DESERT GOL

CHAPTER XI .- Continued. -12-

The Indian led off into one of the gray notches between the tumbled streams of lava. At the apex of the notch, where two streams met, a narrow gully wound and ascended. Yaqui led Diablo into it, and then began the most laborious and vexatious and painful of all slow travel.

The disintegrating surface of a lava bed was at once the roughest, the hardest, the meanest, the cruelest, the most deceitful kind of ground to travel. The fugitives made slow progress. They picked a cautious, winding way to and fro in little steps here and there along the many twists of the trail, up and down the unavoidable depressions, round and round the holes. At noon, so winding back upon itself had been their course, they appeared to have come only a short distance up the lava slope.

It was rough work for them; it was terrible work for the horses. Blanco Diablo refused to answer to the power of the Yaqui. He balked, he plunged, he bit and kicked. He had to be pulled and beaten over many places. Mercedes' horse almost threw her, and she was put upon Blanco Sol. The white charger snorted a protest, then, obedient to Gale's stern call, patiently lowered his noble head and pawed the lava for a footing that would hold.

The lava caused Gale toil and worry and pain, but he hated the choyas. He came almost to believe what he had heard claimed by desert travelers-that the choya was alive and leaped at man or beast. Certain it was when Gale passed one, if he did not put all attention to avoiding it, he was hooked through his chaps and held by barbed thorns. The pain was almost unendurable. It was like no other. It burned, stung, beatalmost seemed to freeze. It made useless arm or leg. It made him bite his tongue to keep from crying out. It made the sweat roll off him, It made him sick.

Moreover, bad as the choya was for man, it was infinitely worse for beast. A jagged stab from this poisoned cactus was the only thing Blanco Sol could not stand. Many times that day, before he carried Mercedes, he had wildly snorted, and then stood trembling while Gale picked broken thorns from the muscular legs. But after Mercedes had been put upon Sol Gale made sure no choya touched him.

The afternoon passed like the morning, in ceaseless winding and twisting and climbing along this abandoned trail. Gale saw many waterholes, mostly dry, some containing water, all of them catch-basins, full only after rainy season. Little ugly bunched bushes, that Gale scarcely recognized as mesquites, grew near these holes; also stunted greasewood and prickly pear. There was no grass, and the choya alone flourished in that hard

Darkness overtook the party as they unpacked beside a pool of water deep under an overhanging shelf of lava. It had been a hard day. The horses drank their fill, and then stood patiently with drooping heads. Hunger and thirst were appeased, and a warm fire cheered the weary and footsore fugitives. Yaqui said, "Sleep." And so another night passed.

Upon the following morning, ten miles or more up the slow-ascending lava slope, Gale was in the rear of all the other horses, so as to take, for Mercedes' sake, the advantage of the broken trail. Yaqui was leading Diablo, winding around a break. His head was bent as he stepped slowly and unevenly upon the lava. Gale turned to look back, the first time in several days. He thought, of course, of Rojas in certain pursuit; but it seemed absurd to look for him.

Yaqui led on, and Gale often glanced up from his task to watch the Indian. Presently he saw him stop, turn, and look back. Ladd did likewise, and then Jim and Thorne. Gale found the desire irresistible. Thereafter he often rested Blanco Sol, and looked back the while. He had his fieldglass, but did not choose to use it. "Rojas will follow," said Mercedes.

Gale regarded her in amaze. The tone of her voice and been indefinable. If there were fear then he falled to detect it. She was gazing back down the colored slope, and something about her, perhaps the steady, falcon gaze of her magnificent eyes, reminded him

Many times during the ensuing hour the Indian faced about, and always his followers did likewise. It was high noon, with the sun beating hot and the lava radiating heat, when Yaqui halted for a rest. The horses bunched and drooped their heads. The rangers were about to slip the packs and remove saddles when Yaqui restrained

He fixed a changeless, gleaming gaze on the slow descent; but did not seem to look afar.

Suddenly he uttered his strange ery—the one Gale considered involuntary, or else significant of some tribal trait or feeling. Yagul pointed down the lava slope, pointing with finger 'arm and neck and head-his whole being seemed to have been animated and then frozen.

'Shore he sees somethin'," said Ladd. "But my eyes are no good." "I reckon I ain't sure of mine," re-died Jim. "I'm bothered by a dim

ovin' streak down there." rne gazed eagerly down as he beside Mercedes, who sat mo-be facing the slope. Gaie looked rods in width to large craters, some

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he took his glass out of its case on Sol's saddle.

There appeared to be nothing upon the lava but the innumerable dots of choya shining in the sun. Gale swept his glass slowly forward and back. Then into a nearer field of vision crept a long white-and-black line of horses and men. Without a word he handed the glass to Ladd. The ranger used it, muttering to himself.

