

GIFT OF THE DESERT

By Randall Parrish

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IN THE TOILS

"You—you are the justice from Nogales?" she asked doubtfully.

"That's what I am; Judge Cornelius Garrity, ma'am, at your service."

"And you were asked to come out here to marry me to Bob Meager?"

"Maybe so, if you are the girl."

"I am Deborah Meredith. I want to appeal to you, Judge Garrity, as an officer of the law, to refuse to perform this marriage."

"Refuse! I refuse Bob? Why, it's all straight enough; I've got the license here all made out regular with your name on it."

"That is just the point. That license was procured without my consent or knowledge. I repudiate it; I refuse to assent to it in any way. I have never agreed to marry Bob Meager. I am here now under threat, and I appeal to you for protection."

Does Judge Garrity protect her? Hardly. He marries her forthwith to Bob Meager. She strikes down with a pistol—but the hated bridegroom and steals out into the night to get a horse and dare the perils of the desert. She meets "Frisco Kid," an outlaw with a price on his head. And deliberately she chooses to trust him and rides off with him into the desert.

So the possibilities of all sorts of excitement are found in this stirring story by Randall Parrish. Many a thrilling tale has this author written. And this is one of his most thrilling.

CHAPTER I

The Choice.

It was a wonderful thing to be twenty-three, full of hope and ambition, and in the wide out-of-doors; more wonderful still to possess the glorious memory of nearly two years in the hospitals of France, six months of that time just behind the American fighting line. Yet the girl was not thinking of this then as she sat there alone at the edge of the ravine, gazing silently off across the dull leagues of desert to where a distant blue range of mountains cut off the view from the ragged summits, while arching over all hung the clear Arizona sky, slowly turning to purple.

She compared that sun-kissed vista with other sunsets in France and Germany, when the ground was yet red with the blood of sacrificed manhood. Her heart ached still with the sad memory that would not die—hours of toil, scenes of suffering. But this mood had also passed away, and now, although her eyes were still upon that outspread picture below, her thought had centered upon the present in a dull wonderment at the strange situation surrounding her. Why had she ever listened to the plea of old Tom Meager, back there in Chicago, and finally, partially from pity, partially from that new love of adventure engendered within her by service across the water, agreed to come west with him? Of course, she never had dreamed what it really would be like—life on this vast isolated ranch along the southern border, with the drear desert stretching away on every side from this little oasis of water and grass. Tom Meager had never told the whole story; he had dwelt on the loneliness of his sick wife, the chance she had of regaining health, with proper nursing and care; the rare beauty of the sunsets, the wonderful glow of the cool desert nights, the wild, free existence of the range, filled with excitement and a dash of danger. It all had appealed to her strangely—the service, the complete change in environment, the escape from the humdrum life of the Marine hospital. The pay was good, the opportunity excellent, and she had said "yes" without half realizing then what it all meant.

But she realized now. Those first few weeks had been glorious indeed. She found everything new, attractive, tinged with romance and color. She liked Mrs. Meager, and discovered her task to be an easy one, her time largely at her own disposal. But it was lonely, terribly lonely; and after those first few weeks, nothing seemed to occur to break the dull monotony. It was sixty miles over a half-obiterated desert trail to the nearest town, and that little more than a general store and a cattle corral. The only link between there and the civilization she had left to the eastward were the glistening rails of the railroad.

Day by day, week following week, she saw the same faces, heard the same voices. Riders from the outer range came in with their reports, bringing the tales of Mexican raiders, or of cattle strayed into the desert. Whenever she could she rode about with old Tom Meager, in and out the ravines, and occasionally far beyond into the vast sand plains, listening to his quaint tales of adventures, and helping him round up bunches of strayed stock. She became expert in the saddle, learned to use a gun skillfully, and even picked up some knowledge of the lariat. Thus, little by little, she had adapted herself to the rough life, determined to keep her word, but nevertheless growing constantly more and more heartsick.

