

marked man

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By H. C. WIRE

WNU SERVICE

CHAPTER XX—Continued.

Bitterly Walt Gandy said, "Oh, Lord, oh, Lord! Helen thinking all the time you did it! And Cash letting you carry the guilt!" But then he stared down through the flicker of candle light. "Or actually believing you did. I wouldn't say even yet that Cameron pulled off those killings."

"I don't think he did myself, now," Hollister answered. "Do you know about Jeff Stoddard being at the house lately?"

Gandy tightened. "When did you find that out, Bill?"

"Only this morning—that he'd been there, and what he had baited Helen into promising. Walt, don't you see!"

"I do," said Gandy. "Stoddard has been almighty certain of the way things were going to fall. Only they haven't quite. What is it he can hold over Helen?"

"Nothing, if Cameron isn't guilty, and I'm not. As long as I suspected Cash, I thought Stoddard might have got hold of the truth somehow. He made Helen believe it—that he held proof against someone on the C.C." Hollister drew a sudden choking breath. "Wish to God I'd reached Stoddard today!" He turned his head into the light. "Any more coffee?"

In the opposite of his true feeling, Gandy turned back to the bunk with a burst of anger. "Why the hell did you come out alone like this, Bill! You could have told me!"

Hollister smiled faintly, reaching for the tin cup. "I have other plans for you, boy."

He lifted his head, drank and lay back. His voice had weakened when he said in a few minutes: "I wanted to clean it all up myself without you getting into any gunfight, because you're going to carry on this place. You and Helen."

"What do you mean?"

"The C.C." Hollister's smile lighted at Gandy's puzzled stare. "It's yours, most of it anyway. My part. What did you think I got you into this country for!"

Walt could say nothing.

"What's the difference?" Hollister went on. "Things have all been the same, haven't they, yours and mine? Helen . . ." He seemed to be switching onto another trail, but managed after a pause: "I was too solemn a cuss, that's it. You're her kind, Walt. I knew." Then later, "That two hundred dollars you gave me settled a lien and cleared your title. Papers are in my war bag at the ranch."

Walt Gandy had risen, not wanting to show his face, as strangely in a single moment there appeared before him every detail of the years that he and Bill Hollister had been together. Camps. Times they had fought their border battles side by side. And now . . . He glanced down. Hollister had shut his eyes and rolled his head over as if to sleep.

For a long time Walt looked on, then moved to the stove and put more brush stems in the fire. There was no need for light, and he blew out the candle, leaving only a red flicker from cracks in the stove. He remained standing and after a while held his watch down to one of the cracks.

Hollister had not spoken again, but at the creaking of floor boards he opened his eyes. "Midnight?"

"Yes," Walt told him. "Need anything?"

There came no answer. It was all of half an hour later when Bill Hollister struggled suddenly, trying to sit up.

His voice grated. "Walt! Bent Lavin knows something! If you can get him to talk . . ." He dropped back, rigid as steel under the restraining pressure of Walt Gandy's hands.

At one o'clock Bill Hollister was dead.

CHAPTER XXI

HOLLISTER was dead; but what he had started to do could still be done. He had wanted to settle this trouble single-handed, without risking the lives of more C.C. people—young Champion, Horseshief Fisher, Helen herself. Walt Gandy believed he could carry it through.

Some time between half-past one and half-past two, riding Hollister's black, he returned up the west cut and topped out upon the prairie. The stiff steer hide that had been hanging on a limb of the water-hole cedar was now in a roll beneath his left arm and held by loops of his rope. His right hand guided the black away from the ravine head in a course quartering sharply northward.

The drive of 77 cattle which he had seen this afternoon would move toward the sink at about two miles an hour. That gave them perhaps five miles before they had bedded down for the night. They would still be a couple of miles short of the sink rims. Yet there was considerable chance for error, Gandy knew, in this figuring.

Here on the prairie top he could hardly see his hands in front of his face; his northward course was chosen more out of instinct than anything else. Only faintly, at rare times, could he distinguish a division between the level earth and the overcast sky, and know at least he was not riding toward a jump-off. Wind generally swept from the

northwest this time of year. He kept his face into that.

Every move Walt Gandy made was mechanical, with a cold deadly calm. Never had his feelings been so close to those of a killer. He looked forward with no fear nor misgivings. The thing was merely fact—if there came a hitch in the business ahead, he would kill.

