DESERT GOLD

ZANE GREY Author of Riders of the Purple Sage, Wildfire, Etc.

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THORNE

SYNOPSIS.-Seeking gold in the desert, "Cameron," solitary pros pector, forms a partnership with an unknown man whom he later learns is Jonas Warren, father of girl whom Cameron wronged, but later married, back in Illinois Cameron's explanations appease Warren, and the two proceed to-gether. Taking refuge from a gether. Taking refuge from a sandstorm in a cave, Cameron discovers gold, but too late; both men are dying. Cameron leaves evidence, in the cave, of their discovery of gold, and personal docu-ments. Richard Gale, adventurer, in Casita, Mexican border town, meets George Thorne, lieutenant in the Ninth cavalry, old college friend. Thorne tells Gale he is there to save Mercedes Castaneda. Spanish girl, his affianced wife, from Rojas, Mexican bandit. Gale "roughhouses" Roias and his gang, with the help of two American cowboys, and he, Mercedes and Thorne escape. A bugle call from Thorne escape. A bugie call from the fort orders Thorne to his regi-ment. He laves Mercedes under Gale's protection. The pair, aided by the cowboys, Charlie Ladd and Jim Lash, arrive in safety at a ranch known as Forlorn River, across the border. The fugitives are at Tom Belding's home. Belding is immigration inspector. Living with him are his wife and stepdaughter, Nell Burton, Gale, with Ladd and Lash, take service with Belding as rangers, Gale telling Belding the cause of his being a wanderer, a misunderstanding with his father concerning the son's business abilities. Mercedes gets word to Thorne of her safety. Dick also writes to his parents, in-forming them of his whereabouts. Nell's personality, and her kind-ness, attract Gale. Riding the range, Gale falls in with a party of three Mexican raiders encamped at a water hole. Watching his opportunity to oust them, he sees two Indians ride into the camp. One of them. a Yaqui, is evidently badly wounded, and the Mexicans seek to kill him in a cruel way. Dick drives them off, conveying the wounded Yaqui to Belding's ranch. The Indian becomes Dick's ardent admirer. Gale's admiration for Nell increases. Belding's horses, the pride of his life, are run off by the Mexicans. Gale, with Ladd, Lash and the Yaqui, pursue the raiding party, finally cornering them. The whites, with the recovered horses, return to the ranch in triumph. Gale secures from Mrs. Belding reluctant per-mission and begins his courtship with energy. Not getting word from Thorne, whose period of army service has expired. Mercedes loses heart. Nell, although forbid-den, rides to Casita to seek information of him.

CHAPTER X .- Continued. -10-

"Blanco Sol gone!" yelled Belding,

"Raiders!" exclaimed Jim Lash.

"Lord only knows. Yaqui says it wasn't raiders."

"Send Yaqui to find the hoss' trall

an' let's figger," said Ladd. "Shore this 's no raider job," In the swift search that ensued Gale

did not have anything to say; but his mind was forming a conclusion. When he found his old saddle and bridle missing from the peg in the barn his



"Blanco. Sol Gone!" Yelled Belding, in a Rage,

conclusion became a positive conviction, and it made him, for the moment. cold and sick and speechless.

"Hey, Dick, don't take it so much to heart," said Belding, "We'll likely find Sol, and if we don't, there's other good horses."

"I'm not thinking of Sol," replied

Ladd cost a sharp glance at Gale, anapped his fingers, and said;

"D-n me if I ain't guessed it to "What's wrong with you locoed

gents?" bluntly aemanded Belding. "Nell has started for Casita," burst out Gale. "She has gone to fetch Mercedes some word about Thorne. liling, you needn't shake your

ad. I know she's gone. She tried

ersuade me to go, and was furious n I wouldn't."

She's a little devil at times, but she always had good sense."

"Tom, you can gamble she's gone," said Ladd. "Aw, h-l, no! Jim, what do you

think?" implored Belding. "I reckon Sol's white head is pointed level and straight down Casita trail. An' Nell can ride. We're losin'

That roused Belding to action.

