

Gift of the Desert



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by
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"FRISCO KID"

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. He tells her he has sent for a justice of the peace, who will marry them tomorrow. Horrified, the girl seizes a revolver.

CHAPTER III—Continued.

She was alone—alone! Beyond law, justice, mercy even, without a friend, a hope; a mere atom left to perish at the will of a brute. Even God had deserted her.

Her wrist watch had stopped, and she possessed no knowledge of the time, yet surely it must be late. The respite now would be short; those who were coming to carry out this mockery could not be delayed much longer. She even hoped now they would come; anything was better than this uncertainty, this horror of waiting.

She wondered where Bob Meager was, and what he was doing. There was no movement about the house, except that of the cook in the detached kitchen. The fellow's regular work would have been completed long ago; no doubt he was busily preparing some sort of feast with which to celebrate the wedding. The wedding! Her wedding! There was the harsh mockery of laughter in her voice as she repeated over aloud the ironic words. Her wedding! Girl-like she had wondered often what it would be like. And now it was here, she was actually waiting the hour, the moment. And the husband; the man whom Fate or the devil had brought to her? He was waiting, too, no doubt, alone in the front room yonder, drinking himself into a reckless courage, becoming a greater demon with every moment of delay. It was too much, too much. The very heart seemed to go out of her, and she buried her face in her arms on the sill, her body shaking with the sobs which could no longer be restrained.

Suddenly her ears caught the distant sound of horses' hoofs through the silence, and she sat up, gasping for breath, once more clutched by fear. Yes, they were actually coming, the end was already at hand; he had not lied to her, not merely threatened—he was really brute enough to carry out the mad scheme. She was upon her feet, standing, motionless and rigid, back beyond view, when the little party rode up to the main door of the ranch house, which opened at their approach, a startling beam of light flashing within.

There were but three in the company, all men. Two of the faces she could not distinguish at all, one a rather trim figure, sitting his saddle like a cavalry man; the other a humping, decidedly ungainly fellow, topped with a broad Mexican sombrero which completely shaded his features. These two remained mounted, but the third man swung instantly down from the saddle, noisily greeting Meager as he stepped into the open doorway. He was a heavily built American, with coarse, bloated face, and wore a scraggly beard. When he spoke he croaked like a frog.

"Hullo, Bob!" he called out, waddling forward. "Well, I got here all right."

"So I see," with no special cordiality in the voice, which was hoarse from drink. "And you didn't come alone, Garry; who the h—l is with you?"

"Alone!" He spluttered out a laugh. "Did you think I'd ride across that d—d desert at night alone? Not for all the money you got, Bob Meager. Arvan came along with me, an' out here at Silver Springs we run into another old pard o' yours, an' persuaded him to ride on along with us. Ain't that all right?"

"It depends! D—n you, Garry, I told you this was to be a private affair, didn't I? Who is the fellow you brought along from Silver Springs?"

"Frisco—don't that beat h—l?"

"Frisco! Why, by G—d, I never supposed he dared show up this side the line." He stepped out eagerly, reeling a little from the liquor he carried, yet heading straight toward the taller figure in the dim light. The latter swung down from the saddle and met him, Meager, garrulous with drink, greeting him effusively.

"Say, I'm glad to see you, Kid, he burst forth, "but how the h—l do you dare come here? There is a lot o' guys who'd kill their own mother for the reward Arizona's got on you. Tryin' to commit suicide?"

"No, not as desperate as that, Bob," answered the other, his voice rather

low and musical. "I knew what I was doing all right, and these fellows didn't catch me asleep out at Silver Springs. I know who they were before I joined up with them. Fact is, Bob, I was headed this way and willin' to have company of the right sort."

"Headed this way? Huntin' me, you mean? What's up?"

"Nothing to worry about tonight. What I came for will wait. Safe for me here, isn't it?"

"Sure," and Meager burst into a drunken laugh. "I've cleaned out the outfit complete. Come on in, all of you, an' let's have a drink. Hey there, Sanchez," and his voice roared out the order to the bunkhouse. "Take care of these horses."

Deborah, her heart beating wildly, sank down upon a chair, with face buried in her hands. They had come, and there was no hope in them. The judge, the half-breed, were mere puppets, dancing to the voice of their master; the very tone in which he greeted them spoke his contempt of the fellows. Any appeal for mercy to such as they would be but wasted breath. And the third man! The girl had somehow, at first view, hope of him. His trim appearance in the dim light, the pleasant, firm sound of his voice, her knowledge that he was not part of the original conspiracy, had given her a sudden thrill of expectation. But this existed no longer since she heard his name. The "Frisco Kid"; the very sound of it served to chill her blood. Outlaw, desperado, spoken of in whispers along the border; tales of him had reached her ears ever since her first arrival. There was no hope for her in his presence.