His greatest concern was that he might stumble upon the cattle and jump the herd before finding the men who guarded it. He wanted the men. One man, Jeff Stoddard.

It was perhaps an hour, half-past three, when the biting wind came laden with something besides the cold—the odor of cattle, not unpleasant to a cowman's nostrils. Gandy drew his horse in. He rested the hide roll across his saddle. His wounded left leg bothered him and he let it hang straight for a moment.

He sat absolutely still. To one uninitiated in working range cattle, it would not seem possible that two-thirds head might be lying there within a stone's throw. He could imagine them with noses tucked back against bent forelegs avoiding the cold, the herd giving off no sound whatever if it was comfortably bedded. An outsider would not know, either, the lightning swiftness with which these same animals could rise and hit the ground, running. Any foreign noise could start that jump, or even the unexpected stamp of a horse's hoof too near some light sleeper.

Walt Gandy sat waiting for some time, until certain he had the bed ground located straight in front of him, off perhaps a couple of hundred paces.

Stiffly he drew his left foot up to the stirrup. He shifted the rolled hide over and let it down onto the ground, leaving his rope looped about it. There might be some difficulty in finding the hide again, yet edging forward once more, he could mark the gray blob it made against the dark prairie.

A little later, certain that he was close to the bedded herd and in the route of night guards who would be riding circle, Gandy halted, slid from his saddle and dropped the black's reins.

The horse stood anchored, head lowered into the unbroken sweep of fall wind. Gandy moved back half a dozen steps and crouched down. Now from this position, melted into the earth, he could faintly make out the animal in front of him and a sector of prairie horizon lined against the overcast heavens.

He did not have long to wait.

Cowhands riding night herd don't sing altogether to amuse themselves. They want to let the cattle know they are moving around, and by the familiarity of a human voice avoid the sudden jump and stamper that Gandy himself had been wary of. In less than five minutes after he had hunkered low, he heard the swish of a rider coming through dry prairie grass, and the unmusical monotone of the man's cow-lullaby.

The rider was bearing out of the northwest along with the sweep of wind. Cigarette smoke drifted ahead of him. Then there came a pin point of red light that alternately glowed, faded, and presently described a downward arc as the butt was thrown away.

Gandy drew his thirty-eight, for if the rider continued direct approach he would discover the black horse in another two or three minutes. The tired animal had lifted his head, but then dropped it without nickering and now remained motionless.

The looming form was within five paces when Walt Gandy spoke without rising: "Reach up, you! Quick! And quiet. Don't spur that horse of yours, either!"

There was a split second in which the figure jerked, and if he could have located the voice, guns would have flared. Then Walt saw two arms go up. "Drop it!" he snapped. A revolver spun downward and thudded. He stood up, giving orders low-voiced while moving across the short space between himself and the mounted man: "Turn and slide down, facing me. Don't grab anything. I don't usually play ball this way. Now stand there."

He stepped up to a lean range rider of about his own height, thrust the thirty-eight in close and felt for more weapons. There were none. He reached out and slid the rifle from his saddle scabbard.

"Now," he said, "gather up both horses and walk the way I tell you."

The arms came down. "Look here . . ."

"Shut up!" said Gandy. "Turn square about and go straight ahead."

In time, walking behind his prisoner and the two animals, he came to the steer hide, angled on a short distance to the left of it and halted. Rapidly he took down the man's own rope, ordered him to stretch full length upon the earth and bound him.

His voice was quiet; every action was in that cold deadly calm. "Listen, you. Carefully. Because I'm going to kill you." He paused, then finished, "Right here on the spot unless you give me the dope. Is Jeff Stoddard with the herd?"

He bent over. From flat on his back, the man glared up, silent.

Gandy clicked the hammer of his gun. "Better speak up, brother. What you say won't work to hurt you any. But what you don't say will check you out. Is Jeff Stoddard with the herd or not?"

"Yes," came the answer.

"Where? In camp or night-riding?"

"How do I know!"

Gandy stabbed downward. The gun muzzle pressed against hard flesh.

"Honest, I don't know!"

"Then what's your password to-night?"

The reply came more promptly, "On guard."

"And the answer to that?"

"Hands down."

"You better be sure that's right," Gandy warned, "because I'm going to try it, and if it doesn't work I'll come back and kill you."

He reached down, yanked the man's coat tail up over his head and tied rope ends around it, muffling him.

In the course of half an hour two riders approaching warily from opposite directions across the black prairie, came to a stop.

"On guard," said one, low-toned.