"I say you're all wrong," he yelled, starting for the corrals, "She's only taking a little ride, same as she's done often. But rustle now. Find out. Dick, you ride cross the valley. Jim. you hunt up and down the river. I'll head up San Felipe way. And you, Laddy, take Diablo and hit the Casita trail. If she really has gone after Thorne you can catch her in an hour or so.

"Shore I'll go," replied Ladd. "But, Beldin', if you're not plumb crazy you're close to it. That big white devil can't catch Sol. Not in an hour or a day or a week!"

"Laddy, you mean to say Sol is a faster horse than Diablo?" thundered Belding, his face purple.

"Shore I mean to tell you just that there," replied the ranger. "I'll ride your Blanco Devil as he never was rid before, 'cept once when a d-n sight better hossman than I am couldn't make him outrun Sol."

Without more words the men saddled and were off. The interminable time that followed contained for Gale about as much suspense as he could well bear. What astonished him and helped him greatly to fight off actual distress was the endurance of Nell's mother.

Early on the morning of the second day, Gale saw three white horses and a bay come wearily stepping down the road. He heard Blanco Sol's famillar whistle, and he leaped up wild with joy. The horse was riderless. Gale's sudden joy received a violent check, then resurged when he saw a limp form in Jim Lash's arms. Ladd was supporting a horseman who wore a military uniform.

Gale shouted with joy and ran into the house to tell the good news. It was the ever-thoughtful Mrs. Belding who prevented him from rushing to tell Mercedes.

Lash handed down a ragged, travelstained, wan girl into Belding's arms. "Dad! Mamma!"

It was indeed a repentant Nell, but there was spirit yet in the tired blue eyes. Then she caught sight of Gale and gave him a faint smile. "Hello-Dick."

"Nell!" Gale reached for her hand, held it tightly, and found speech difficult.

"You needn't worry-about your old horse," she said, as Belding carried her toward the door. "Oh. Dick!

Blanco Sol is-glorious!" Gale turned to greet his friend. Indeed, it was but a haggard ghost of the cavalryman. Thorne looked ill or wounded. Gale's greeting was also

a question full of fear. Thorne's answer was a faint smile. He seemed ready to drop from the saddle. Gale helped Ladd hold Thorne rse until they reached the house. Belding came out again. His welcome was checked as he saw the condition of the cavalryman. Thorne reeled into Dick's arms. But he was

able to stand and walk. "I'm not — hurt. Only weak — starved," he said. "Is Mercedes-Take me to her."

"She'll be well the minute she sees him," averred Belding, as he and Gale led the cavalryman to Mercedes' room. There they left him; and Gale, at least, felt his ears ringing with the girl's broken cry of joy.

When Belding and Gale hurrled forth again the rangers were tending the tired horses. Upon returning to the house Jim Lash calmly lit his pipe, and Ladd declared that, hungry as he was, he had to tell his story.

"Shore, Beldin'," began Ladd, "that was funny about 'Diablo catchin' Blanco Sol. Funny ain't the word. I nearly laughed myself to death. Well. I rode in Sol's tracks all the way to Casita. Never seen a rebel or a raider till I got to town. I went straight to the camp of the cavalrymen, an' found them just coolin' off an' dressin' down their hosses after what looked to me like a big ride.

"Some soldier took me to an officer's tent. Nell was there, some white an' all in. She just sald, 'Laddy!' Thorne was there, too, an' he was bein' worked over by the camp doctor. I didn't ask no questions, because I seen quiet was needed round that tent. After satisfying myself that Nell was all right, an' Thorne in no danger, I went out.

"Shore there was so darn many fellers who wanted to an' tried to tell me what'd come off, I thought I'd never find out. But I got the story plece by plece. An' here's what hap-

"Nell rode Blanco Sol a-tearin' into camp, an' had a crowd round her in a jiffy. She told who she was, where she'd come from, an' what she wanted. Well, it seemed a day or so before Nell got there the cavalrymen had heard word of Thorne, You see, Thorne had left camp on leave of absence some time before. In a few more days it turned out pretty sure that for

some reason Rojas was holdin' Thorne. "Now, it happened when this news came Colonel Weede was in Nogales with his staff, an' the officer left in charge didn't know how to proceed. Rojas' camp was acr 3 the line in Mexico, an' ridin' over there was serious business. It meant a whole lot more than just scatterin' one Greaser camp. Thorne's feller soldiers was but they had to walt for orders.

