

GIFT OF THE DESERT

BY RANDALL PARRISH

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"TO GET ME?"

SYNOPSIS—On the isolated Meager ranch, on the southern border, Deborah Meredith, trained nurse, is in attendance on Mrs. Meager, whose husband has recently been killed. Immediately after the death, Bob Meager, Mrs. Meager's stepson, arrives and takes possession. He insults Deborah and she resolves to leave, but there seems no possibility of her getting away. Meager gloats over Deborah's plight.

CHAPTER II—Continued.

"Very well," she said, forcing a strange calmness into her voice. "I will listen to what you have to say."

"Listen! I rather guess you will. I like your d—n nerve, but you'll find out I've got some myself. Now, see here, Miss Deborah Meredith. A week ago I didn't even know you existed. But after we had that little seance together the other day in the old lady's room, I made up my mind that I was going to give you a lesson. You didn't like me, did you?"

He stopped, but she did not answer, although her eyes met his own.

"Come on! talk up. I know you didn't; but I want to hear you say so."

"It certainly is true."

"Surely it's true. Why in h—l shouldn't it be? The old man had filled you full—"

"Your father never once spoke of you to me."

"Then my precious stepmother did."

"Only in reply to some questions, but nevertheless, I knew. If it is necessary for me to answer, I will—I do not like you, Bob Meager."

The man grinned almost cheerfully. "Some fellows might get mad at that, but I don't. I rather enjoy it. Why? Because I've got you where it don't make any d—n difference. That's why. As long as I want you, I'm going to have you. I don't care what you think of me. Likely I'm even worse than that; but from the first minute I seen you in that white uniform, I made up my mind you was the girl I wanted; and I made up my mind, too, that it wasn't any use of my trying to make love to you—not a d—n bit. You'd just laugh at that. So I went to work and figured out another way."

"To get me?" in growing horror. "To get me? For what?"

"Oh, it's all going to be honorable, so don't let that worry you now. This is going to be a square deal, only I handle the cards—see? The first thing I had to do was to build a 'hog-tight fence around this ranch, so you couldn't get out. I ain't been bothering you any meanwhile. I hain't spoken to you since that first time. There wasn't no use, I saw in your eye what sort of a girl you was, and just about what you thought of me. But I'd made up my mind what I was after, and how I was going to get it. I didn't have any notion of coming to you again until I had the cards stacked—see?"

"And—and now you—you are ready to play, and have come?"

"Correct. I can't lose. You got to do what I say, whether you like it or not. Maybe you don't just get this straight? Well, listen. In the first place I am Bob Meager, and, I reckon, you never heard nothin' very soft about me. It's pretty generally known around here that I am a he-man, and that I usually get what I go after. You know that, don't you?"

"I—I have heard of your methods—yes."

"I thought most likely you had. Well, that's one point. The second point is, I'm the real boss of this

ranch; it's mine, and I've got the letters to prove it. Now, do you get the picture?"

It was almost dark, but she could still distinguish his face, as he leaned forward peering at her. There was no doubt as to the real meaning of the man, and she comprehended fully her own helplessness of resistance. All she could hope to do now was to cause delay, to thus win a chance to think and act.

"Yes," she managed to say, marvel-



"Now Do You Get the Picture?"

ing at the calmness with which she spoke, and now on her feet facing him. "I think I know what you mean. You have me completely in your power; you have planned it all out."

"That's the ticket. Now there ain't no use your getting mad. I like you; I like you awfully well, and I'm going to be mighty square with you. But there wasn't any other way for me to get you—was there?"

"No," she said frankly, "there was no other course possible."

"Which means you don't like me at all?"

"It means all of that, and more, Bob Meager. I do not believe I ever despised anyone so much in my life as I do you. I disliked you before I ever saw you; now I hate the very ground you walk on. Have you any use for me after that?"

"You just bet I have," he grinned. "You're sure a wildcat, but I'll tame you. D—n it! I like it in you; you're not the wispy-washy kind. One of us has got to be boss; I saw that from the very first, and that's what this means now; I'm going to be the one."

