

Marked Man

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By H. C. WIRE

WNU SERVICE

CHAPTER XIII—Continued

Walt brought his eyes back, meeting the unreadable darkness of hers. "Not unless you tell me why you want it," he stated flatly. "That bullet is the only thing I know about for certain; my key maybe to unlock a few blind doors."

"Walt Gandy," Helen asked, leaning toward him across the table top, "did anyone ever tell you that some doors should never be opened? I want that bullet for the best of reasons. No, I can't explain. I can't, Walt. But perhaps if you knew one thing . . ."

A look of despair came upon lips momentarily closed; she spread her hands hopelessly, and then said, "It's always true that one lie has to be covered with another, and another. Bill Hollister lied at the Chino Drake inquest."

Inside Walt Gandy everything seemed to stop. He sat like stone. Steadily Helen went on: "He lied about being on the south rims that day the cook was killed. I know, because I was on the south rims then myself. Bill wasn't there. Now will you give me the bullet?"

He shook his head. "I haven't got it."

"But you can get it for me!" she said quickly. "Can't you?"

"Tomorrow, maybe, in town. I suppose we'll be called in for a hearing over Powell."

"And then, Walt, you'll go." The girl's voice was all at once surprisingly tender.

Gandy looked at her. "You'll tell me nothing, Helen?"

"Only this, there's going to be no war on the Emigrant range, no more killing. I'm working our troubles out here."

"You are!" Then Walt Gandy's smile came slowly, the fine lines crowfooting his bronzed skin. "All the more reason for me to stick. Do you think for a minute I'd quit? Curiosity if nothing else would keep me hanging around. But I'm in this as much as anybody. I'm in the groove, and I'll see where it leads, regardless!"

"You mean that?"

"Why not?"

Helen Cameron half rose from the bench, hands on the table edge, and once more the color was gone from her face. She dropped back. "You don't know what you're doing! You can't! What if you are in it? Go ahead and throw your life away and even that wouldn't stop all this horror! But I can stop it—and I'm going to!"

She'd try, no doubt of that, in whatever way seemed open. Yet to Walt Gandy a forced note in this breathless outburst had too much the sound of lashing herself into doing something almost beyond her nerve.

His glance shifted out the window into rapidly gray afternoon. He avoided her desperate eyes, but could still hear the overwrought quickness of her breathing. Abruptly it ceased; and then in a darting look he caught the focus of her gaze fixed beyond him.

Slowly, Gandy turned, and was aware that he had been sitting with his back to the closed hallway door. In the instant of that discovery he knew the meaning of the girl's look. They were not alone in this house!

He sprang up. But Helen was ahead of him in reaching the door. Backed against it, both hands behind her gripping the knob, she confronted him cold as steel: "Don't you dare!"

Gandy reached in under his coat, came out with the thirty-eight, and at sight of it her face blanched. She choked. "Walt!" came from lips that were suddenly trembling.

Sharply he said, "I don't want to hurt you. But I'm going in." With his left arm around her he took the two small fists in his one. She struggled.

"I'm sorry," said Gandy. "Things like this have gone far enough. I'm going to see who is in there—who has been listening to my talk!"

He had the girl at one side of the casement now, released her abruptly, grabbed the knob and flung the door inward. In the same move he thumbed back the gun hammer.

The door banged hollowly. Nothing sounded after that. For a second Gandy waited, then stepped from the kitchen into a dim part of the house where he had not been before.

CHAPTER XIV

CASH CAMERON had built early on the Emigrant Bench, and he had put up a house with the thick log walls and deep windows of a fort. The kitchen wing with storage shed and foreman's quarters had been added later. That was modern; of mill-sawed boards, battened on the outside, painted white within. But as Walt Gandy passed from the kitchen, through a short hallway into the great front living-room, it was like stepping back half a hundred years. For this main part had kept the look of Cameron's pioneering.

By the glint of rifle barrels he made out a gun rack near the fireplace. Dark outlines of chairs showed against the plastered wall. A Navajo rug woven in an old four-corners-of-the-earth pattern made a long gray patch upon the floor. Other pieces of furniture were no more than vague forms, grouped mostly around the chimney end.

From the moment of entering here Gandy's eyes had been pulled repeatedly to the fireplace maw. Now he stood squinting at the black square; until suddenly his nose brought definite knowledge before sight registered what he was squinting at. The red eye of a cigarette stub glowed in the fireplace ash.

