

GIFT OF THE DESERT

By Randall Parrish

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CHAPTER XVII

—16—

The Finding of Gomez.

The little squad of cavalry moved up the creek bottom with much caution. The rangy young lieutenant, exercising his first independent command, was determined to neglect no precaution.

Deborah begged for haste, but the officer remained adamant, and, at last, in despair, utterly wearied, her mind in a chaos she rode on listlessly beside him. Kelleen must be dead; she dare not even dream anything else. She had heard the shot, seen the burst of flame, caught sight of his tottering body plunging over the edge of the cliff. The men who shot him had no doubt; they had fired to kill, believed they had killed; and gone away satisfied—Bob Meager and the Mexican. She shivered at the memory of them. Her husband! that murderer her husband! He could claim her, would claim her if he lived; legally she belonged to him. The ceremony was sacrilege, a hideous mockery, yet it was legal, legal; it left her forever in the power of that brute. She shuddered at recollection of that scene in the ranchhouse, the leering, drunken faces, the sharp voice of Judge Garrity, the brutal grip with which Bob Meager held her, those hateful words which bound her to such unspeakable shame. And then the struggle to save herself; the hours of torture waiting for his coming, the broken door, the clutch of his hands, the hot, drunken breath on her face, the blow which set her free. Good G—d! could this all be true! The fresh night air, the escape through the black night, the meeting with Daniel Kelleen.

He had been a man, a real man; he had died for her. Unchecked, unnoticed the tears welled into her eyes, and fell on the saddle pommel. She could see nothing but his face, realize nothing but that they were riding now to bring back his body. She had almost known before that she loved him, but now, in bereavement and despair, she comprehended that all the brightness and hope had gone from life. She yet lived, must continue to live—the wife of Bob Meager.

It must have been nearly noon when the little cavalcade debouched from the bed of the stream, forced their jaded horses up the bank, and came to where the riders could look down into the half-concealed valley below. Advance scouts awaited them here among the rocks, to point out the trail, curving downward through a ravine. They had discovered no signs of recent passage, no marks of hoofs; nor were there any signs of human presence in the lower valley.

The lieutenant studied the scene through his glasses, yet vaguely suspicious of some trick, consulted with the sergeant, and finally spoke to Deborah.

"This must be the place," he said, "but it seems deserted. Do you recognize anything?"

She sat straight in the saddle, a new light in her eyes, as she pointed the directions.

"I can never forget. Straight ahead down there is where they were storing the things—a fire burned there by that big rock; you can see a whisp of smoke even now. This trail must lead direct. Over there," she hid her face for an instant in her hands as though to shut out the sight, "is the cliff over which Captain Kelleen fell, and just beyond, at the upper end of the valley is the cave I told you about. I—I am going down whether you and your soldiers come or not. I—I must learn the truth."

She forced her horse forward, and the others followed, waiting for no command, the sergeant riding almost beside her in the narrow trail. They found the storehouse, back within the shadow of the great rock, so concealed by trees as to be invisible a few yards away. It was deserted, unguarded; and satisfied as to this fact, convinced by a hundred signs that the entire outfit had indeed returned the way they came, the lieutenant scattered his force to explore the upper valley. His mood had changed from suspicion of this girl to faith in her strange story. Things were exactly as she had described. Dismounted, their horses being led behind them in readiness for any emergency, the squad advanced, the men with carbines in their hands. The sergeant kept close in against the southern cliff until he came to where Deborah pointed out the spot of Kelleen's fall. They found no body, no signs to indicate any such tragedy. Carney gazed about in perplexity.

"You are sure this is the place, miss?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yes, Sergeant; we were on the rock up there, the one jutting off over the edge; there is no other spot like it."

His eyes, narrowed, surveyed the distance, marking every detail.

"Then it's likely he struck them trees, miss, and there may be a ledge there that he lit on. I'm going up."

He fought his way from rock to rock, with difficulty finding foot and handhold, winding in and out of crevices, and using every shrub to aid his

progress upward. Once or twice he paused, as though blocked, clinging to the face of the cliff like a fly, yet found a way, and went on. Those below watched breathlessly until the man finally crept over an outcropping ledge, imperceptible from where they stood, and disappeared. It seemed as though he was gone a long while. Deborah, hand pressed on her heart, never removed her eyes from the spot, or stirred. What had he found up there? Surely he must have discovered something—the dead, mangled body, no doubt. Then he appeared again, alone, standing up and gazing down at them. His voice as he hailed them below, sounded clear, exultant, a new ring in its tone.

"He ain't here, miss, but, by G—d, sir, I believe he's alive."

