

THE DESERT MOON MYSTERY

CHAPTER IV The Cabin

The girls had been on the Desert Moon a little better than six weeks when, one evening, Sam came out into my kitchen where I was setting bread. "Mary," he began, real solemn for him, "the ancients used to have cities that they called cities of refuge. No matter what a fellow had done, if he could get inside into one of those cities, he was safe. Your kitchen always kinda seems like that to me—a city of refuge."

"Lands, Sam," I said, "what have you been up to that you are heading this safety first movement?"

"I haven't been up to anything," Sam answered, "and I don't aim to be. But, Mary, some time ago you came to me with some suspicions. I laughed them off. I am not laughing now. I'm worried. Queer things are going on around here. What I want to know, now is what do you know?"

"Nothing. What do you know?"

"Nothing."

"What do you suspect, then, Sam?"

"Nothing. What do you do?"

"Nothing."

That, I see now, wouldn't have been a bad place for us both to laugh. Neither of us did.

"Have you any idea," Sam questioned, "why the girls go prowling all over the place, afoot and horseback, daytimes, and nighttimes, too, when they should be in their beds?"

"Well, all I know is just what I've known all along. They are hunting for something."

"Sure they are hunting for something. But what?"

"I don't know. But whatever it is, they are going to use it to get revenge, to injure maliciously somebody."

"Revenge, h—!" Sam said.

"Have it your own way. Only I happened one night to hear Gaby say to Danny that they had come to this ranch for the purpose of revenge."

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If he was ready, at last, to listen, I was more than ready to tell what little I knew. I told; even to confessing about hiding in the clothes closet.

"Well, well," he drawled, when I had finished my story, "we are probably making a mountain out of a molehill. I wouldn't go pussy-footing around after them, any more, if I were you, Mary. There's a screw loose somewhere, that's sure; but it is not in the Desert Moon's machinery. We've got nothing on our consciences. We don't need to worry."

Don't need to worry! Sam and I, sitting in that peaceful kitchen, talking so smart and frivolous, and deciding that we did not need to worry is a memory I could well be shed of. We didn't need to worry a bit more than if I'd used arsenic in my covered pan of bread; not a bit more than if there had been a den of rattlesnakes in the cupboard under the sink, or gasoline instead of water in the tank on the back of the stove. That is how safe and peaceful we really were, at that minute, if we had had sense enough to know it. When I realize that four weeks from that very evening, three people—

But I guess it would be better to tell things straight along, as they happened. It seems to me a good book cannot be hurried, any more than a good cake can. "Mix and sift the dry ingredients," is the way all recipes for cakes begin.

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Just as I opened the window I heard John say, "I thought Danny was in here."

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"What about?"

"About—this."

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"What," Danny questioned, when the door had closed behind John, "made you both look so angry, just now?"

"Never mind. Are you going to that fools' celebration, with only a day or two left, now?"

"I suppose not, if you don't want me to. I'd love going. I know there is no use in staying here."

"In other words, you would sacrifice my future for a rodeo? I more than half believe that you know—"

"What possible object could I have?"

"Many, my dear. Very many. Though I think that getting rid of me would outweigh the others. Listen to me, Danielle Canneziano, if I thought that you were keeping this from me, in order to bury me alive in this Godforsaken hole, and force me to watch you and John—"

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"I've been a fool! Why can't I learn to take into consideration your d—n moralities? Understand this, Dan. Don't fancy for one instant that failure is going to keep me here. Did you think, with a weapon like that in my hands, that I'd stand for anything less than a fifty-fifty proposition? Our original plan would have been better—easier, simpler. But I'll have my share out of this, anyway. So, if you do know—"

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"That is for you to say, darling."

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"Give John to me. I've changed my mind. If you'll do that, I'll stay right here, and settle down, and do an imitation of a moral, model wife that would satisfy even you."

"Gaby, you speak as if John were a child's toy, to be passed

about. I couldn't give him to you, if I were willing to."

"You could and you know it. You won't. So, that's that. But keep your righteous fingers out of my life; stop your d—n preaching, and meddling. I am going out to the cabin now. You would better come with me."

"We've searched that cabin a thousand times."

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The cabin is the one Sam built to live in when he first came to the valley. It is up Boulder creek, about half a mile from the ranch-house. Sam had kept it in repair, inside and out; owing, I think, to sentimental memories, though he declares it is because he dislikes wreckage on the place. When John and Martha were little things, Sam used to hide their Christmas presents up there, under the shelf in the kitchen.