"Hands down," replied the other. They closed in.

"Up!" said Gandy, gun whipped into startled eyes. "Quick! Kick your foot out and come down facing me."

He followed to the ground, added to his collection of guns and then, afoot, drove this second prisoner back in the same direction as the first, but not within sight of each other. These men all looked alike to him, hard, long-backed, tight-paces.

mouthed. Yet his cold words brought talk enough, and he left this one as he had that other, bound flat, and head swathed in a coat. He still had no definite news of the 77 owner.

Whether his approach to the herd this time was a little misjudged, or an animal had shifted its bed out from the edge, he didn't know. A lone critter rose suddenly almost under his horse's nose.

The black wheeled. The steer plunged off in a stiff-legged jump, then circled to see what had broken into its sleep. Split hoofs had rattled unnaturally loud in what had been dead silence, and now, about-faced, the animal took a snorting breath.

Gandy waited, his horse pulled in, praying the fool steer would quiet down and not start the others. Then next moment at his back a voice said:

"On guard."

"Hands down," he answered, shifting his horse around.

Immediately the voice snarled, "What's the matter with you, you damn fool! Jumping a cow like that! Want to start 'em running?"

The rider came close, growling, "Time to change the guard. Go on in."

Gandy's gun flicked into the dim face. His words rapped the night. "Put your hands up! I mean it, you! Put . . ."

The upward flick of his gun continued on in a slashing blow at the man's jaw, and his left hand shot out and grabbed the rider's reins; for here was one who took a chance. He had tried to draw.

Gandy felt his gun strike bone. The head snapped backward. Then the startled horses broke apart and he could only grab a handful of clothing, losing both his grip on the reins and his thirty-eight as he was yanked from the saddle, still holding to the other's coat front.

They struck earth together, Gandy's arms around a thick body, huge in size and heavily muscled. It was a giant of a man he had met here, and the next moves were those of a skilled fighter. Twice they rolled, clawing, and then he felt himself suddenly in a scissors lock between powerful legs. He wrenched. The legs held. Iron arms were crushing him backward. He recoiled from a savage head butt. His wounded left leg went numb; his fists lashing in curving blows seemed unable to connect.

All breath was rapidly being cut off from him and a blackness more

than the night was flooding before his eyes. He braced both arms back upon the ground, trying to heave the weight from his body, managed only to rise a little without being able to turn. And then his outflung right hand touched metal. He closed upon a gun and put all strength into a blow aimed at the back of the gouging head.

Twice he struck. The crushing weight went limp. Gandy rolled and struck again. Dizzily he groped up onto his knees and crouched, swaying over the inert figure, drawing painful breath into his lungs and fighting through a moment when the prairie top tilted and threatened to throw him down.

The man was breathing but did not move. Gandy felt over him, lifting a revolver from the belt holster, and knew then that the gun he had recovered first was his own thirty-eight. In a moment he located a sound of horses munching grass not far off, found the black and the other animal and brought them to the motionless form.

Calm deliberation was gone now, an eager haste flooding over him. Neither of the other two prisoners had tried a desperate break as had this one, and the savagery of his fighting seemed all at once more than an ordinary fear of capture.

The eyes were opening narrowly, pin-pointing up at him. Gandy whipped downward with the thirty-eight. "Don't try yelling! Sit up!"

As nothing happened he reached over and yanked the man upright. "I said up—clear up; get onto your feet!" He helped with a prod of his right boot toe. The man rose groggily.

"Now walk," said Gandy, jabbing forward with the gun. He followed, leading the two horses, and took a course still to the left of his other captives.

Far enough, he halted. "Stand there!"

In rapid movement he pulled the man's rope from against the saddle horn, made a loop and dropped it over the bare head, letting it fall to knee level before jerking it tight.

His jerk was sudden, the man lost balance, tripped and sprawled face down. Gandy sat on him, bound his legs, knotting the rope behind out of reach. He secured the wrists hard together, and yet allowed for slight freedom of the fingers, then cut the rope.

Feeling in the inner coat pocket, he found an envelope, drew it out and cupped a match close. Under the flick of his thumbnail the match flared once and died in the wind. Gandy did not strike another, but put the envelope back in the coat pocket.

Very deliberately he took the man's own gun and emptied it of all but one shell. He tied a ten-foot length of rope to the gun butt and laid it out on the prairie; brought the free end back toward the prone figure.