Deborah could not speak, could not utter a sound. Alive! Alive! why that was impossible; her very heart seemed to stop beating. She could only stare up at the man dazed and helpless. It was the lieutenant who answered.

"You say he is alive, Carney?"

"Well, he sure left here alive, sir, and on his own legs. I found the place where he come down, an' where he got on his feet again. There wasn't nobody else here helpin' him, an' I should say, but goin' alone. Whatever happened since, sir, he certainly left here able to navigate. Maybe I better follow the trail?"

"Yes, go on, Sergeant."

Deborah's limbs trembled so she could scarcely walk for the first few steps. She clung gratefully to the lieutenant's arm, her gaze never deserting the man moving cautiously along the narrow ledge of rock high above them. Alive! Daniel Kelleen was alive! Nothing else mattered: Her hands clasped tightly at the officer's sleeve.

"Have the sergeant hurry; please have him hurry! He doesn't need to trace Captain Kelleen's trail. I—I am sure I knew where he was going."

"Where was that?"

"To the cave I had found, and told him about; it is there just beyond that mound. Good G—d, Lieutenant, there are horses grazing yonder—they have found him already."

There were two animals in a little cove, hobbled, and nibbling at the short grass, but both saddled and bridled. They had the Meager ranch brand on their flanks, and the sergeant, joining the party below, easily followed the trail of two men on foot until they circled the mound of earth, and ascended the opposite side. Deborah pressed her way forward, too eager now to be longer held back, yet fully realizing the danger confronting them.

"Be careful here," she warned. "They are certainly in there—two or three, at least, and they will shoot. Here, Sergeant, let me show you; I know the way."

They were already before the clinging vines; her hands trembled as she forced these aside revealing the black vacancy behind. The startled sergeant pressed them farther back, staring bewildered into the void, his service revolver thrust forward, an oath breaking from his lips.

"By G—d! but this beats h—I, sir, D—n it, but I'm goin' in!"

He went over the barrier of rock unmolested, unstoppered, and recklessly Deborah followed. The lieutenant paused an instant.

"Jones, you and Calhoun follow us; the others remain out here. Keep your eyes open, lads."

The next moment he had also scrambled through the opening, and crouched down beside the trembling girl. Just ahead the two could dimly distinguish Carney, leaning forward, peering into the total darkness beyond.

"It's—it's perfectly level, the floor is," she whispered. "You can follow along the wall—I did."

They advanced together slowly, feeling their way, scarcely a sound breaking the silence. Suddenly the sergeant, slightly in advance, stopped, feeling at something on the floor with his feet; then he stooped over.

"By G—d, here's a dead man!"

"A dead man! Are you sure?"

"He's dead all right, sir. Where's the flashlight? We've got to find out what this means."

"Jones has it; Jones, come up here. Give me the flash."

The round glare of light struck the side walls, swept over the still kneeling sergeant, glinting on his drawn weapons, and then touched the motionless body outstretched on the floor. At last it rested on the upturned face. The sergeant stared down as though he saw a ghost.

"By G—d! it's the old devil himself, 'What's that, Carney! you know him?"

"Know him! Why, sir, Lieutenant, it's Gomez, Manuel Gomez—there's fifty thousand dollars on him dead or alive. Well, he's dead all right."

"Gomez, the outlaw; but are you sure?"

"Sure," the sergeant rose to his feet and swung about. "Sure? H—I!—begging your pardon, sir, why shouldn't I be sure? I've chased that

old fox ever since I've been in the army, twenty years, sir. Twice we were after him down in old Mexico. It's Manuel Gomez lying there, and it was a knife that killed him."

The boy lieutenant's face was white in the reflected light, but his lips were firmly set.

"Well, he's dead now," he said sternly, "and it is up to us to find out what all this means."

He lifted the flash from off the upturned face, and sent it dancing along the gray walls into the black chasm ahead.

"But, Lieutenant, this ain't no cave, sir; it's a bloomin' mine," a voice spoke from behind in tone of surprise.

"What makes you think that, Calhoun?"

"Cause it's been blasted out mostly, sir, or else picked. I've been a miner myself, and ought to know. Maybe there was a cave yere once, but I tell yer, sir, these yere walls have been hand-worked, or I'm a piker."

"All right, we've got to explore the passage just the same. Come on, men."

