

The Desert's Price

By William MacLeod Raine

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SYNOPSIS

Wilson McCann, young Arizona ranchman, is called to help an old friend, Jim Yerby, with a broken leg. Julia Stark, daughter of Matthew Stark, inveterate enemy of the McCanns, is with him. Taking a note from Julia to her father, Wilson is fired on by Jasper, Julia's brother. Ann Gifford, with her young sister, Ethel, are sheep raisers, and on that account unpopular with the cattlemen. "Night riders" shoot a McCann rider, Peter McCann, Wilson's father, offers a reward for the disclosure of their identity. Wilson McCann horsewhips Jasper, he making practically no resistance. Matthew disowns his son for his cowardice, and posts notice he will kill Wilson McCann on sight. Ann Gifford's tragedy is the fate of her dead sister, Nora, betrayed and abandoned by her lover, Jasper Stark and Carl Gitzner, known as a "killer," hold secret conferences. A Stark rider, Tom McArdle, is believed by the Starks to have been killed by the McCanns, but rumor links his name with that of Nora Gifford. Matthew Stark is shot and killed, from ambush. Julia finds him dead, with Wilson McCann stooping over him. She and Phil, her younger brother, both accuse McCann of the killing, despite his vehement denial. Wilson is shot from the chapparal, while standing over Matthew Stark's body. Believing him dying, the Starks have him taken to their home. Despite opposition, his father is allowed to see him. Dave Stone, Stark rider, a Texan with a record as a "killer," openly doubts Wilson's guilt. Jasper is disinherited by his father's will.

CHAPTER VI—Continued

"Jule, you an' Phil wouldn't keep me outa my share of the property, would you? That would be a low-down trick, jus' because Dad got sore at me an' hadn't time to forget it."

"Phil and I haven't talked this over. We haven't even thought about it." She broke into sudden passionate protest. "I'd think, Jas, you'd have the decency to forget it till—for a few days anyhow."

"Easy enough for you to talk," he grumbled. "Nobody's done you a meanness like they have me."

"We'll do what's right, Phil and I. But you can't come here and bully us. We don't want the McCanns here any more 'n you do. We hate it—especially—"

She bit her lip to keep back a sob. Both the men knew she was thinking of her father.

"Well, then, why not throw 'em out?" Jasper wanted to know.

"Because we're not savages. Because one of 'em is dying—and the other is his father. Can't you see, Jas? It's not what we want to do, but what we've got to do."

"Folks are liable to do a lot of talkin'. I'll say that."

"Then they'll have to talk. We can't help it."

"I don't sabb this business, Jule," he told her, narrowed eyes full in hers. "What's back of it? What game are you playin'?"

A flush swept the girl's cheeks and died away leaving her white and still. She knew what he meant—that this was a covert insinuation of a love affair between her and Wilson McCann. A wave of nausea engulfed her. "I think you're the most hateful man I ever knew," she flamed, and went out of the room on a crescendo of sobs.

Phil missed the point but knew that his sister thought Jasper had insulted her. He asked a question bluntly.

"What you drivin' at, anyhow?"

"Don't you get sore, too, kid," the older brother answered. "I got eyes, an' I use 'em. She's mighty high-heeled, Jule. But she can't draw the wool over my eyes. It ain't all Christian kindness that's moving her. Not on yore sweet life. It's that Wills McCann. She's in love with him."

"What?"

"Sure as you're a foot high. There's somethin' doin' between her an' that lobo wolf that killed Dad." Jasper nodded malevolently and triumphantly.

His brother recoiled, hard hit. "I don't believe it."

"You'll see," Jasper promised, wisely.

To those stricken by grief it seems at first that death has dammed the river of life and that its channel must be forever dry. But it is of the fortunate essence of our being that life flows on in spite of us. The very detail of existence so absorbs us that our sorrow is pushed into the background.

Thus it was with Julia in the days after her father's body had been laid to rest. Her time was very fully occupied, for she had inherited the joint management of large interests. Jasper still called the ranch his home apparently, though he was of no use whatever in looking after it. Julia did not understand him at all. It was not only that he considered himself ill-

used. There was something on his mind that made him savage and irritable. His idea of justice was that Phil and she should make out a deed to him of one-third the property left by their father and should let him run the ranch according to his fancy without interference.

If he had been at all reasonable Julia would have been tempted to join with Phil in acceding to his demand. But she knew in her heart that if she gave way it would be weakness. In this Phil concurred. He knew, better even than Julia, that Jasper had flung away the reins of all self-control, that he was drinking heavily and spending his time with worse than worthless characters. In Mesa was a Mexican tendejon that had become a sink of iniquity where the scum of humanity gathered. It was known as Pedro's place. Here Jasper went every morning and remained most of the day.