"They're on the lava fifteen miles down in an air line," he said, presently. "Jim, shore they're twice that an' more accordin' to the trail."

Jim had his look and replied: "I reckon we're a day an' a night in the lead."

"Is it Rojas?" burst out Thorne with set jaw.

"Yes, Thorne. It's Rojas and a dozen or more," replied Gale, and he looked up at Mercedes.

She was transformed. She might have been a medieval princess embodying all the Spanish power and passion of that time, breathing revenge, hate, unquenchable spirit of fire. If her beauty had been wonderful in her helpless and appealing moments, now, when she looked back white-faced and flame-eyed, it was transcendent.

Gale drew a long, deep breath. The mood which had presaged pursuit, strife, blood on this somber desert, returned to him tenfold. He saw Thorne's face corded by black veins, and his teeth exposed like those of a snarling wolf. These rangers, who had coolly risked death many times, and had dealt it often, were white as no fear or pain could have made them. Then, on the moment, Yaqui raised his hand, not clenched or doubled tight, but curled rigid like an eagle's claw; and he shook it in a strange, slow gesture which was menacing and terrible.

It was the woman that called to the depths of these men. And their passion to kill and to save was surpassed only by the wild hate which was yet love, the unfathomable emotion of a peon slave. Gale marveled at it. while he felt his whole being cold and tense, as he turned once more to follow in the tracks of his leaders. The fight predicted by Belding was at hand. What a fight that must be! Rojas was traveling light and fast. He was gaining. He had bought his men with gold, with extravagant promises, per haps with offers of the body and blood of an aristocrat hateful to their kind. Lastly, there was the wild, desolate environment, a tortured wilderness of jagged lava and poisoned choya, a lonely, fierce and repellent world, a red stage most son.berly and fittingly colored for a supreme struggle between men.

Yaqui looked back no more. Mercedes looked back no more. But the other looked, and the time came when Gale saw the creeping line of pursuers with naked eyes.

A level line above marked the rim of the plateau. Sand began to show in the little lava pits. On and upward toiled the cavalcade, still very slowly advancing. At last Yaqui reached the rim. He stood with his hand on Blanco Diablo; and both were silhouetted against the sky. That was the outlook for a Yaoul. And his great



That Was the Outlook for a Yaqui.

horse, dazzlingly white in the surlight, with head wildly and proudly erect, mane and tall flying in the wind, made a magnificent picture. The others tolled on and upward, and at last Gale led Blanco Sol over the rim. Then all looked down the red slope. But shadows were gathering there

and no moving line could be seen. Yaqui mounted and wheeled Diable The others followed. The Yaqui led them into a zone of craters

and looked till he hurt his eyes. Then | shallow, others deep, and all red as fire. Yaqui circled close to abysses which yawned sheer from a level surface, and he appeared always to be

turning upon his course to avoid them. The plateau had now a considerable dip to the west. Gale marked the slow heave and ripple of the ocean of lava to the south, where high, rounded peaks marked the center of this volcanic region. The uneven nature of the slope westward prevented any extended view, until suddenly the fugitives emerged from a rugged break to come upon a sublime and awe-inspiring spectacle.

They were upon a high point of the western slope of the plateau. It was strange to Gale, and perhaps to the others, to see their guide lead Diablo into a smooth and well-worn trail along the rim of the awful crater. Gale looked down into that red chasm. It resembled an inferno. The dark cliffs upon the opposite side were veiled in blue haze that seemed like smoke. Here Yaqui was at home. He moved and looked about him as a man coming at last into his own. Gale saw him stop and gaze out over that red-ribbed vold to the Gulf.

Gale divined that somewhere along this crater of hell the Yaqui would make his final stand; and one look into his strange, inscrutable eyes made imagination picture a fitting doom for the pursuing Rojas.

CHAPTER XII

The Crater of Hell.

Presently Gale, upon turning a sharp corner, was utterly amazed to see that the split in the lava sloped out and widened into an arroyo. It was so green and soft and beautiful in all the angry, contorted red surrounding that Gale could scarcely credit his sight. Blanco Sol whistled his welcome to the scent of water. Then Gale saw a great hole, a pit in the shiny lava, a dark, cool, shady well. There was evidence of the fact that at flood seasons water had an outlet into the arroyo. The soil appeared to be a fine sand, in which a reddish tinge predominated; and it was abundantly covered with a long grass, still partly green. Mesquites and palo verdes dotted the arroyo and gradu; ally closed in thickets that obstructed the view.

"Shore it all beats me." exclaimed Ladd. "What a place to hole-up in! We could have hid here for a long time... Beldin' was shore right about the Indian. An' I can see Rojas' finish somewhere up along that awful hell-hole."

