

# marked man

© D. APPLETON-CENTURY CO.

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, Bent Lavie, by name, who tells him to get out and 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 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, she 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. A dark, swarthy man 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. Gandy is called to the sheriff's office, where he meets Hollister. Battle tells Hollister that Cameron is through. Hollister and Gandy return to the C C. Hollister borrows two hundred dollars from Gandy. That evening Walt meets Helen Cameron in the kitchen. From the first he has been drawn to her. Then she tells him that Bill Hollister is one of the finest men she has ever known. The bawling of cattle that night brought Walt out to investigate. Curious, he steps into the saddle shed. Then the shed door opens slowly. It is Helen. She leaves, but not until she warns him to forget the C C. Hollister tells Walt that Cash Cameron, thought to be worth a fortune, is flat broke. The murder of Chino Drake may be his finish. Gandy points out to Hollister that Ranger Powell, Cameron's alibi for Drake's death, has disappeared. Riding the range, Hollister and Gandy meet Pete Kelso and two of his hired men.

## CHAPTER XI—Continued

Kelso apparently had not recognized the man between his two henchmen, until Walt Gandy came to a stop. He had been chewing tobacco. His mouth suddenly quit working. One cupped hand went up to it and he threw away the cud. Then his ramrod trunk leaned forward a little across the saddle horn, and a queer smile creased the lines of his sharp, black face. Still he said nothing; but sat there, an insolent, confident man, plainly feeling himself in control of the situation.

He turned his head and looked at Hollister. "Where'd you get him? Looks green to me. I see you don't let him carry a gun, either. That's good. Just you C C people keep your guns shed and stick to the east rims and everything will go along fine." Hollister let him talk.

Kelso went on smoothly, in a round-about way drawing toward something which Walt Gandy had already foreseen. "I'm being wide open with you, Hollister. Jeff Stoddard means to winter two thousand 77 animals here in the sink. As his range boss, I'll see that he does it. We're gathering now and we'll drive day after tomorrow."

Interest came into Hollister's eyes. "Day after tomorrow? I'll make a note of that, Pete. Will Stoddard be along?"

"Riding point, same as usual," Kelso told him. "What of it?"

Hollister said nothing, but Gandy, watching closely that set face, believed the lank man had concluded some long line of thinking.

Pete Kelso, too, must have felt that perhaps in some way he did not control all destiny, that the game was slipping out of his hands, although he did not see how. His black eyes glittered. His words quickened.

"It would be a damn bad mistake for you to show up on that day, Hollister." He jerked his hardening gaze across to Gandy. "Or any other C C man!"

Behind that look, thinly veiled, was the thing Walt Gandy had been expecting.

Pete Kelso had not forgotten the livery barn fight, nor its oat-bitten ending. He was thinking of it now, hot-blooded. The tight dark skin of his face burned; jaw sinews were corded. With effort his hands remained on the saddle horn, away from the gun in his belt holster.

Gandy twirled his cigarette sack on the end of a bare forefinger. He watched Pete Kelso's hands. Then he was aware that a look had been exchanged between the red-faced guard on his right and the 77 foreman. Once more, as when first approaching this spot, he was conscious of being maneuvered.

Hollister, Kelso, and the sheer cliff wall were directly before him. Kelso's two hirelings hemmed him in right and left. Now the left one edged forward. On the right, he of the red face turned in his saddle and gazed off up the ravine, and in so turning, his long-backed body hid the forty-five.

Kelso was speaking again, once more in his smoothly confident voice.

"Hollister, you might as well make up your mind to quit the Emigrant Bench. The C C is sunk. What do you want to go down with it for? You're only the foreman. Why don't you get out?"

He paused, then shot home: "You'd have to sneak, sure. God knows both you and Cameron are in a hole as far as the law's concerned. But none of us blames you for doing away with that cook."

In a fleeting shift of his glance, Gandy caught the rock-like control of Bill Hollister's face; control covering more smoldering fire than any

man would guess. For good reason Hollister had ridden today unarmed. He would have no outbreak until he himself touched it off. But it was taking almost more than his iron will to keep silent under Pete Kelso's continued thrusts.

"That's what I'm saying to you," the 77 man finished. "I'm not promising so much for any green hands you've taken on. They're bound to get into trouble at a time like this, whether you give 'em guns to play with or not!"

Lazily, Walt Gandy stretched in his saddle. He was not watching Kelso now, but out of his eye-corners kept the red-faced man on his right fixed in view. He had caught the note of a cue speech in that last talk of Kelso's, as if this act had been planned and rehearsed.