"When Nell found out Thorne was bein' starved an' beat in a dobe shack no more'n two mile across the line, she shore stirred up that cavalry camp. Shore! She told them soldiers Rojas was holdin' Thorne-torturin' him to make him tell where Mercedes was. An' she begged the cavalrymen to rescue Thorne.

"From the way it was told to me I reckon them cavalrymen went up in the air. Fine flery lot of young bloods, I thought, achin' for a scrap. But the officer in charge, bein' in a ticklish place, still held out for higher orders.

"Then Nell broke loose. You-all know Nell's tongue is sometimes like choya thorn. I'd have give some thin' to see her work up that soldier outfit. Can't you fellers see her on Sol with her eyes turnin' Blanco black?"

Ladd mopped his sweaty face with his dusty scarf. He was beaming. He



He Was Very Weak, Yet He Would Keep Mercedes' Hand and Gaze at Her With Unbelieving Eyes.

was growing excited, hurried in his narrative.

"Right out then Nell swore she'd go after Thorne. If them cavalrymen couldn't ride with a western girl to save a brother American-let them hang back! One feller, under orders, tried to stop Blanco Sol. An' that feller invited himself to the hospital. Then the cavalrymen went flyin' for their hosses. It didn't take long for every man in that camp to ge; wind of what was comin' off. Shore they musta been wild. They strung out after Nell in a thunderin' troop.

"Rojas and his men vamoosed with out a shot. That ain't surprisin'. There wasn't a shot fired by anybody. The cavalrymen soon found Thorne an' hurried with him back on Uncle Sam's land. Thorne was half naked. black an' blue all over, thin as a rail. He was given food an' drink. Shore he seemed a starved man. But he picked up wonderful, an' by the time came along be start for Forlorn River. So was Nell. By main strength as much as persussion we kept the two men quiet till next evenin' at dark.

"Well, we made as sneaky a start in the dark as Jim an' me could manage, an' never hit the trail till we was miles from town. Thorne's nerve held him up for a while. Then all at once he tumbled out of his saddle We got him back, an' Lash held him on. Nell didn't give out till daybreak."

As Ladd paused in his story Belding began to stutter, and finally he exploded. His mighty utterances were incoherent. But plainly the wrath he had felt toward the willful girl was forgotten. Gale remained gripped by

"Laddy, what knocks me is Rojas holding Thorne prisoner, trying to make him tell where Mercedes had been hidden," said Belding.

"Shore, It'd knock anybody." "The bandit's crazy over her. That's the Spanish of it," replied Belding. his voice rolling. "Rojas loves Mercedes as he hates her. He wants this girl only to have her, then kill her. It's d-n strange, boys, and even with Thorne here our troubles have just begun."

"Tom, you spoke correct," said Jim Ladd, in his cool drawl.

"Shore I'm not sayin' what I think," added Ladd, But the look of him was not indicative of a tranquil optimism.

Thorne was put to bed in Gale's room. He was very weak, yet he would keep Mercedes' hand and gaze at her with unbelleving eyes. Then, fighting sleep with what little strength he had left, at last he succumbed.

For all Dick could ascertain his friend never stirred an eyelash nor a finger for twenty-seven hours. When he awoke he was pale, weak, but the old Thorne.

"Hello, Dick; I didn't dream it, then," he said. "There you are, and my darling with the proud, dark eyes—she's here? Mercedes is wellsafe! Oh! . . . But say, I haven't a dollar to my name. I had a lot of money, Dick, and those robbers stole it, my watch—everything. D—n that little black Greaser!"

"Cheer up. Belding will make you a proposition presently. The future smiles, old friend. If this rehel busi-

ness was only ended!" "Dick, you're going to be my savior twice over. . . Well, now, listen to me." His gay excitement changed to earnest gravity. "I want to marry Mercedes at once. Is there a padre

"Yes. But are you wise in letting any Mexican, even a priest, know Mercodes is bidden in Foriorn River?"