The shelf, about three feet wide, is built across one end of the kitchen. It served Sam for a table, pantry, and sink. Being a man, he built it right handily, like a chad, so that the entire top of it had to be raised to get to the storage place underneath. There was no secret about it. All that anybody had to do, was to remove everything off the top of it, and lift the lid. But I had read how the hardest problems for detectives always turned out to be something that had been too simple to notice; so my plan was to go up there and raise the lid.

On my way, I met the girls coming home. I imagined that they looked at me with suspicion. I passed a remark about the sweet-smelling clover hay, and hurried right along.

Half an hour later, when I was expecting instant death at any minute, I thought about that sweet clover smell, and how unappreciative I have been of it, and of the blue sky and the fresh air, and of the green things lighted yellow with sunshine, and I took a vow that, if I ever did get a chance to enjoy them again, I would spend the remainder of my life in so doing, and in being grateful to the Creator of them.

In the cabin, I went at once to the kitchen; and, removing fish-baskets, fly-books, and reels from the shelf, lifted it back.

I am sure that I had expected to find it empty. What I had not expected to find, and what I certainly had never hoped to find, was what was there; any number of neatly wrapped packages, addressed to Mr. Sam Stanley, sent by express, and labeled, variously, "Danger," "Explosives." "Handle with Care."

It did not take any common sense to know, straight off, that, sent to him or not, Sam was not mixed up in any business that had to do with explosives, bombs, and Bolshevism. It was easy enough to remember, then, that Sam had not been to Rattail for the past ten days; that Hubert Hand had been making the trips down for the mail, expressage, and supplies.

Just as he came into my mind, I heard his voice. It was a startling coincidence; but I need a better excuse than that, for surely no mortal ever did a more foolish thing than I did then. I climbed into that chest, along with those packages, and lowered the lid down over me. If I had any idea, I suppose it must have been a desire not to let him know that I had discovered his secret—his and Gaby's together, undoubtedly—but I can't remember having any thought at all until, just as the lid closed, I remembered the sad poem about the bride and the mistletoe chest.

Then I heard, through the thin boards, Hubert Hand, talking to some one, come into the kitchen. I chose death by suffocation or combustion.

"My dear woman," were the first words I heard from him, "you may set your mind at rest. I am not going to marry the girl. I am not a marrying man, as you know; and, if I were, she wouldn't have me."

"You leave her alone, then. Understand me. Leave her alone."

If I believed my ears, that was Mrs. Ricker's voice; that was Mrs. Ricker, not only talking, but talking like that to Hubert Hand.

"You flatter me," he said. "Jealous, still, after all these years? I told you that I wouldn't marry her, and that she wouldn't have me, if I were willing to."

"Wouldn't she, though? Wouldn't she? She is mad about you. She can't look at you without love in her eyes, nor speak to you without love in her voice. She tries to hide it; but she can't hide it from me. I know. She loves you."

I am not sure whether I read it, or whether I figured it out for myself; but I do know it is a fact that no woman ever accuses another woman of being in love with a man unless she could imagine being in love with him herself.

"As to that," Hubert Hand said, "what possible difference would it make to you, Ollie?"

"Only that I would kill her, and you, too, before I would let her have you."

"Easy on, there, my girl. Your last attempt at murder—at least I hope that was your last attempt, was not, you may recall, very successful."

"I would be successful another time."

I kept quiet; very quiet. Surrounded, in there by explosives, and out there by people who talked of murder as calmly and as comfortably as if they were discussing moss-roses, very quiet did not seem half quiet enough.

They went into the other room of the cabin and I stayed there for a few minutes. I could not hear what they were saying, but I did not budge an inch. After I heard them passing the window, and I was sure they had left the cabin, I remained, very quiet, in the chest for about five minutes longer before climbing out of it.

I was progressing toward home, shivering in every bone, limping, since both of my legs had gone to sleep, when Sam, riding his bad-tempered bronco, named Wishbone, came up behind me and dismounted.

"Corns bad, Mary?" he questioned. "Want to climb up on Wishbone and have me lead him?"

"When I go to meet death," I told him, "I sha'n't go on the back of a nasty-tempered bronco. Considering that everyone on the Desert Moon is, at this minute, in mortal danger of their lives, all your lighthearted jesting seems pretty much out of place."

