

GIFT OF THE DESERT

By Randall Parrish
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"I'M YOUR HUSBAND"

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 of 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 glances over Deborah's plight. He tells her he has sent for a justice of the peace, who will marry them tomorrow. Horrified, the girl secures a revolver. The justice, Cornelius Garrity, scoundrel and bosom friend of Meager, arrives with a party, among them the "Frisco Kid," notorious desperado. Despite Deborah's protests the justice performs the marriage ceremony. She escapes and reaches her room.

CHAPTER V

The Blow in the Dark.

Deborah, the revolver held tightly in her fingers, moved silently back into the darkest corner of the room, and crouched there listening. If those men entered that door she meant to shoot, and shoot to kill. This one deadly purpose was all she was conscious of, or cared for.

Perhaps in some vague way, Meager may have realized her desperation. He knew nothing of her being armed, yet, even in his drunkenness, had learned something of her temper, and hesitated to face her immediately. Why should he run the risk? He already had attained his principal object: they were married, and he could wait until her anger subsided somewhat before asserting his legal rights. Meanwhile the boys were waiting for their drinks, and he felt more inclined to celebrate the victory along with them and let tomorrow take care of itself.

Some faint conception of this situation occurred to her, as she crouched there in the dark watchfully waiting, yet remained undisturbed. The tension relaxed, and she felt again her womanly weakness, her questioning and despair. She laid the revolver beside her on the floor and buckled about her waist; then picked the weapon up once again and rested it on her knee. She was no longer crazed, but able to think clearly and decide what to attempt next.

Meager's action could mean but one thing—his utter confidence that she was already securely in his power. She could not escape, she would be waiting there for him when he was ready to possess her. What difference did an hour make; she was his wife; when he was drunk enough, reckless enough, he would come to claim her. Well, let him come; she would continue to wait, and he should have his welcome. His wife! She might be his widow before dawn.

She did not move for a long, long time; did not take her eyes from the closed door, or release her grip on the revolver. She felt cold, tired, actuated only by a relentless hatred. She wished he would come so that it might be over with. But nothing happened, and, little by little, her mood changed. The strain began to tell, began to break down her resolution, left her doubtful and afraid. She ventured to open the door a slight crack and peep cautiously into the hall; it was deserted, not even a guard had been stationed there, but the door at the farther end, leading into the living room, had been left open, and she could hear the men in there making merry. It was a babel of voices at first; then someone began to sing a rhyed song in English, and at the first line she drew back, shutting out the hateful sound with a feeling of supreme disgust.

Trembling from head to foot, she crossed to the window and looked out into the cool mists of the night. No guard had been posted here either. Evidently she had been left perfectly free to go or come as she pleased, yet she fully understood how limited that freedom was. She might flee from the house, but that was all; the borders of the ranch were still her prison walls, the efficient guard those sand deserts stretching in every direction, trackless and impassable on foot, vast, waterless leagues, where she would perish miserably. A light still burned in the bunkhouse, but the building seemed deserted. Once two men passed down the hill, leaning heavily upon each other, staggering and singing, disappearing finally through the open door. She was still staring after them, when a sound from behind suddenly caused her to face about. A fumbling hand was lifting the iron latch; the door was being pressed open with an effort at silence. Motionless, breathless with apprehension, the girl watched the entering beam of light broaden until Bob Meager stood swaying in the doorway, clutching at the knob to steady himself. He did not see her at first, his bloodshot eyes blindly searching the apartment; then he must have perceived her outline against the window, for he lurched forward, giving vent to an exclamation of relief.

"Hi—, so you are here, waiting for me? D—d if I didn't think maybe you'd taken a chance outside. Too blame sensible, ain't you? I thought likely you'd come to your senses if I left you here alone awhile. Going to be good to me now, you little cat? Say! what you got to say for yourself, anyhow?"

"Only this; don't you come another step toward me."
He burst into a gruff laugh, slapping his knee.

"The h—l you say! Who do you think I am, anyhow? Some kid afraid of a woman? Say, listen, that's no way for a wife to welcome her husband. I got a right here, and you bet I'm going to stay. Got an idea you can bluff me, I reckon. Well, I ain't that kind, an' you might as well learn it now as later. This is our wedding night. Here's where I ought to be, ain't it? Say, why don't you say something? What you going to do?"

"I am going to kill you, Bob Meager," she said coldly, "unless you leave this room."

