

# THE DESERT MOON MYSTERY

## CHAPTER VII

### A Confession

The sheriff, the coroner, the undertaker, a newspaper reporter, and another man that the coroner had brought along for a jurymen, drove up to the ranch at 5 o'clock that morning. Sam and the sheriff had been friends for 30 years. Sam's money had paid for the coroner's medical education. They, and the others, were mighty sorry to have to bother us at all, and their sole aim was to make as little trouble as possible.

They interviewed each one of us, alone, but pleasantly and informally, in the dining room; each one, that is, but Danny—the coroner, visiting her as a doctor, said it would never do to pester her, in the state she was in—and Martha, who was still asleep, and whom they said it was no use to wake. They kept each of us about ten minutes. They brought in the verdict of died by his own hand, for Chad; and, murdered by person or persons unknown for Gaby. They left, on tiptoe, holding their hats in their hands clear to the end of the driveway.

The sheriff left, I am all but certain, with the strong conviction that I had committed the murder, and with the resolution that he would not do Sam an ill turn by depriving him of a good cook. The coroner, and the others, except the reporter, were sure, I think, that one of us was guilty; but were thankful to goodness that they had not found out which one.

The undertaker did not leave with the others. He was preparing the bodies to take them to Telko; there to wait the instructions that we could not give until after we had gotten in touch, if possible, with Chad's people, and had come to a decision about Gaby's burial place.

All the Nevada newspaper accounts made much of the fact that the fiend, who had committed the terrible murder on the Desert Moon ranch, had made a complete escape, without leaving any clues of any sort.

No clues! Lands alive! The place was positively cluttered with clues; and most of them about as useful, in the end, as clutter generally is.

I asked Sam about the contents of Gaby's beaded bag.

"It is all on the table in her room," he said, "where I put it for the coroner's jury. You can go and see. But, first, read this. It was tucked inside her dress. The undertaker found it, and gave it to me. I dread giving it to Danny."

He handed me a folded sheet of paper. I opened it, and read:

"Danny dear: If you ever read this, I shall be dead—murdered. Don't have me buried here in this Godforsaken country. Take me to San Francisco and have my body cremated. I love a flame. I hate the cold earth.

"You have had much trouble on my account, old dear. Don't blame me for having kept the fear and the dread of this thing, which I felt certain was going to happen, from you. You, nor no living person, but one, could have saved me.

"Remember, Dan, that in spite of all the distress I have caused you, and may still be causing you, I have always, in my own way, loved you. Gaby."

"Sam," I said, "I knew she was afraid, yesterday. Oh, why didn't she tell us? Of course you men could have saved her. Why did

she go out alone to meet that fiend?"

Sam's only answer was a slow shaking of his bowed head, and a deep sigh.

"Mary," he said, then, "will you give this note to Danny, and explain to her how it is?"

"How what is?"

"I mean—Well, she can't leave the Desert Moon, now, to take the body to Frisco. Until we find out who murdered that girl, not a man-jack of us is going to leave this place, for any reason. Danny may be as innocent as she seems to be, and—she may not. She, nor anyone else, can leave this place until we have gotten to the very bottom of this thing. That goes. This note, in Gaby's handwriting, clears Danny of the crime, if all the other evidence didn't, which it does. We know that she did not kill her sister. But, of all the people in this house, she is in the best position to know who did it. Of course, if she is involved in this she is involved innocently. If she put the key in your pocket, while we were out in the car, she did it with no idea of what she was doing. Just the same, I want her right here on the Desert Moon, for a while. Mary, you take the note to her, and explain, in your nice way—"

"I'll give her the note, Sam," I said. "But you'll have to do the explaining yourself. I'll tell you why. It isn't right for you to try to protect anyone, not even Martha, to the extent of refusing to allow one sister to carry out the dying request of another sister."

Sam dropped his pipe. As I saw the tobacco and the ashes scatter, I was more certain than ever that I was acting as a decent woman should.

The door opened, and Danny came in. She was so pale that her cheeks had sort of a greenish tinge to them. Great dark circles spread far down under her eyes that were red and swollen from crying.

I hurried to her, and put my arms around her. Sam turned away, as if he could not bear to look at us.

I took her into the living room, and sat down in a big chair and held her in my lap.

"If only," she kept saying, "if only she could have left us in her beauty. She was so beautiful, Mary. And now—"

Remembering what I had seen the night before, I knew that I must get her mind into other channels if her reason was to be saved. I thanked my stars when I remembered the note.

After she had read it, she cried harder than ever; but I knew that it was crying of a saner sort.

"Will you go with me, Mary?" she questioned, when she had quieted some. "To San Francisco?"

"We'll have to talk to Sam about that, dear," I said. "I am afraid that Sam wants us all to stay here, for a while. Sam thinks that the duty of each one of us, right now, is to stay here and help him to find the guilty person."

"Does Uncle Sam think we will find him here?" she questioned.

