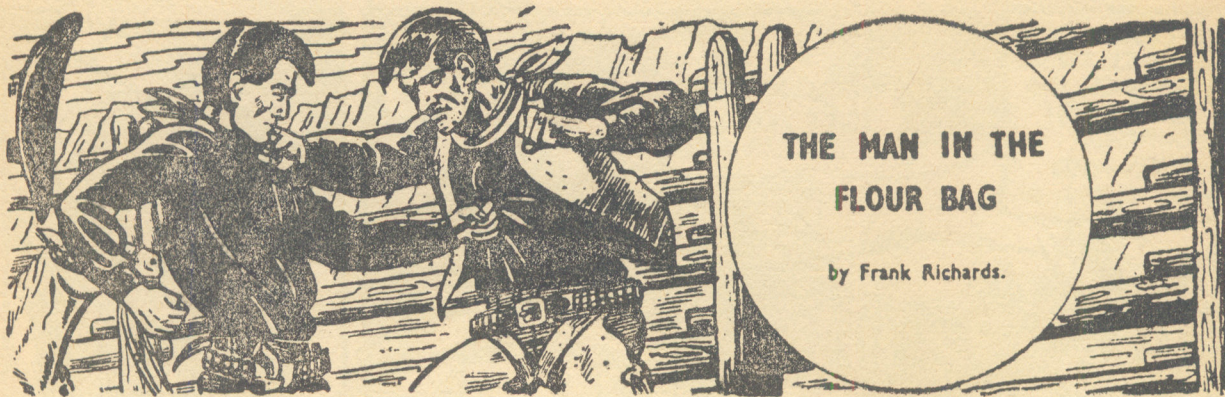
"You've wiped out the Jadwyn gang, that have been rustling cows in this section for dog's ages"

"Surest thing you know."

"Yesterday you asked me if I wanted a good man in my outfit. If you're still of the same mind, ride back to the ranch with me, and sign on." And, as the boy puncher hesitated, the grim face relaxed into a smile, "Kid, my bark's worse than my bite, as any man in the bunch could tell you. You won't find me a tough boss. I'll be proud to sign you on, and the bunch will be proud to ride with you."

"Mr. Poindexter, sir, you've sure spilled a hatful!" said Slick. "Me for the Circle-Bar, jest like you say, sir!"

And the rancher mounted his horse and they rode through the chapparral together.



THE MAN IN THE FLOUR BAG

by Frank Richards.

"LET 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 wreak it upon an animal, got 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 hone for trouble with the older hands. And it was against all the laws and customs of the cow country to intervene 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 flush 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 bronco, 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 ornery in the morning, you sure can't take it out of your critter that-a-way."

"I guess that critter started buck-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, nohow," said Slick.

"Jest let up!"

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

"Mebbe 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 boss that-a-way. Let up with that quirt."

Cactus Pete did not answer in words. His answer was to deal another lash with the quirt, with all the force of his arm: and the broncho yelled 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 knucky 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 knucky 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 out. 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 bulldozers 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 light out of Bullwhacker the minute I've cinched the roll at the bank, and burn the wind back to the ranch."

"Hyer's the draft," Mr. Poindexter handed over an envelope. Slick tucked 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 Jadwyn 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

BANG!

Slick Dexter, "kid" as he was, was not often taken by surprise. But that sudden shot from the chapparral 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 chaparejos, when he remounted his broncho and hit the home-trail. He had not been five minutes in Bullwhacker and no guy there was wise to his business, excepting the cashier at the bank. He rode at an easy gallop on the twenty mile trail back to the ranch: by sunlit prairie or shady chapparral. He was little more than half-way home, and riding a dusky trail where it wound through a wide stretch of chapparral, 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 dusky chapparral, 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.

"Stick '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 flour-bag was drawn down over his head, completely hiding his face: only two threatening eyes gleaming from the eye-holes cut in it.

"You dog-goned geck!" 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 flour-bag. "Keep them hands up if you don't want yours 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 rustler 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 flour-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 boys 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 Tendertown. 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 levelled revolver never wavered. He jerked away Slick's gun, and tossed it into the foliage of the chapparral. Then there was a hoarse chuckle under the flour-bag.

"I guess you can hoof 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 brow 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 afoot. It was so unusual, or rather unknown, for a guy to be seen on foot on a Texan 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 promiscus, jest to please yourself, and leave other hands to do your work. You was wanted to drive cows to Mesquite Creek, and I've had to send Yuba Bill. I guess you're asking to be fired off this ranch."

"I'll say I'm ready to ask the Old Man for my time, if I ain't wanted!" sneered 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 too, and I'm sure ready to tell him so."

Up from his rocker rose Rancher Poindexter, his grizzled brows contracted, his eyes gleaming 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 sure lam you a few with a quirt 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 sullen and scowling 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 durned rustler shot my cayuse under me, on the home-trail, and held 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 outfit here. How'd a rustler 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 flushed 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.

"Haw! You want to think up a better tale than that, Slick Dexter. I reckon if I was Mr. Poindexter, I'd make you tough 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 for him 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 corralled the roll? I guess he can be hunted"

"I wouldn't know, sir," said Slick, "He had a flour-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 wise 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 gleaming over the levelled 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 gleamed 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 hombre knowed. You keep them paws up, Cactus Pete!" he added, grimly, as the cow-man made a movement, "You get yours sudden if you reach for a gun, you gol-darned coyote. You Barney Cash, you go through his rags! I'm telling you that that's the galoot that held me up in the chapparral and cinched the roll."

"It's a durned 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 jest after the hold-up. Mebbe he's honing to travel with a thousand dollars to 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 cuts, after that weary trail on foot 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 hombre who had worn the flour-bag, was gone, fleeing with half-a-dozen cracking quirts behind him. The boy puncher from Panhandle was through with his enemy on the Circle-Bar.

THE END