"Kill me! Why, you blame little fool, I could crush the life out of you with one hand—see, just like that. And by G—d, I got the right if you get too gay. I'm your husband, ain't I? That's what the law says, and I'm going to be your husband, you can bet your life on that. Think you'll scare me, do you? I'm burst into an ugly laugh. "Not this time, you won't." He turned and closed the door; then crossed the room toward her, reeling drunkenly, yet quite able to retain his feet. The starlight rendered his features visible. Her motionless silence caused him to pause.

"Pretty d—n still, ain't you?" he exclaimed, peering at her suspiciously; "why don't you talk? When I speak to a woman I want her to say something."

"There is nothing more for me to say."

"Only that you're going to kill me if I touch you, hey? All right, then; here's your chance."

He took two steps toward her, his hands reaching out eagerly, his face thrust forward. Then he stopped suddenly, with startled eyes staring into the leveled muzzle of the .44, his lips giving suppressed utterance to a swift ejaculation.

"It'll be d—d!"

"Put your hands up, Bob Meager!" the words were icy cold. "Up, I say! Don't fool with me now. Turn around and go out that door. I am not playing; this means your life or mine. Go!"

He cringed back, cowardly, yet with drunken cunning. Desperate as she was, there was hesitation in the girl's action. Dimly he grasped the truth that she shrank from the necessity of shooting; that she would actually pull the trigger only as a last resort. He took the chance.

"Sure," he muttered, "you got the drop and I cave. So long, honey."

He half turned away, reeling drunkenly, then suddenly, unexpectedly, flung his body directly at her, crushing her back against the wall, both falling together, the weapon discharged beneath her body. It was surprising as the assault was, she had yet escaped the grip of his hands, and was on her knees again before he could move. The revolver was her only weapon, but in the fall she had lost grip of the stock. It lay there glittering in the starlight, and, desperate, maddened by the danger, obeying the first wild instinct of the instant, she snatched it up by the barrel and struck with all her force at the man's head. The fellow gave utterance to no moan, his limbs twitched, and then he lay motionless, his face against the floor.

Deborah slowly lifted her body, shrinking back from the darkly outlined form, beginning to comprehend with horror what she had done. She still held tight to the weapon with which she had dealt the blow, although realizing that she no longer required its protection. The silence was terrifying; her nerves tingled painfully, she found difficulty in breathing. Was the man dead? Had she actually killed him with that one hasty blow? She could scarcely realize the possibility, and yet she had struck with all her force, driven to it by terror uncontrollable. She shrank now from even touching him; nurse as she was, having witnessed death in every form of horror, and ministered to wounds of every degree, she would not place hand on this man, whether he lived or died. He represented to her mind all that was base and evil; she was glad she had struck him down.

But what now? This question overshadowed all else. The thing she had been imagining for so long had at last come to pass. He had come to her, come claiming her with insult and outrage, and she had actually dealt the blow of which she had dreamed. Her courage had not failed her, and he was lying there now in the darkness at her feet, sorely wounded, perhaps dead. It was her act; she had done it—what now? She had never faced this situation before, the aftermath. Whether Meager was dead or alive, she must get away. Better to face any danger of the great desert than remain where she was, with not a friend to counsel or protect her, not a white man to whom she could appeal.

The girl thrust the revolver back into its holster at her waist, and glanced out through the window into the quiet night. Of two evils, the desert, or these lawless men, she chose the less cruel, the desert. If she was to die, it would be, at least, in honor. Once decided, her mind worked rapidly. In all probability not a man remained sober about the home ranch; if any horses had been left in the stable, she therefore ought to get several hours the start of a pursuing party. She believed Meager was dead,

and if so, his followers would be slow to discover what had happened, and would possess no leadership. This, inevitably would mean delay. While, even if the fellow should live, hours surely must elapse before he could take the trail. With a good horse under her, she would be beyond sight on the desert, riding straight for those two peaks old Tom Meager had pointed out to her as marking the Nogales trail. With such a start in the race there was surely a chance to win. Her pulses throbbled excitedly at this sudden awakening of hope, and, without so much as another glance at the body prostrate on the floor, she hurried to carry out her plans.

An unrecognized Mexican lay in drunken slumber, curled up like a dog, on the floor of the passage, but she found no difficulty in passing the fellow. She neither heard nor saw any of the others, as she made her way through the rear door and across the few feet of open space dividing the main house from the detached kitchen. There was a lamp burning in the latter, and the remains of fire in the stove, but no occupant. Deborah knew the place well, and lost no time in gathering together what food she required, fortunate enough to discover a small sack in which it could be conveniently transported.