The man left of him had edged forward far enough so that the rump of his horse was even with Sunspot's shoulder. The palomino lay back angry ears. And now in a heavy half minute, Walt Gandy saw the play that was coming. There would be a sudden lashing out of hind hoofs from the animal edged forward, a crowding and mix-up of horses to the right, a gun discharged and someone killed in the accident—fellow named Gandy.

He stopped twirling the tobacco sack and thrust it in under his coat to his shirt pocket. And then the play came.

For some reason the red-faced killer did not wait for the mix-up of crowding horses to give excuse. His hidden right hand jerked suddenly. It was quick, but Hollister's warning shout was a second quicker.

A gun ripped the ravine silence in a single jarring crash. Upon the red face came a look of stupid surprise. The man lurched forward, grabbing his saddle horn. An ugly wound ran up along his right wrist. He had dropped his gun.

Smoke drifted in a gray flag over Walt Gandy's palomino. "Try that again," said Gandy, "and I'll put the next one where you won't ever feel it!"

He covered all three with a short swing of the thirty-eight. Under the sheepskin coat his shoulder holster lay exposed, snugged beneath his left armpit and near the shirt pocket holding his tobacco. He turned cold eyes upon the 77 boss.

"Did anyone ever tell you the difference between green and yellow? You all keep your hands up. Bill, to make it safe for awhile, dump their guns out, will you?"

There was a time of steel objects thudding upon the ravine sand.

"Now," said Gandy, "travel! And don't come back to get this stuff too soon."

As Pete Kelso lowered his hands, the queer smile that had been there once before today, creased his swarthy face. Without a word he led off across the flat sink, the others following. But out of earshot he stopped, spoke quickly, then swung north alone, jumping his horse at once into a lope.

North meant to town. Puzzled, Walt Gandy watched him go.

"God help you now, Walt!" Hollister's voice broke in. "But come on, we'd better look up the rest of our people."

CHAPTER XII

HOLLISTER and Walt swung in along the curving bluff where an arm of the sink cut back into the bench. Pete Kelso's figure was a dark speck northward. Twisting in his saddle Gandy saw the two henchmen circling out on the flat and knew they would not be long in returning to pick up their guns. They'd be harmless for the rest of this day. All their shells were in Hollister's saddle pockets.

Farther out on the sink, C C cattle were grazing in scattered herds, peaceful, stupid brutes, unable to know of the war that men were planning in order to keep their paunches full of grass. Or was it the men that were stupid? Irrelevantly, Walt Gandy wondered.

Half a mile ahead the arm narrowed, and he could make out the notch of a trail leading upward onto the bench top. A small bunch of half a dozen cows were near at hand. Suddenly Bill Hollister swore.

A range boss can tell his own animals before reading their brands; but it took a closer view for Gandy to be sure these were 77's, and not C C's. As he started to say something about this enemy run-in, a riderless horse trotted into sight where the sink arm narrowed to a point. He bit his words off.

Hollister had seen the horse too, and in unison his black and Gandy's palomino were lifted into a run. The mount was Cash Cameron's tall gray. They drove it back, swept onto a tongue of grass from seepage water, and then, passing a cabin-size chunk of rock, slid to a stop next instant beside a spring.

Cameron stood there, water plastering the white hair close to his head, his hat on the ground. He pivoted groggily, recognized the two C C men, stooped and splashed more water on his face.

Hollister swung down. "Where's Helen?"

"The girl went back an hour ago," Cameron said, rising.

"Alone? Lord, Cash, the 77 is loose all over here!"

"Don't I know it!" The old man bent and recovered his hat, sourly examining a hole high up the crown. His gray face tightened. "And I've got to take a thing like this!"

"What happened?" Hollister asked.

"I was cleaning rock from the pool here and saw some cows. Them yonder." Cameron pointed to the 77 bunch. "Went out to have a look. Five men were up a draw, waiting for just such a move, I figure, but I didn't see them till one put a bullet at me. My fool scarehead horse bucked, and I didn't stick."

Hollister scanned the high rim, then the sink bottom. "Which way'd they go, Cash?"

"West. They were 77 all right, but too far off for me to get a good look. Using rifles."

Worried, Hollister thrust his boot toe in the stirrup and mounted, saying, "We'd better get on back and see about Horsethief Fisher and Paul." He made no mention then of his own meeting with part of the 77 crew.

They climbed a narrow steep-slanting trail single file and topped out on the bench. There, holding in to let the horses draw wind, he stated flatly what had happened, making no comment.

"Pete Kelso," he said, "made a pass at turning back my bunch of strays. Gandy drilled one of his men in the wrist—brought his thirty-eight along today in a shoulder holster."

"Gandy did!" Cash Cameron jerked himself around in his saddle, as near to flaring up as Walt had seen so far. "Look here. There wasn't to be any gunning on the C C! Now what have you done?"

