

THE DESERT MOON MYSTERY

by KAY CLEAVER STRAHAN

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SYNOPSIS

Sam Stanley, wealthy owner of the Desert Moon ranch, informs his housekeeper, Mary Magin, who tells the story, that his former wife's twin daughters, Danielle and Gabrielle, are coming to the ranch to live, their mother being dead and their father, Daniel Cannezano, who had been the cause of Sam's divorcing his wife, in the penitentiary. Sam has adopted a boy, John, now grown to manhood, and a girl, Martha, twenty-one, physically healthy but weak-minded. Mrs. Ollie Ricker, Martha's nurse, lives with them. Hubert Hand, a wanderer, and Chadwick Caulfield, John's wartime buddy, who is an expert ventriloquist, are the other members of the household. The girls arrive. Mrs. Magin has an uneasy feeling that there is a sinister motive in the twins' presence at the ranch, and her suspicions are strengthened by the girls' mysterious prowling around the place. John becomes engaged to Danielle. Caulfield shows a pronounced liking for Gabrielle. Gabrielle seeks to win John from her sister, and John, disgusted, tells Mrs. Magin the girl is a trouble maker and he would like to choke her. Gabrielle's actions when she receives a letter from France arouse and mystify Mrs. Magin.

CHAPTER V

An Insight

That evening, the second of July, the two girls came down, late, to gether. Danny was paler than usual, and her face had a drawn, hot look, which she explained by saying that she had a severe headache. Gaby was gayer than gay.

I kept watching her, trying to catch her face in repose, to see if any trace remained of that dreadful expression I had seen in the afternoon. Her face, for one bit of her, was in repose for a minute from the time she came downstairs until she went upstairs again, after twelve o'clock that night.

She put "La Paloma" on the phonograph, and did a Spanish dance, clicking her heels and snapping her fingers until they sounded like firecrackers. She did an Egyptian dance, slinking about, and contortions. It wasn't decent.

Mrs. Ricker was doing some tattling. As I watched her, I decided that, ears or no ears, she was not the woman I had heard talking, that afternoon, up in the cabin. Hubert Hand had said to that woman that she had attempted murder. She could not have been Mrs. Ricker; not our Mrs. Ricker, the thin, silent woman who had lived so decently with us for so long. Those tight, wrinkled lips had never said, "I would kill her, and you too." John had never said—I shivered. Wicked thoughts and wicked words bred wicked actions, and I knew it then as now.

Martha came crying to Mrs. Ricker. "Gaby hurt Chad," she said. "I wish she would die. We could make her a nice funeral."

Mrs. Ricker's fingers darted faster, back and forth.

Danny spoke, from theavenport. "You shouldn't talk like that, Martha. dear. It is wrong."

Her voice sounded as if it ached. She looked, lying in a huddle over there, as miserable as I felt. I was drawn to her. I went and sat beside her.

"Could I do anything for your head ache?" I asked. "Get you some aspirin, maybe."

"No, thank you, Mary." There was so much gratitude in her big dark eyes for nothing but common decency on my part. That I felt downright ashamed of myself.

"Danny," I said, straight out, never caring much about mincing words. "I know that something is troubling you. Why don't you tell John, or Sam, or even me about it? Just tell us the truth. We'd all go far to help you, if we could."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Bless your heart, Mary," she said. "Bless all your hearts. You are all so good here—"

I was enough annoyed with John for coming up right then to have slapped him. I answered his question for Danny.

"There is plenty you could do for her," I said. "You could shut off that screeching radio, for one thing."

Danny wouldn't hear to John's stopping the racket. Every one was having such a good time. Had was the place for her. She couldn't hear any noise in her room, with the door shut. And off she went.

I know now that she would not have told me anything that could have helped matters. But I did not know it then, and I was sorely disappointed. For those sudden tears in

own hands, I do not know. A man can give his life. That is what Chad gave.

After dinner John surprised us all by saying that he was going to take the sedan and drive down to Rattall for the mail.

I suspected, right then, that he was up to something. He could not fool me into thinking that he would take a fifty-mile trip—twenty-five miles each way—through the desert heat for no other reason than to get the mail. When Danny seemed hurt and troubled about him going, and when he went riding right off, anyway, I decided that Sam must have sent him, expecting some word concerning Cannezano. I was wrong.

It was too tarantula hot to do anything but try to keep cool. I stacked the dinner dishes, to wash in the evening, and joined the others, sitting around in the living room with the electric fans going full blast.

I was expecting, every minute, to see Gaby break out again. She didn't. She yawned around, and fussed about, and then went and sat beside Danny, who was looking at the pictures in a magazine, and put her arm around her, and petted her up a little—a most unusual performance for her.

When Chad, who had been monkeying with the radio, got a rip-roaring patriotic program from Salt Lake, the two girls went upstairs together.

A few minutes later I had an errand upstairs—a real one, I wouldn't have taken myself up in that heat to satisfy my curiosity—so, out of habit,

I stopped at Gaby's door to listen. I heard the girls giggling in there; and, knowing no great harm is afoot when girls giggle, I went on, got my scrap of pongee silk to mend Sam's shirt, and came downstairs again.

