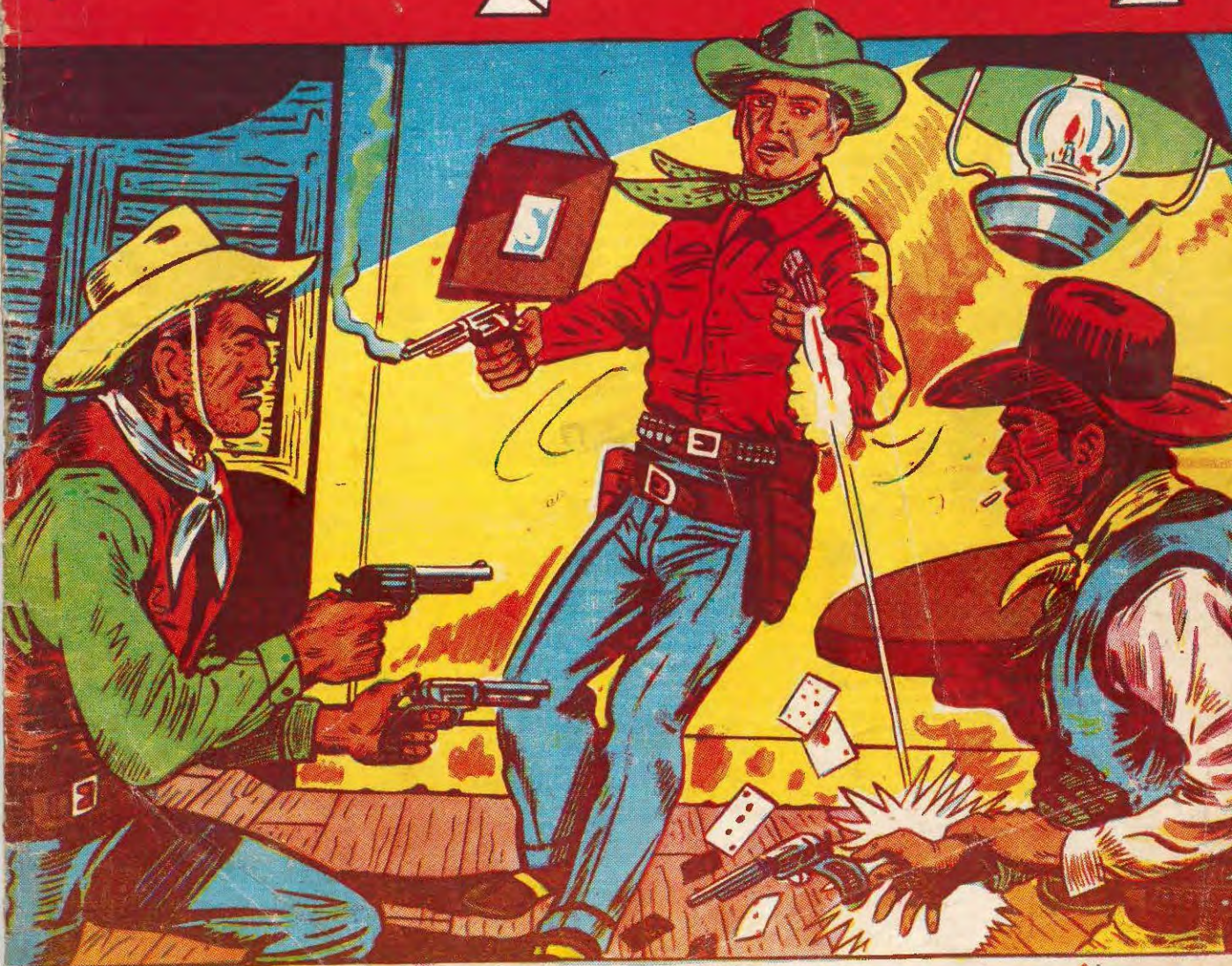


THE BLAZING TRAIL OF THE WILD WEST

ACE HIGH

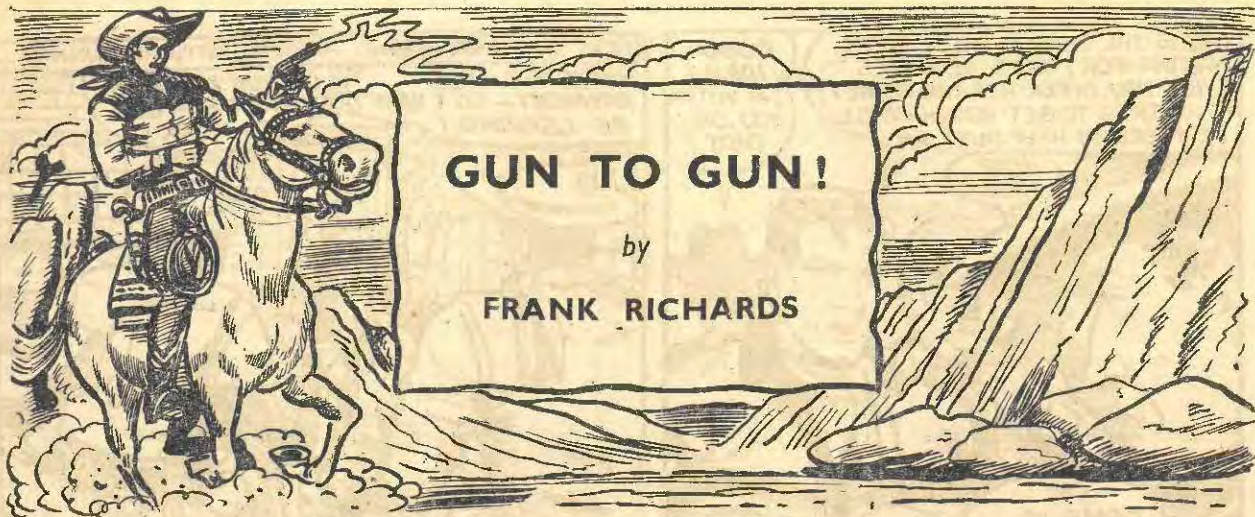
WESTERN COMIC Nº 5



A TERRIFIC **SLIM DEXTER** STORY
BY FAMOUS AUTHOR
FRANK RICHARDS

GUNFIGHTER • LT. MIKE RONEY • AUTHENTIC WESTERN





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 petting 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 moustaché 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?"

"Sure 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-slinger 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.

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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 caynse, 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 jammed 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!"

Suort, 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.