Camp was made on a level spot. Yaqui took the horses to water, and then turned them loose in the arroyo. but her great dark eyes burned in her white face. Yaqui watched her. The others looked at her with unspoken pride. Presently Thorne wrapped her in his blankets, and she seemed to fall asleep at once.

Little of Yaqui's purpose or plan could be elicited from him. The rangers and Thorne, however, talked in low tones. It was absolutely impossible for Rojas and his men to reach the waterhole before noon of the next day. And long before that time the fugitives would have decided on a plan of defense.

"What stuns me is that Rojas stuck to our trail," said Thorne, his lined and haggard face expressive of dark passion, "He has followed us into this fearful desert. He'll lose men, horses, perhaps his life, 'He's only a bandit, and he stands to win no gold. All for a poor little helpless womanjust a woman! I can't understand it." "Shore-just a woman," replied Ladd, solemnly nodding his head.

Then there was a long silence, dur ing which the men gazed into the fire. Those were cold, hard, grim faces upon which the light flickered.

"Sleep," said Yaqui. Thorne rolled in his blanket close beside Mercedes. Then one by one the rangers stretched out, feet to the fire. Gale found that he could not sleep. His eyes were weary, but they would not stay shut; his body ached for rest, set he could not tie still. The Yaqui sat like an image carved out of lava. The others lay prone and quiet. Would another night see any of them lie that way, quiet forever? Gale sat up after a while and again watched the fire. Nell's sweet face floated like a wraith in the pale smoke — glowed and flushed and smiled in the embers. Other faces shone there his sistef's that of his mother. Gale shook off the tender memories. This desolate wilderness with its forbidding slience and its dark promise of hell on the morrowthis was not the place to unnerve oneself with thoughts of love and home.

Toward dawn Gale managed to get some sleep. Then the morning broke with the sun hidden back of the uplift of the plateau. The horses trooped up the arroyo and snorted for water. After a hurried breakfast the packs were hidden in holes in the lava. The ddles were left where they we

wander at will. Canteens were filled. a small bag of food was packed, and blankets made into a bundle. Then Yaqui faced the steep ascent of the lava slope.

The trail he followed led up on the right side of the fissure, opposite to the one he had come down. It was a steep climb, and encumbered as the men were they made but slow progress. At length the rims widened out and the red, smoky crater yawned beneath. Yaqui left the trail and began clambering down over the rough and twisted convolutions of lava which formed the rim. It was with extreme difficulty that the party followed him. The choya was there to hinder passage. Finally the Indian halted upon a narrow bench of flat, smooth lava. and his followers worked with exceed ing care and effort down to his position.

At the back of this bench, between bunches of choya, was a niche, a shallow cave with floor lined apparently with mold. Yaqui spread blankets inside, left the canteen and the sack of food, and with a gesture at once humble, yet that of a chief, he invited Mercedes to enter. A few more gestures and fewer words disclosed his plan. In this inaccessible nook Mercedes was to be hidden. The men were to go around upon the opposite rim, and block the trail leading down to the waterhole.

Ladd chose the smallest gun in the party and gave it to Mercedes.

"Shore it's best to go the limit on bein' ready," he said, simply. "The chances are you'll never need it. But f von do-

He left off there, and his break was significant. Mercedes answered him with a fearless and indomitable flash of eyes. Thorne was the only one who showed any shaken nerve. His leavetaking of his wife was affecting and hurried. Then he and the rangers carefully stepped in the tracks of the Taqui. He strode on up the trail toward a higher point, where presently his dark figure stood motionless against the sky. The rangers and Thorne selected a deep depression, out of which led several ruts deep enough for cover. Here the men laid down rifles and guns, and, removing their heavy cartridge belts, settled down

Jim Lash crawled into a little strip of shade and bided the time tranquilly. Ladd was restless and impatient and watchful, every little while rising to look up the far-reaching slope, and then to the right, where Yaqui's dark figure stood out from a high point of the rim. Thorne grew silent, and seemed consumed by a slow, sullen rage. Gale was neither calm nor free of a gnawing suspense nor of a waiting wrath. But as best he could be put the pending action out of mind.

It came over him all of a sudden that he had not grasped the stupendons nature of this desert setting. There was the measureless red slope, its lower ridges finally sinking into white sand dunes toward the blue sea. The cold sparkling light, the white sun, the deep azure of sky, the feeling It was a tired and somber group that of boundless expanse all, around him ward the barren red simply merged into distance. The field of craters rose in high, dark wheels toward the dominating peaks. When Gale withdrew his gaze from the magnitude of these spaces and heights the crater beneath him seemed dwarfed. Yet while he gazed it spread and deepened and multiplied its ragged lines. No. he could not grasp the meaning of size or distance here. There was too much to stun the sight. But the mood in which nataure had created this convulsed world seized hold upon him.