"In what way do you mean?"

"Haven't you got the idea yet? I'm going to marry you—see? I took the notion the first time I saw you—you're exactly my style. But I know'd then there wasn't but one way to do it. Now I'm ready to talk business. How is it, my lady? Going to be nice about it?"

She endeavored to rally her courage, even attempting a laugh.

"Marry you? Not in this world. I know you are a scoundrel, but I never thought you were a fool before."

"No, and you never will again," his voice hardening. "Because you will have no chance. It is nothing to me whether you say yes or no. I been down in Nogales today, an' among other things I got a marriage license. It's right here in my pocket, an' the names written in it are 'Robert Meager and Deborah Meredith.' And that ain't all; sometime between now and ten o'clock a justice of the peace is going to drive in here to do up the business for us. That's why I'm telling you all this—so you can sorter brace up and get ready."

She made no attempt to move or to speak; she seemed paralyzed, staring at him through the gathering darkness.

"I ain't going to touch you now," he went on sullenly, angered by her silence. "But you just think it over, and go on back to the house. When I send for you, you better come; that's all."

He turned, and walked back to his horse, and she stood there, trembling in every limb, as he vanished amid the shadows.

She understood now, clearly, definitely, just what she was called upon to face. Bob Meager had not minced his words, or left anything to imagination. He had planned this deliberately, in cold blood, and he had the will, and, perhaps, the power, to carry it out.

At first she was in a white flame of indignation; she even laughed hysterically at the fellow's threat. It seemed preposterous, absurd, a dream of delirium. Marry him! Marry that degenerate brute! Why, she would rather die a hundred deaths than have him even touch her. He was a foul, brutal cur! Yet even as she realized this, shrinking in terror from any possible contact with him, there arose in her mind a sense of fear, a grim, persistent fear she could not conquer.

He was ruthless, merciless. If he truly desired her, nothing would be permitted to stand in his way. He had not been drinking when he talked with her; he had spoken soberly and with full knowledge of what he said. Fiendish as it was, he had acted deliberately and in cold blood. That made it all the more dangerous, for he would likely drink now and become an utter fiend. Within an hour he would be raging drunk, capable of any indignity, any wild act. A brute sober, he became a demon drunk. And she must face it—alone! This was the conviction that slowly took full possession of her mind. His threat was not an idle one. He could turn contemptuously away and leave her there, completely confident that she could not escape. There was no spot of safety to which she could fly, no friend to whom she could appeal.

She gazed hopelessly out into the black void; not a light gleamed anywhere except from those distant stars overhead. There was but one way leading across that expanse, the single trail connecting with the pass through the mountain canyon beyond. There might, of course, be others—known to Indian or outlaw—but this path was the only one she ever had traveled. And it never could be traversed alone on foot.

Yet, was there any other hope of escape—of postponement even? To appeal to Bob Meager would accomplish nothing. She knew the base heart of the man now if she never had before; he would only laugh, whether she came to him with reproaches or tears. And there was no one else—not a single white man left on the estate to her knowledge; not an officer of the law nearer than Nogales. The justice of the peace who was coming out to marry them! Bah! Whoever he was, he would assuredly be a creature of Meager's own choosing. No other kind would be employed under

the circumstances. And Mrs. Meager would only break down and cry; under no conditions could she be of the slightest service, her terror of her stepson was the real cause of her nervous breakdown.

No, there was absolutely no one to rely upon but herself. And what could she do? The girl stood up in the darkness, her hands gripped, her eyes on the opening through the chaparral leading toward the house—the trail along which Bob Meager had disappeared. She must follow him; there was nowhere else for her to go. She must face this thing alone, with all the desperate courage she could muster. If the worst came she must act, swiftly, decisively—even to killing the monster. There was no other choice left, no other possibility of escape. But where could she procure a weapon? She possessed none of her own; had never dreamed of owning such a thing, yet they were plentiful enough about the ranch. Surely one could easily be secured.

