

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-waiting Gandy is on his way to help his old range partner, Bill Hollister. Gandy 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 groggy, misshapen man, Bent Lavin, by name, 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 and he is to be 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 Hollister's daughter. She has been seen by Hollister, she seems faint and, as Gandy rushes to her aid, slips something in his hand. It is the bullet from Drake's body. Walt then she is called to the stand and she tells him that she saw Hollister in the livery stable. She tells him that she saw Hollister in the livery stable. She tells him that she saw Hollister in the livery stable. She tells him that she saw Hollister in the livery stable.

There was flat finality in the way Hollister said the word. "Lord!" breathed Gandy; and his gaze swept out over the miles of C C domain, along the benches that stepped down from the high Emigrant Mountains, swung north following the curve of the range, west into the long basin of the sink, and then, hardly aware of it, he was staring on still farther west to the wide prairie that marked the 77. So Cash Cameron was busted!

"Flat," Bill Hollister was saying. "No one knows it, not even Helen. The bench knows he is in a hole, and that it might break him, later; but the fact is I've been carrying the C C for more than a year. I'm supposed to be only part owner. Wait, I own darn near the whole thing!"

CHAPTER VII—Continued

"Lavin was a cowman some eighteen, twenty years ago," Hollister continued. "He controlled range, Cameron owned cattle, they were going to merge into one big outfit when Lavin had his accident. Got thrown from a horse and laid in the snow all of one night before anyone found him. I don't know what set in because of that, but it left him in awful shape. And it did something else."

"You haven't seen it yet. Lavin hates Cameron. Jealousy. He hoped to be the king here, and Cameron's rise to the power he wanted curdled his gizzard. Watch his face sometime across the table, you'll see. After the accident, Cameron opened his money bags and bought Lavin out instead of watching him lose his range, then told Lavin to make the ranch his home as long as he wanted to. Bent stayed—so far as I know he's never been off of the C C even to go to town. Know why? Helen." Hollister shot a sidelong glance. "What do you think of that girl?"

"Let's finish with Lavin first," Walt answered. "Might help," Hollister grinned back. "It's like I said, Bent stayed because of Helen. Her mother had died, and he raised her; she was only a little kid then. Lavin kept the house going, was her watch-dog, and later on taught her all she knows of riding and camping out."

"And hitting what she aims a gun at?" Walt put in. "Tight-reined, Hollister set his horse back to sudden stop. "What do you mean by that?"

Gandy's palomino took the cue and halted also. Walt wet his thumbs and began the rolling of a cigarette. "Helen Cameron," he said, exhaling blue smoke, "strikes me as being a keen party with a rifle, that's all. She has a straight eye and a steady hand, and I'll bet when she handles a gun it's no fooling!"

"Walt, don't jump up and grab onto the conclusion that I'm ready to quit or something. That isn't it, and before this thing is over with, a pack of chop-licking hyenas are going to find it out. But you've sat in plenty of poker games yourself, and you know once in a long while you can read your cards before you pick them up. It's more than a hunch—you know what lies there face down."

"I know what you're going to say," scoffed Gandy. "All right," Hollister insisted, "it's a fact. I can see it coming. And that," he emphasized, "is why you're here."

Walt Gandy grinned. "The black boy is in 'em, huh?"

"He tried to make light of this thing that Hollister was predicting; but a cold chill played leapfrog up and down his backbone, for he knew Bill Hollister, and he knew also the too frequently proved fact that if a man is marked in a country like this, the day will come sometime when a horse trots back to the home ranch with stirrups flapping and the saddle empty. It takes only one bullet, and that bullet can be met at any turn of the trail; any clump of cedar or benchland coulee can hide its sender."

The murder? Something rotten? Under that dark mood of his Bill Hollister had a temper. Chino Drake had been shot in the back. No man would admit that, even to a partner. Walt Gandy scowled and threw away his cigarette.

"What are the cards in this hand you've read face down?" he asked. "Turn 'em up! If I'm sitting in on this game, I don't play anything blind."