Lavie? Had he circled from the bunk shacks and come in by the front entrance? But Gandy had watched from the window, and no one had crossed the open front clearing. Besides that, Lavie wouldn't matter; he was dead.

His soundless movement carried him on to a door which must lead into the family wing of the house. By this time he knew the front room was empty. He paused.

"Walt! Listen to me!" Appealing hands gripped his right arm. Whispering, Helen begged: "Don't! You can't help. I'm working this out, everything! You must not go any farther."

But Gandy shook his head. He freed his arm from her tightening fingers.

The door gave more easily than he expected, as if it had been closed not quite far enough for the latch to click into place. It opened wide at his touch, and before him was a small plain cubicle with a desk, a



"That bullet is the only thing I know about for certain."

chair, and a cot; Cash Cameron's office, disordered, empty.

Immediately on his right was a door leading to the inner court formed by the house wings. Gandy sprang across to it, found it unlocked. Whoever had been here was gone now.

But there was still another passage ahead. He moved rapidly along this, seeing a bedroom on the left of it, and then the last room of the family wing at the end.

Helen Cameron was no longer behind him. In her father's office she had turned back. Walt stopped, for the door was open, and he stood motionless, brought up short on the threshold of the girl's own four walls. It was a large, airy place, with windows on three sides, curtained, a fleece rug on the floor, intimate with her things that revealed unguardedly the girl who lived here.

Horsethief Fisher's voice blared suddenly outside. Gandy jumped back along the passage. By the time he had reached the kitchen the old bronco rider and Paul Champion had tramped in. Helen was putting plates on the dining-room table.

"Man an' child!" Horsethief burst out. "Give us grub!"

Horsethief hung his battered hat on its own particular wall peg and reached under the sink for the wash pan.

"Say, Miss Helen," he called. "Someone leave here just now? Paul he was ahead of me coming along the north pasture and thought a rider took off southwest."

From his position, entering the kitchen from the living-room, Walt Gandy could not see the girl. Whether she signaled Fisher or not, he couldn't tell.

Without pause nor change in his conversational tone, Horsethief finished, "But the kid he gets ideas sometimes. I guess he didn't see no one."

In another step Gandy could look at Helen Cameron. She was motionless beside the long ranch table, a dish in her hands. "Walt," she said quickly, "I haven't told them. You'd better."

He nodded and went to the wash bench where Fisher and young Champion were bent over, dissolving gray dust from their faces. "We found Ranger Powell this afternoon," he said. "Been dead some time."

Two dripping faces turned. Horsethief Fisher looked up, made no reply, bent again and went on washing the back of his neck.

Paul Champion stood up full height and opened his mouth. "Jeez," he said, drawing it out. "Where's the boss?"

"Cameron won't be around for awhile," Gandy told him. "Hollister will be back some time tonight. Horsethief, after we eat I'm coming down to your bunk house. Wait there, will you?"

Fisher and Paul Champion were in the middle of the bunk room, near an iron barrel stove that had no fire. A single oil lamp gave dim yellow light.

So savagely was he gripped in the urge to smash through any more barriers and evasions, that Gandy's stride carried him on close to Horsethief Fisher, and before the bronco rider had gathered what was happening, an elbow was hooked around his neck, and a hard fist was pushing against his nose.

CHAPTER XV

"If you don't open up and talk to me," said Gandy, "I'm going to crack your skull and see what's in it!" Then he grinned, dropping his arms. "Horsethief, for Lord's sake let's go at this thing fifty-fifty!"

"I think you're the only man on the CC that has nothing to hide. I've listened to a lot of talk that tells nothing; now I want to hear some without a joker in it. What do you say?"

Horsethief Fisher stared, blinking sun-squinted eyes. Then the round face wrinkled with good humor.

It lasted but a moment. Sobering, he said, "You're right, Gandy. Plenty of side-mouth talkin'. Nothin' straight out."

He wiped an open hand downward over his face as if to iron off the wrinkles; a slow movement, considering Walt Gandy during the process. "I've been agurin' on you," he admitted. "Maybe you're the man I been lookin' for. Hollister, well, something's happened to Bill lately. Cash he's kept away from gun-fightin' too long. And Miss Helen, snucks, I don't know, she's all balled up somehow."

Gandy propped himself against a post supporting double bunks and took papers and tobacco from the side pocket of his coat.