"Cameron," said Gandy, "that was sort of personal between Pete Kelso and me, only he shoved the job onto one of his killers." He bent toward the old man, doubled left fist propped upon his thigh. "But damned if I see what you're driving

at! Now that the first gun's fired, why don't we call it an opening shot and go ahead?"

"C C cattle are all there in the sink, settled for the winter. Are you going to hold it, or is the 77 going to crowd their stuff in and run yours out? Why don't we meet that drive before it ever reaches the west rims?"

"Well, boy," said Cameron patiently. "You're right. It's what ought to be done, except the C C is straddling a keg of dynamite, remember that. It isn't only the 77 we've got to consider—every Emigrant Bench outfit is primed and ready to blow us off the public domain. A ranch needing as much of that as we do, is always in a ticklish position. Right now we've got the law and the people against us; we don't dare have any more killings charged against the C C until we come clear of what has already happened. Understand that, don't you? So I'll ask you to keep that gun of yours out of action."

Gandy shook his head, his eyes hardening to a dark and stubborn bronze. "I don't get it! You mean," he asked, unbelieving, "that you'll let the 77 drive come in?"

Cash Cameron looked at Hollister. Then his steady blue gaze came back. "Yes," he said. "I might."

It was after three by the time they had pushed across the bench-top and were loping slantwise up the timbered mountain skirt. In deepening forest shadow they reached the home ranch trail, had just passed the section corner where the fence began, when from ahead came a moaning of cattle.

Walt Gandy chilled with recognition. Beside him, Cameron and Hollister exchanged a sudden eye to eye look. Wordless, they moved on.

The cattle were off on their left, and had gone into that fenced section where a panel of barbed wire had either been let down, or had not been put up in Bent Lavie's recent mending. They were in thin timber, near another fence that enclosed the garden patch.

CHAPTER XIII

BILL HOLLISTER was the first to take his eyes from the mutilated, khaki-clad body of Ranger Powell. Cash Cameron sat stunned. Hollister spoke quietly to Gandy: "Pull off a little, will you, Walt?"

Gandy neck-reined his palomino around and rode back among the pine trunks out of hearing. Hollister, he knew, had something to say that was for the old man alone.

Too plainly in one blow all his props had been struck away. There was his alibi in the Chino Drake killing, dead. More than that, there was the federal ranger he had been wrangling with over forest grass.

When Walt turned to look again, Bill Hollister was coming through the trees toward him, his face set and bleak as granite, telling nothing.

"I'm going over the mountain," he said. "Taking Cash with me. This puts him in an awful hole."

"It sure does," Gandy agreed. "I'd hate to see Sheriff Battle or any of the Emigrant hot-heads get hold of him now!"

Hollister nodded. "That's it. He's got to stay under cover, give us time to work out something. I'll be back tonight, late."

He seemed not to be considering any hole that he too might be in. Gandy watched him narrowly, offering, "Suppose I phone Battle from the house? Let him think I found the body. How's that?"

The deep-set eyes stared out in their drilling look. "You believe Cameron actually did this? Or I did?"

"I'm doing my believing private," said Gandy. "Only it's dead sure something has got to be done. You go on. I'll ride in and call the sheriff." Under knee pressure his palomino was already sidestepping away.

A twisted figure scuttled from the kitchen door, as coming in by the rear lot, he approached the ranch home. Bent Lavie went dragging down toward the bunk sheds. Gandy swung off on the stone step, leaving the pony's reins up. No one was in the kitchen when he entered a minute later.

Standing at the wall telephone, he cranked for Emigrant, and when the operator answered, said, "Sheriff's office."

As the connection was made and a thick voice rumbled in his ear, he asked, "Battle?" Then, "This is Gandy at the C C. You'd better come out here; there's been a body found. Yes. Ranger Powell."

Walt hung up, and was aware then that by some miraculous means Helen Cameron had appeared behind him. He pivoted, looking at her. She stood near a table; but all at once, with the blood gone from her face, she dropped upon a bench and stared back at him, speechless.

She had overheard his telephone conversation, yet even as Walt Gandy took a step toward the girl, he realized that what he had told Sheriff Battle was not news to her. The shock now registered upon her face was something else.

Her first words seemed to prove it, for she did not question what had happened. Hoarsely from a tightening throat she asked, "Where is my father?" And before he could answer: "Why did you call Battle? Why did you?"

Unanswering, Walt Gandy let himself down upon a bench opposite. He took off his hat and laid it at his side. His weight creaked the floor boards, and there was a clink of spurs under the table as his legs shifted uneasily; he'd give anything to have Helen Cameron out of this! But she wasn't.

In a flat statement he said, "So you knew Ranger Powell had been killed. I suppose it isn't any use asking how you knew that?"