Then he stood looking down. "Stoddard," he said, "your game's up. Two dead men are going to sit beside you on this prairie top to-night, Drake and Powell, maybe one more. Now listen. Straight along this rope is your gun with one bullet. You can roll to it, but if there's nothing on your conscience stay where you are. I've caught two of your guards and now I'm going to send your herd back to the hills. After that I'll come to see what you've done about this bullet."

He muffled Stoddard also with a coat tied around his head, then left him.

Unbroken darkness still hung over the prairie, but morning light could not be far off. Gandy swung the black into a fast walk until he located the steer hide, picked it up, mounted again and circled toward the bedded herd with the roll under his left arm.

Not long after that, any old-timers who were guarding the 77 drive must have thought they were back in Indian days, for it was an Indian stamper trick that Walt Gandy launched with the abruptness of a thunderbolt.

In a burst of drumming hoofs his black horse came down along the pool of cattle, and at the end of a forty-foot rope the stiff steer hide, now outspread, sailed and slapped the earth, sailed again and slapped a startled cow. The cow jumped, bawling. The thing sailed on, rose swooped, a gray shape that darted crazily into the air, slammed into the herd, and all the while set up a rattling and crackling of dry leather.

Two thousand head of cows were on the hoof. Their rising sounded like hail—and then they were on the run. They knew only one way, back in the direction they had come.

The earth vibrated and gave off a rolling thunder. Guns crashed suddenly up ahead . . . guards trying to turn the herd back upon itself. But the animals were in full move. The gunfire lasted only a moment. The thunder and earth vibration continued.

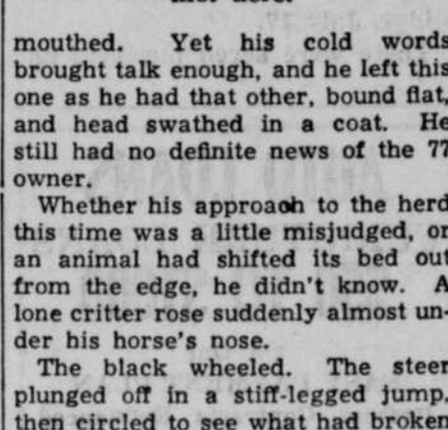
Twice Walt Gandy crossed behind the galloping white-faces, until a gun blazed close and a bullet winged past. He wheeled, throwing two slugs blindly, then was carried out of range by the onrush of his horse. He cut the hide loose and rode for a time following the stampede, certain at last that it could not be checked, and that these animals were headed for the 77 home range.

It was a giant of a man he had met here.

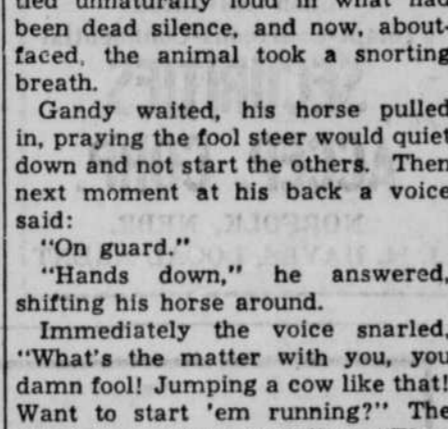
It might take a dozen weekday crowds to equal a throng of 55,000 like the one shown above, attending a Cleveland Indians night game. (Right) Night football game in progress at Manchester, N. H. Night football is a boon to small town high school teams.



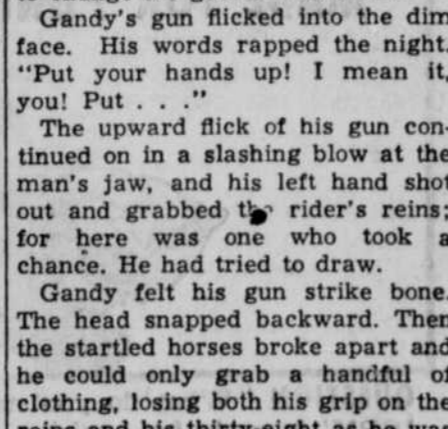
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(Above) The Milwaukee Brewers playing to large nighttime crowd. (Left) Shooting how Westinghouse engineers focused the lights on the New York Giants' Polo grounds. The boxes, serving as targets, were removed when adjustments were O. K.