"Paul," he asked, turning to the boy whose ears were visibly sticking out, "rustle some wood and build us a fire, will you?"

"Sure!"

As young Champion went out he took his belt and big forty-five from a nail next the door.

"Now then, Horsethief," said Gandy, "tell me who rode off when you came back to the place tonight. I know it's true, because somebody was at the house before I got there. Who was it?"

"Man," Fisher declared, "I don't know but I sure wish I did!"

His squinted blue eyes shone with honest eagerness. "I do," he explained, "because I been agurin' myself that it was time to quit this game of guesswork and see just who had stacked the cards! I owe Cash Cameron a debt that I'd like to pay back by fightin' for the CC. But where do a fellow begin? When the cook was found dead I had my hunch. But now with Ranger Powell . . ." He raised hard hands and let them fall.

"Make a guess," Gandy urged. "About tonight, I mean. Who could have been there in the house while the rest of us were away, and who might have been taking off across the bench when you came in?"

Horsethief shook his bald head. "I didn't see. It was Paul who caught sight of someone on a smoky blue, thought he did anyway. But the only man that rides a smoky blue in these parts, couldn't have been on the CC. Leastwise he'd be a fool if he did come sneakin' around now."

"Who'd that be, Fisher?" Gandy asked.

"Jeff Stoddard."

In the act of rolling a cigarette, Walt Gandy's fingers stopped movement, and his brown eyes lifted for a long studying look at the man before him. "Stoddard. Owner of the 77?"

Horsethief Fisher nodded. "Only one I know of ridin' such an animal. But Stoddard ain't set foot on the place since Bent Lavie began takin' pot-shots at him two year ago. Leastwise, I always figured it was Lavie. And now with Cameron and Stoddard on the peck over winter range in the sink, it don't seem no way sensible that Jeff should show up here."

He looked along the bunk at Fisher, who had backed against the edge and sat down. "What was Bent Lavie shooting at Stoddard for?"

"Judas, I don't know! Except that the old fellow is nuts. Hasn't Hollister told you about him?"

"Some. Lavie aimed to be king cowman here, and isn't, and seems to hold it against Cameron. That it?"

"Hates Cameron," said Fisher flatly. "Hates Hollister, too. I've seen it the last couple of months. Man, I wouldn't trust that old rooster the other side of a fence, lest I could watch him!"

"But then, there's Helen. Bet he burns candles to that girl like a fellow does in church to one of his saints! He sure worships the kid. So when Jeff Stoddard took it into his noodle to come courtin' a couple of year ago, I figure it was Lavie who used to sing his ears with a rifle bullet quite too frequent when night-time came and Stoddard started home."

Silent for a moment, Walt Gandy rolled the paper ball in tightening fingers. Then he looked down and met Fisher's gaze.

"Helen in love with Stoddard, was she?"

"Naw, school-kid stuff," the man declared. "She was nineteen. Stoddard must have been thirty-five."

Cash, he didn't like it so much, and the thing was ended."

Walt Gandy said nothing. He stood motionless, leaning with a shoulder braced against the bunk support, but with a body gone all at once cold from more than the chilled air of the room. For it was plain to him now who had been in the house with Helen this afternoon.

THE immediate, and too obvious, conclusion brought by this knowledge held him in its tight-muscled silence for perhaps five minutes. Vaguely he knew that Horsethief Fisher had gone to the door and looked out, and that Paul Champion had not returned with the wood. The room grew chillier. Fisher came back and stood near the cold barrel stove. Walt Gandy continued to study the brown cigarette paper crushed in his fingers.

Helen . . . and Stoddard. A man thirty-five. Owner of the largest outfit next to the CC, and Cameron's enemy. Only yesterday Pete Kelsö of the 77 in offering a short but well-paid job, had said: "There's going to be one smashing scramble for public range that the CC controls. The man I boss for is getting the jump." The man was Stoddard. And Stoddard had been here today, secretly, with a girl who had fought to keep him from being discovered.

"School-kid stuff," Horsethief Fisher had declared. . . . the thing was ended." Was it?

Through those five minutes Walt Gandy stood in a mood both bitter and hard, piling one grim thought upon another in what seemed for a little while an absolute case against the girl. But in the end he knew he was overlooking one fact. Helen Cameron was no cheat.