I told him, then, about the packages of explosives hidden under the shelf. I had not told him about my climbing in with them; so I was in no way prepared for his actions.

He stopped. He dropped Wishbone's bridle. He put both his hands on his stomach and leaned over and burst into uproarious laughter. "Ho-ho-ho," it rolled out, seeming to fill the entire valley.

"Fireworks," he gasped. "I got them for Martha. Going to surprise her on the Fourth. Sent for them months ago. Hid them up there. Ho-ho-ho! I told you to stop pussy-footing around, Mary. Ho-ho-ho! 'Do not look for wrong and evil, you will find them if you do—'"

With as much dignity as a heavy woman, with both of her legs asleep, could muster, I turned and left him. His words and his actions had certainly given me one decision. From this time on, I would tell Sam Stanley nothing.

When I got back to the house, John was driving up the road in the sedan. He had been to Rattail for supplies and for the mail. He tossed the mail bag out to me and drove to the kitchen door to unload. There was a letter for Gaby, postmarked France.

About a month before this, Gaby had received another letter that was a duplicate of this one; the same gray paper, the same sprawling handwriting. Instead of taking it indifferently as she did other letters, and reading it wherever she happened to be, she had snatched it out of my hand and had run off to her room. All that evening she had seemed to be pre-occupied, and worried. Sending only two letters in close to two months, it seemed to me that whoever had written them did not write unless he or she had something of importance to say. I was still puzzling over it, when Gaby came into the room.

Sure enough, she snatched it out of my hands, just as she had done

with the other letter, and ran straight upstairs with it.

When John and Danny came in, a few minutes later, I went upstairs. Habit stopped me at Gaby's door for a minute, with my ear to the keyhole. Faintly, sounds don't come plainly through our thick doors, I heard the portable typewriter that she brought with her when she came to the ranch, click, clicking away.

I was tuckered and tired. So, after telephoning some instructions to the kitchen, I took plenty of time to tidy myself up. I dawdled in my bath, and I cut my corns, and rubbed hair tonic into my scalp. But, when on my way downstairs again, I stopped for a second at Gaby's door, the typewriter was still going. There was nothing to be made out of it, so I went along. It was fortunate that I did, because, before I had reached the top of the stairway, Gaby's door was flung open and she called to me, with something in her voice that made me shake in my shoes.

I turned and looked at her. Her face worn an expression that was not human; an expression that would have made any decent woman do as I did, and turn her eyes quickly away.

"Tell Danny to come up here," she said.

I hurried off downstairs, and delivered the message to Danny who was with John in the living room.

"What's the matter, Mary?" John questioned, when Danny had gone upstairs. "You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"I think," I answered, "that I have—the ghost of Sin."

"Doggone that girl," he said. "I wish she were in Jericho."

"Gaby, you mean?"

"You're darn right. She's causing all the trouble around here."

"What trouble?" I asked, just for a feeler.

"I don't know—exactly. She keeps Danny miserable. But that isn't it, or not all of it. Don't you

seem to feel trouble around all the time? I thought you did. I do. Gosh knows."

"I know," I said. I feel it. I think Sam does, though he altogether admit it. John, there isn't a man can put our fingers on it."

"I suppose not. Sam, though, when I see Danny as she looked when she was stairs just now, I feel as if it be a good thing if somebody put their fingers around the pen's throat."

"John," I spoke sharply. "I don't say things like that. Don't mean it. It is wrong to say it."

I was sure that he did not. I was sure that only the spoken, and that the thought had died with the words. But, from that day I have never repeated those to a living soul. Because the way that Gaby was choked to death, with great bruises left on her throat.

(To be continued)

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with the other letter, and ran straight upstairs with it.

When John and Danny came in, a few minutes later, I went upstairs. Habit stopped me at Gaby's door for a minute, with my ear to the keyhole. Faintly, sounds don't come plainly through our thick doors, I heard the portable typewriter that she brought with her when she came to the ranch, click, clicking away.

I was tuckered and tired. So, after telephoning some instructions to the kitchen, I took plenty of time to tidy myself up. I dawdled in my bath, and I cut my corns, and rubbed hair tonic into my scalp. But, when on my way downstairs again, I stopped for a second at Gaby's door, the typewriter was still going. There was nothing to be made out of it, so I went along. It was fortunate that I did, because, before I had reached the top of the stairway, Gaby's door was flung open and she called to me, with something in her voice that made me shake in my shoes.