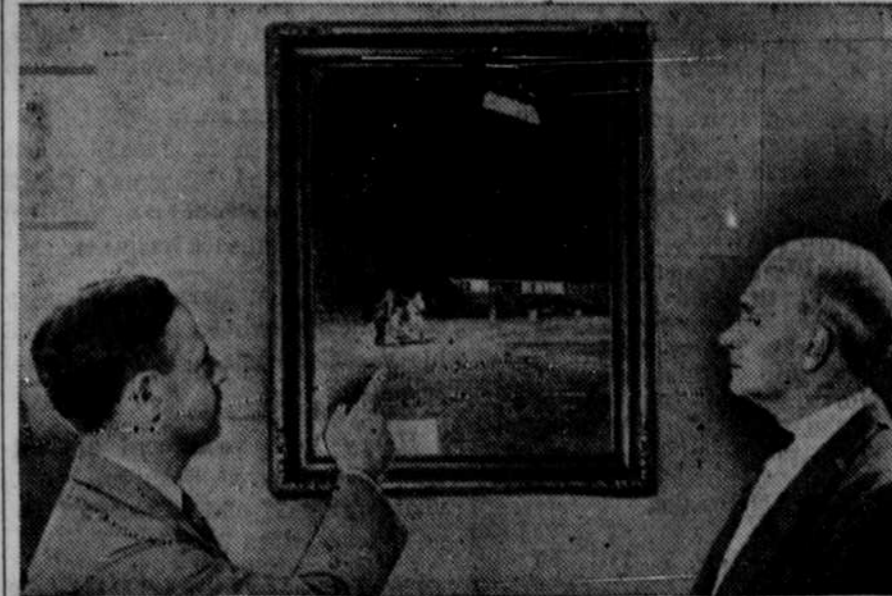


Picture Parade

Ten manufacturers now produce the aluminum reflectors which, with the special "alzac" finish developed in Aluminum Research Laboratories at New Kensington, Pa., resist all weather conditions, it is claimed. They are now used in virtually all ball parks.

Night Sports, in Tenth Year, Going Stronger Than Ever

The national pastime is still baseball, due, say some sports authorities, to the success of NIGHT baseball. Ten years ago this summer the first night game in organized baseball was played at Des Moines, Iowa. Minor league ball, backbone of the whole baseball industry, flood-lighted its way through the depression. Fans like the nocturnal sport. It enables them to see games without neglecting their work, or without burying their grandmothers.



(Above) R. J. Swackhamer of the General Electric presents a picture of the original Des Moines night contest to Wm. Beattie (right), curator of the National Baseball Museum at Cooperstown, N. Y.



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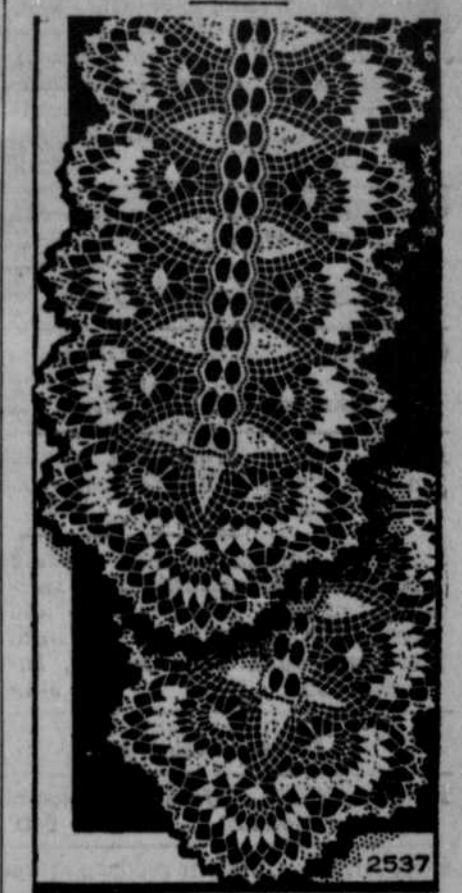
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'Squawk' Troublesome

'Squawk' is one of the hardest words in the language for spelling bee contestants, according to Dr. Harry Hagen, who has completed a check-up on what words cause the most casualties.

One reason people can't spell "squawk" is that they hardly ever see it in print. Squawks are heard, but seldom seen. The most common misspelling is "squak," although "squalk," "sqwawk" and "sqwawk" also occur.

"Fricassee" seems to be one of the most difficult stumblers in the language, judging from the damage it has done. Fourteen spellers went down on "fricassee" in one national contest—probably the record toll.

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(TO BE CONTINUED)