Sam and Hubert Hand were deep in a chess game. Mrs. Ricker was tattling. Chad and Martha were playing dots and crosses.

The radio program had just that minute stopped. Martha, who when she didn't forget it, usually fed her rabbits about that time of day, had gone out to do it. Gaby came downstairs, humming a tune.

She had on the tomato soup colored wrap that she had worn on the train, and the hat to match the wrap. She was carrying a beaded bag. She never dressed up like that, to go walking around the place; a wrap, even such a light one, in the heat of that day, was downright ridiculous.

Chad said, "All dressed up and no place to go?"

She tossed her head at him, and hurried straight down the rooms and out through the glass doors. Chad followed her. They stopped together on the porch. She stood with her back to me. Chad faced me. In a minute, I saw his mouth bend up into a grin of bliss. Nothing would have surprised me more. For this reason.

As that girl had walked through the room, I had seen that she walked in mortal fear. In spite of her humming, in spite of her attempted swagger, fear was in her widened eyes, in her drawn-in chin, in the contraction of her shoulders. Wherever it was that she was going, she was afraid to go. But where could she go? John had the sedan. Except for the trucks, which she couldn't drive, and her pony—she surely would not dress like that to ride horseback—there was no way for her to get off the place. It must be, then, that someone was coming to the place, and that she was going out alone to meet them?

Who? Cannezano? Not less Sam had been mistaken about the time when he was to be released from prison. Usually, when people think at all, they think quickly. All this had gone through my mind while she had walked the forty feet to the door.

Gaby and Chad stood on the porch talking for two or three minutes—a very short time, at any rate. Then she went down the steps, and Chad still smiling, came back into the room from the top of the stairway. "Gaby—oh, Gaby?"

She knew where Gaby was going, and whom she is going to meet, and she, too, is afraid. I decided, because of the queer, strained quality of her voice.

"Gaby has gone out," I called, in answer. And then, since I could still see Gaby walking down the path "Do you want her, Danny? We could fetch her back."

"No," Danny answered. "Don't bother. I'll come down."

I had to reverse my first decision about Danny's being frightened. At least, her voice was natural enough now. I fancied, perhaps, a note of relief in it.

It couldn't have been more than ten minutes after that, when Martha came running into the house, laughing and dancing, and wearing the gold bracelet with the monkey clasp. Gaby, she said, had given it to her, just now, out by the rabbit hutch.

While we were all still exclaiming over the monkey, and praising it up, to please Martha, Danny came down stairs. She said her headache was worse again, and she drew the curtains at the windows beside the big davenport, to ease the glare of the light, before she curled up on it.

"Do you know where Gaby was going this afternoon?" I asked her.

"For a little walk."

"Why did she wear her wrap, and carry her beaded bag, just to go out for a little walk?"

Danny sat up straight, pressing her hands to her aching head. "Her wrap—today? Her beaded bag? Surely not."

"That's just what she did. Didn't you see her before she left?"

"I was lying down. She came to my door and said that she was going for a walk, and asked me if I cared to go with her. I said that my headache was too severe. She went into her room, and from there downstairs. I felt gully about refusing to go with her, after our talk, I thought that I should; so I called after her. But, when you said she had gone, I was afraid she would be annoyed at being called back. I had gotten up; so, since John will surely be home before long, now, I came down. I can't understand her wearing a wrap. It is so silly, on a day like this."

It sounded all right, but I was not quite satisfied.

"Gaby was frightened," I said. "Something was the matter with her when she walked through the room. I'll go bond that, wherever it was she was going, she was afraid to go."

"Mary, it must be that you are imagining this. Unless—Oh, it couldn't be that Gaby has not told me the truth about—about anything. I am sure she was honest with me this afternoon. I am sure—And yet—Dear me, I wonder where she went for her walk?"

"Gaby told me," Martha piped up, from where she was sitting on the arm of Sam's chair, "that she was going to the cabin. She was in a big hurry. She ran."

"Up toward the cabin?" Danny questioned, though we all knew we could not put a mile of trust in anything Martha said.

"Yes, Chad loves me better than he loves her. Don't you, Chad?"

"You are positive," Danny insisted, and I could not see why, for a minute, that she went to the cabin, or toward it? As you saw, she didn't go around the house toward the road."

When she asked about the road, her meaning was clear to me. Danny was afraid that Gaby had gone to meet John, who should have been back from Rattall before this.

"She told me she was going to the cabin," Martha answered. "She ran. She was in a hurry."

Danny stood up. "I think I shall walk up to the cabin and see whether I can find her. You'll come with me, Mary?"

I said not in the heat. She asked Mrs. Ricker to go with her. Mrs. Ricker refused. I wondered why, when neither of us would go, Danny did not go by herself. She did not. Had she, perhaps, guessed at the cause of Gaby's fear? Did she share it? Was she afraid to go to the cabin alone?

CHAPTER VI

Murder and Suicide

At five o'clock the men put up the chessboard. Chad stopped playing the piano, and the three of them went to the barn together.