Wilson McCann and his father were still at the Stark ranch. Slowly, inch by inch, the young man was beating back the tide that had almost engulfed him. His strength began to renew itself. He was so nearly out of danger that the question of moving him became imminent. Neither Phil nor Julia ever entered the sick room or exchanged a word with the McCanns.

On an afternoon Julia made a suggestion to Phil that flushed his boyish face with pleasure.

"Let's go see the Gifford girls. We ought to show we feel friendly. Don't you think so? You used to know them, didn't you?"

"Yes, before—before Nora went away. I knew 'em right well. But now nobody's welcome there."

"And Jasper knew them, too, I've heard."

"Yep. Quite a few of the boys went there. Tom McArdle did—an' Gitzner—an' I've seen Dave Stone there. They don't any of 'em go any more. Ann won't have 'em. Makes it mighty lonesome for Ethel. She's a mighty nice gal, Jule. If you could make friends with her an' Ann—"

He left his sentence unfinished, but it was expressive enough as it stood. "I'll try," she promised.

They rode up out of the valley toward Tincup pass. From the distance came faint voices. The foreman of the Circle Cross was making a gather of beeves for the trail. The plaintive bleating of a calf just reached them. Through the pass they moved down to the desert. The girl thought of almost the last time she had crossed it, in the moonlight, beside her the strong sun-browned man who had become anathema to her family. She had talked with Dave Stone. In her heart she knew that Wilson McCann had not killed her father. He had given her his word that he would not wage any but a fair fight. In spite of her resentment against him she believed he would keep his word.

The horses climbed the mesa where the sheep ranch had its headquarters. A shy-eyed girl came to the door to meet them. At sight of Phil her cheeks flew a flag of color.

The boy swung from the saddle. "Miss Ethel, meet my sister. She'll be right glad to know you."

Ethel Gifford's blue eyes flamed with tears when Julia came forward and impulsively kissed her. She was starved for affection. There was none of it in her life except that which came from Ann, who jealously protected her from any chance of it on the part of others.

"My dear, we're going to be friends," Julia said.

The other girl's lip trembled. "Won't you—come in?" she invited dubiously. Ann was away from home, but the thought of her obtruded. She would not like her asking the Starks into the house.

The visitors followed her into the low-ceilinged room. It was a homelike place, Julia saw in the first swift glance. In the deep windows of the adobe walls were potted flowers, geraniums, begonias, and fuchsias. They were curtained with clean muslin. A piano filled one corner. On the mantel were photographs and a framed print of a Del Sarto madonna.

There was a moment of silence before Ethel explained that her sister was out at one of the camps. "But I expect her back any time," she added.

"I think she must be a pretty good manager," Julia said. "I hear you are doing so well. I am glad."

"If we could only sell out and go away," Ethel wistfully replied. "Perhaps we can when folks find out we're making money here."

"You don't like the desert?" the older girl asked.

"I hate it. It's . . . horrible. It . . . takes us and . . . crushes our lives." She flung out her hands in a gesture of passionate despair. "Folks that are good and kind—they change—and awful things happen."

"Yes," said Julia, struck by a sudden depression of sadness.

Ethel's sweet mouth quivered. "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot—about you. I was thinking of myself. It gets so terrible sometimes—when I let myself think—"

She broke off. In her eyes was an expression of fear, of some haunting dread too great for endurance.

Phil's heart was very tender to this

charming creature, so soft and defenseless. It ached for her now. The generous youth in him was eager to defend her.

But defend her against what? Not grief alone for her sister Nora's death had brought that stricken look into her face. There was something else—something sinister and evil that she felt like a shadow of disaster hovering over her life. What could it be? What had so moved her to futile and protestant outburst? Was it possible that some threat still overhung, one of the nature of which he was in the dark?

"Couldn't you and your sister come and stay with us a few days?" Julia asked, her fingers caressing the soft and dimpled cheek. "We'd love to have you?"

"Oh, I wish we could. But we can't. There's no use talking," Ethel cried. "It's sweet of you to ask us, though. Ann wouldn't want to go. I'm sure she wouldn't."

A shadow darkened the doorway. "Where is it Ann wouldn't want to go?"

Miss Gifford came into the room, a quilt dangling from her wrist. In an unlovely khaki divided skirt and spurred boots, a revolver cased in the belt at her hip, she looked very much a denizen of the desert. But she had an aspect of efficient competence.

"I was asking your sister if you and she wouldn't come and stay for a few



"Stop Right Where You Are," She Said.

days at the Circle Cross. We're—lonesome just now," explained Julia.

"No, thank you," Ann answered bluntly.

"We'd so like to have you come," Julia persisted. "There aren't many of us women folk on the desert. Don't you think we ought to be friends?"

"Friends!" Ann's voice carried a laugh far removed from humor. "Why not? When we have lived here two years and none of you have come to see us, when you've all treated us as though we had the plague, when you've harried our sheep over cliffs and poisoned them, when your vile men—"

She stopped abruptly, to add a moment later contemptuously, "Yes, let's be friends."

