

# THE DESERT MOON MYSTERY

BY KAY CLEAVER STRAHAN

"That is up to you," Sam drawled. "As the sheriffs say, everything you say will be used against you. But, as they don't say, everything you don't say will be used against you, a sight harder. If I knew you had no suspicions, I wouldn't try to force you to invent some, just to be sociable. But you were pretty free with your hints this morning. All right. Talk."

Hubert lowered his Roman nose and pulled at his moustache for a minute. It was easy to see he was busy with a decision of some sort. He settled back in his chair more comfortably and, still pulling at his moustache, he began.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### Hubert Hand Talks

Well," he said, "I can talk all right. But I want to start with this understanding. I don't know any facts that amount to a damn. You're right that I have suspicions. If you weren't forcing them out of me, I'd have sense enough to keep my mouth shut, from now on, at least until airing them might do some good. But, since you are determined to have them now, at the point of a gun, I'll say that I think John did it, and that somebody else in the house is shielding him."

Danny gave a thin, sick little shriek and threw her arm around John in a protecting way. John straightened. Under his tan I could see the color seeping out of his face. Gently, he removed Danny's arm.

Sam lowered his white eyebrows until his eyes looked like two slits of blue light, glinting out from away behind his face. When he spoke his voice was iron.

"Why do you think John killed her?"

"In the first place, John is the only one here who hasn't a water-tight alibi—"

"Not by a damn sight he isn't," Sam interrupted. "But never mind. Go on."

"At four o'clock Gaby came down through the room. While she was still in sight, Danny called down, trying to get her to come back. Now this is just another suspicion, I don't know whether anyone here will back me up in it or not—probably not,"—he added the last in a hateful, slurring way—"but I noticed that her voice sounded strange, like she was excited, maybe, or else afraid."

Sam asked, "Did anyone else hear anything of that kind?"

"I had decided right at first, to keep my mouth shut about everything; so I did."

"I thought not," Hubert Hand said, as if he had known from the start that he was the only honest one in the crowd.

Mrs. Ricker spoke. "I noticed it," she said. Hubert bowed to her, in a sort of mocking way. Knowing what I knew, I thought that her corroboration would do Hubert Hand more harm than good. But, of course, the others did not know what I knew. Nor were they going to know it, since Hubert Hand was keeping his part of our bargain. Right or wrong, I was thankful, just then, that we had made that bargain.

"Let me see," Hubert Hand continued, "where was I? Gaby, after coming through the room, stopped on the porch for a minute to talk to Chad. He came into the house in a fine humor. Gaby then went around the house to the rabbit hutch, and for some reason, gave her bracelet to Martha. When Martha's turn comes, in this inquisition, I suggest that she be questioned rather closely."

Sam banged his fist on the table. "Never mind your sug-

gestions. You are accusing John now. Stick to that."

"You bet," Hubert Hand accepted, "especially since Martha was in the house again within five or ten minutes, with every last one of us. Danny had come down by that time. From four to five, then, you and I were playing chess. Chad was at the piano. Danny and Mary were over there, talking together. Mrs. Ricker was tating, where she is now, by the window. Martha was bothering us, part of the time, and part of the time she was just fooling around the room. I'm pretty certain not one of us left this room during that hour. You might check up on that, Sam."

Sam asked Mrs. Ricker, and Danny, and me, if we remembered anyone's leaving the room during that hour. We all said we did not. Danny added that she might not have noticed. I wished seeing Hubert Hand smile, she had let well enough alone and not bothered to add that.

"At five," Hubert Hand resumed, "we three men went together to let the cows in and to milk. Mary, I believe, was in the kitchen alone, getting supper, during that time. Mrs. Ricker, Danny and Martha remained here in the living-room. Is that right?"

"Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't," Sam said. "There is the hour in there, before supper, that we'll all have to account for, right accurately, before any of us has that water-tight alibi you were talking about, Hand. And," Sam added, with his own sort of emphasis, "we won't have it then."

"All right," Hubert Hand agreed. "You and Chad and I went down to the barns together. We let the cows in. We milked them. At least, you and I did. Chad stayed with you and was kidding around down in your end of the barn. I heard you laughing and talking down there, together, the whole time. Is that right?"

