

marked man

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By H. C. WIRE

WNU SERVICE

THE STORY THUS FAR

Summoned to the C C ranch in central Nevada, desert-wise Walt Gandy is on his way to help his old range partner, Bill Hollister. Walt is stopped short by a girl—who holds a rifle in firing position. She knows him, tells him how to get to the ranch, and tells him that they will meet again. Within a quarter of a mile from his destination, Walt is stopped again. This time by a grotesque, misshapen man who tells him to get out and then tells him the C C crew is in Emigrant, the closest town, for an inquest. Someone has been murdered. Riding to the inquest in Emigrant, Walt leaves his horse at the livery stable. Walt learns that Cash Cameron, owner of the C C ranch, is in trouble. A hard but honest man, Cash has many enemies. At the inquest Walt sees Hollister and the girl who had stopped him, Chino Drake, former cook at the C C ranch, has been murdered and Sheriff Ed Battle is trying to pin the blame on Cash Cameron. The girl is called to the stand. She is Helen Cameron, Cash's daughter. She seemingly faints and, as Gandy rushes to her aid, slips something in his hand. It is the bullet from Drake's body. Walt rents a post office box and leaves the bullet in it. Leaving the post office he is accosted by a dark, swarthy man who offers him a job. He draws the man out, finds that he wants to usurp Cameron's public range land. Gandy then turns him down in biting fashion. The man leaps at Walt, who whips him after a hard battle. The man is Pete Kelso, foreman of the 77 ranch, an outfit hostile to Cameron. Gandy is called to the sheriff's office, where he meets Hollister.

CHAPTER VI—Continued

Walt Gandy leaned over and studied the floor boards between his boots. It came to him that this man showed surprising intelligence after all. If he would use it!

"Cash Cameron," Battle was saying, "has represented the power in control here. With the example of a big fellow like him holding the lid screwed on, and able to buy out any man who wanted to quit, there hasn't been much cause for trouble. Wasn't no need for the little fellows to jump his range rights nor each other's. But if the C C crumbles and its grass on public domain and in the national forest is open for anyone to grab, there's going to be hell." Battle roared suddenly, "I won't have it!"

Under his heavy brows Bill Hollister was no longer smiling. "You're dead certain, are you," he asked, "that the C C is going to crumble?"

Battle leaned forward over the flat top of his desk. "Yes."

His eyes narrowed and glittered. "A man in Cameron's hole right now don't dare take up a gun—even if his range is being crowded in on!"

"The C C don't own title to five thousand acres of land. It's using close to a hundred thousand, all public. Every man who rode in to the inquest today is figuring on just that. Get the C C tangled with the law, get you people tied up in court and you might as well start raising hogs on your five thousand acres, because your power on the open cattle range is gone, and nobody will be afraid to crowd you, Walt!" Battle waved his cigar as Hollister started to speak.

"The power on this range has shifted from Cameron's hands now, back to mine, where it belongs! And I'm going to use it to the advantage of everybody, big man and little man alike. You people can't even chew what you've bit off out there, let alone swallow it; I guess Ranger Powell was beginning to see that himself when he announced the C C allotment in the national forest is going to be cut next summer." Battle clamped his cigar righteously, saying around the end, "Time for the little fellow to have a show here, and I'm seeing that he gets it!"

"Little fellows," Bill Hollister's quiet voice asked, "like the 77?"

Battle stiffened. His smoking stopped.

Hollister uncrossed his knees, and the C C foreman and the sheriff of Emigrant County traded long measuring looks.

"What do you mean by that?" asked the sheriff evenly.

"This," Hollister stated. "Funny thing, isn't it, that every man, woman and child on the Emigrant Bench from here north to Salt Flat and west to the Barricades, came to the hearing today—everyone except those from the 77!"

Still sitting stiffly upright, Battle made no reply.