"No." The girl's slim straight hands clenched on the table top. "What have you done? Where is my father?"

"He won't be in for awhile."

"But where is he? What . . . ?" Her tone had risen, sharp and ringing. With a startled look she broke off and sat rigid, staring at him but somehow strangely through him. And then her words began again, quietly, with more self-control and determination than he had ever heard in a girl's voice:

"Walt Gandy, you have got to leave this ranch. It was a mistake for you to come. It will be a greater mistake for you to stay any longer. You've got to go." Very evenly the speech was given, but toward the end a little catch came into that determined tone.

Leave the ranch. Walt Gandy turned his head away, looking out of a window into the fading afternoon. Did she know what she was asking? He did.

It was not a feeling of the moment, aroused because she was so plainly in desperate trouble, but one that had grown steadily since the first instant of their meeting—he wanted to be with this girl always; Helen Cameron meant more to him than anything else in the world.

"But first," she was saying, "I want you to give me something. I want the bullet I passed to you at the inquest the other day."

CHAPTER XIV

Walt Gandy was the first to take his eyes from the mutilated, khaki-clad body of Ranger Powell. Cash Cameron sat stunned. Hollister spoke quietly to Gandy: "Pull off a little, will you, Walt?"

Gandy neck-reined his palomino around and rode back among the pine trunks out of hearing. Hollister, he knew, had something to say that was for the old man alone.

Too plainly in one blow all his props had been struck away. There was his alibi in the Chino Drake killing, dead. More than that, there was the federal ranger he had been wrangling with over forest grass.

When Walt turned to look again, Bill Hollister was coming through the trees toward him, his face set and bleak as granite, telling nothing.

"I'm going over the mountain," he said. "Taking Cash with me. This puts him in an awful hole."

"It sure does," Gandy agreed. "I'd hate to see Sheriff Battle or any of the Emigrant hot-heads get hold of him now!"

Hollister nodded. "That's it. He's got to stay under cover, give us time to work out something. I'll be back tonight, late."

He seemed not to be considering any hole that he too might be in. Gandy watched him narrowly, offering, "Suppose I phone Battle from the house? Let him think I found the body. How's that?"

The deep-set eyes stared out in their drilling look. "You believe Cameron actually did this? Or I did?"

"I'm doing my believing private," said Gandy. "Only it's dead sure something has got to be done. You go on. I'll ride in and call the sheriff." Under knee pressure his palomino was already sidestepping away.

A twisted figure scuttled from the kitchen door, as coming in by the rear lot, he approached the ranch home. Bent Lavie went dragging down toward the bunk sheds. Gandy swung off on the stone step, leaving the pony's reins up. No one was in the kitchen when he entered a minute later.

Standing at the wall telephone, he cranked for Emigrant, and when the operator answered, said, "Sheriff's office."

As the connection was made and a thick voice rumbled in his ear, he asked, "Battle?" Then, "This is Gandy at the C C. You'd better come out here; there's been a body found. Yes. Ranger Powell."

Walt hung up, and was aware then that by some miraculous means Helen Cameron had appeared behind him. He pivoted, looking at her. She stood near a table; but all at once, with the blood gone from her face, she dropped upon a bench and stared back at him, speechless.

She had overheard his telephone conversation, yet even as Walt Gandy took a step toward the girl, he realized that what he had told Sheriff Battle was not news to her. The shock now registered upon her face was something else.

Her first words seemed to prove it, for she did not question what had happened. Hoarsely from a tightening throat she asked, "Where is my father?" And before he could answer: "Why did you call Battle? Why did you?"

Unanswering, Walt Gandy let himself down upon a bench opposite. He took off his hat and laid it at his side. His weight creaked the floor boards, and there was a clink of spurs under the table as his legs shifted uneasily; he'd give anything to have Helen Cameron out of this! But she wasn't.

In a flat statement he said, "So you knew Ranger Powell had been killed. I suppose it isn't any use asking how you knew that?"

"No." The girl's slim straight hands clenched on the table top. "What have you done? Where is my father?"

"He won't be in for awhile."

"But where is he? What . . . ?" Her tone had risen, sharp and ringing. With a startled look she broke off and sat rigid, staring at him but somehow strangely through him. And then her words began again, quietly, with more self-control and determination than he had ever heard in a girl's voice:

"Walt Gandy, you have got to leave this ranch. It was a mistake for you to come. It will be a greater mistake for you to stay any longer. You've got to go." Very evenly the speech was given, but toward the end a little catch came into that determined tone.

Leave the ranch. Walt Gandy turned his head away, looking out of a window into the fading afternoon. Did she know what she was asking? He did.

It was not a feeling of the moment, aroused because she was so plainly in desperate trouble, but one that had grown steadily since the first instant of their meeting—he wanted to be with this girl always; Helen Cameron meant more to him than anything else in the world.