"Practically," Sam answered. "All but I couldn't swear that you were in the barn during the entire time." "No? Well, I'll admit that I hadn't thought of that. If I'd thought of it, I'd probably have known that you—how is it?—couldn't swear that I was in the barn during the entire time."

"Meaning?" Sam demanded. "That if John is guilty, you'll shield him with your last lie. Sam's fist knotted at his side. His voice was not iron, now; it was tempered steel. We'll settle about my last lie later, Hand."

"You're begging for this," Hubert Hand reminded him. "Get on!"

"I milked four cows. Not very good, for the time—about forty minutes; but as good work as you did. And I will swear that you were in the barn the entire time. Anyway, that is easy settled. Mary, did I, or did anyone of the three of us, come through the kitchen and go upstairs during that hour?"

"No," I answered. "Weren't you," Sam questioned going back and forth between the kitchen and the dining-room?"

"No, Danny set the table for me. I didn't step foot out of the kitchen."

"Mrs. Ricker," Hubert Hand questioned, "did any one of us men come in, and go upstairs through the living-room during that hour?"

"No," she said. "Mrs. Ricker," Sam asked, "were you right there, alone, in the living-room during that entire hour?"

"I was not alone. Martha was with me. And, several times during the hour, five or six times at least, Danny came

in from the dining-room to see whether she could see John coming up the road."

"Danny," Sam spoke to her, "were Mrs. Ricker and Martha in the living-room every time you went in there—"

"I—think so."

"Only think so, eh?" Hubert Hand half sneered at it.

"I mean," Danny explained, "that I am sure Mrs. Ricker was here. She was sitting right by the window. I did not particularly notice Martha."

"I can vouch for Martha," Mrs. Ricker snapped. "All right," Hubert Hand went on, "so far, so good. The ladies, I think, especially if you remember the glass doors between the living-room and the dining-room, have established alibis that would satisfy any jury."

"Now for you and Chad and me, again. We walked together, carrying the milk, to the dairy. There we took off the barn coveralls, and at your suggestion, washed up in the dairy kitchen to save time. We came back to the house together. Mary said that supper was on the table. We all sat down to the table together. All present you see, except John."

"Would it have been possible for you, or for me, or for Chad, to have gone down to the barn (you and I each milked four cows, remember), come back to the house and through it, with not one of the ladies seamed us, committed the murder, got back to the barn, and then to the house again, all in an hour? I think, Sam the wisest thing you can do, is to grant us all our alibis for that hour, anyway, and then work on from there, if you're bound to."

"I felt reasonably certain that, if Hubert Hand had gone through the living-room, between five and six o'clock, Mrs. Ricker would not tell of it. But I was more certain that Danny, on the watch out for John, would have seen anyone who had come in through the front door."

"The alibi hour sounds fine, Hand," Sam said, "but you are making a mistake. You are assuming that I think that someone here committed the murder. I don't think that. I do think that someone in this room, right now, knows who did it. Where any one of us was, or was not, at the particular hour you're making such a stew about, probably doesn't cut any ice."

"I think it does. I began this, you know, by saying that I thought John—"

"You said that once," Sam interrupted. "Once is plenty. Go ahead with it now, if you can. Give your proofs."

"There you go. I told you I didn't have any proofs, didn't I, when you made me talk? But I have got some pretty solid bases for my suspicions. John decided, all of a sudden, to go to Rattail for the mail—or something. The kidding he came in for, right then, shows whether he usually went for the mail on a holiday afternoon. He was gone four hours instead of the two—two and a half, anyway—that he could have made it in. He had two bum excuses. First, tire trouble. That would be a better excuse, if the car wasn't standing in the garage right now with the same tires on it that he started out with."

"I know you said you had no proof of anything," Sam broke in. "I reckon, of course, you can prove that, though?"

John spoke. "I don't think he could prove it, dad, since the spare was a Truetread, same as the others. But he's right. I changed tires twice, that's all. The spare was rotten. When I had the second blow-out, I patched the first tire and put it back on. The patch is there, to prove that."