"You're right about what is going to happen here," Hollister went on. "This range is over-stocked. Someone has got to move out. There isn't enough land here of any sort, private, public or national forest to hold the flood of animals that has been poured onto the Bench lately. That's too almighty true! But don't you talk to me about the little fellows." He eyed Ed Battle, took a long breath and rocked his body forward in a lightly balanced motion.

"Cash Cameron has played square with them. He figured when he bought a man's brand, taking his cows, he bought range rights too. That's custom. But no, these little fellows have hung on, getting a few more cows and only waiting to jump his grass at any chance. Little fellows!"

It took Bill Hollister some time to get warmed up. He was hot now. "Look at 'em out there on the street, sure! A pack of wolves licking their chops! Eyeing each other to see who is going to lead in a rush onto the C C. Give them a leader and the rest will follow all right. And you, Battle, you know you'll be!"

Ed Battle seemed set against answering.

Hollister flared. "Everyone came in today to see how the inquest was going to fall, to see if Cameron was going to get properly tied up. Only the 77 didn't! Where's Stoddard? His

77 is the biggest contender for range rights that we control. But they aren't troubled about how this inquest will fall. The 77 knows!"

"Meaning that I've been bought, huh?" Battle asked suddenly.

"Meaning," said Hollister, "that someone who keeps his name off the records is part owner of the 77 brand."

Visibly the tension went out of Sheriff Ed Battle. He relaxed, shaking his head. "Nope. You guessed wrong that time. I own nary a cow in any size, shape or form, not on paper nor on the 77. If Jeff Stoddard and his bunch didn't come in today, they had their own reasons." He gave Hollister a placating grin. "But we're sort of wrangling ourselves off the track, aren't we? I called you in here to make a proposition . . . for the good of everybody. Want to listen?"

With an abruptness of action not usual in him, Bill Hollister rose and his lank form towered. "Battle," he said, evenly, "you're a plain white-ribbed skunk! Your bait's good all right, but it stinks of next election's votes!"

Color flooded hotly into the fleshy face of Sheriff Battle. He gripped his desk edge. Control over some quick and revealing retort came only after a minute of struggle.

When at last he got up onto his feet, the red flood of anger had drained away. He looked out with cold, hard eyes. "I said I had another piece of evidence, Hollister; something I didn't bring up at the inquest."

His ponderous figure came around to the open floor.

Watching, Walt Gandy wondered. Battle's gaze went down, came back. "Hollister," he asked, "why did you have Paul Champion run water into that corn row where Chino Drake was lying dead?"

At Ed Battle's questioning thrust, Hollister's jaw had sprung shut. Muscles bulged. He stood planted as if to take a blow, a fighting man, yet to Walt Gandy it seemed the dogged courage of someone plodding on grimly to an end, without fire nor vital care for what would come after that end was reached. Whatever had happened to Bill Hollister had struck him at the roots.

Battle had the knife in and he gouged with it. "Well? Want me to say why you had that corn row flooded? To cover some boot tracks! Some almighty big ones!"

Again the sheriff's eyes went downward, and following them Walt Gandy's rested upon the black stitched boots that Bill Hollister wore. They were big; number elevens. These that he had on today were brand-new.

"The trouble with that trick," said Battle, "was that you slipped up. One track didn't get flooded. My deputy ran cement into it and I've got the cast. Never mind about the pair of boots that left the track; we've probably got those too."

CHAPTER VII

SOMETHING was wrong at the C C. Riding abreast, but strangely silent for a pair who had not seen each other for two years, Walt Gandy and Bill Hollister topped the last bench and looked ahead to the home buildings. Out upon the open flat they had ridden in waning daylight. Here under the mountain wall night had come, darkening the ranch basin and spreading a gray mist close to the ground.

Hollister's long-legged black caught up beside the palomino. They loped through a lane between post corrals, passed the saddle sheds and reached an open yard. And then, almost before seeing them, they were upon three men standing motionless in front of a bunk house door. The door was open. No light showed inside.