"Phil and I didn't do any of this, did we?" Julia asked gently. "Oh, I know you haven't been treated right. But give us a chance now. If you're generous you'll give us a chance to make up for it. We'd love to try."

"I'm not generous," Ann Gifford replied, and in her eyes there burned sparks of anger. "The less we have to do with any of you the better pleased we'll be."

"That's plain enough," Julia said stiffly. "It doesn't leave much room for argument. If you won't have our friendship, why of course we can't give it."

Phil spoke. "Miss Ann, some time you might need friends, don't you reckon? You can't play a lone hand 'way off here. You ain't livin' in Denver or El Paso. You seen yoreself how it was with old Jim Yerby. He bust his laig an' would of died if Sis hadn't drapped around an' took care of him. You went up there every day an' looked after him. Folks are dependent on each other in this country. You gotta have friends here. It ain't reasonable to say you won't have 'em. We're tryin' to say, Jule an' I are, that we'd like to be neighborly even if you don't exactly want us for friends. Miss Ethel an' you, why you need good neighbors—"

"When we're looking for some one to neighbor with, Mr. Stark," Ann cut in with a swift flare of feminine ferocity, "we'll not choose any of the Circle Cross outfit."

"Why?" Julia asked.

"I'll not tell you why."

There was nothing more to be said. Ann had closed the matter by imperative veto. Phil longed for a rehearing, but knew it would be of no use. Better than his sister, he guessed at the grounds of Ann's resentment toward the Circle Cross. Most of the cowboys visiting the sheep ranch had heard whispered comment at the bunk house. Probably she had reason to think some one of them was responsible for the trouble that had come to her sister Nora.

His troubled gaze clung to Ethel. For her his heart was wrung. So soft and young she looked, so little able to cope with the harsh world into which circumstances had flung her. Ann's attitude was unjust. He knew that. But he was still a boy, and he did not know how to cope with it.

Reluctantly he followed Julia from the house and swung to the saddle. They rode across the mesa and dipped into a draw. Round a sharp bend they moved—and came face to face with Jasper.

The meeting was a surprise to all three, to Jasper a disconcerting one. "Lo, Jas! Where you headin' for?" his sister asked.

He murmured something about a calf caught by its mother while the cow went to the nearest water hole. Neither Phil nor Julia voiced their doubts after they had ridden on. He was going to the Gifford sheep ranch. Both of them believed that. But why? Was it possible that in spite of Ann's watchfulness he could be holding secret meetings with Ethel? It might be so. He was good-looking in his way. There was a swagger about him some women found attractive.

Both Phil and Julia hoped that little Ethel Gifford was not one of them. Though Jasper was their brother, they much distrusted him.

CHAPTER VII

Court of Public Opinion

Jasper did not ride up to the house at the sheep ranch and announce himself. He turned up an arroyo that brought him unobserved to a pocket in the hills. Here he left his horse and climbed to the rolling ground above. Carefully, so as not to be at any time within observation from the house, he worked his way to a grove of live oaks in a draw. From this he could look down on the ranch.

He laid his hands around his mouth and gave the hoot of an owl. Twice, at intervals of half a minute, he repeated this.

Presently from the back door of the house a slim and graceful figure emerged. As she walked up the rise toward the grove a little breath of wind brought the print dress about her limbs so that the skirt clung to her knees and remodeled itself at each step. There was something in the gesture of her fine and exquisite. Momentarily she stood silent, her breast rising and falling fast from the climb. After one swift glance her eyes had fallen before him.

"What do you want with me?" she asked at last.

The hateful note of triumphant victory was in his laugh. "What do you reckon I want with you?"

The look on his face sent the color flying to her cheeks. There was nothing in the armory of her innocent and girlish coquetry to protect against such grossness.

"You—keep at me," she faltered. "You won't let me alone. If I had anything to give you—anything at all—"

She was considering in her mind, as she had done a hundred times, whether there was any way to raise money enough to buy him off, and she knew, as she had each time decided, that there was no chance of this unless she made a clean breast of her dilemma to Ann.

"I ain't onreasonable," he said. "I'm askin' you to marry me, girl. Do that, an' what I know will be buried. Fair enough, ain't it? You'll be makin' a good deal. I'll be some husband, if I do say so my own self."

At this she flared out. "Never! Never! No matter how much you bully me, I'd rather kill myself," she passionately cried, with the unconscious melodrama of youth.

"It ain't a question of you killin' yoreself, but of you sending yore sister to be hanged, or leastways to the pen for life. You'll throw in with me or I'll sure enough put her through. I never rue back. Not me." He emphasized the claim with an oath. "You can't help yoreself. I got the deadwood on you, an' I'll certainly go through."