"And the rotten spare?" Hubert Hand questioned.

"It wasn't worth bothering to put on the rack. I rolled it off across the desert."

"My mistake," Hubert Hand said. "Maybe. Two hours is a long time to change tires, even twice. The second excuse was, that he had met Leo Saule and

had given him a tow. Saule is a rotten little half-breed, who could be bought for a half dollar. Also, he lives alone away off the main road—"

John jumped to his feet "Get this, Hand—"

Sam jumped too. He got to John and put his hands on his shoulders. "Keep your shirt on, son. I am to blame for this. Your turn is coming. Wait for it. Go on, Hand."

John hesitated, and sat down again. Sam went back to his chair by the table.

"Sorry," Hubert Hand apologized. "I don't like this a damn bit better than John does; but it seems to be up to me. Well, then, he came in two hours late. He came through the kitchen; and instead of leaving the car in the garage, he left it in the back entrance. He went straight upstairs. It took him half an hour, or more, to get shaved and change his clothes. When he came down he acted like a man in a daze. He couldn't eat. He offered being out in the sun every day."

"I think that he had met Gaby, as they had planned right after dinner when he started for Rattail. Maybe she had promised him to leave the place. He was crazy to get her off the ranch. I know that. He told me so, just the other day—said she was making trouble here, and so on. She may have had something on him, that she was threatening to tell Danny, or Sam. I don't know about that, either. I don't know a damn thing about whatever they might have had between them. But I think that he killed her. out on the desert some place."

"I don't think that he had planned to do it. I think he must have threatened her. off and on, though; her note to Danny, and other things, show that she was afraid for her life. All the same, I think he started it, yesterday, as a bluff. But the desire was back of the bluff—that's pretty certain."

"I don't know why he brought her body back and hid it in the house. I don't give him credit for figuring out what a smart thing that was to do. He may have been afraid of footprints in the road, or on the desert, if he carried the body away and tried to hide it out there. He didn't know that the storm was coming, to cover up his traces. I think, though, that it was pure funk that made him come driving home with the body hidden in the car—covered with the sacks of rock salt."

"I didn't like to think that it was Danny who helped him out, after that. It didn't seem like her. I couldn't think of anyone else, though, who would help him. In the last few minutes, I've managed to think of someone else. It is a lucky thing for John. You are a damn sight stronger ally, Sam, than Danny or any one else would have been. For instance—this present magnificent bluff of your's."

"All right," Sam said. "All through?"

"I'm satisfied, if you are," Hubert Hand answered.

"I'm not," Sam drawled. "Because, like the caterpillar said, 'It's all wrong from beginning to end.' It is a queer thing, though, the way quotations always come to me. Most of the time you were talking, Hand, I kept thinking of this one: 'Give a guilty man enough rope and he will hang himself.'"

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### John Talks

If you mean me, dad," John spoke right up, and I'd given a pretty penny to have had him say something else, for, of course, Sam had not meant him. "I'm not worried. They don't hang innocent men in Nevada, no matter how much rope their friends present them with."

"As a matter of fact," Hubert Hand said, "I guess they don't hang any men in Nevada, now, do they? Lethal chamber, isn't it?"

(TO BE CONTINUED)



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### Rejuvenation

Dr. Sims Lee Rice, the Richmond surgeon, was talking about the Voronoff and other methods of rejuvenation.

"These methods," he said, "rejuvenate, yes, but the rejuvenation only lasts a short time. A year or so passes, and you are older, far older, than before."

"One of our millionaires," Professor Rice went on, "underwent the rejuvenating operation, and temporarily the change in him was remarkable. Though he was seventy years old, a crop of thick brown hair burst forth on his bald head, his wrinkles disappeared, and the strength of youth came back to him. When he returned home the home papers all called him the grand old man."

### Vitality of Germs

Germs sealed up in culture tubes 26 years ago have been found to be still alive by Dr. Ortiz Patte, reports Modern Mechanics Magazine. Having a number of these culture tubes made up as long ago as 1903, he inoculated samples into living animals to see if typical diseases would be produced. Many of the germs grew in the new cultures and some produced disease just as these same germs would have done when young.