Someone rapped gently on the door, and she sprang to her feet and stood motionless, staring through the darkness. The rapping came again.

CHAPTER IV

The Marriage.

Deborah stepped forward silently, her lips pressed tight, opened the bureau drawer, straightening up once more with the heavy .44 gripped in her hand. The time had come, and she suddenly felt calm and cold.

"Who is there?"

"It's just me, Miss Meredith," answered a woman's voice weakly. "I've got one of my spells again. I—need you bad. I just thought I couldn't drag myself this far; only I had to."

The reaction left the startled girl trembling, but she had no doubt as to the urgency of the call. Thrusting the revolver back into its hiding place, unwilling that Mrs. Meager should even see it, she swiftly unlocked the door and stepped forth into the dimly lit hall. Her eyes caught one glimpse of her patient's face, ghastly white, but



Directly Fronting Her Stood Juan Sanchez.

with terror rather than pain, and as quickly realized that she had walked into a set trap. Before she could even spring backward, a burly form crowded past her into the opening, completely blocking it, while directly fronting her, grinning maliciously, stood Juan Sanchez. She knew, without seeing, who was behind her—Bob Meager, chuckling in drunken satisfaction. It was the shrinking, frightened woman against the opposite wall who spoke first.

"I—I didn't want to do it," she screamed hysterically. "He—he made me; he—he said he'd kill me if I didn't. My G—d! what do these men want of you?"

"Shut up!" roared Meager angrily. "Run the old fool back into her room,

Juan, and shut the door on her. Go on; I'll take care of the girl. Rather fooled you that time, I reckon, young lady."

She looked him coldly, contemptuously in the face, conscious of the struggle to remove the older woman. "Don't try to remain, Mrs. Meager," she said quietly. "Go back to your room. I can take care of myself."

"But—but, dearie, what is it they want to do with you?"

Deborah laughed bitterly, so desperate by then as to be reckless. "Marry me to this drunken brute," she explained, "this delightful stepson of yours. There is nothing you can do to help me; so go on back to your room—please go!"

Sanchez, grinning still, as though he enjoyed the task, forced the helpless woman down the hall. He shoved her roughly into her room, closed and locked the door. Deborah heard the fall on the floor within, but her eyes were upon the threatening face of Bob Meager.

"Well?" she said sharply, "you seem to have won the first round?"

"You bet I have. There wasn't no need breaking in, while there was an easier way. So you ain't going to make no row?"

"I have not said what I mean to do."

"An' I don't give a d—n," roughly. "Only I'd like to know whether you're going along by yourself, or whether we got to drag you? It's one or the other of them two things."

"Along where?"

"To the living-room, of course. That's where I aim to have the ceremony pulled off."

The girl thought quickly. Resistance there and then was absolutely useless. Both men were armed, and one of them, at least, was crazy drunk. It would be better to appear to yield, to seem reconciled to the inevitable. She was weaponless, unable to put up any defense; perhaps in the larger room some better opportunity for action might present itself. If she lulled their suspicions, led them to believe that she was conquered, she might be able to snatch a revolver from some holster, or even evade them and rush back to the safety of her own room. It was a grim, ghastly chance, but she could think of none better.

"I prefer going there by myself," she said, wondering at the steadiness of her voice, watchful of the expression on Meager's leering face. "No! don't touch me; don't dare to touch me."

The fellow laughed, but there was a snarl in his tone.

"All right; so the cat has still got claws, has she? Well, I guess I can wait putting hands on you; it won't be long. Go on ahead, then. Come along, Sanchez."

In spite of her trembling limbs the girl walked firmly, never so much as turning her head to glance at the two behind her. She must act her part, play her character, permit them to think her indifferent to results, yet in no way afraid. Without a question she opened the door herself at the end of the narrow hall, and stepped into the room beyond. There were two men in the room, the short, thick Mexican called Arvan, sprawling on a settee, and the judge, sunk into the easy chair, where old Tom Meager had sat for so many years, calmly smoking a pipe. At their entrance the fellow got upon his feet and bowed, the pipe still in his hand. Deborah looked anxiously about for the other—the "Frisco Kid"—but he was not in the room. Then, ignoring the hand Garry held out, her eyes fastened upon the face before her. She never before had seen a countenance more repulsive or so deeply marked by disipation, and her heart seemed to choke her before the sudden stare of those pig eyes and the bestial grin of the thick lips.

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

"That's what I am; Judge Cornelius Garry, 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 Garry, 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."