Hollister swung off. Gandy waited, then walked in close behind him. Cash Cameron turned his white head. The boy, Paul Champion, was on his left. The short figure on his right was one Walt could not recall having seen before.

"Place has been searched, Bill," said Cameron. "All the buildings. Someone while we were gone."

Until that moment Walt did not see a fourth figure which had remained crouched back on the dark doorstep. It rose as the ranch owner spoke, came out with a scuffling limp, and the twisted body of the deformed man seemed at night more gruesome than ever. He dragged past within touching distance, slanted his sunken eyes up in a direct stare into Gandy's, yet showed no recognition.

Walt had thought this afternoon that the man was more than a little off; he changed the opinion now. Something with a worse twist than insanity looked out from those deep eye-pits. He caught the feeling of a mind as warped as the body.

"What about Bent?" Hollister asked, indicating the retreating figure with a jerk of his chin. "He's been around all day. Hasn't he anything to tell?"

"Says he knows nothing about it," Cameron answered. "Bent couldn't have heard anyone, and he was mending the south pasture fence this afternoon. So he couldn't have seen, either, if it was somebody who came in from any other direction."

Only the youngest cowhand, Paul Champion, appeared free of what-

ever it was that gripped these others. He swung the knotted end of his halter rope and kept running one hand back to the throat of his horse. A grin of repressed excitement looked almost foolish on his boyishly eager face.

"I'd say we better . . ." he began.

"Never mind, Paul," Cameron stopped him gently.

Walt Gandy had begun the making of a cigarette. Now he flung the unfinished tube away. He faced Cameron, saying, "There's one thing I guess ought to be made known right now, before anybody starts to check up."

Cash Cameron's white head pivoted.

"I was on your place this afternoon," said Gandy.

It was Hollister's voice, snapped out in the dark: "Why didn't you tell me that!"

Only Cash Cameron's features were visible from where Walt stood; the others were blotted in the night. But he could feel the quick stab of eyes toward him. He did not know yet who the cowpuncher was, mak-



"I've gone all through the house again, Dad."

ing a squat shapeless form at the ranch-owner's right side. Cameron's mouth opened, closed. A hand came up and smoothed down the coarse hair of his gray mustache.

"Say, look here!" Gandy blazed. But he felt that he was only throwing words against a stone wall. The silence of these men was that thick. Battling a rise of impatient anger he turned from them, pulling the tobacco sack from his shirt pocket.

"No lights!" Cameron warned. "Listen!" Then almost at once: "It's all right. Go ahead." His daughter came abruptly around the bunk shack end.

She reached Cash, and standing close up to his raw-boned size, seemed to Walt Gandy once again as she had this afternoon, a small and fragile girl in spite of the rough garb in which she clothed herself, and far too rare a person to be caught in the black war that was gathering around her.

"I've gone all through the house again, Dad," she said, her voice low and controlled. "Whoever did it wasn't trying to rob us."

"No," said Cameron. "No, of course not." He asked no further, and it was Bill Hollister who spoke up:

"Then there's nothing missing, Helen?"

Slowly she turned and lifted her face to him, though in the dark she could not possibly read his features. "A rifle," she said, "and a pair of boots. Yours."

All others stood fixed, but the effect of her words upon Bill Hollister was sudden action, almost as if from relief.

"Paul," he ordered rapidly, "put up the horses. Walt, throw your war bag down here. You can turn Sunspot in the end corral by himself tonight and give him something extra. Bent Lavin will show you the lanterns and where the grain bins are." He turned away into the dark, alone.

His voice came back over departing shoulders: "I'll rustle firewood for whoever's going to cook."

As Walt kicked straw across the stable floor for Sunspot's bedding, he looked at Bent Lavin's feet. They were big—all out of proportion to that shrunken body. The boots he wore would be about size eleven.

Cash Cameron was in the kitchen trying unfamiliarly to get together a meal in his own house, and as Walt Gandy entered, he asked, "You know anything about pot-busting, young fellow?"