"But first," she was saying, "I want you to give me something. I want the bullet I passed to you at the inquest the other day."

CHAPTER XV

Walt Gandy was the first to take his eyes from the mutilated, khaki-clad body of Ranger Powell. Cash Cameron sat stunned. Hollister spoke quietly to Gandy: "Pull off a little, will you, Walt?"

Gandy neck-reined his palomino around and rode back among the pine trunks out of hearing. Hollister, he knew, had something to say that was for the old man alone.

Too plainly in one blow all his props had been struck away. There was his alibi in the Chino Drake killing, dead. More than that, there was the federal ranger he had been wrangling with over forest grass.

When Walt turned to look again, Bill Hollister was coming through the trees toward him, his face set and bleak as granite, telling nothing.

"I'm going over the mountain," he said. "Taking Cash with me. This puts him in an awful hole."

"It sure does," Gandy agreed. "I'd hate to see Sheriff Battle or any of the Emigrant hot-heads get hold of him now!"

Hollister nodded. "That's it. He's got to stay under cover, give us time to work out something. I'll be back tonight, late."

He seemed not to be considering any hole that he too might be in. Gandy watched him narrowly, offering, "Suppose I phone Battle from the house? Let him think I found the body. How's that?"

The deep-set eyes stared out in their drilling look. "You believe Cameron actually did this? Or I did?"

"I'm doing my believing private," said Gandy. "Only it's dead sure something has got to be done. You go on. I'll ride in and call the sheriff." Under knee pressure his palomino was already sidestepping away.

A twisted figure scuttled from the kitchen door, as coming in by the rear lot, he approached the ranch home. Bent Lavie went dragging down toward the bunk sheds. Gandy swung off on the stone step, leaving the pony's reins up. No one was in the kitchen when he entered a minute later.

Standing at the wall telephone, he cranked for Emigrant, and when the operator answered, said, "Sheriff's office."

As the connection was made and a thick voice rumbled in his ear, he asked, "Battle?" Then, "This is Gandy at the C C. You'd better come out here; there's been a body found. Yes. Ranger Powell."

Walt hung up, and was aware then that by some miraculous means Helen Cameron had appeared behind him. He pivoted, looking at her. She stood near a table; but all at once, with the blood gone from her face, she dropped upon a bench and stared back at him, speechless.

She had overheard his telephone conversation, yet even as Walt Gandy took a step toward the girl, he realized that what he had told Sheriff Battle was not news to her. The shock now registered upon her face was something else.

Her first words seemed to prove it, for she did not question what had happened. Hoarsely from a tightening throat she asked, "Where is my father?" And before he could answer: "Why did you call Battle? Why did you?"

Unanswering, Walt Gandy let himself down upon a bench opposite. He took off his hat and laid it at his side. His weight creaked the floor boards, and there was a clink of spurs under the table as his legs shifted uneasily; he'd give anything to have Helen Cameron out of this! But she wasn't.

In a flat statement he said, "So you knew Ranger Powell had been killed. I suppose it isn't any use asking how you knew that?"

"No." The girl's slim straight hands clenched on the table top. "What have you done? Where is my father?"

"He won't be in for awhile."

"But where is he? What . . . ?" Her tone had risen, sharp and ringing. With a startled look she broke off and sat rigid, staring at him but somehow strangely through him. And then her words began again, quietly, with more self-control and determination than he had ever heard in a girl's voice:

"Walt Gandy, you have got to leave this ranch. It was a mistake for you to come. It will be a greater mistake for you to stay any longer. You've got to go." Very evenly the speech was given, but toward the end a little catch came into that determined tone.

Leave the ranch. Walt Gandy turned his head away, looking out of a window into the fading afternoon. Did she know what she was asking? He did.

It was not a feeling of the moment, aroused because she was so plainly in desperate trouble, but one that had grown steadily since the first instant of their meeting—he wanted to be with this girl always; Helen Cameron meant more to him than anything else in the world.

"But first," she was saying, "I want you to give me something. I want the bullet I passed to you at the inquest the other day."

CHAPTER XVI

Walt Gandy was the first to take his eyes from the mutilated, khaki-clad body of Ranger Powell. Cash Cameron sat stunned. Hollister spoke quietly to Gandy: "Pull off a little, will you, Walt?"

Gandy neck-reined his palomino around and rode back among the pine trunks out of hearing. Hollister, he knew, had something to say that was for the old man alone.

Too plainly in one blow all his props had been struck away. There was his alibi in the Chino Drake killing, dead. More than that, there was the federal ranger he had been wrangling with over forest grass.

When Walt turned to look again, Bill Hollister was coming through the trees toward him, his face set and bleak as granite, telling nothing.