The effort had proven easy and safe so far, and her heart beat hopefully as she emerged from the kitchen, thus equipped. Now if she could only procure a horse, escape actually appeared possible. Doubtless the ranch horses had all been turned loose in the large corral. She had no means of catching these half-broken animals, but it might be that the horses ridden by the party arriving during the evening had been put up in the stable, ready for immediate use. These were weary enough from their desert trip when they arrived, but that was hours ago; they must have been fed and watered since, and, with the rest, would be fairly fit by this time for another journey. They were wiry broncos, able to endure any amount of hardship. It was then she remembered the horse the "Frisco Kid" had been riding. Even in the darkness she had marked the fine blooded lines of the animal, the far better condition in which he appeared to be. If she could only lay hands on him.

"Frisco Kid" What had ever become of the fellow? She wondered as she slowly made her way down the slope, keeping as far from the bunkhouse as possible. She had neither seen nor heard of him since that first meeting with Meager. Perhaps he was among those drunken dogs in the living room, sleeping off their carousal; yet somehow she did not believe it. Someway his voice and manner had strangely impressed her as different; he did not belong with that crew. Outlaw, desperado, she knew him to be, a man with a price on his head, yet surely he was no drunken, roystering brute. He had not even gone into the house; she was sure of that now, remembering clearly. He had led the horses away, while the other two entered with Meager. Nor had he returned later; not at least while she was at the window, and he was not in attendance at the wedding.

Then the truth suddenly occurred to her—the man was hiding out. He dare not risk drinking, or being shut up in a house. He was a hunted creature, watchful of treachery in every human being. He could trust to no one, not even his companions in crime; there was a reward for him, dead or alive. He would be out yonder in the dark somewhere, alone, he and his horse, wakening at the slightest sound. Perhaps he would be the one she needed to fear the most, when the pursuit started. These thoughts flashed swiftly through her mind, almost unconsciously, as she stole forward silently through the shadows.

She passed a figure lying in the trail, too drunk even to reach the bunkhouse, but as she crept past the open door she saw no signs of any occupants within. Except for the few line riders, and that outlaw hiding in some thicket of chaparral, the whole personnel of the ranch were stupefied with liquor, indifferent to any occurrence going on about them.



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A bit reckless now, because of this knowledge, the girl ventured through the great open door of the stable, and began groping her way forward searching the stalls. The first was empty, and, as she started to advance toward the second, she came to a sudden pause, with heart leaping into her throat—there had been a sound at her left, a rustling of straw, as though something had made a quick movement. She listened intently, drawing a breath of relief at the succeeding silence. No doubt it was a horse stirring, or possibly a rat. Then a voice spoke sternly not three feet away.

"Put up your hands! Who are you? What are you doing in here?" She obeyed instinctively, too frightened to even speak, dropping the bag to the floor, forgetting completely the revolver buckled about her waist.

A hand reached forward out of the darkness and gripped her upraised arm; she was conscious of the close presence of a man, yet for the instant retained no power of movement.

"Why don't you speak?" said the same voice, impatiently, evidently angered at her silence. "What are you sneaking about in here for? Well, I'll be d—d!" his tone changing. "If I don't believe it's a woman."

"It is a woman," she managed to reply falteringly. "But—but does that make any difference?"

He laughed, a certain relief evidenced in the sound, although he did not in any way relax his vigilance.

"Well, I confess it might," he admitted, "for you are a most unusual discovery in this section. I was looking for almost anything else. You belong with this outfit?"

"To the Meager ranch, you mean? Yes—that is, I have been employed here. You—you are not a Mexican, are you?"

"I should say not. I belong north of the line, if that's any relief to you. And what's more, if you want to be square with me, I'll play fair on my side. You believe that?"

"I shall have to; it wouldn't do me any good to lie."

"I reckon not; so let's get it over with; who are you?"

"Deborah Meredith," she explained, rather eagerly. "I—I am a professional nurse; my home is in Chicago. Tom Meager employed me to come out here and take care of his wife. Are you a friend of Bob Meager's?"

The man chuckled, and she knew he had put away the weapon he had held in his hand.

"Well, he's got an idea that I am. We've run, about together a bit. I admit; which confession maybe is no recommendation to you."