Impelled by this thought of self-defense, realizing clearly that she could turn nowhere else with any hope of escaping this dilemma; that she could neither flee the place nor find assistance, Deborah, the color high in her cheeks, her lips firmly pressed in determination, advanced resolutely through the darkness toward the house. She would defend herself at all hazards; before she would submit to that brute she would shoot to kill.

The men of the home ranch were evidently at supper, the big dining-hall being lighted, and, as she slipped past the unshaded windows, she had glimpse of the fellows within and heard their voices conversing loudly in Spanish. They were a motley bunch, scarcely a face down the long table that was not vicious and depraved—the scum of Mexico, the majority exhibiting Indian blood. They were a precious gang of ruffians, indeed, worthy of their master, and the girl crept away, glad to escape the sound of their voices. There was a single dim light burning in the bunkhouse, but no sign of any occupant. Undoubtedly every hand on the place was at supper, and no better opportunity could be found in which to seek for and appropriate some forgotten weapon. She advanced cautiously, listening intently for any sound, eager to accomplish her object. Once armed, she would feel more confident; the very touch of a weapon in her hand would bring her renewed courage.

The bunkhouse was a long building of adobe, the bunks lining the walls, open at both ends, the only light a lantern swung from a center beam. The glass of this was blackened with smoke, and only a dim radiance made the interior barely visible. However, there were no occupants. Without hesitation, but with heart beating wildly, she slipped silently within, her eager eyes swiftly searching the vacant bunks and the wooden pegs above, on which dangled a miscellaneous collection of garments. She advanced gingerly, satisfied that if any occupant had left his belt behind it would be found in one of the bunks.

She had gone entirely down one side, and moved across to the other before she found what she sought, her heart leaping exultantly as she perceived the gleam of a steel barrel in the dim light. It lay fully exposed on top of a dirty blanket, a wicked-looking .44 in a well-worn holster, with a belt containing a half-dozen cartridges. She grasped these in her hands, conscious, even as she did so, of the sound of voices outside. The men were already returning; scarcely a moment remained before some of them would enter the upper door. The moment was sufficient to permit the frightened girl to dash out of the lower entrance into the darkness beyond, and crouch there, the prize still securely in her hands, waiting opportunity to steal away toward the protection of the ranchhouse. None of the fellows chose that entrance, but surged in through the other without a care in the world.

The two who had entered first stretched themselves out in bunks opposite each other, puffing vigorously on their cigarettes, and conversed in English, evidently proud of the accomplishment. One she recognized as Juan Sanchez, who had accompanied Bob Meager on his return, and had since been made foreman, a swarthy, evil-eyed half-breed, with a long mustache and a livid scar on one cheek. The other was an Indian, a mere boy, but with cruel mouth, and face hideous from pockmarks. Sanchez called him Pedro, yet talked to him as he might to a dog. It was the boy who questioned eagerly:

"'Tis he, senior—the man? I hear eat not all, the fools they make so much noise. We have festa?"

Sanchez blew a cloud of smoke into the polluted air, flipping the ash of his cigarette onto the floor.

"Plenty drink, Pedro," he said indolently, "an' no work tomorrow. The boss he marry."

"Marry! the gringo? How that be again, senior?" and Pedro sat up, dangling his feet over the edge of the bunk.

Sanchez laughed grimly.

"Ah, Pedro, I forgot you were there. It was a great night, was it not; yet, Santa Anna; it counts for nothing this side the line. 'Tis no seniorita of Mexico this time, but one of his own race,

which is different; now he marry for long while."

"He marry of his own race—here?"

"Sure; you have seen her; she cares for the old seniora."

"The girl in white?"

"'Tis she; and Madre de Dios, I would it was I who had her, Pedro! Did ever you see such eyes? Sacra! I would ride through h—l to make her smile on me."

"Bah! indifferently, 'she is too pale for my taste."

"Pale! with those cheeks and lips! My blood boils at dream of her kisses. I'd give every maid in Mexico for such as her."

"'Tis as your taste runs, senior; but how came she to love this fiend of an Americano?"