### He Knew His Kitchens

A corpulent widower planning to be married in the near future was inspecting an apartment. After a peek at the kitchen he said: "Have you one with a smaller kitchen? I don't like to help wash dishes."—Indianapolis News.

An author may be good in spite of some faults, but not in spite of many faults.—Voltaire.

What is "mental anguish" if not worry?

### Speaking of Sermons

A young fellow from Fargo who should have known better than ask the question, inquires "if there are many women preachers in the United States?" "Millions," sighed the Tribune editor, gazing at his wife's picture on the desk. "Millions, my boy; and they're not all in the pulpits, either."

### Candles as Bullets

Capt. Eric D. Porter, infantry, of the department of experiment, Fort Benning, as part of a test recently fired an ordinary tallow candle from a 12-gauge shotgun, completely penetrating a one-inch pine board at close range.—Army and Navy Journal.

### Must Be Natural

It is impossible to simulate honesty; honesty begins with yourself.—Rabbi J. B. Wise.

Outdoors is the place for bad amateur singers to sing, but the very outdoors.

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During October a woman in Montana wrote—"My first bottle of Kruschen Salts lasted almost 4 weeks and during that time I lost 19 pounds of fat—Kruschen is all you claim for it—I feel better than I have for years."

Here's the recipe that banishes fat and brings into blossom all the natural attractiveness that every woman possesses.

Every morning take one half teaspoonful of Kruschen Salts in a glass of hot water before breakfast.

Be sure and do this every morning for "it's the little daily dose that takes off the fat."—Don't miss a morning. The Kruschen habit means that every particle of poisonous waste matter and harmful acids and gases are expelled from the system.

At the same time the stomach, liver, kidneys and bowels are toned up and the pure, fresh blood containing Nature's six life-giving salts are carried to every organ, gland, nerve and fibre of the body and this is followed by "that Kruschen feeling" of energetic health and activity that is reflected in bright eyes, clear skin, cheerful vivacity and charming figure.

If you want to lose fat with speed get an 85c bottle of Kruschen Salts from any live druggist anywhere in America with the distinct understanding that you must be satisfied with results or money back.

### Testing Mr. Agha's Memory.

From Minneapolis Tribune.

If the physicians cannot authenticate the age of Zoro Agha, who modestly claims to have survived the vicissitudes of 156 years, it may be barely possible that the framers of questionnaires can throw some light on the veracity of that venerable gentleman's pretensions.

The Tribune is frankly skeptical of Mr. Agha. It does not believe that any rational person with the accumulated wisdom of 156 years would be silly enough to risk his 187th year in America, where 1930 model automobiles are known to be no respectors of 1774 model wheels.

Neither does it believe that a veteran of the French revolution, of the Crimea and of Plevna would be foolhardy enough, if informed of the hazards ahead, to strike out toward Chicago.

Nevertheless, if the visiting Turk's memory can be tested and checked by questionnaire, it may yet be proved that he is, in reality, the patriarch of 156 summers.

Can Mr. Agha, for example, recall the last heavyweight fight that did not end in a foul? Does his memory run back to the year when Babe Ruth was first described as slipping? Can he remember the first fare-well tour of Harry Lauder, and the

summer in which Minneapolis' paving blocks were not washed out and replaced on an average of three times a week?

Does he recall the first war to end gang wars in Chicago? Can he name, within a decade, the year in which Will Hays did not clean up the movies, in which Senator Brookhart remained discreetly silent and in which the northwest received and agriculture with it, all the breaks in Congress?

Let Mr. Zoro Agha rally his ancient wits about him and set to work. The questions, if he is actually 156 years old, seem fair enough. But if he has barely passed the century mark, let the gentleman be-

ware. He is in, we should say, for a first rate flunking.

### Naming Pullman Cars.

From Fortune.

Mrs. Frank O. Lowden, daughter of the late George Mortimer Pullman, never, though thousands have believed that she did, named a single Pullman car. It was Richmond Dean who achieved the brilliant record of naming 300 Pullman cars in 24 hours. He did so by dispatching a phalanx of assistants to the public library and having them copy virtually every old Roman and Grecian name of which there was record.