"No, it is not."

"I thought likely it wouldn't be. So you and Bob are not good friends?"

"I despise and hate him; he is a drunken brute."

"Granted freely; but if you feel that way, why did you remain here on the ranch?"

"Because I have had no chance to get away since his father died. I could not desert my patient, and besides, had no reason to suppose Bob would come back and take possession. He was a fugitive from justice; his father had lost all faith in him, and—and I had reason to believe he had been shut out from all right to this property."

"You had reason to believe? What reason? I am not asking merely from curiosity; I want to understand the entire situation. I already have an idea what this means; you are endeavoring to escape alone?"

"It seemed my only chance," she confessed. "But I am talking with a stranger; perhaps I trust you too much. You are not employed here?"

"No; I just blew in last night."

"What is your name?"

"Daniel Kelleen."

"You are not a cow-puncher surely? You—you have education?"

He laughed good-humoredly.

"Nevertheless, I am quite accustomed to cow-punching. Perhaps I've had a trifle more schooling than some of the boys. Now let me have the straight of this affair, and then we'll get busy. Tell it to me from the first."

Deborah stared at the man's dim outline through the darkness. If she could only see the expression of his face. And there was no choice left her—she must trust him blindly, absolutely; he could defend or betray her at his own will. So clear was this situation she scarcely hesitated.

"You killed him? You did? Say, I like you. You are sure some girl."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Community Building

YOUNG COUPLE NEEDS HOME

Means Much for Their Prospect of Happiness in the Years Stretching Before Them.

Mrs. Fred Drelver, head of the woman's division in a prominent Detroit real estate firm, thinks the home owner has all the best of it.

"Of course there are men with money who believe that an investment in nontaxable stocks is better than home owning, when you take into consideration high rate of taxation and the cost of building and maintenance. But the woman's side of it isn't considered in such a view. A woman wants a home. The family are happier, more united in interests, and there is a feeling of responsibility toward the community and each other that is engendered where the home belongs to the family who lives in it."

"One thing that keeps the apartment houses filled," said Mrs. Drelver, "is many a man's disinclination for home work. He is often downright lazy about the house. Some men won't fire a furnace nor carry ashes, and some wives are looking for an easy time, too, so they tuck themselves up in a stuffy apartment and let the children, if they have any, breathe bad air. If they were willing to take a little extra trouble, they could go out farther from the city center and have a small home—but, of course, they wouldn't be near the movies, and there would be more work to do."

"It's the only thing for the young couple starting out in life. They should try to get a home of their own."

INSTINCT IS TO OWN HOME

No Possession More Desirable, and the Great Majority of People Recognize the Fact.

In the old days—days not so old after all when you come to think of it—the home was the center of social activities, the place where all family pleasures were enjoyed. And the pride of every family head was to own his home; to know that the abiding place he provided for his loved ones was theirs, endeared to them by possession and insuring to them a shelter in the event of untoward circumstance.

In these days it sometimes seems that we are drifting away from the home. Life is more complex; social and entertainment features are provided in such unlimited and varied directions that we are tempted away from the roof tree during most of our hours of recreation. The old-fashioned ways of entertaining "company," the pleasant home parties are almost forgotten.

And with this there has come to some persons a feeling that there are other possessions more desirable than a home. The desire for home owning seems to have been stifled in them.

But this is but a transient phase in the lives of a relatively few people. The home-owning instinct is a true one and one that is not supplanted by any other for any length of time.—Exchange.

Capitalizing Barber Shop Talk.

All the barbers of Lebanon, Penn., were recently invited to a smoker given by the chamber of commerce. The invitations were extended in the belief that the barbers have a continuous opportunity to give visitors a favorable impression of the city, that many barber shops are forums of public discussion where municipal questions are freely argued, and that the barbers should have a true conception of the city's development with an understanding of the part taken by the chamber of commerce in the general progress. The invitations made it plain that the smoker was not in any way a scheme to promote the chamber's membership or influence. The barbers got an entirely new point of view on their opportunities for service to the city, and have actually made use of these opportunities.—The Nation's Business

'Co-operating' the Sales Managers.

The St. Louis Chamber of Commerce has an active sales managers' bureau, the purposes of which are to build up the city by increasing its sales and to serve the city's trade territory efficiently. These purposes are effected through good-will tours, by educating sales managers in better methods of merchandising their products and of serving their trade, by publishing a weekly bulletin containing items of benefit to sales managers, by entertaining visiting buyers and delegates attending important conventions, and through the preparation of notion pictures.