Behind Gandy, Bill Hollister came in just then with an armful of wood.

"Sure he does," Bill said. "I suffered his cooking for a couple of years and lived through. Guess we can stand it for a few days."

Walt swung around from hanging his hat on a peg near the door. Hollister continued. "We're short on coals, but I don't want to bring a new man out here now. I've got an idea that we'll talk about later. Go ahead, Walt. You take the job."

As Gandy peeled out of his coat and rolled up his shirt sleeves, the

other cowpuncher who had stood at Cash Cameron's right hand out there in the dark, emerged from a lean-to storage room with a gunny-sack full of potatoes balanced on his left shoulder. He walked on short legs, bandy enough to fit the roundest horse ever born. A calf could jump between them and not scrape his boots. His face was homely, good-natured, and now solemnly intent upon the job of carrying potatoes.

He put the sack down on the floor. Cash Cameron said: "Horsethief, shake hands with our new cook. Gandy, this is Horsethief Fisher, and that name's no joke! But he has sort of weaned himself away from the habit the last ten, fifteen years."

A humorous twinkle of some past experience lighted Cameron's blue eyes, banishing momentarily the strain that this day had put there, and Walt Gandy had a glimpse of a hugely likeable old man.

Horsethief Fisher grinned and put out a knobby paw. "Glad to meet you, Gandy."

Walt shook. Here, he knew at once, was a tough and loyal benchman of the C C. Horsethief took off his hat to hang it on a nail next the door, showing a head as bald as a hen's brown egg.

Hired hands on the C C ate in a dining-room that opened through an archway directly off the kitchen. Cash Cameron took his accustomed chair at the table's end opposite the kitchen arch. Bill Hollister ranged around on his right, Walt Gandy next. On Cameron's left was an empty place, then Paul Champion, Horsethief Fisher and Bent Lavin.

No one spoke of the seat that remained unoccupied, but all through the meal Bill Hollister kept staring there, as if he could not keep his eyes from picturing the girl in it, and again that somber studious look was set upon his face.

In the end he seemed to have thought something out. He pushed back his chair, saying: "I'm going to move down to the bunk house, Cash. If Gandy is going to cook, he ought to have my room here so he can roll out and get the fire built early."

It sounded reasonable. Cameron nodded. But somehow the ease and forgetfulness that had been upon the room for a little while was gone.

Gandy stood up when Hollister did. "There before the men he said only: 'I'll go down with you, Bill, and bring up my war bag.' But outside when they had passed beyond earshot of the house, he stopped short in his tracks."

Hollister's lank form halted too, and turned in the dark.

Walt wet his thumb to roll a cigarette. "You know," he said, his words slow and dragging, "there's a lot of country between here and the border, mostly desert."

Hollister dropped his head forward. "Huh?" He sounded startled. "Most hot desert, too," Walt went on, "and the wild flowers weren't blooming, and there wasn't much moon, and one place they forgot to put up the trail signs. Did I make that ride for any purpose, Bill?"

Closing up the short space that separated them, Hollister asked, "Are you crazy? Too much heat or something?"

"Too much something," Walt admitted. He put his next question flatly:

"What am I here for, Bill? Am I needed now, or did I come in too late? A man has already been killed. Things point mighty straight to someone here on the C C. I'm not asking if it's so or not; I'm using my own head. But this business of every last one of you appearing to have it all doped out and yet acting like you're afraid to tell, is making me itch. Is this ranch split against itself? Is that it? What's happened, anyway?"

He paused, then as Hollister said nothing, finished. "Well, no, you don't need to go into details until you're ready. But I've got to know one thing—do you need me or not?"

It seemed to take Bill Hollister an unreasonably long time to form his answer, yet when it came, there was no room for the slightest doubt that he meant every word.