He flashed the warning light ahead, as they advanced, taking his own place beside the sergeant, and compelling Deborah to remain behind with the two soldiers. As the passage curved to the right the leaders crept forward with extreme caution, to gain view of what lay hidden beyond. Carr reaching out his hand to send the flicker of light dancing down the narrowed tunnel. The flashing rays brought no response, awoke no sound of movement, and Carney ventured to protrude his head far enough around the protecting rock to gain view of what was beyond. The flashlight was no longer needed to reveal the scene. At the end of the passage, down through that



"It's the Old Devil Himself!"

slight opening, leading to the desert above, streamed the glare of day, white and dazzling to his eyes after the pitch darkness in which he had been blindly feeling his way forward. It rested, a pool of light on the floor, and in its very center, every detail outlined as in an etching, were two bodies, one face downward, curled in grotesque shape the other lying at full length, features upturned to the low roof. Beyond these the flare of the flashlight, leaping across this narrow space of day, exhibited a jumbled mass of rock blocking the passage from top to bottom. They seemed to have attained the very end of things.

The startled sergeant stared speechless—first at those motionless bodies, death pictured in each attitude; then beyond at a strange, ghastly, white face, on which the searchlight fantastically played. Suddenly something else reflected into his eyes, the sparkle of an upturned revolver's polished tube.

"Who are you?" asked a hoarse voice sternly. "Stop these until you answer."

"My G—d, sir!" was the instant cry. "I'm Carney, Sergeant Carney, Captain. We've come here for you, sir."

The threatening revolver sank weakly, and Carney and the lieutenant, oblivious to all else, rushed forward, circling the two dead bodies in their eagerness to reach the one five man beyond, held helpless in that fall of rock. Deborah, left in the darkness behind, groped her way forward, dazed, speechless, only one fact echoing in her mind—he was alive, Daniel Kelleen was alive!

She dropped to her knees, and drew his head into the comfort of her lap, her hand smoothing back his hair. There were glistening, unshed tears in her eyes, and he saw them.

"No, I got away," she explained hastily. "They did not see us at all, and then God guided me to your men."

"I know part of it—Meager told me."

"Bob Meager?" her heart choked her. "He was really here with you, then? What—what happened? Can you tell me? they will have those rocks dug away in a moment."

"Yes, yes, he was here, he and Garrity—the judge, you know. They—they are both in there now, buried under tons of rock. I—hardly know what did happen; it all came on us in a flash. There was a tunnel in here, a room, where old Alvara had been mining years and years ago, for I must have died there all alone, for I saw his skeleton on a pile of stone. Then those two went in—Meager and Garrity—with a broken lantern. I—I think one of them fell, and—there must have been some powder left there—powder old Alvara had, maybe, a lot of it. I—saw the flash, and jumped back—they are there yet, buried."

"Bob Meager is dead?"

"Crushed to a pulp."

His head sank back helplessly, and his eyes closed. Carney and Jones rolled the last stone from off the imprisoned limbs, but he lay insensible. The three soldiers bore him out through the black passage to the entrance, and, with the assistance of those others outside, lifted his body over the rock barrier, between the clinging vines into the sunlight. Deborah never left his side, and as they placed the body on the short turf, his head rested again on her arm. The sergeant knelt, and felt the outstretched limbs.

"Badly bruised, and perhaps crushed a bit," he said at last, "but I doubt if there is a bone broken. He'll be all right presently. One of you fellows bring a canteen. Now, miss, a little water will do the captain more good than anything else. What is it, Lieutenant?"

"We can hardly move him at present, Sergeant. He'll have to rest awhile before he can ride. Perhaps we better search those bodies back there, and dispose of them in some way."

"Very well, sir."

They disappeared together, all but two troopers left on guard; below in the valley the troop horses grazed in the sunshine. Deborah, bathing the white face gently, waited with wildly beating heart. She was free, free, and Daniel Kelleen lived. There was nothing else in life to think about.

He slowly opened his eyes, and smiled up at her, as though her being there was the most natural thing in the world.

"The blue sky," he said, his voice trembling, "how beautiful it is. G—d! but it is good to get out of that hole, with dead men everywhere."

"Yes," she replied, "but don't try to talk now; that is all over with."

"But I want to talk," he insisted. "It keeps me from thinking; it makes me know it is all real—this blue sky, and you."

"Then if you must, tell me what happened; it seems almost a miracle."

"It was a miracle, and I am not sure but you were God's messenger," he replied soberly. Then slowly, hesitatingly, prompted now and then by a question, he told his story, his voice growing stronger as he spoke. The guard sat on a rock a dozen feet away, their carbines between their knees, eyes on the deserted valley below. The girl bent over eagerly, seeking not to lose a word. At the end Kelleen asked suddenly:

"The paper you took from the boy's hand—what was it?"

"Only a map, very roughly drawn, and written on in Spanish. I could make little out of it—see."

She held it out before him, a yellow, creased paper, looking a century old. He held it for a moment in his own hands, peering at the crisscross of lines impatiently.