"I'm going over the mountain," he said. "Taking Cash with me. This puts him in an awful hole."

"It sure does," Gandy agreed. "I'd hate to see Sheriff Battle or any of the Emigrant hot-heads get hold of him now!"

Hollister nodded. "That's it. He's got to stay under cover, give us time to work out something. I'll be back tonight, late."

He seemed not to be considering any hole that he too might be in. Gandy watched him narrowly, offering, "Suppose I phone Battle from the house? Let him think I found the body. How's that?"

The deep-set eyes stared out in their drilling look. "You believe Cameron actually did this? Or I did?"

"I'm doing my believing private," said Gandy. "Only it's dead sure something has got to be done. You go on. I'll ride in and call the sheriff." Under knee pressure his palomino was already sidestepping away.

A twisted figure scuttled from the kitchen door, as coming in by the rear lot, he approached the ranch home. Bent Lavie went dragging down toward the bunk sheds. Gandy swung off on the stone step, leaving the pony's reins up. No one was in the kitchen when he entered a minute later.

Standing at the wall telephone, he cranked for Emigrant, and when the operator answered, said, "Sheriff's office."

As the connection was made and a thick voice rumbled in his ear, he asked, "Battle?" Then, "This is Gandy at the C C. You'd better come out here; there's been a body found. Yes. Ranger Powell."

Walt hung up, and was aware then that by some miraculous means Helen Cameron had appeared behind him. He pivoted, looking at her. She stood near a table; but all at once, with the blood gone from her face, she dropped upon a bench and stared back at him, speechless.

She had overheard his telephone conversation, yet even as Walt Gandy took a step toward the girl, he realized that what he had told Sheriff Battle was not news to her. The shock now registered upon her face was something else.

Her first words seemed to prove it, for she did not question what had happened. Hoarsely from a tightening throat she asked, "Where is my father?" And before he could answer: "Why did you call Battle? Why did you?"

Unanswering, Walt Gandy let himself down upon a bench opposite. He took off his hat and laid it at his side. His weight creaked the floor boards, and there was a clink of spurs under the table as his legs shifted uneasily; he'd give anything to have Helen Cameron out of this! But she wasn't.

In a flat statement he said, "So you knew Ranger Powell had been killed. I suppose it isn't any use asking how you knew that?"

"No." The girl's slim straight hands clenched on the table top. "What have you done? Where is my father?"

"He won't be in for awhile."

"But where is he? What . . . ?" Her tone had risen, sharp and ringing. With a startled look she broke off and sat rigid, staring at him but somehow strangely through him. And then her words began again, quietly, with more self-control and determination than he had ever heard in a girl's voice:

"Walt Gandy, you have got to leave this ranch. It was a mistake for you to come. It will be a greater mistake for you to stay any longer. You've got to go." Very evenly the speech was given, but toward the end a little catch came into that determined tone.

Leave the ranch. Walt Gandy turned his head away, looking out of a window into the fading afternoon. Did she know what she was asking? He did.

It was not a feeling of the moment, aroused because she was so plainly in desperate trouble, but one that had grown steadily since the first instant of their meeting—he wanted to be with this girl always; Helen Cameron meant more to him than anything else in the world.

"But first," she was saying, "I want you to give me something. I want the bullet I passed to you at the inquest the other day."

CHAPTER XVII

Walt Gandy was the first to take his eyes from the mutilated, khaki-clad body of Ranger Powell. Cash Cameron sat stunned. Hollister spoke quietly to Gandy: "Pull off a little, will you, Walt?"

Gandy neck-reined his palomino around and rode back among the pine trunks out of hearing. Hollister, he knew, had something to say that was for the old man alone.

Too plainly in one blow all his props had been struck away. There was his alibi in the Chino Drake killing, dead. More than that, there was the federal ranger he had been wrangling with over forest grass.

When Walt turned to look again, Bill Hollister was coming through the trees toward him, his face set and bleak as granite, telling nothing.

"I'm going over the mountain," he said. "Taking Cash with me. This puts him in an awful hole."

"It sure does," Gandy agreed. "I'd hate to see Sheriff Battle or any of the Emigrant hot-heads get hold of him now!"

Hollister nodded. "That's it. He's got to stay under cover, give us time to work out something. I'll be back tonight, late."

He seemed not to be considering any hole that he too might be in. Gandy watched him narrowly, offering, "Suppose I phone Battle from the house? Let him think I found the body. How's that?"

The deep-set eyes stared out in their drilling look. "You believe Cameron actually did this? Or I did?"

"I'm doing my believing private," said Gandy. "Only it's dead sure something has got to be done. You go on. I'll ride in and call the sheriff." Under knee pressure his palomino was already sidestepping away.