"It couldn't be hidden long." Gale was compelled to acknowledge the truth of this statement.

"I'll marry her first, then I'll face my problem. Fetch the padre, Dick. And ask our kind friends to be witnesses at the ceremony."

Much to Gale's surprise, neither Belding nor Ladd objected to the idea of bringing a padre into the household, and thereby making known to at least one Mexican the whereabouts of Mercedes Castaneda. Belding's caution was wearing out in wrath at the persistent unsettled condition of the border, and Ladd grew only the cooler and more silent as possibilities of trouble multiplied.

Gale fetched the padre, a little, weazened, timid man who was old and without interest or penetration. Apparently he married Mercedes and Thorne as he told his beads or mumbled a prayer. It was Mrs. Belding who kept the occasion from being a merry one, and she insisted on not exciting Thorne. Gale marked her unusual pallor and the singular depth and sweetness of her woice.

Thorne could not be kept in bed, and all in a day, it seemed he grew so well and so hungry that his friends were delighted, and Mercedes was radiant. In a few days his weakness disappeared and he was going the round of the fields and looking over the ground marked out in Gale's plan of water development. Thorne was highly enthusiastic, and at once staked out his claim for one hundred and sixty acres of land adjoining that of Belding and the rangers. These five tracts took in all the ground necessary for their operations, but in case of the success of the irrigation project the idea was to increase their squatter holding by purchase of more land down the valley. A hundred familles had lately moved to Forlorn River; more were coming all the time; and Belding vowed he could see a vision of the whole Altar valley green with

Meanwhile everybody in Belding's ousehold, except the quiet Ladd and the watchful Yaqui, in the absence of disturbance of any kind along the border, grew freer and more unrestrained, as if anxiety was slowly fading in the peace of the present. Jim Lash made a trip to the Sonoyta oasis, and Ladd patrolled fifty miles of the line eastward without incident or sight of raiders. Evidently all the border hawks were in at the picking of Casita.

The February nights were cold, with dry, icy, penetrating coldness that made a warm fire most comfortable. Belding's household congregated in the sitting room, where burning mesquite logs crackled in the open fireplace. There came a low knock at the door.

It may have been an ordinary knock. for it did not disturb the women; but to Belding and his rangers it had a subtle meaning.

"Who's that?" asked Belding, as he slowly pushed back his chair and looked at Ladd.

"Yaqul," replied the ranger. "Come in," called Belding.

The door opened, and the short, square, powerfully built Indian entered. He carried a rifle and strode with impressive dignity.

"Yaqui, what do you want?" asked Belding, and repeated his question in Spanish.

"Senor Dick," replied the Indian. Gale jumped up, stifling an exclamation, and he went outdoors with Yaqui. The Indian's presence was always one of gloom, and now his stern action boded catastrophe. Once clear of trees he pointed to the level desert across the river, where a row of campfires shone bright out of the dark-

"Raiders!" ejaculated Gale.

Then he cautioned Yaqui to keep sharp lookout, and, hurrledly returning to the house, he called the men out and told them there were rebels or raiders camping just across the line. Ladd did not say a word. Belding, with an oath, slammed down his

cigar. "I knew it was too good to last. . Dick, you and Jam stay here while Laddy and I look around."

Dick returned to the sitting-room The women were nervous and not to be deceived. So Dick merely said Yaqui had sighted lights off in the desert, 'and they probably were campfires. Belding did not soon return, and when he did he was alone, and, saying he wanted to consult with the men, he sent Mrs. Belding and the girls to their rooms.

"Laddy's gone over to scout around and try to find out who the outfit be longs to and how many are in it," said Belding. "I don't look for an attack on Forlorn River. I'm afraid it's-' Belding besitated and looked with grim concern at the cavalryman.

"What?" queried Thorne.

"I'm afraid it's Rojas." Thorne turned pale but did not lose

his nerve. "I thought of that at once. But Rojas will never get his hands on my wife. If I can't kill him, I'll kill her!