I turned and looked at her. Her face worn an expression that was not human; an expression that would have made any decent woman do as I did, and turn her eyes quickly away.

"Tell Danny to come up here," she said.

I hurried off downstairs, and delivered the message to Danny who was with John in the living room.

"What's the matter, Mary?" John questioned, when Danny had gone upstairs. "You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"I think," I answered, "that I have—the ghost of Sin."

"Doggone that girl," he said. "I wish she were in Jericho."

"Gaby, you mean?"

"You're darn right. She's causing all the trouble around here."

"What trouble?" I asked, just for a feeler.

"I don't know—exactly. She keeps Danny miserable. But that isn't it, or not all of it. Don't you

seem to feel trouble around all the time? I thought you did. I do. Gosh knows."

"I know," I said. I feel it. I think Sam does, though he altogether admit it. John, there isn't a man can put our fingers on it."

"I suppose not. Sam, though, when I see Danny as she looked when she was stairs just now, I feel as if it be a good thing if somebody put their fingers around the pen's throat."

"John," I spoke sharply. "I don't say things like that. Don't mean it. It is wrong to say it."

I was sure that he did not. I was sure that only the spoken, and that the thought had died with the words. But, from that day I have never repeated those to a living soul. Because the way that Gaby was choked to death, with great bruises left on her throat.

(To be continued)

"Nothing. What do you know?"

"Nothing."

"What do you suspect, then, Sam?"

"Nothing. What do you do?"

"Nothing."

That, I see now, wouldn't have been a bad place for us both to laugh. Neither of us did.

"Have you any idea," Sam questioned, "why the girls go prowling all over the place, afoot and horseback, daytimes, and nighttimes, too, when they should be in their beds?"

"Well, all I know is just what I've known all along. They are hunting for something."

"Sure they are hunting for something. But what?"

"I don't know. But whatever it is, they are going to use it to get revenge, to injure maliciously somebody."

"Revenge, h—!" Sam said.

"Have it your own way. Only I happened one night to hear Gaby say to Danny that they had come to this ranch for the purpose of revenge."

"Revenge, h—!" Sam repeated himself. "Unless they are sore at me about Canneziano. What else did they say, when you happened to overhear this revenge remark?"

If he was ready, at last, to listen, I was more than ready to tell what little I knew. I told; even to confessing about hiding in the clothes closet.

"Well, well," he drawled, when I had finished my story, "we are probably making a mountain out of a molehill. I wouldn't go pussy-footing around after them, any more, if I were you, Mary. There's a screw loose somewhere, that's sure; but it is not in the Desert Moon's machinery. We've got nothing on our consciences. We don't need to worry."

Don't need to worry! Sam and I, sitting in that peaceful kitchen, talking so smart and frivolous, and deciding that we did not need to worry is a memory I could well be shed of. We didn't need to worry a bit more than if I'd used arsenic in my covered pan of bread; not a bit more than if there had been a den of rattlesnakes in the cupboard under the sink, or gasoline instead of water in the tank on the back of the stove. That is how safe and peaceful we really were, at that minute, if we had had sense enough to know it. When I realize that four weeks from that very evening, three people—

But I guess it would be better to tell things straight along, as they happened. It seems to me a good book cannot be hurried, any more than a good cake can. "Mix and sift the dry ingredients," is the way all recipes for cakes begin.

For three days, beginning with the Fourth of July, there was to be a big celebration and rodeo at Telko.

Sam suggested at noon on the second of July, while we were at dinner, that maybe all of us would like to go; all, that is, except Martha and himself. Celebrations were never good for Martha.

I spoke right up and said to count me out. I know the deserts in July. But the boys were enthusiastic about it, and Danny was interested. Gaby, coming in late, greeted the idea with the same enthusiasm with which a woman greets moths in the clothes closet.

"Whence the crave for a Fourth of July celebration?" she asked.

"We have never seen a rodeo," Danny answered.

"Go, by all means," Gaby said. "Buy pink lemonade. March in the parade. Ride in the Liberty car. Mrs. Magin would be stunning as the goddess of Liberty, with—"

"Don't let my stunningness stop anything," I said. "I am not going."

"We'll think it over," Danny said. "It would be a long, hot ride. Probably we should have a pleasanter time, right here at home."