A twisted figure scuttled from the kitchen door, as coming in by the rear lot, he approached the ranch home. Bent Lavie went dragging down toward the bunk sheds. Gandy swung off on the stone step, leaving the pony's reins up. No one was in the kitchen when he entered a minute later.

Standing at the wall telephone, he cranked for Emigrant, and when the operator answered, said, "Sheriff's office."

As the connection was made and a thick voice rumbled in his ear, he asked, "Battle?" Then, "This is Gandy at the C C. You'd better come out here; there's been a body found. Yes. Ranger Powell."

Walt hung up, and was aware then that by some miraculous means Helen Cameron had appeared behind him. He pivoted, looking at her. She stood near a table; but all at once, with the blood gone from her face, she dropped upon a bench and stared back at him, speechless.

She had overheard his telephone conversation, yet even as Walt Gandy took a step toward the girl, he realized that what he had told Sheriff Battle was not news to her. The shock now registered upon her face was something else.

Her first words seemed to prove it, for she did not question what had happened. Hoarsely from a tightening throat she asked, "Where is my father?" And before he could answer: "Why did you call Battle? Why did you?"

Unanswering, Walt Gandy let himself down upon a bench opposite. He took off his hat and laid it at his side. His weight creaked the floor boards, and there was a clink of spurs under the table as his legs shifted uneasily; he'd give anything to have Helen Cameron out of this! But she wasn't.

In a flat statement he said, "So you knew Ranger Powell had been killed. I suppose it isn't any use asking how you knew that?"

"No." The girl's slim straight hands clenched on the table top. "What have you done? Where is my father?"

"He won't be in for awhile."

"But where is he? What . . . ?" Her tone had risen, sharp and ringing. With a startled look she broke off and sat rigid, staring at him but somehow strangely through him. And then her words began again, quietly, with more self-control and determination than he had ever heard in a girl's voice:

"Walt Gandy, you have got to leave this ranch. It was a mistake for you to come. It will be a greater mistake for you to stay any longer. You've got to go." Very evenly the speech was given, but toward the end a little catch came into that determined tone.

Leave the ranch. Walt Gandy turned his head away, looking out of a window into the fading afternoon. Did she know what she was asking? He did.

It was not a feeling of the moment, aroused because she was so plainly in desperate trouble, but one that had grown steadily since the first instant of their meeting—he wanted to be with this girl always; Helen Cameron meant more to him than anything else in the world.

"But first," she was saying, "I want you to give me something. I want the bullet I passed to you at the inquest the other day."

CHAPTER XVIII

Walt Gandy was the first to take his eyes from the mutilated, khaki-clad body of Ranger Powell. Cash Cameron sat stunned. Hollister spoke quietly to Gandy: "Pull off a little, will you, Walt?"

Gandy neck-reined his palomino around and rode back among the pine trunks out of hearing. Hollister, he knew, had something to say that was for the old man alone.

Too plainly in one blow all his props had been struck away. There was his alibi in the Chino Drake killing, dead. More than that, there was the federal ranger he had been wrangling with over forest grass.

When Walt turned to look again, Bill Hollister was coming through the trees toward him, his face set and bleak as granite, telling nothing.

"I'm going over the mountain," he said. "Taking Cash with me. This puts him in an awful hole."

"It sure does," Gandy agreed. "I'd hate to see Sheriff Battle or any of the Emigrant hot-heads get hold of him now!"

Hollister nodded. "That's it. He's got to stay under cover, give us time to work out something. I'll be back tonight, late."

He seemed not to be considering any hole that he too might be in. Gandy watched him narrowly, offering, "Suppose I phone Battle from the house? Let him think I found the body. How's that?"

The deep-set eyes stared out in their drilling look. "You believe Cameron actually did this? Or I did?"

"I'm doing my believing private," said Gandy. "Only it's dead sure something has got to be done. You go on. I'll ride in and call the sheriff." Under knee pressure his palomino was already sidestepping away.

A twisted figure scuttled from the kitchen door, as coming in by the rear lot, he approached the ranch home. Bent Lavie went dragging down toward the bunk sheds. Gandy swung off on the stone step, leaving the pony's reins up. No one was in the kitchen when he entered a minute later.

Standing at the wall telephone, he cranked for Emigrant, and when the operator answered, said, "Sheriff's office."

As the connection was made and a thick voice rumbled in his ear, he asked, "Battle?" Then, "This is Gandy at the C C. You'd better come out here; there's been a body found. Yes. Ranger Powell."

Walt hung up, and was aware then that by some miraculous means Helen Cameron had appeared behind him. He pivoted, looking at her. She stood near a table; but all at once, with the blood gone from her face, she dropped upon a bench and stared back at him, speechless.