"Love him!" Sanchez rocked with laughter. "H—l! he has but spoke to her the once, to my knowledge. I

do not doubt if she knows yet the happiness in store for her. 'Tis what I like about him; he does not ask, he takes. Sacra! he got the other so; she hated him, yet it made no difference. He is the devil's own, Pedro. Let's stop this chatter and win a bit of sleep before the bout begins."

Deborah, scarcely venturing to breathe, her heart fluttering with terror, but her hands clasping tightly the heavy revolver, stole silently away through the darkness.

CHAPTER III

The Coming of the Judge.

Assured that the way was clear, Deborah made a quick passage across the open space, a dim, ghostly figure fleeing through the night, and succeeded in obtaining entrance at the side door without being observed.

First of all she must safely conceal the weapon she had stolen, which was too large and cumbersome to be carried upon her person. Her own room at the end of the hall, small, but neatly furnished, gave the greatest promise of security, and she felt a decided sense of relief when she finally thrust the weapon under various articles at the bottom of a bureau drawer. It was there, ready at hand, if an emergency arose, while she felt fully prepared to make use of it. The conversation just overheard had strengthened her resolve to defend herself at all hazards.

Certain that nothing further would occur until after the arrival of the expected guests from Nogales, she stole into the room occupied by her patient, relieved to find Mrs. Meager sleeping soundly. Locking the door, she sat down wearily at the window, which was slightly open, peering anxiously out into the night, the cool evening air of the desert caressing her hot cheeks.

Another day? What would it bring to her? Married to Bob Meager? death? or would she be a fugitive, with the stain of murder on her soul? She shuddered, the blood seeming to stop circulating in her veins, as these questions brought home so nakedly the situation. It must be one of the three; there was no alternative. The fellow was fully capable of this infamy. He was but repeating an old offense. Somewhere, down below those mountains that marked the boundary line, a girl of another race had met this same fate now confronting her, and was paying the price.

Well, she would never pay it, or if she must, then she would choose herself what that price should be. She felt, at that moment that she could kill the brute as she would a mad dog. It was a duty, a privilege. Again and again her mind swept about the unbroken circle; the chain binding her was complete; she could turn nowhere for help; she was absolutely a prisoner. The revolver hidden away in that bureau drawer alone promised protection. There were tears in her eyes, but not tears of weakness or of pity; her lips were firmly set, and her hands clasping the window sill were steady with determination. She had made up her mind.

"But I refuse to marry him; I do not consent."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Sumptuous Gowns for Evening Wear

Simple Frock Not as Fashionable as in Past Seasons, Writer Says.

Lightweight Frock of White Crepe de Chine

There is a definite return to gorgeousness for evening. The simple frock has ceased to be as fashionable as in former seasons. Materials that are marvels of richness, gold and silver lame, colored lame, sumptuous Persian embroidery and lace dotted with brilliants all are seen in the grande maisons, notes a Paris fashion writer in the New York Tribune.



This charming lightweight summer frock of white crepe de chine printed in black is trimmed with a plastron of pure white, edged with loops of green grosgrain ribbon.

Perhaps the most featured of all are the white satin and crepe gowns embroidered all over with pearls, crystals and brilliants. These gowns are very simple in cut, but the effect is magnificent. Usually they are ankle length, with trailing panels or sashes to give an effect of dignity. There is hardly a notable house which has not several such models and their prices are exorbitant, from 12,000 francs upward.

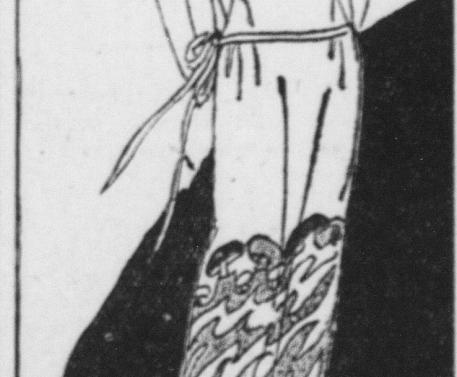
Myrhor makes strikingly original evening gowns of white satin or taffeta with very bouffant skirts or trailing panels and bodices entirely covered with brilliant futuristic flowers embroidered in wool. She has gowned the duchess of Marlborough, the marchioness of Curzon and other notables.