I went into the kitchen to get supper. Danny, in spite of her headache, insisted upon helping me.

At six o'clock, though neither John nor Gaby had returned, we sat down

to supper. Danny was so nervous she touched a bit of food. She kept looking out of the windows, and at her watch, and out of the windows again.

"Don't worry, Danny," Sam said. "John has had his trouble on account of the heat. They'll come riding up the road any minute now."

"They?" she questioned.

"Gaby toggled up and went down the road to meet John, didn't she?"

"No," Danny's voice curled into a wail. "No, Uncle Sam, she didn't. Martha saw her going to the cabin. Didn't you, Martha?"

"Martha," Mrs. Ricker astonished me all by saying, "doesn't know where Gaby went. She knows only where Gaby told her she was going."

"But why should Gaby tell her a fib about it?" Danny asked.

"And why," I questioned, "should Gaby go around the house to get to the road, instead of going right out the front way?"

Again Mrs. Ricker shocked us by speaking. "She would not go out the front way, if she wanted to keep her trip to the road a secret."

"Mrs. Ricker," Danny's voice trembled. "What are you hinting? What is it that you know?"

"I know," said Mrs. Ricker, "that there is not a man living who is not as false as sin."

Sam growled, "Come down to facts, Mrs. Ricker, if you have any."

"I have no facts," she said, "except that right after dinner today John and Gaby had a private conversation, and he decided, very suddenly, to go for the mail."

At that minute we heard a sound for some ears—the car coming up the driveway. Danny jumped up and ran to look out of the living room window. "He has gone all the way around to the kitchen," she said, when she came back.

She ran into the kitchen. She and John came to the door of the butler's pantry. John was gray with dust. His brows were knitted, as they are whenever he is troubled about anything.

"He hasn't seen Gaby," Danny announced, with an exultation that showed plainly what she had been so anxious about. "He brought up the rock salt. That's why he drove to the kitchen. Come and see, Mary?"

"I'd rather see you two come and eat your supper," I said.

"Good night!" John answered. "I've got to go and get rid of a few tons of dirt before I can come to the table."

"No," Danny insisted. "Never mind the dirt, dear. Supper is all cold now. Please come and eat—"

John patted her on the shoulder, and smiled at her, and, manlike, did as he pleased. He went through the kitchen and upstairs the back way. Danny called after him, asking him to hurry. He didn't.

When he finally did come, all slicked up, and bathed and shaved, he said it was too hot to eat, and would have nothing but some ice cream.

Sam asked him what had kept him so long, on the trip. John said his trouble; and that he had met Leo Saule, two miles this side of Rattall, with his fiver broken down. John had stopped to help him, and, at last, had been forced to tow him the six miles north to his place.

John has a way, when he is worried, of shutting and opening his eyes, and of tossing his head back and to the side with a quick little jerk, as if he were trying to get shed of something that was in it. All the while he was eating and talking, he kept doing this. I asked him whether his head ached.

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She Whirled Around Like a Crazy Thing.

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Railroaders Strong in Use of Colorful Terms

A brakeman is telling a story of the rails: "Before we leave I take a run up to the calliope to match waltzes with the hoghead and find a student tallow pot in the cab, taking orders from the bakthead and spadin' diamonds with his feet together."

Substitute locomotive for "calliope," engineer for "hoghead," apprentice fireman for "student tallow pot," fire man for "bakthead," coal for "diamonds" and it all becomes quite intelligible, says the Bookman. The railroad man has not one but several colorful terms for the men and things that enter into his day's work.

The locomotive is still "the hog," from the wood burning days when its gluttonous appetite kept a fire man constantly on his toes, but it is

also the "calliope" and the "holer." A switch engine, which butts cars about the yards, is the "goat." The engineer is "hoghead," "hogger" and "swell head." The fireman is "bakthead."

A "snake" is a yard switchman and a "stringer" is a brakeman, while the yardmaster answers to "dinger." A "drag" is a slow freight and the caboose, reasonably enough, is the "crummy."

Knocking the Magazines Aldous Huxley, novelist and short story writer, said on his last visit to New York: "A magazine must come down to the popular taste, or else it must go up. That's why most magazines accept the worst and reject the best."

"A talented author recently wrote a short story. There," he said to his wife after he finished reading it out loud to her. "There, that's the best thing I've ever done. It's equal to Poe or Ambrose Bierce."

"Yes, darling. It is," his wife agreed. "And now I'll go and make out a list of the 12 likeliest magazines for you to submit it to first."

So stumble twice against the same stone is a proverbial disgrace.—Clevor.

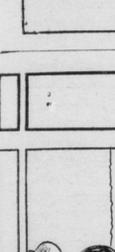
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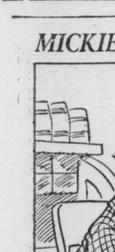
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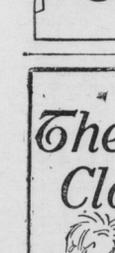
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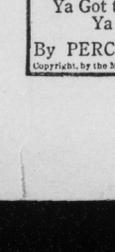
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