"You wouldn't do that," she begged, one hand clasping the other small knotted fist in an agony of indecision. "No man would do that to two lone girls when—when things were like they were."

"Wouldn't I?" He thrust his face forward, lids narrowed so that his eyes were mere points of glittering light. "Grab it from me, I would. Chieto, compadre! What's eatin' you anyhow? Ain't Jasper Stark good enough for a sheepwoman?"

"I didn't say you weren't good enough. I don't want to—to marry you."

"Why don't you?"

"Because."

"That ain't a reason."

"I don't—"

She stopped. Her mind refused to let her utter the word love even in denial to him. It seemed a desecration.

"I'm mighty fond of you, honey, more'n of any girl I ever did see." He moved close and put his arms around her.

She shivered but offered no resistance. He was stronger than she. The weapon he held was one she could not

parry. If he insisted on using it she must surrender, though the very thought struck all the warm joyous life out of her body. His ravenous kisses fell on cold lips and cheeks, on a soft throat line from which the pulse seemed to have died.

With a curse he released her. Ethel turned. Her sister was swiftly breathing the hill toward them. She must have seen.

With an awkward swagger the man strode forward a step or two. "Pleased to meet up with you," he laughed. "We hadn't aimed to make any announcement yet, but since you drapped in why we gotta admit the corn."

The older sister looked at Ethel, standing there white and stricken. She did not understand, but she knew instinctively that the girl hated this bully and was afraid of him. Her fierce eyes went back to Stark and stabbed at him.

"Get off our land," she ordered in a low tense voice. "If I ever see you on it again I'll kill you."

"Like you did Tom McArdle," he suggested significantly.

The blood ebbed from her face, but the hard and shining eyes did not falter. "Who says I killed him?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

"Why, I'm sayin' it right now, an' I know another fellow who could say it," he told her exultantly.

"You're a prince of flars," she told him.

"Thought you'd get away with it, didn't you? Thought nobody knew how you'd dry-gulched Tom at the cut-bank? Pretty slick work, eh?"

He straddled, bow-legged in his leather chaps, glaring at her exultantly. The slim brown-faced woman looked like a child beside him, but she faced him without quailing. She might have stood for a portrait of quiet defensive resolution.

"I'm asking you what you mean."

"Plain enough, ain't it? You shot Tom from the brush, an' I can prove it."

The older sister turned to the younger. "How long has he been meeting you?"

"He came the week after—after he was killed," Ethel spoke in a low voice of distress. The pronoun of indefinite antecedent was quite clear to all present as to who was meant.

"And he has been here since?"

"Four-five times."

"Threatenin' you?"

Ethel nodded.

"That he would tell—what he claims to know about me? Is that it?"

"Yes."

"If you wouldn't marry him? I suppose he does you the honor to offer marriage. Or does he?" Ann spoke in a low clear note of concentrated bitterness.

"Yes."

"I'm on the square with her," Stark said virtuously. "That's the kind of a fellow I am. I'm here as a friend, understand."

"But if she doesn't marry you I'm to go to the penitentiary. Is that it?"

"She'll marry me. I ain't worried about that."

"Or you'll send me to prison," the other sister persisted.

"Have it yore own way," he laughed brutally.

The pupils of her eyes dilated as they blazed scorn at him. "You yellow coyote! If there's anything that walks as low as you—"

His teeth showed in a snarl. "That's no way to talk to me, you crazy hell-cat. I got you where the wool's short—got you right. Get on the hook with me, an' I'll sure enough put you through."

"Do whatever you've a mind to do. But get off our ranch and stay off. If I ever see you on it again I'll pump lead into you—as I would into a diamond-back." Voice and manner were full of disgust and bitterness. She felt degraded at having to wrangle with him. It seemed to put her on his level.

"I'll get off when I'm good an' ready to go. But get it straight, girl. It's a showdown. I'm tellin' you. Me, Jas Stark." He swaggered into the shade of a live oak and rolled a cigarette for effect. "I'm tellin' you that either Ethel an' me take a trip to the sky pilot or you take one to the pen. Understand?"

"I told you to go," Ann warned.

"Don't run on me," he advised savagely. "I'm dangerous, girl. Don't fool yoreself till it's too late. I want the kid, an' I allow to have her in spite of h—I an' high water."

"You'd better go."

"What's the sense of all this theater talk? I'm makin' a reasonable proposition?" He turned to Ethel. "Look here, honey. She ain't in this a-tall. It's between you'n me. Listen."

"I don't want to," she cried at him, a little hysterically.

"Well, you're going to listen."

He moved toward Ethel in his heavy domineering way. What his intentions were perhaps he did not quite know himself. He meant to take her into his arms and by sheer momentum ride down her will; just how, he did not know.

But Ann was taking no chances. Out of its scabbard she whipped the small revolver she carried. "Stop right where you are," she said.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)