Then Tom Meager came to his

death. Riding home alone from Nogales at night, in the dark of Silver canyon, his horse slipped and fell, and Meager lay there on the rock motionless. A packer found his body the next day, and brought it on to the ranch. In some way the message of the old man's passing crossed the border line down far into old Mexico, until it reached the ears of his son, God alone knows where. Three days after the burial this wanderer of many years returned, drove his saddle horse into the corral, and assumed control. Whatever might be his legal right, there was none to oppose his bold assumption of authority or management. The widow lay helpless on her bed; she was not the boy's mother, and he never so much as crossed the threshold of her room. If there had been a will, no one searched for it, or made inquiries. By sheer force and audacity Bob Meager took command, asking permission of no one.

For some days after his arrival the girl did not even encounter this new master. From dawn to dark he was in the saddle, familiarizing himself with every detail of his new possessions. She had no desire to meet him, for long ago his story had been told to her—not by old Tom, who never spoke his son's name, or the patient, invalid wife, but by others, long in the Meager service, glad now of an opportunity to gossip with a stranger. It was a story of brutal shame; of base ingratitude, verging on crime; of sudden disappearance; of vague rumors floating back from here and there, bearing the tale of a wild, disreputable life. To her Bob Meager had become the synonym of all that was evil in this borderland. Yet now, through some strange play of fate, he was here and she was left helplessly in his power, under his orders, wholly dependent on him for employment. The thought was almost maddening.

They finally met the morning of the fifth day, unexpectedly, when, without even knocking, the fellow strode into the widow's room unceremoniously. The girl, in her nurse's uniform, arose hastily to her feet, and confronted the rude intruder indignantly, her eyes blazing with sudden antagonism.

"Who are you?" he asked gruffly,



"Who Are You?" He Asked Gruffly.

yet with a measure of doubt in his tone. "Some poor relative?"

"Not quite as bad as that," she answered, resenting his manner, yet endeavoring to control her speech. "I am Mrs. Meager's nurse."

"Nurse!" he sneered sarcastically. "Good Lord, so the old man stood for that, did he? Well, you can hardly expect me to; it is more than my mother ever had. Do you know who I am?"

"I presume you must be Robert Meager."

"You guessed right, and I've come back here to run this ranch; you get me?"

"Quite clearly—yes."

"Oh, you do, hey? Then I'll enlighten you further. You're Mrs. Meager's nurse, you said? Pretty soft job, isn't it? I don't believe there will be any necessity for her having a nurse very long. What's your name?"

"Deborah Meredith."

He laughed, showing a row of cruel white teeth.

"Sounds like a story book; where did the old man pick you up?"

"My home is in Chicago."

"Well, he certainly showed good taste, I'll say that for him. You are some good-looker, Deborah Meredith. I'm d-d if I don't rather like your style."

He stared at her insolently, his glance appraising form and features much as he might take in the points of some animal he contemplated purchasing. The girl's face flushed indignantly, but her eyes never fell.

"You sure do look good to me," he

announced finally, "and I don't believe I'll fire you—not yet, anyhow."

"It will not be at all necessary," she said quietly. "I shall attend to that for myself."

"You mean you will quit?"

"I certainly shall."

"Oh, b—! Spunky little tigress, ain't you? I reckon I'll have something to say about that."

"You mean you will compel me to remain whether I wish to or not?" she asked in surprise. "Why, that cannot be done; I am not a slave."

"It can't hey? Do you know where you are?"

"Certainly I do."

"By G—d, I doubt it. This is the Meager ranch in Arizona. There ain't another outfit within fifty miles, and nothing else round us but desert; there ain't no water, and no grass. I'm a-runnin' things here, and you bet I know how to run them. You get me? I'm the boss; before another week's out every white man on this ranch will be hunting a job, and there'll be Mex in their places. I know how to handle Mex; they'll do what I say—you bet they will. So Miss Deborah Meredith, how is it you're going to quit before ever I say you can? Aim to hoof it across the alkali to Nogales? Ten miles o' that stuff would break your heart. You better think it over."

She saw him clearly in the light of the window, and in spite of her natural courage, the girl's heart sank. Was there any act of brutality the man would be incapable of? He was big, burly, with broad shoulders and a deep chest, almost a giant of a man, but it was the face which bespoke his character. Brute was written plainly all over it, seemingly imprinted on every feature, yet at the moment she did not fear him; instinctively she felt the coward skulking back of his brutishness.