"Perhaps it was one Alvara left," he said slowly, "and the boy had found. He followed the rainbow to the end."

"And we will never know?"

"No; the end was death."

They were quiet a long while; then his hand moved and touched her own. Her eyes, which had been on the valley, dropped wonderingly to his face.

"This is not all, is it—just to be alive again?" he asked softly.

"I—I hardly know what you mean."

"Back there in the tunnel," he insisted, "when I first looked up into your eyes I read a message; I want to read it again."

"A message—are you sure?"

"Yes, dear, I am sure; it was a message of love."

She was no longer looking at him, and she caught her breath. Then their eyes met once more.

"It is the same message always, Daniel Kelleen," she said simply.

[THE END.]

Oldest-Known Will.

A will executed in 2548 B. C. is the oldest extant. It is written on papyrus by an Egyptian named Uah. In it he gave his home and other property to his wife, to be left by her to any of his children; arranged for the burial of himself and wife, and appointed a guardian for a son. In fact the will differs little from one which might be executed today.

Community Building

TOWNS MUST HAVE LIBRARY

In Czechoslovakia Every City and Village Should Possess Public Reading Rooms.

It would be a fine thing for the United States if in the next seven years we could boast that every city, town and village in the country possessed a public library—with a reading room open daily where local residents and strangers could consult reference books and read current periodicals. But do not grow excited. We find no indication at all that this will ever come to pass in the United States.

To witness such a system of libraries it possibly would be necessary seven years hence to make a trip to Czechoslovakia, which has a law making establishment of such institutions compulsory. The act was passed in 1919, and we are told that its provisions are being obediently and even enthusiastically carried out by the people. Many of the towns have exceeded the legal requirements.

Larger places that were without libraries when the new law was passed were ordered to give the matter attention almost immediately. Communities having at least 300 inhabitants are given until December 31, 1924, while those still smaller have until December 31, 1929. By January, 1930, under this arrangement, Czechoslovakia plans to have a public library within reach of every person in the land.

This is what you might call a form of compulsory progressiveness, but name it what you will, it is a long step ahead from the standpoint of national education. It would be interesting to know how many towns of 5,000 and less in the United States have no public libraries. We venture a count would show more without them than thus provided. Czechoslovakia's library system doubtless will be a great force in furthering national enlightenment.—New Orleans Times-Picayune.



MODERN HITCHING POST

Although the motor has largely supplanted the horse, he still has his uses and competition from the automobile will never teach the horse as a class, to stand still without being tied. Here is a neat and sturdy hitching post that can't be dragged away. Moreover it is slightly and easily built by filling a form with concrete and inserting a hitching ring in the proper position.

TO BE BEST LIGHTED CITY

Ahliens, Tex., Installing Street System That Will Rival That of Any Other Town.

Among towns of 15,000 population Ahliens, Tex., lays claim to holding the laurel wreath as the best illuminated community in the Southwest, and perhaps in the whole United States. Resulting from a lively community movement, a street lighting system that will cost \$20,000 a year to operate is being put in, to maintain which the city will spend about 8 cents out of every taxed dollar.

The installation is to be of the white way type and the lighting units will number 250. The material will require five carloads to bring it to the city, one carload for the units, one for the 60,000 feet of cable, one for the iron posts for brackets and two for the 350 ornamental posts.

Turf-Cutting Tool.

A single-bladed chopping knife can be made into a turf cutter for edging lawns around walks and flower beds. It is only necessary to remove the wooden handle with which the chopper is provided, and to drive the tang into a longer handle, which may be the handle from an old spade or similar implement.

City Without Taxation.

The city of Long Beach, Cal., is the only city in the country without taxes. The municipality owns 200 oil wells on Signal Hill, at the edge of the city, and they are gushers, so the city is so rich the citizens do not have to pay taxes, or will not after 1924.

Wrong Color.

"You look blue, old man."

"Yes, I've just been done out of \$500 in a curb stock."

"Then I must be color blind. It's green you are."—Boston Transcript.

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On retiring gently rub spots of dandruff and itching with Cuticura Ointment. Next morning shampoo with Cuticura Soap and hot water. Make them your everyday toilet preparations and have a clear skin and soft, white hands.—Advertisement.

Teating Out Conditions.

"My hat is in the ring!" exclaimed the aggressive politician.

"That," said Senator Sorghum, "is a prudent move. Wait and see what happens to the hat and maybe you'll decide to postpone going in after it."

Marked.

"When I hears a man quarrellin' over de telephone," said Uncle Eben, "I picks him foh one o' dese safety first fighters."—Washington Star.

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