But there was something in the

way she had said it, too quickly in answer to a look from Gaby, that made me think there was more to her backing out of the plan than had appeared on the surface.

Gaby had just begun her dinner. The rest of us had finished; so, according to our custom, we excused ourselves and went our ways. Chad tried to stay with Gaby, but Martha fussed and insisted that he come with her.

I had a sure feeling that Danny would return, and that she and Gaby would have something to say to each other. I went into the kitchen, stepped back into the pass-pantry, and opened the pass-window a crack.

Just as I opened the window I heard John say, "I thought Danny was in here."

"No," Gaby said. "But won't you come in and talk to me?"

"What about?"

"About—this."

I dared not peek, so I did not know what she meant until she said, "Why won't you kiss me?"

"Shall I say, I don't want to pick flowers in Hubert Hand's yard?"

"I hate you!"

"Don't be sore at me, Gaby," John said. "But I'm tell you, that's a lot nearer the truth than—than what you usually say."

John was one of the poorest talkers ever heard. One of those silent men supposed to abound in the West, and who are likewise supposed to make every word that they say count. If John's did, they counted backwards.

"My dear, haven't I proven over and over again that I love you? In every way. I have made myself ridiculous here, because I haven't been able to conceal my feelings for you."

"I think," John said, "that most of that stuff you pull is just to spite Danny. It doesn't spite her, though. She knows she's the only girl in the world for me. I wish you'd cut it out—all of that, Gaby. Won't you, and just be good friends?"

"You'd not want me for an enemy, would you?"

"Getting at anything, going any place, Gaby?"

"Perhaps. If Danny should hear that you have made love to me—"

"I have never made love to you. It would be your word against mine. I think Danny would take mine, if it came to a showdown. Listen here, child; don't you try to make trouble between Danny and me."

"Meaning?"

"Nothing. Except that it wouldn't be healthy for anyone who tried it."

"Boo-oo! Dangerous Dan McGrew stuff? Out where men are men? Killer loose tonight—all that, eh, Johnnie?"

A door opened. "John," came in Danny's voice, "uncle is looking everywhere for you."

"What," Danny questioned, when the door had closed behind John, "made you both look so angry, just now?"

"Never mind. Are you going to that fools' celebration, with only a day or two left, now?"

"I suppose not, if you don't want me to. I'd love going. I know there is no use in staying here."

"In other words, you would sacrifice my future for a rodeo? I more than half believe that you know—"

"What possible object could I have?"

"Many, my dear. Very many. Though I think that getting rid of me would outweigh the others. Listen to me, Danielle Canneziano, if I thought that you were keeping this from me, in order to bury me alive in this Godforsaken hole, and force me to watch you and John—"

"Gaby!"

"I've been a fool! Why can't I learn to take into consideration your d—n moralities? Understand this, Dan. Don't fancy for one instant that failure is going to keep me here. Did you think, with a weapon like that in my hands, that I'd stand for anything less than a fifty-fifty proposition? Our original plan would have been better—easier, simpler. But I'll have my share out of this, anyway. So, if you do know—"

"Gaby, I don't know. I'll swear that I don't. How could I? But surely you wouldn't—you wouldn't attempt—"

"That is for you to say, darling."

Darling, as she said it then, was as wicked a word as I had ever listened to.

"For me to say?"

"Give John to me. I've changed my mind. If you'll do that, I'll stay right here, and settle down, and do an imitation of a moral, model wife that would satisfy even you."

"Gaby, you speak as if John were a child's toy, to be passed

about. I couldn't give him to you, if I were willing to."

"You could and you know it. You won't. So, that's that. But keep your righteous fingers out of my life; stop your d—n preaching, and meddling. I am going out to the cabin now. You would better come with me."

"We've searched that cabin a thousand times."

"All the same, it is the one logical place; far removed, and under cover."

The cabin is the one Sam built to live in when he first came to the valley. It is up Boulder creek, about half a mile from the ranch-house. Sam had kept it in repair, inside and out; owing, I think, to sentimental memories, though he declares it is because he dislikes wreckage on the place. When John and Martha were little things, Sam used to hide their Christmas presents up there, under the shelf in the kitchen.

The shelf, about three feet wide, is built across one end of the kitchen. It served Sam for a table, pantry, and sink. Being a man, he built it right handily, like a chad, so that the entire top of it had to be raised to get to the storage place underneath. There was no secret about it. All that anybody had to do, was to