"I prefer," she said quietly, "not to discuss the matter now. Surely this was not why you came in here?"

"I sure like your nerve, little girl," he admitted admiringly. "No, I didn't come exactly for that, but whatever brought me I've changed my mind. We'll let things go on just as they are at present, I reckon. But don't you ever imagine I am playing with you; law don't count for much out here, sister, an' what I say goes."

She watched him as he turned and went out the door, her hands clenched, a wave of intense hatred surging over her. Yet in another moment she had conquered herself, and moved quietly back to the side of the bed on which her patient lay sobbing. She bent above the distressed woman.

"He is worse even than I thought," she said, unable wholly to hide her distress. "What caused him to come in here, do you suppose?"

"He came to send me away," answered the other clasping the girl's hands. "I knew it would not be long; he has disliked me always."

"Send you away! Why, you were his father's wife. Even if there was no will you must have dower rights in the estate. Surely, that is the law."

"I—I do not know," wearily. "Tom never explained anything to me, but—I am afraid of Bob Meager. Don't cross him; don't anger him. He is dangerous, and I am afraid of him, for your sake as well as my own."

"What do you want me to do?" the girl questioned, influenced by the timidity of the other. "Let that beast have his own way with me?"

"No—no, not that. But—but treat him fairly, Miss Meredith. He will not always be as he is today. As he said, you cannot fight or run away. All depends on winning his favor. Then sometime there will be a chance. We must wait and watch, until he is in a mood to let us both go. But even if there was a way for you to escape alone, you could not leave me here in his power."

"You fear him like that?"

"If I stand between the man and this fortune his father left, my life is worth nothing—I know that."

And Deborah Meredith, looking down into the white face lying on the pillow, made her choice.

CHAPTER II

Meager States His Plan.

It was the memory of this scene—her promise to Mrs. Meager, and her dislike of Bob Meager—which left the girl unobserving of the desert view outspread below, and thoughtless of the descending night. She had sought this spot to be alone, to escape any possibility of encountering Bob, and to turn over once more in her mind the conditions which had made her virtually a prisoner. There had been an expression in the man's eyes that had frightened her more than she would even confess to herself—an insolent boldness, a sneering dominance which haunted her memory with its sinister threat. He was playing with her as a cat plays with a mouse, biding the proper time to strike. He knew he could afford to wait; that she was utterly in his power. His very silence and aloofness increased her alarm, her dread of the morrow.

Not a day passed without witnessing a change in the personnel of the ranch. She might not have observed

this, but for her own personal suspicion. Old Tom Meager would never employ a Mexican on the place, nor trust them; but now, one by one, the old hands disappeared, while swarthy-skinned riders appeared mysteriously to take their places. Within six days the transformation was practically complete, and Bob Meager was surrounded by those of his own kind. Creatures of his will, denizens of that world he knew best. This change was, to Deborah's mind, ominous of evil; it increased her fear, and rendered more difficult any possibility of escape. The walls closed her more tightly in. What did this man plan to do with her? The question could not be answered; she could only wait fearfully for his actions to make reply. Yet it must be evil; she could conceive nothing else in Bob Meager's heart.

Her thought was not with the wild desert scene outstretched before her, or the beauty of that red sunset behind those far-off peaks. She was not even conscious of her more immediate surroundings, remaining totally oblivious to the solitary horseman, approaching along the barely discernible trail skirting the edge of the mesa. The horse was moving slowly, with wearily drooping head, and on the hard-beaten and the hoofs made no noise sufficient to disturb her. It was on the farther edge of the chaparral that the horseman suddenly perceived the girl, her white skirt showing conspicuous in the purple light, and quickly held up his pony. She had evidently neither seen nor heard his approach, and he swung silently over the animal's head, before advancing toward her on foot. It was not until he had reached within a very few yards of her position that Deborah became aware of some presence near, and arose instantly to her feet, facing him in sudden alarm. It was too late then to flee; the man blocked the only path available.

"Frightened you, didn't it?" he asked carelessly, flipping a weed with his quirt, but with searching eyes on her face. "You must have been in some daydream, I'll say."