She had overheard his telephone conversation, yet even as Walt Gandy took a step toward the girl, he realized that what he had told Sheriff Battle was not news to her. The shock now registered upon her face was something else.

Her first words seemed to prove it, for she did not question what had happened. Hoarsely from a tightening throat she asked, "Where is my father?" And before he could answer: "Why did you call Battle? Why did you?"

Unanswering, Walt Gandy let himself down upon a bench opposite. He took off his hat and laid it at his side. His weight creaked the floor boards, and there was a clink of spurs under the table as his legs shifted uneasily; he'd give anything to have Helen Cameron out of this! But she wasn't.

In a flat statement he said, "So you knew Ranger Powell had been killed. I suppose it isn't any use asking how you knew that?"

"No." The girl's slim straight hands clenched on the table top. "What have you done? Where is my father?"

"He won't be in for awhile."

"But where is he? What . . . ?" Her tone had risen, sharp and ringing. With a startled look she broke off and sat rigid, staring at him but somehow strangely through him. And then her words began again, quietly, with more self-control and determination than he had ever heard in a girl's voice:

"Walt Gandy, you have got to leave this ranch. It was a mistake for you to come. It will be a greater mistake for you to stay any longer. You've got to go." Very evenly the speech was given, but toward the end a little catch came into that determined tone.

Leave the ranch. Walt Gandy turned his head away, looking out of a window into the fading afternoon. Did she know what she was asking? He did.

It was not a feeling of the moment, aroused because she was so plainly in desperate trouble, but one that had grown steadily since the first instant of their meeting—he wanted to be with this girl always; Helen Cameron meant more to him than anything else in the world.

"But first," she was saying, "I want you to give me something. I want the bullet I passed to you at the inquest the other day."

CHAPTER XIX

Walt Gandy was the first to take his eyes from the mutilated, khaki-clad body of Ranger Powell. Cash Cameron sat stunned. Hollister spoke quietly to Gandy: "Pull off a little, will you, Walt?"

Gandy neck-reined his palomino around and rode back among the pine trunks out of hearing. Hollister, he knew, had something to say that was for the old man alone.

Too plainly in one blow all his props had been struck away. There was his alibi in the Chino Drake killing, dead. More than that, there was the federal ranger he had been wrangling with over forest grass.

When Walt turned to look again, Bill Hollister was coming through the trees toward him, his face set and bleak as granite, telling nothing.

"I'm going over the mountain," he said. "Taking Cash with me. This puts him in an awful hole."

"It sure does," Gandy agreed. "I'd hate to see Sheriff Battle or any of the Emigrant hot-heads get hold of him now!"

Hollister nodded. "That's it. He's got to stay under cover, give us time to work out something. I'll be back tonight, late."

He seemed not to be considering any hole that he too might be in. Gandy watched him narrowly, offering, "Suppose I phone Battle from the house? Let him think I found the body. How's that?"

The deep-set eyes stared out in their drilling look. "You believe Cameron actually did this? Or I did?"

"I'm doing my believing private," said Gandy. "Only it's dead sure something has got to be done. You go on. I'll ride in and call the sheriff." Under knee pressure his palomino was already sidestepping away.

A twisted figure scuttled from the kitchen door, as coming in by the rear lot, he approached the ranch home. Bent Lavie went dragging down toward the bunk sheds. Gandy swung off on the stone step, leaving the pony's reins up. No one was in the kitchen when he entered a minute later.

Standing at the wall telephone, he cranked for Emigrant, and when the operator answered, said, "Sheriff's office."

As the connection was made and a thick voice rumbled in his ear, he asked, "Battle?" Then, "This is Gandy at the C C. You'd better come out here; there's been a body found. Yes. Ranger Powell."

Walt hung up, and was aware then that by some miraculous means Helen Cameron had appeared behind him. He pivoted, looking at her. She stood near a table; but all at once, with the blood gone from her face, she dropped upon a bench and stared back at him, speechless.

She had overheard his telephone conversation, yet even as Walt Gandy took a step toward the girl, he realized that what he had told Sheriff Battle was not news to her. The shock now registered upon her face was something else.

Her first words seemed to prove it, for she did not question what had happened. Hoarsely from a tightening throat she asked, "Where is my father?" And before he could answer: "Why did you call Battle? Why did you?"

Unanswering, Walt Gandy let himself down upon a bench opposite. He took off his hat and laid it at his side. His weight creaked the floor boards, and there was a clink of spurs under the table as his legs shifted uneasily; he'd give anything to have Helen Cameron out of this! But she wasn't.

In a flat statement he said, "So you knew Ranger Powell had been killed. I suppose it isn't any use asking how you knew that?"

"No." The girl's slim straight hands clenched on the table top. "What have you done? Where is my father?"