"My dear young woman," he began hoarsely, "I was told before coming here that you were somewhat temperamental, and might therefore desire not to proceed with the ceremony. I shall not be swayed in any way by such tantrums. My own duty is plain; the papers are in correct form; Mr. Meager assures me that he had your consent, and has acted in accordance with your own wishes in the matter. It is too late at this hour to change your mind. I trust you will see the justice of this and make no further objections."

"Oh, cut out the hot air, Garry," broke in Meager, surging forward, unable to control himself any longer. "Let her rave if she wants to; it don't hurt none of us, I reckon. You came out here to do up this job for me, and the sooner it's over with the better. The law of Arizona don't say anything about whether the female consents or not, does it?"

"Well, not directly, Bob; that's implied, rather."

"Implied, h—l! You go on and imply it then, pronto. I ain't organizing no debating society, you d—n pot-bellied idiot. I'm here to marry this Deborah Meredith; that's what I'm

paying you for; an' after that I'll attend to her tantrums myself."

"You mean to force me to marry you?" she asked, her own temper rising to combat his.

"Sure," he replied brutally. "I never supposed you'd do anything else but kick. But that's none of Garry's business."

"But such a marriage will not be legal; no court would ever sustain it."

"Legal! Courts! You make me tired. This ain't Chicago! We're out here in an Arizona desert, and I don't remember ever caring a d—n what the law says, since I was a kid. Here's my law, when it comes to that, and he suggestively slapped the gun holster on his hip, "an' there ain't nobody tells me what I shall do or what I sha'n't. You better get that first of all. Legal! Well, I reckon you heard what it was the judge said, didn't you? He's got the license there, and the authority. Here's two witnesses, according to law. Now what the h—l you going to do? Suppose any court is going to take your word, unsupported, against the four of us? Besides,"



The Startled Mexican and Meager Collided.

and he grinned suggestively, with a drunken leer, "after tonight, I don't reckon you'll be hunting the court anyway; you'll be d—n glad you've got a husband. Come on up closer, boys, so you can see the whole show—Garry is going to splice us now, without no more words about it."

The judge cleared his throat, taking a printed slip of paper from his pocket in his stubby fingers.

"Bob's quite right, miss," he said, with an effort at dignity. "He's sure got the law with him, an' the witnesses."

"But I refuse to marry him; I do not consent," she insisted, with trembling voice.

"I ain't got nothing to do with your personal quarrels. They are for you and Bob to settle. I reckon every married couple has them. You just stand there an' face me."

She was pressed back against the table, helpless to move, too thoroughly bewildered and dazed for the moment to attempt any action. Sanchez had deserted the door he was guarding, and stood just behind her, grinning cheerfully. Arvan was opposite, his dark, half-breed Indian face exhibiting no emotion, while Meager had planted himself at her right, his bloodshot eyes scowling into her own. Garry began to read, but she only heard him dumbly, her mind inactive, comprehending not a single word. Then suddenly, consciousness came back as though something had snapped in the numbed brain, the words sounding clear, distinct: "I pronounce you husband and wife, and whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

With a single sharp cry, she sprang wildly backward, jerked herself free from Sanchez' hasty grip, and dashed headlong for the door leading into the hall. The startled Mexican and Meager, springing forward to intercept her flight, collided, cursing and striking at each other in that instant of confusion, while she flung open the door and swept out, untouched, into the hall. Her mind contained but one thought as she ran—her own room, the weapon in the bureau drawer. She could defend herself there; kill herself, kill him, if necessary! He should never touch her—never! She was free now, and would be helpless in his hands never again. She would die first, die gladly, but Bob Meager would never possess her alive. The drunken oaths behind spurred her on, strengthened her resolve. She ran, never glancing back, straight to the entrance sought, flung it open and sprang within, slamming the door shut behind her and feeling desperately for the key. It was not in the lock, nor could she find it lying on the dark floor beneath. Drunk as Meager was, he had thought of that; had seen to it that the way to her apartment would be left unguarded. The girl turned, her heart beating rapidly, and crossed to the bureau. Thank God! he had not discovered the gun, and she swung defiantly about, the weapon gripped in her hand.

"Well, I'll be d—d, if I don't believe it's a woman!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Wide Latitude in Choice of Styles

Present Modes Allow Each Woman to Dress to Suit Her Own Taste.

Printed Silk Is Used to Decorate This Hat



Printed silk swatches this little cloche of soft beige felt and matches the embroidery of black and white that trims the beige frock. It is a late French fashion.

No fixed or absolute rules govern the fashions for the summer of 1923, writes a fashion correspondent in the New York Tribune. One has wide latitude in the choice of styles. This allows each woman to dress according to her individual taste, but supplies her with such delightful inspiration in the way of particular models that she cannot fail to be guided by it.