"I—I was thinking," she answered, a little catch in the voice, but as instantly determining to tell the truth, and thus learn, if possible, his purpose, "of what you intend to do with me. I—I cannot continue to bear things as they are."

"Why, they are not so bad, are they?" he asked provokingly, but making no effort to advance. "This is the same ranch to which you came voluntarily; I have not cut down your wages, and the food, and all that, is just as good. Do you mean you don't like it here any longer?"

"I certainly do not under the circumstances. I am no longer here of my own free will."

"Oh, is that it? Well, perhaps we can remedy that trouble. Sit down there again while we talk it over."

"I prefer to stand."

"All right then, only it ain't going to do you no good to be offish about it. I'll tell you that at the start. You ought to know by this time that I ain't the playing sort. Found any way to leave yet? I reckon not, or you wouldn't be here. Well, that lessor ought to mean something to you. I've left you alone for three days now, just to let it sink in."

"That I could not escape from here without assistance?"

"Sure; there ain't no way for a woman—a tenderfoot—to get across that desert without help of some kind and a horse. I reckon you are smart enough to know that. It was mostly on your account I sent them old punchers away, an' got a lot o' Mex in to ride herd, an' do whatever odd jobs were needed. There ain't nobody round who cares a whoop in h—l what happens. You better let that soak in, too, first of all. Then it will be easier for us to come to an understanding."

"An understanding?" she asked in surprise. "You desire to explain, then? Yet first you threaten me?"

He laughed.

"Threaten, h—! I don't have to threaten; I'm holding all the cards." He took a step forward, and, as the girl drew slightly back from his approach, his face quickly darkened, with anger. "You don't want me to touch you, hey? or come near you? All right, I'll wait, but just the same you'll do just what I tell you to. Sit down there on that log. You hear me? Sit down!"

She took the place designated, realizing the utter uselessness of refusal, while he remained standing, with one foot insolently planted on the log beside her.

"You're sure a wildcat, but I'll tame you!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Trouble Ahead for Pussy. Mattie came running into the house, excitedly exclaiming, "My pussy has borne five kittens! I don't know how she'll manage to take care of five children when it keeps me and you busy every minute with nothing but the twins, muvver."

Lovely Negligees Appeal to Women

Deshabilles, peignoirs, negligees! What soothing, luscious words they are—and how translatable! Don't they conjure up pictures of heaped cushions, graceful reclining chairs and pier mirrors to reflect the lovely unconventional beauty that only this type of garment may so delightfully express? For in no other part of her wardrobe may give free rein to her imagination and indulge her craving for weird color, eccentric line and luxurious fabrics. There are literally no restrictions, as there are a fashion writer in the New York Times.

The woman who finds it difficult to express her personality in her formal clothes will revel in the planning or selecting of her negligees. There are such charming creations for every type. The doll-like girl will find the



Plaited and Plain Chiffon, Along With Gold Embroidery, Makes Most Graceful House Gown, Picturesque Enough to Satisfy the Most Fastidious.

dainty, befrilled pastel sort of thing that accentuates her extreme femininity as no other garment possibly could; the majestic Junoesque type of woman will select costumes for her hours of leisure created on long clinging lines, in strange exotic colors, with a great deal of lovely drapery and magnificent trimmings, and for all the numerous types between these two extremes are accurately interpreted the personalities of their fair wearers.

The popular idea, often expressed, that negligees are only for the woman of leisure who spends hours in her boudoir each day is distinctly erroneous. To have at least one decorative but not necessarily expensive lounging robe to don, after the prosaic workaday clothes are discarded, is a most refreshing tonic to a busy woman. The executive who rushes from one conference to another all day in her smart but nevertheless uninspiring dark frock, will be immeasurably rested by even a short half hour in a lovely pale thing of filmy chiffon that will absolutely dispel all thoughts of the business of the day. A simple model in crepe de chine, chosen in her favorite tint, should be just as much a part of the stenographer's wardrobe as her tailored blouses. And the busy housekeeper will find herself walled away from tiresome domestic problems by slipping into a soft clinging satin thing of dreams.

Creations for Summer.