"Walt," he said, "I need you now more than I've ever needed a partner in all my life! You've got to take that much and believe it. It's all I can tell you, because, boy, it's the only thing I know for certain!"

A sudden grip on Walt's arm spilled tobacco from an unfinished cigarette.

Hollister started to speak, the grip digging in, but then bit off the word and stood tight-mouthed, staring back toward the ranch house.

Next moment he gave a strange short laugh. "Lord!" he said, with disgust. "Me getting the jumps. I'll be taking pot-shots at my own shadow first thing you know!"

"But what is it?" Gandy remained rooted, half turned around.

In pine trees beyond where the long front gallery of the house ended against the hill slope, a white, shapeless patch was shifting back and forth, slowly, regularly—once a man hanging by the neck had looked like that. It brought a cold creeping sensation up his spine. Then he, too, understood the apparition, recalling a child's swing there at the end of the ranch home. But who would be swinging? This time of night!

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Star Dust

STAGE-SCREEN-RADIO

By VIRGINIA VALE

(Released by Western Newspaper Union.)

DOROTHY LAMOUR may have to remain in the sarong that made her famous, but Jon Hall has finally grabbed off a role that will enable him to wear regular clothes—the curse of "The Hurricane" has lifted for him, if not for her.

After his success among its winds and waves he was idle for two years. Then Producer Edward Small asked to borrow him for another South Seas picture, "South of Pago-Pago." Near the end of shooting on it, Small was planning to film "Kit Carson," and had already signed Randolph Scott for the leading role when Hall appeared at the studio one day wearing a ten gallon



JON HALL

hat and a semi-cowboy outfit. He had a late call for work that day, and had spent the early morning hours riding with his wife, Frances Langford.

Small met Hall near the actor's dressing bungalow—and now it's Hall instead of Randolph Scott whom you'll see as Kit Carson.

In its latest issue, "The Philippines; 1896-1946," the March of Time pictures the new problems facing the Philippines as a result of today's mounting war fever, and shows how Philippine independence, scheduled to take effect in 1946, is already threatened by Japan's current expansion program in the south Pacific.

It's been announced that Joan Blondell plans to retire from the screen indefinitely when she finishes "I Want a Divorce." She has been suffering from severe colds and inertia for the past year, and says that she will travel throughout America with a road company, (a novel cure for both severe colds and inertia) and later on will make an extended tour of South America for a change of climate.

Fred MacMurray has grown to be so expert at water polo that a company that makes short features has asked him to make one on the sport.

Felix Knight, starred on the airwaves "All Star Revue," had a bad moment recently. After he had sung a medley of songs about the month of May, gardens and apple orchards, the Three Jesters strode up and down the aisles, tossing apples and other farm products to the audience. Knight swears he was scared to death for fear the fruit would be handed right back—hurtling through the air straight at him.

If Columbia's Wayne King wanted to start up in the pipe tobacco business, he already has a large clientele all over the country. For 15 years he has been smoking his own private mixture, but he won't tell anyone what it is. It's the result of four years of experimenting. But though he won't give away the secret of the mixture, he does give away the tobacco—12 pounds of it a month. When he travels on personal appearance tours there's always a large can of it on his dressing table—so if his orchestra is playing in your town, and you know anyone who smokes a pipe, you might drop in and get some.

Deems Taylor, the music critic and composer who acts as master of ceremonies on "Musical Americana," has a maid who delights in taking part in contests of all kinds. She was greatly excited recently when she was notified that she had qualified among the winners in a national contest, and couldn't wait to receive her prize. When it came it turned out to be an autographed copy of Taylor's latest book on music!

Bob Trout maintains that during those first few days after war really broke loose he averaged only two and one-half hours' sleep out of each 24, and could have floated a battleship on the amount of coffee he drank to keep awake. Newscasting isn't all that it's cracked up to be.

Republic has arranged to produce a picture starring Gene Autrey; the title will be "Melody Ranch"—same as his radio program—and several members of the radio cast will appear in the picture.

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