The very simple chemise frock in a dull shade with only a touch of a bright color is quite correct as is also the elaborately draped, tightly fitted dress which clings to the figure. The modified Second empire silhouette is good, too, and the 1880 pert bustle style has many adherents. The skirt made subtly full by godet plaits is fashionable, and split skirts, paneled skirts and many-tiered skirts all give pleasant variety.

Printed silks, chiffons and georgettes are universally fashionable, and for afternoon frocks they often have sober dark blue as their background, which renders them practicable. While dark blue is the favorite, bois de rose is very smart, as is also almond green, Havana brown and gray.

Bodices and sleeves are variable. In many houses the waistline has resumed its natural place. Waistbands



Summer Frock Made of Printed Chiffon Voile With Ribbon Cockade Trimming.

are usually placed just above the hips. Cherit is advancing the Greek waistline idea, which is charming in her classic models. Sleeves are as many as imagination and individual taste can conceive. The tight upper sleeve with a very full lower portion, either loose or caught to the wrist, is good. Plain, long tight sleeves, tiny lingerie sleeves and puff sleeves are to be seen, as well as dresses with no sleeves at all. The one rule is to make the sleeve individual, regardless of how it is done.

Curtains and Floors Suggest Simplicity

Curtains for the summer cottage should be of simple materials, depending upon the general style of the furnishings. For the rustic cabin, burlap in natural color or in blue or green has some advantages. For the gay cabin, cretonne, figured calico, striped linen or figured sateen may be selected. Unbleached cotton in the natural color or dyed is another popular fabric that may be adapted to many uses. Curtains made of it are easily kept fresh and crisp. White materials such as dotted swiss and cross-barred dimity have the merit of simplicity, but they need frequent trips to the laundry. For the beach cottage materials having much dressing should be avoided as when the fog rolls in it renders them limp and unlovely.

Painted walls are best. Next to these are those in the natural wood, oiled or stained. Papered walls are totally unsuited to the real cabin or informal cottage. If some wall covering is considered necessary, burlap is perhaps the best, for it preserves the informal character essential. Burlap-covered walls may be painted or varnished or both and thus rendered dust resisting.

Floor coverings should not be heavy or warm looking. Linoleum, grass rugs, those made of woven rushlike fiber, those India druggets that are so wear-resisting, reversible linen rugs and the Kilmark fiber rugs that are light in weight, reversible and have good colors and patterns are all ready for the seeker after the best and most suitable.

Bare floors painted or stained are cool and sanitary, but comfort dictates

Lighting Arrangement for Family Comfort

In the bedroom the lighting fixtures should be placed on each side of the dressing table space. If this is not possible one light should be placed in the wall just above the mirror. If the door has a mirror in it a light should be placed directly above it (on the wall), in case lights cannot be placed on each side of it as suggested for the dresser. Each side of the bed space should be provided, or, in lieu of this, baseboard sockets should be placed conveniently near so that a reading lamp may be used. In the dining room there should be, as just stated, a central chandelier with downward-facing globes (the spray arrangement is excellent) placed at such an elevation that there is no glare in the eyes of the diners.

A sleeping porch should be provided with a light at the head of the bed. In the various rooms, sockets should be provided for vacuum cleaners, electric heaters and electric irons.

Jewelry Novelties.

Among new novelties in jewelry are the ribbon earrings. They are made of a long piece of narrow ribbon wound into a small cylinder shape and having pointed ends, one end being caught by the gold or silver mounting which fastens to the ear and from which the ribbon ornament hangs as a drop. One can easily match one's earrings to one's costume by using the desired color of ribbon. Eret ribbon is especially effective made into drops, as they appear to have an engraved design upon them.

Wrapped Turban Favored.

The close fitting, little cloche finds many admirers this season. The wrapped turban is also a favorite. The latter is often worn with a novelty frock, suit or coat, the turban made of matching material. Such a costume was seen recently on a smart "movie" actress. Her coat was a red, white and black novelty weave affair, topped by a jaunty little matching turban.

Gas Stoves Not Indispensable.

For those who live out of the reach of city gas and electricity there are several makes of oil stoves that give excellent results. In appearance they resemble some of the most up-to-date gas ranges. Their only objection is the odor that escapes from them, particularly when they are just turned off. All of the above may be said of gasoline stoves also. The best results may be obtained from these stoves only if a high grade of oil or gasoline is used. The difference is quite marked.

Bustle Sash.

The bouffant frock demands ribbons. So designers and modistes are kept busy originating new ribbon touches. Sashes are bouffant, and Paris decrees that they shall now be carried to the hat, so now the summer girl sports not only a large bustle sash at each side or back, but another in miniature billowing softly over a large hat of visca or leghorn.

Velours Sports Hats.

Sports hats of velours come in vivid colors and are trimmed with velvet flowers and leaves. Frequently there is a touch of moleskin.