"There isn't anywhere else to try to find him," I said. "Did you know about the key in my pocket?"

She nodded. "I knew about that," she said.

"What else did you know about?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said, hurriedly. "Nothing. But, Mary, doesn't it seem possible to you that someone,

clear from the outside, did it? And gave the key to Chad, and asked him to put it in your pocket? And that, for some reason we probably never shall discover, Chad could not, dared not, tell on the person who gave it to him? And that is why he shot himself?"

"And we hadn't thought of that!" I gasped. "I do believe it. It is as clear as day."

Her sudden, definite silence talked as plainly as any words she could have spoken.

"Danny," I questioned, "you thought of that, but in your heart you don't believe it. Do you?"

"I—I want to believe it," she evaded.

"But you don't?" I persisted.

She was silent.

"Danny," I pleaded, "tell me about it. Just tell me, dear. I'll never breathe it to a soul, if you say for me not to. What is it you know, or think that you know?"

She waited so long before answering me that I thought surely she was finding the words with which to take me into her confidence. I was so disappointed I could have cried with her, when she hid her face on my shoulder, again, and moaned, "Mary—I can't. I dare not tell. I tell you—I dare not."

She jumped up out of my lap, and ran upstairs as if wicked, dangerous things were running after her.

John came into the room. "The outfit is back, or most of it," he said. "Darn their souls! Curiosity, nothing else. But for this, they wouldn't have shown up for two days yet. I think the women went into the kitchen just now, Mary."

There they were, Belle, Sadie and Goldie, all huddled up together like a bunch of something, near the back door. As I came into the room, they jumped and screamed. The only thing that makes me madder than being scared myself is to scarce somebody else. I spoke to them right sharply.

I told them that I expected them to go about their work, and to act like sensible girls while so doing.

Sadie, the sauciest of the lot, spoke up.

"We haven't decided yet that we want a go workin' in a house where a murderer, and maybe more'n one, is livin'!"

"Very well," I said. "If you are going, go now. If not, put on your aprons and get to work."

"I could scarcely believe my eyes. The three of them skeddaddled out through the door. I felt sort of sick, watching them go. Not because I'd have to teach new girls the work and my ways, but because their leaving gave me my first realization that the Desert Moon ranch was darkened by the shadow of sin.

When I telephoned to Sam, down in his office in the outfit's quarters, I tried to keep the truth from him; saying, only that the girls and I had had a spat, and asking him to find some new girls for me.

He came up, in about half an hour, with an Indian girl, not more than fifteen years old, trailing along behind him. Answering his nod, I went with him into the living room.

"She is the only one I could get," he said. "We'll have to send to Reno or Salt Lake. None of the outfit want their women folks working here. I don't blame them. The Desert Moon ranch is disgraced—"

He stopped short, looking at a piece of paper on the writing desk just in front of him. It had been propped up against a vase; but it had slithered down into a curve. He reached for it; read it, and handed it to me.

"I killed her. Chadwick Caufield. P. S. Sorry to put you to the trouble of disposing of me. Make it cheap and snappy. I haven't a relative in the world. P. G."

"A lie," Sam said. "I tell you, she had been dead two or three hours, anyway—probably longer—when we found her. Listen, Mary. Between 4 and 5 o'clock—we all saw her alive at 4—Chad sat right there at that piano, and he never left it once. Did he?"

"No, he didn't. I kept thinking he would, to join Gaby. But he didn't."

"Between 5 and 6 o'clock," Sam went on, "he was with me, every minute of the time, down in the barn, and coming up to the house. Never out of my sight. Between 6 and 7 he was with us all at supper. If he'd been gone all afternoon, I'd know that note was a lie; know it just as well as I know it now—"

"But this note! A confession! Why should he die in disgrace, when we know he was innocent?"

"God knows. To shield someone else, I reckon."

"Who?"

Sam dropped his pipe.

I heard him stamping the sparks out. I did not look down. I did not write to look down.

"He wrote it," I said. "The writing is his. So is the wording. You know it."

I guess I was too sentimental. But I couldn't bear to see Sam's good old face all aching with worry.

"Sam," I wheedled, "have sense. We've a confession here that will satisfy the world. He killed her; and, when the body was found, he shot himself. Nothing could be more reasonable. No one would doubt it. We can send this to the papers—he has no relatives to be disgraced, or to sorrow over it—and the Desert Moon will be cleared of crime. One of your favorite sayings, Sam, is to let well enough alone."

Sam drew himself up to the top of his six feet and five inches and looked down, from there, at me; away down—as far, say, as if I had suddenly dropped into a dirty old cistern. "There is no question of well enough," he shouted, so that I could hear him in my depths, "until the Desert Moon is cleaned, clean, Mary Magin. Cleaned and fumigated, or destroyed. It is not going to be white-washed. There is someone on this ranch who is as guilty as h—; who knows who committed the murder; who aided and abetted it. We are going to find that person. Then we will find the murderer. They'll be hung together. After that, we can leave well enough alone."