Belding, this is tough on youthis risk we put upon your family, I regret-" "Cut that kind of talk," replied Belding, bluntly. "Well, if it is Rojas

he's acting d-n queer for a raider. That's what worries me. We can't do anything but walt. With Laddy and Yaqui out there we won't be sur-

gotten some sleep that night, but it was certain the men did not get any. Morning broke cold and gray, the 19th of February. Ladd came in hungry and cold, and said the Mexicans were not breaking camp. He reported a

taciturn as to his idea of forthcoming

About an hour after sunrise Yaqui ran in with the information that part

of the rebels were crossing the river. "That can't mean a fight yet," declared Belding. "But get in the house, boys, and make ready anyway. I'll meet him."

"Belding, you're an officer of the United States. Mexicans are much impressed by show of authority. I've seen that often in camp," said Thorne.

"Oh, I know the white-livered Greasers better than any of you, don't mistake me," replied Belding. He was pale with rage, but kept command over himself.

The rangers, with Yaqui and Thorne, stationed themselves at the several windows of the sitting room. Rifles and smaller arms and boxes of shells littered the tables and window seats. No small force of besiegers could overcome a resistance such as Belding and his men were capable of making.

The horsemen halted at the corrals. They were orderly and showed no evidence of hostility. They were, however, fully armed. Belding stalked out to meet them. Apparently a leader wanted to parley with him, but Belding would hear nothing. He shook his head, waved his arms, stamped to and fro, and his loud, angry voice could be heard clear back at the house. Whereupon the detachment of rebels retired to the bank of the river, beyond the white post that marked the boundary line, and there they once more drew rein. Belding remained by the corrals watching them, evidently still in threatening mood. Presently a single rider left the troop and trotted his horse back down the road. When he reached the corral he was seen to halt and pass something to Belding. Then he galloped away to join his comrades.

Belding looked at whatever it was he held in his hand, shook his burly head, and started swiftly for the house. He came striding into the room holding a piece of soiled paper. "Can't read it now and don't know

as I want to," he said, savagely. Not one of the men was able to translate the garbled scrawl. "Shore Mercedes can read it," said

Ladd. Thorne opened a door and called her. She came into the room followed by Nell and Mrs. Belding.

"My dear, we want you to read what's written on this paper," said Thorne, as he led her to the table. Mercedes gave the writing one swift glance, then fainted in Thorne's arms. He carried her to a couch, and

work over her. Belding looked at his rangers. "Laddy, it's Rojas all right. How many men has he out there?"

with Nell and Mrs. Belding began to

"Mebbe twenty. Not more." "We can lick twice that many

Greasers." "Shore." Jim Lash removed his pipe long

enough to speak. "Let's stave the Greaser off till dark. Then Laddy an' me an' Thorne will take Mercedes an' hit the trail for Yuma." "Camino del Diablo! That awful

trail with a woman! Jim, do you forget how many hundreds of men have perished on the Devil's road?" "I reckon I ain't forgettin' nothin',"

replied Jim. "The waterholes are full



When He Reached the Corrais He Was Seen to Halt and Pass Something to Belding.

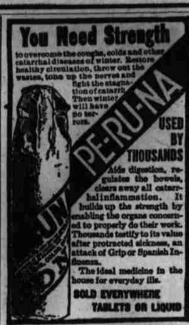
now. There's grass, an' we can do the job in six days."

"It's three hundred miles to Yuma." "Beldin', Jim's idea hits me as pretty reasonable," interposed Ladd "Lord knows that's about the only chance we've got except fightin'."

"But suppose we do stave Rojas off, and you get safely away with Mer cedes. Isn't Rojas going to find it out quick? Then what'll he try to de to us who're left here?"

"I reckon he'd find out by daylight." replied Jim. "But. Tom, he ain't a-goin' to start a scrap then. You see, I'm figgerin' on the crazy Greaser wantin' the girl. But he's too smart to fight you for nothin'. Rojas may be nutty about women, but he's afraid of the U. S. Take my word for it. he'd discover the trail in the mornin' an' light out on it. I reckon with ter hours' start we could travel comfort

"'Dearest, I'm going-soon. And maybe I'll never-"



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