Dresses for evening are longer than those for daytime, many of them touching the floor. Hemlines vary, as do necklines. Renee makes some of her hemlines uneven by pearl-edged scallops while Paquin places a skirt of trailing panels over a short-draped slip. Drecoll uses a six-inch tulle ruffle to outline a hem that is

Egypt and from the Second empire. One of the most interesting gowns is a simple straightline sleeveless gown of pale gray brocade, the bodice of which has only one side cut surplice. The other side is filled in with strands of pearls.

Cut of Blouse Makes or Mars One's Looks

For those who wear blouses and shirtwaists, the most important point to remember is that the cut of the neckline makes or mars the contour of the face—just the right cut forms a setting for the head.



Sleeveless Evening Dress of White Crepe de Chine With a Bright Green Appliqued Trimming as a Decoration on the Skirt.

two semi-circles. Chanel edges a similar hemline with three folds of crepe.

Evening gowns are, above all, picturesque, borrowing charm from the tradition of the Moyen Age, from

Bridal Gown of Today Can Have Color Touch

Once upon a time, the idea of having the bridal gown anything but all white would have been nothing short of a shocking departure. But the bride of today gives a more alive note to her wedding frock by introducing a clever touch of pastel color along with the white.

It may be a lining of pale blue chiffon, it may be a touch of ecru or flesh, or it may be a panel lined with pale green. But whatever the mode of introduction, the color is there, and while brides have been "beautiful" from time immemorial, this pastel touch of the bride's favorite color makes her even more so.

Fashion Notes That Interest All Women

What will next year bring—a plump-figured miss, perhaps? That's the gossip now among the designers.

The woman who likes unusual things will choose an exotic Hindoo choker necklace of carved wooden and bright-colored glass beads.

Barundiik, a new summer fur, is really just old-fashioned chipmunk; the little striped animals that are seen scampering about the woods of the Northwest.

Hoop earrings are being revived again! They come in jet, silver filigree, metal hoops set with Egyptian stones and jade. They are said to be newer than the pendant earrings for summer wear.

Forty is called the dangerous age for women. It certainly is if they depend upon their girlish charm for happiness. But the woman who dresses and acts in accordance with her years knows no dangerous age, for she always can be attractive. She puts aside girlish chatter for soft, intelligent conversation and she lets the younger women bear the responsibility of the bobbed heads.

Crepe de chine makes a beautiful and serviceable dress for the summer days, as it can be fitted in colors and used as a dance frock. The simple crepe de chine gown is very popular this season and white is one of the season's best sellers. Of course, one could also have a plaited crepe de chine frock and this could be used as a sports frock later on if worn under a colorful jacquette.

The matronly woman who attempts to wear the voguish attire of the young

girl adds years to her age. There is nothing sadder in the world than a woman who refuses to grow old. One may see examples of these women often, old women who cling to their youth and dress in ridiculously youthful clothes. Often their hair is bobbed in the latest cut or frizzed about their sallow faces in dyed shades that draw immediate attention to their withered skins.

Invisible corsetry is the aim of the best corset creator—a happy example is in the "wrap around" model. It is very quickly adjusted; merely "wrap it" and "snap it" round the figure, the elastic sections alternating with coutil, only stretching sufficiently for this purpose. For this reason it is an improvement on the "pull-on" corset, as there is not a trace of lacing anywhere, and not a line shows through the gown, a precaution rendered doubly necessary by the sheathlike draperies.

Cottage Dinner Sets.

Some of the wealthy and all of the rest of us use open sets of table ware. These open sets belong in general to the cheaper grades of china and they have become so popular that more and more attention has been given to making the decorative designs and coloring more attractive. A high degree of perfection has been reached in this direction. If you are thinking of replacing your old set with a new one your only difficulty will be in choosing from among the large assortment that stores are carrying at present.