Gandy twisted his cigarette and bent over the lamp chimney for a light. Horsethief Fisher had once more crossed to the door, opened it and was looking into the dark. His bow legs had carried him on a step outside, when from somewhere on the slope above the bunk house a gun's sudden crash jarred the deep silence.

At the first impact Gandy puffed out the lamp. He straightened up in darkness, one hand slipping out of the thirty-eight. He heard Fisher leap into the room. The door remained open, and outside, after the rolling echo of that first explosion had faded



"There's going to be one smashing scramble for public range that the CC controls."

from the timbered slope, all sounds of every sort were hushed.

"Gandy!"

"Over here."

Fisher hunched out of the dark. "Come on! You heard where that was from?"

"Not exactly."

"The garden patch!" said Fisher's husky voice. "Where the cook got his!"

But Gandy thought otherwise; that the shot had come from higher up, in timber where Powell's body lay. Moving outside and sliding on rapidly across open ground beyond the bunk house, he saw that Fisher, close on his left, had strapped a belt holster over blue jeans. A dull glint of gunmetal showed in the bronco rider's hand. Fisher's left hand came out suddenly. They stopped.

"I dunno," he whispered, answering a questioning turn of Gandy's head. "Thought I saw something."

Walt was a little in advance. Over his shoulder he said, "Guess not. I've been watching. Let's go on."

Again Horsethief Fisher's hand groped out of the dark and touched him. Gandy shook his head. They stood facing up the slope. Minutes passed. He could feel Horsethief begin to shift restlessly. To the right of them the barbed wire creaked in a fence post staple.

The sound was as abruptly startling as a shot. Someone was crawling through the fence.

Gandy turned his head, whispering: "Fisher. You wait. Less noise, one at a time. I'll go."

As he crept on beside the barbed wires his eyes began to pick objects out of what had seemed solid blackness. When a gray blot moved across his vision, soundless as his own forward advance, it took shape at once in human form.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

At That, We Doubt Ready Answer Saved the Day

A certain gentleman was very fond of golf, and of a little refreshment after the game. He arrived home very late one night, and was met by his wife in the hall.

"Well, and what excuse have you got to offer for coming home at this unearthly hour?" she asked angrily.

"It was like this, my dear, I was playing golf with some friends and—"

"Playing golf!" she cried in disgust. "Are you trying to tell me you can play golf in the dark?"

"Oh, yes, my dear," he said quickly. "You see, we were using the night clubs."

These Things Endure

IF WE work upon marble it will perish. If we work upon brass time will efface it. If we rear temples they will crumble to dust. But if we work upon men's immortal minds, if we imbue them with high principles, with the just fear of God and love of their fellow-men, we engrave on those tablets something which no time can efface, and which will brighten and brighten to all eternity.—Daniel Webster, "Speech in Faneuil Hall," 1852.

ASK ME ANOTHER ?

A Quiz With Answers Offering Information on Various Subjects

The Questions

1. What tragic handicap afflicted the composer Beethoven?
2. Are all meteorites fiery when they strike the earth?
3. What city in Europe is known as "The Bride of the Adriatic"?
4. Where and when did the tuxedo first make its appearance?
5. Are any dogs naturally tailless?
6. Where is frankincense obtained from?
7. If an army were decimated in battle, what fraction of the men would be lost?
8. In what city are the ruins of the Parthenon?
9. Have diamonds ever been known to explode?
10. Is the beaver a docile animal?

The Answers

1. Deafness.
2. Although meteorites shoot through the atmosphere in a blaze of fire and are thought to be very hot when they strike the earth, many are actually cold, reveals Collier's. In fact, one completely covered with frost fell in Colby, Wis., on July 4, 1917.
3. Venice.
4. In the cheap dance halls of the Bowery of New York city in the early nineties.
5. Yes, the Schipperke poodle is.
6. Frankincense is a fragrant gum resin obtained from trees.
7. One-tenth.
8. Athens.
9. Yes, freshly mined diamonds occasionally explode with considerable violence.
10. The beaver appears docile, but when aroused will engage in a fight to the death with his aquatic foe, the otter.

I'd Rather Be—

I'd rather be a Could Be,
If I could not be an Are!
For a Could Be is a May Be,
With a chance of touching par;
I'd rather be a Has Been,
Than a Might Have Been, by far,
For a Might Have Been has never been,
But a Has Been was once an Are.
—Ladies' Home Journal.

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