Feeling so strongly woman's need of intriguing robes for her leisure, the designers have innumerable exquisite creations for the summer. The obvious essential of foremost importance is, of course, the quality of coolness. And this element has been attained by various means. Chiffons and crepes are used in place of the velvets and brocades of winter. Trimmings include sheer laces, valencennes and soft shadow laces, and lovely bands of fillet. Ribbons and ruffles take the place of fur and metallic ornaments. Cool greens and blues and orchids replace the warmer orange tones and rich flame colors.

A thing to invite one's soul is a design of apricot crepe and ivory lace. Its success lies in the fact that, while really very simple in cut, it is draped so as to appear delightfully eccentric. The long interrupted line of heavy lace across the shoulders and down to a point below the knee is perfect in its simplicity; while the amusing idea of leaving one arm bare and massing the drapery over the other is unusual.

Another charming model, less extreme, with an interesting medieval note is of rose charmeuse, with silver lace sleeves trailing from shoulder to hem. The sleeves are caught up at a point above the elbow with amulets of old silver and blue enamel to give the familiar Moayan age silhouette.

These models are excellent examples of the more formal types of negligees, but there are numerous possibilities for the woman who lives to be original in devising lounging robes along less usual lines. In this category are found fascinating combinations of loose satin

trousers and chiffon blouses, which really aren't blouses but squares of material thrown over the head, falling into becoming folds to the hips. The obvious advantage of this type of garment is the added variety it affords the woman of limited means. For example, a cerise georgette overblouse, picoté in silver, might be worn as successfully with black charmeuse trousers as with a simple white slip. Interesting cords and narrow girdles of semi-precious stones and bead ornaments are just the decorative note needed to create harmony.

Contrasted to this more or less bohemian type of thing, one finds demure little breakfast coats in pastel colorings with hardly any trimmings, but quaint ruffles of the same material. These models are cut often only three-quarter length, and are worn over lady's robe de nuit or a silk costume slip.

Make Negligees at Home.

With all the beautiful silks and chiffons that are crowding the market these days, there comes an excellent opportunity for the making of negligees at home. They are merely matters of lengths of material gathered into becoming folds and the amount of sewing which is necessary is, on the plainer ones at least, almost to be discounted. They are collections of color and fine stuffs with plentiful distributions of silver and gold applied and used as foundations. Then there are widths and widths of lace, either colored or white or of metal.

A plain, straight kimono is often most satisfactory because it is there and ready to be thrown over the shoulders at almost any minute, to keep out a passing breeze or to cover one's nightie in an emergency. You can make awfully good-looking kimonos from the printed silks that are now so popular, and for this sort of robe you can go the limit with colors and designs, where you might be a little timid about being so bold with a dress you expected to wear out in polite society. If you want the kimono to be as elegant as possible, then line it with a plain-toned chiffon. In this way you manage to increase the effect of your color scheme and to create something which is really quite beautiful.

The printed challes are good, too, for this particular purpose. They have just a shade more warmth than the silks and they do come in such charming patterns that they positively inspire you to take your needle in hand and see what you can do in the way of a kimono. They can be washed again and again, which is no mean attribute for a house wrap of this sort, which may be subjected to all sorts of hard wear.

Interesting Bed Jackets.

All of these materials make lovely little bed jackets that can be slipped over the shoulders when you are having your breakfast in bed, or when a sick day or two overtakes you. It is so



Lovely Robe d'intimate is Made From Series of Loosely Draped Lines Which Are Fastened to Yoke of Lace That Ends in Floating Panel.

much easier to pull yourself together and to get well if you are pleased with the way you look when you are attending to the business of getting back your strength.

Then there are the little things that go along with boudoir apparel. They are always fascinating to the feminine soul. Without them—the slippers, caps, etc.—the house gown, no matter how simple it is, loses much of the best of its effect.

There are dainty little mules covered with gay brocades and lightly woven tapestries. There are others of plain satins and kid which are most amusing. Of course, they are hard to walk in, but they are good-looking. No one can deny that fact. For those who wish more comfort there are flatter sorts of slippers and ones which more nearly approach a guarantee to stay on the foot.