"Suppose," I suggested, "that Chad was the accomplice."

"Somebody suggested, already today, that it was Chad who put the key in your pocket. When did he get the key to put it there? Well, say that he got it between 7 and 8 o'clock, when he was out scouting by himself. Did he meet some entire stranger, then, who asked him to dispose of the key? Did he agree to do it as a favor to said stranger? Did he, later, shoot himself and leave a lying confession to shield the stranger? The stranger, that is, who had killed the girl Chad loved? Chad did carry some secret to the grave with him, Mary. I am sure of that. But not a secret that we can't discover. We are going to discover it."

To doubt Sam, standing there before me talking so earnestly to me, to doubt his honesty of purpose and his goodness, was more than a question of doubting my eyes, my ears, my senses.

"Sam," I began, resolved to tell him, then and there, about those pipe ashes of his on the beaded bag. I had waited too long. Mrs. Ricker was coming down the stairs.

"I think," she said, "that Martha should not sleep so late. I fear that she is sleeping too heavily."

"It is a blessing that she can

sleep," Sam said. "She is all right. Those sleeping powders are as powerful as all get-out. I'm going up, though, I'll have a look at her."

"By the way," he added, from the stairway, "I want you two ladies to be here in this room, at promptly 3 o'clock this afternoon."

"Upon my soul!" I said, when Sam was out of sight. "What do you suppose that means?"

Mrs. Ricker shook her head, and walked to the window and turned her back on me.

I looked at the straight, gaunt back, and at her long arms hanging at her sides. She seemed frail. And yet she could hold Martha still, when Martha was in one of her tantrums, and that was more than I, a much stouter woman, could do. She, with no one but Martha who did not count, had been alone in

the house for an hour the evening before, while the others of us had been out hunting for Gaby.

Sam insisted that Gaby had been dead two or three hours when we found her. But was he certain of that? How did he know? Might he be mistaken? Mrs. Ricker hated Gaby, as only a jealous woman can hate.

(To be continued)

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## Report of the Condition of The Bank of Warren

Warrenton, North Carolina  
To The Corporation Commission At The Close of Business On  
The 4th Day of October, 1929

RESOURCES	AMOUNT
Loans and Discounts	\$393,446.71
United States Bonds	15,000.00
County and Municipal Bonds	22,000.00
Banking House	25,053.28
Furniture and Fixtures	13,145.48
Cash in Vault and Amounts Due from	
Approved Depository Banks	49,063.79
Checks for Clearing and Transit Items	777.92
Cash Items (Items Held Over 24 Hours)	672.47
Other Real Estate	12,627.52
Total	\$531,787.17
LIABILITIES	
Capital Stock Paid In	\$ 50,000.00
Surplus Fund	25,000.00
Undivided Profits (Net Amount)	8,741.27
Demand Deposits Due Banks	408.15
Other Deposits Subject to Check	131,402.31
Deposits Due State of North Carolina and Any	
Official Thereof: Secured, \$27,899.72	27,899.72
Cashiers Checks Outstanding	1,996.48
Certified Checks Outstanding	30.00
Dividend Checks Outstanding	99.00
Time Certificates of Deposit (Due on or After 30 Days)	4,904.00
Saving Deposits (Due on or After 30 Days)	151,306.24
Bills Payable	130,000.00
Total	\$531,787.17

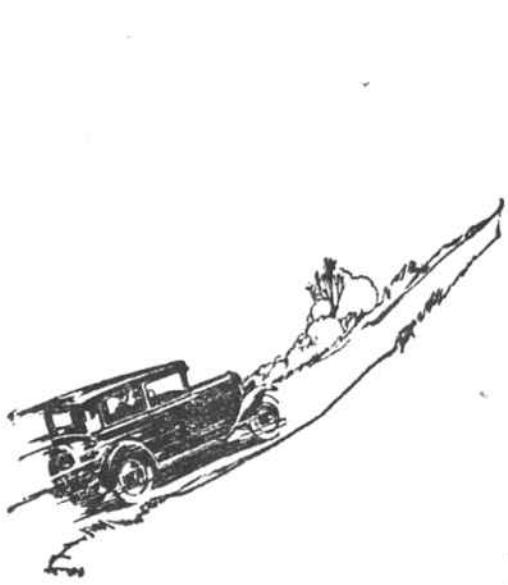
State of North Carolina  
County of Warren  
G. B. GREGORY, Cashier; W. H. DAMERON, Director, and L. C. KINSEY, Director of the Bank of Warren, each personally appeared before me this day, and, being duly sworn, each for himself, says that the foregoing report is true to the best of his knowledge and belief.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this the 9th day of October, 1929.

(Seal) J. E. BANZET JR., Notary Public.  
My commission expires Oct. 15, 1930.

G. B. GREGORY, Cashier.  
W. H. DAMERON, Director.  
L. C. KINSEY, Director.

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