

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...

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...

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 Rattail for the mall. 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 mall. 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 tarntion 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.



She Whirled Around Like a Crazy Thing.

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 talking. 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 swag, 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 was 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 talking down the path, "Who is she talking to?" "I am only carrying out an injunction of humanity. It's the duty of the strong to support the weak," replied the aggrieved husband.—Indianapolis Star.

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, so 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 down there, 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 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 say, 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 Rattail 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 toged 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. Rucker 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 mall." 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 butter 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 most 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 sleeked 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 the trouble; and that he had met Leo Saule, two miles this side of Rattail, 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. "No," he said. "But I think I'm sort of loco from being out in the sun." "Gaby kept you waiting quite a while?" Hubert Hand stated and asked. "What do you mean?" John questioned. "Waited for her down the road, didn't you, and took her to Rattail in time to catch the train for Reno, or 'Frisco?" I thought John would fly into a temper. He has a handy temper. But his eyes looked around at all of us, with a bewildered expression, and, "Say, are you fellows trying to put something over on me, or what?" he asked. (TO BE CONTINUED)

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