To face him, Hollister shifted onto one leg, his hard hands reaching for support on saddle horn and cantle. "All right, I'll show you. How's this: Cash Cameron is broke!"

"Yes, that's right. If these byes had known what condition the C C was in, they wouldn't have waited for something to tie us up before they started jumping our grass. They still think we have the almighty Cameron dollars behind us. Well, we haven't."

"Here's another card. We use public domain for winter grazing, and national forest in the summer, making us all around dependent upon public good humor for our grass. Now what's happening? First thing is we've got to have that national forest privilege—but it's being cut away from us. Each year our allotment of how many cows we can send up into the mountains is being decreased. C C stuff has been penalized for breaking beyond the drift fence, and our summer crews have been charged with setting fires, such stuff as that, until it looks like someone has got the Forest Service by the ear and is talking in low tones. That's what Cameron and Ranger Powell have wrangled about lately."

Walt Gandy sat flicking a loose rein end against his chap's leg. "Powell," he mused, "was Cash Cameron's alibi at the inquest, wasn't he?"

Hollister's heavy brows gathered. "Well?"

"This Powell was the alibi," Gandy amended, "only the alibi didn't show up." His non-committal brown gaze narrowed off over the valley. "He was perhaps just taking a ride and couldn't be got hold of that day. Huh?"

"Look here, Walt! What do you know?" Hollister's voice suddenly had a lash in it. Gandy looked around. At last something had brought a rise out of the man. Muscles of Hollister's lean jaw knotted and his black eyes blazed. "Are you telling me something?" he demanded. "Or was that talk?"

There came to him again the feeling that the C C people were covering up, not uncovering. So he said: "I only know that Ranger Powell hasn't been seen since the day your Chino Drake cook was killed."

"Sure, well," and Hollister visibly let down, "nothing unusual in that. Sam Powell always takes a long circle around his district before winter sets in."

"Let's see the rest of your cards," said Gandy. Hollister again studied the fork of his black's ears. He hesitated, spoke tight-jawed when he said then: "Chino Drake and Helen. That cook was a low cross-breed between an Indian buck and a Chinese woman, and bad. He watched Cameron once and stole money from a post-hole bank. Cash used to pull out a fence post, drop a money bag in and put the post back. We never did get what Drake took and always thought he had it hidden on the place. He was a yellow devil! Ought to have been run off the benches, but Cameron gave him a chance."

While Hollister talked of Chino Drake, a black mood grew upon him, and he finished now with a savage snap. "Then I caught him after Helen!"

In that moment the case of Chino Drake seemed clear. "So you killed him, huh?" Walt asked. Hollister's head jerked around. "Suppose I did, then what?"

face with a whip lash. It was set, lined, and hard. Hollister's powerful hands had a vice hold on the saddle horn, and for a full minute he sat staring straight ahead, until the savage thing that had gripped him passed, and turned with only a smoldering of it in his drilling eyes.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Walt. I'll never marry Helen Cameron!"

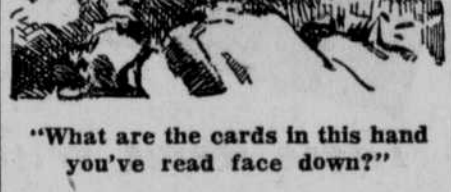
He put spurs to his horse and they loped on, covering miles and saying nothing. Bill Hollister had showed his cards—almost. There was one, Walt Gandy knew, still face down.

CHAPTER VIII

IT TOOK him a couple of hours to become dead certain of that last down card. Meanwhile there was work.

Five white-faced steers jumped from a coulee and fled toward the mountains. He and Hollister circled them, picked up more in a palo-verde brake and returned to the bench flat.

The herd of strays grew. When a deeper ravine cut the bench and



"What are the cards in this hand you've read face down?"

struck down due west to the rims of the sink, Hollister said, "I'll push this bunch along. You can go as far as Willow Spring." He raised a gloved hand, pointing. "It's . . ."

"I know," said Walt. The leveled arm dropped. "How come you do? Didn't you strike across the mountains getting onto this Emigrant bench?"