Cities Adopt Manager Plan.

Berkeley, Chico, Modesto, Stockton, San Mateo, Santa Rosa and Visalia, Cal.; Brookville, Kissimmee, Fort Pierce, Leesburg and Orlando, Fla.; Albany, Ga.; Maywood, Ill. and St. Johnsbury, Vt., have adopted the city manager plan during the last two months.

Keep the Lawn Beautiful.

The lawn is the most important feature of beautiful home surroundings. Don't chop it up with beds or shrubs, but keep these at the sides.

HAD PLENTY BUT COULD NOT EAT IT

Jerome A. Weeks, popular club man, owner of the "Why" restaurant, 7, 9 and 11 Guilford Ave., Baltimore, Md., is another man of prominence to give an unqualified endorsement to Tanlac.

"I heartily endorse Tanlac," said Mr. Weeks, "because I have found it to be a medicine of exceptional merit. While I was not to say sick when I started taking Tanlac, still I did not feel at all well. In fact, my appetite was so poor and I was so nervous and restless at night that I never felt energetic or rested and just could get through a day at business."

"Finally I got me some Tanlac, and in a little while it brought my appetite back, steadied my nerves so that I began to sleep fine, and today I feel so well I can look after business with perfect ease. I can speak from experience and say Tanlac is great."

Tanlac is for sale by all good druggists. Accept no substitute. Over 37 million bottles sold.

Tanlac Vegetable Pills are Nature's own remedy for constipation. For sale everywhere.—Advertisement.

Seemed Like Hand of Fate.

My father was in charge of the engine house of a mining company. His duty was to go down every day to see that the fan which supplied the miners with air was working. A small cage, like an elevator, took the miners up and down in the shaft. One day as my father started on his daily trip to the mine, he remembered something he had left behind in the engine house. He told the operator that he would go down the next trip. On the trip the cable on the cage broke and everyone was killed.—Chicago Journal.

There never was a man or woman who didn't feel pride in keeping other people's secrets.

RECORD IN CROPS

Western Canada Farmers Assured of Bountiful Yields.

Conditions Reported From All Parts of the Provinces Satisfactory in the Highest Degree—Pass Expectations.

From as early as April 17, when seeding became general throughout the Western Canadian Provinces, was there anything but optimism in the feelings of the farmers of that country. An uninterrupted chain of favorable conditions have bound the early seeding data with the conditions of the crop today. There were no setbacks. There may have been a hail storm or two with some ill effects through portions of the country, but the track they took was so small that the percentage of loss was almost imperceptible compared with the whole. Rains fell just when needed, the sun shone as if regulated by the farmer himself, the ground, generally, was in perfect condition and fully responsive. It is now a question of rivalry between districts and provinces which will produce the greatest results in crop yields and averages. Out in Alberta, whether it be in the north or in the south, that which gave assurance, in a well-prepared seed bed of an excellent crop is passing expectation, and experts say there will be produced a crop away greater than ever before in the history of the province, and Alberta has had some big yields. Then, in Saskatchewan there exist the same conditions. The extreme north and extreme south will vie with the east and west in the story at harvest and threshing time.

Manitoba, while not boastful, complacently watches fields of wheat, oats, rye and barley that promise to set a new record for that province.

The fact is apparent that Western Canada will have a crop yield in all grains away ahead of any year in the history of the country. This will be pleasing news to the thousands in the United States, who have friends and relatives farming in that country. It should not be forgotten that these crops will be raised on land that in many cases cost less than \$40 an acre and some of it was procured by merely homesteading. It is possible today to secure improved farms at very low figures, as well as raw or virgin prairie. Any Canadian government agent will gladly give information as to the condition of the crops, and dates when special rates may be had by those who wish to look over what is probably one of the greatest grain fields on the continent.—Advertisement.

It is likely that people who conquer and dominate don't worry much. It's a gift.

There is always enough butter in the world until the green corn season arrives.

To Have a Clear, Sweet Skin Touch plimples, redness, roughness or itching, if any, with Cuticura Ointment, then bathe with Cuticura Soap and hot water. Rinse, dry gently and dust on a little Cuticura Talcum to leave a fascinating fragrance on skin. Everywhere 25c each.—Advertisement.

United States Motor Imports. Imports of motor vehicles into the United States totaled 450 in 1922.