"No; came in sort of wandering around the south tip," Walt told him, and wondered why Bill Hollister seemed disturbed. "I just happened onto this spring of yours—some willows in the bend."

Hollister frowned. "That's the place. Well, anyway, you won't find but a handful of cows there. Bring 'em along into these coulees that meet you say a mile back from the rims. Don't you go shoving into the sink alone."

"Figuring to meet competition?"

"Bound to," said Hollister. "Sooner or later. The joker against this hand I'm holding is a close combination named Pete Kelso and Jeff Stoddard. Pete's foreman and Jeff's the owner of the 77." He faced west. "You can see the rims from here. Looks like the bench continues and flats out onto all that prairie yonder, but in that low part there's a break, a straight jump several hundred feet to the bottoms. The sink is exactly halfway between the C C and the 77, but we developed the water-holes. So it's ours."

"To hang onto," Gandy put in, grinning broadly. "Nice little keg of dynamite! Anyway, this brings us down to facts. What are we going to do, Bill, smash into this 77 before they get set to smash us? Or are we going to wait around and wonder what'll happen?"

He had told no one of his own brush with the 77 foreman, back there in the Emigrant livery barn. "Well," he urged, as Hollister sat silent. "What are we going to do? Wait?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because, Walt," said Hollister flatly, "we've got to! Let's get on with the work!"

here secretly that day of the inquest? What could have brought her! Meeting someone? There flicked across his mind a suspicion of treachery. This spring was out toward the 77 range; only one 77 man had showed up in Emigrant that day. The others? Was Helen having secret dealings with the enemy camp? But then he could not bring that charge against the girl.

A thing was beginning to come clear. In all her acts, in questioning him last night, then being so evasive and suspicious, what was the girl afraid of? Was it altogether the motive, which by her very nature, had appeared instantly the most probable one?

Until this minute he had been working on the idea that Helen Cameron was shielding somebody on the C C. Now suddenly Gandy sat rigid. She wasn't! They were shielding her!

In the light of this, the reason for keeping him in the dark ever since his arrival here was plain enough. They couldn't talk. Everything was being covered. Even Hollister had not wanted to tell him the truth of what had happened. Helen had killed Chino Drake.

In slow deliberation Gandy drew tobacco sack and paper book from his left shirt pocket and rolled a smoke. There was just one hole. From what he had gathered, there was cause aplenty for the breed cook getting a bullet. The girl could have been acquitted. No jury in this country would have hung anything onto her. Then why hadn't the C C come out with it flat-footed?

He lighted his cigarette and took a deep drag. It was a hole, he had to admit, that a fair-sized mule could jump through. Still his belief remained.

Hollister's bunch had already passed. Tracks in the wash sand showed that. Gandy prodded up his white-faces, and in a rising dust fog they swung along in their stiff-backed gallop, seeming to be familiar now with the way to the sink. He knew it could not be far, for the sheer flanking cliffs of the ravine shouldered up some three hundred feet on either side and had begun to bear apart.

There was a bend ahead. His cattle turned on the run; plowed next instant to a bawling stop before another herd coming back. They were C C's, Hollister's strays. But Hollister? Gandy lashed in, milled the combined bunches, got them headed down again, and then with unexpected abruptness the ravine ended, and the seven-mile width of the sink was before him.

Freed, his cattle plunged onto the flat and scattered, but he suddenly pulled down, tight-muscled, as two riders darted from behind a shoulder of the cliff and raced to cut him off.

The fleece collar of his sheepskin coat had been turned up against the biting fall air and salt dust stirred by the cattle. Now he turned it down, sliding one hand along the metal fastenings until the front lay open at his throat and chest.

By this time he had located Bill Hollister, sitting his black horse over against the cliff, and a third member of the well-mounted group was with him. It was this third one who put the deliberation in Walt Gandy's movements, for in another few minutes he and Pete Kelso, the 77 foreman, were going to have their first meeting since that fight in the Emigrant livery barn. It was apt to be, Gandy realized, considerable of a meeting.

The two riders coming to cut him off were close in front now. "Howdy?" he said, gravely polite. "Could you boys give me the time? Or maybe not; don't bother. Let's go over and ask your boss. Kelso, isn't it? Old friend of mine."

He picked up his reins, the unopened tobacco sack still in his right hand. "Come on. Or were you two going some place?"

One crowded in on his right side, red-faced. "You're a smart talker, huh? One of them kind!"

Gandy said nothing, watching him. "You'll shut up soon enough!" the red face growled.

Hollister and Pete Kelso were just ahead. Walt Gandy knew he was being maneuvered into place. He held his palomino back. The two flanking him crowded against his legs.

"What's the idea?" the red-faced one snapped. He seemed to be leader here, probably next under Pete Kelso.

When they halted, Gandy was still flanked right and left, and now with Hollister and Kelso a horse length before him. He whipped a look at Hollister and met direct communication from the deep-set eyes. Whatever had happened up to this point, there had been no open clash. Hollister wanted none; that was his message.

A short space of time before the meeting began allowed comparison between these two who were foremen of the biggest outfits on the Emigrant range: Bill Hollister, with that studious look upon his face, bushy-browed, seeming even now to be figuring on something a long way ahead, while beside him Pete Kelso sat rigidly alert, tiger-like, playing for the present moment.

Springtime Is Season of Joy And Zest for Wild Creatures

With Nature in Her Gayest Mood, Animals Enjoy Their Own Games and Frolics.

SPRINGTIME in the wilds is playtime. The majority of our mammals have their young in the early months of the year, and in April and May it is possible to watch the most delightful games among the puppies of the fields. Badger, fox and otter cubs are very playful little creatures. The otter and badger appear to have a certain amount of method in their games, but fox cubs simply romp among themselves in a wild abandon.

On a sloping sand cliff near my home seven fox cubs came out of a large hole; on the ledge just outside they played with a round stone, pushing it with their feet, tossing it in the air and allowing it to run down the slope.

When tired of this they played a game which resembled "Follow the Leader." One would run forward, dodge and leap over all kinds of imaginary obstacles, and the others would follow in its tracks; then all would roll together in a rough and tumble, in which their small teeth would tug at the fur of their companions.

Bouncing Badgers. Young badgers are among the most amusing cubs to watch at play. With their bold black and white markings they are quaint-

looking little creatures, and rather clumsy, but there is no doubt that they thoroughly enjoy life, and their play is exuberant and strenuous. First they poke their noses in the ground, searching for hidden grubs; then, without any warning, all stiffen their fur, making it stand upright, and now they look twice their size. With their short legs also stiffened they bounce round one another like footballs, then leap in, grip a mouthful of fur, and roll over and over. They break apart, and again play the bouncing game, and just as suddenly as they started to play they cease, and the next moment all are diligently searching for more food.

Fun in the Water. Many young otters are born at an awkward time, that is at the beginning of winter, but they are hardy little creatures and appear to be able to stand any amount of cold. Otters, more than any other wild creatures, show us that they thoroughly enjoy life; a plentiful supply of food makes them contented, and both parents and young play the most delightful games.

What appeared to be a large brown ball was floating gently down stream, hardly making a

Wise and Otherwise

THE hardest tumble a man can take is to fall over his own bluff. Consistency is a jewel which pawnbrokers refuse to recognize. We should be kind to poor old worn-out horses. There are some men who put their shirts on them.

Intelligence test (for girl): Can she refuse a kiss without being deprived of it? No, a grass widow is not a woman whose husband died of hay fever. Some girls are called gold diggers, but they are faithful to the last fiver.

ripple as it swept along. Suddenly the ball seemed to burst open with a loud splash, and four excited otters with their bright, eager eyes well above the water, started swimming round one another. One leaped right out of the stream and over its companions to dive on the other side, and as they floated along this acrobat made circles around them, those below trying to grip it as it passed over. Then they all joined up again, and seemed to be having a struggle as to which could pull the others under the surface, a sort of spirited ducking game. They continue to play until all are tired. Then the parents lead their young off to a well-hidden lair, where they all sleep until hunger and high spirits call again. —Oliver G. Pike in London Tit-Bits.

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