The hours passed. As the sun climbed the clear sky, steely lights vanished, the blue hazes deepened, and slowly the glistening surfaces of lava turned redder. Ladd was concerned to discover that Yaqui was missing from his outlook upon the high point. Jim Lash came out of the shady crevice, and stood up to buckle on his cartridge belt. His narrow, gray glance slowly roved from the height of lava down along the slope, paused in doubt, and then swept on to resurvey the whole vast eastern dip of the plateau.

"I reckon my eyes are pore," he said. "Mebbe it's this d-n red glare. Anyway, what's them creepin' spots up

there?" "Shore I seen them. Mountain sheep," replied Ladd.

"Guess again, Laddy. Dick. reckon you'd better flash the glass up the slope."

Gale adjusted the field glass and began to search the lava, beginning close at hand and working away from him. Presently the glass became stationary. "I see half a dozen small animals,

brown in color. They look like sheep. But I couldn't distinguish mountain sheep from antelope." "Shore they're bighorn," said Laddy, "I reckon if you'll pull around to the east an' search under that long wall

of lava-there-you'll see what I see," added Jim. The glass climbed and circled, wa vered an instant, then fixed steady as a rock. There was a breathless

and lame," antd Gale, slowly,

Yaqui appeared far up coming swiftly. Presently he saw the rangers and halted to wave his arms and point. Then he vanished as if the

"Lemme that glass," suddenly said Jim Lash. "I'm seein' red, I tell you. Well, pore as my eyes are they had it right. Rojas an' his outfit have left the trail. Laddy, I'll be danged if the Greaser bunch hasn't vamoosed Gone out of sight! Right there not a half mile away, the whole caboodie-

"Shore they're behind a crust or have gone down into a rut," suggested Ladd. "They'll show again in a minute. Look sharp, boys, for I'm figgerin' Rojas 'll spread his men."

From time to time the rangers looked inquiringly at Gale. The field glass, however, like the naked sight, could not catch the slightest moving object out there upon the lava. A long hour of slow, mounting suspense

"Shore it's all goin' to be as queer

as the Yaqui," said Ladd. Indeed, the strange mien, the silent action, the somber character of the Indian had not been without effect upon the minds of the men. Then the weird, desolate, tragic scene added to the vague sense of mystery. And now the disappearance of Rojas' band, the long wait in the silence, the boding certainty of invisible foes crawling, circling closer and closer, lent to the situation a final touch that made it

"I'm reckonin' there's a mind behind them Greasers," replied Jim. "Or mebbe we ain't done Rojas credit. . . If somethin' would only come

That Lash, the coolest, the most provokingly nonchalant of men in times of peril, should begin to show a nervous strain was all the more indicative of a subtle pervading unreality.

"Boys, look sharp!" suddenly called Lash. "Low down to the left-mebbe three hundred yards. See, along by them seams of lava-behind the choyas. First off I thought it was a sheep. But it's the Yaqui! Crawlin' swift as a lizard! Can't reu ee him?"

It was a full moment before Jim's companions could locate the Indian. Flat as a snake, Yaqui wound himself along with incredible rapidity.



His advance was all the more remarkable for the fact that he appeared to pass directly under the dreaded chovas. Sometimes he paused to lift his head and look.

"Shore he's headin' for that high place," said Ladd. "He's going slow now. There, he's stopped behind some choyas. He's gettin' up-no, he's kneelin'. . . . Now what the h-1!" "Laddy, take a peek at the side of

that lava ridge," sharply called Jim. "I guess mebbe somethin' ain't comin' off. See! There's Rojas an' his outfit climbin'. Don't make out no hosses. . . Dick, use your glass an' tell us what's doin'. I'll watch Yaqui an' tell you what his move means."

Clearly and distinctly, almost as if he could have touched them, Gale had Rojas and his followers in sight. They were tolling up the rough lava on

"They're almost up now." Gale was saying. "There! They halt on top. I see Rojas. He looks wild. By fellows, an Indian: It's a Papago, Belding's old herder! . . . The Indian points—this way—then down, He's showing Rojas the lay of the trail."

"Boys, Yaqui's in range of that bunch," said Jim, swiftly. "He's raisin' his rifle slow-Lord, how slow he is! . . . He's covered som Which one I can't say. But I think be'll pick Rojas."

"The Yaqui can shoot. He'll pick Rojas," added Gale, grimly.

"Rojas-yes-yes!" cried Thorne, M passion of suspense.

"Not on your life!" Ladd's voice cut in with scorn, "Gentlemen, you can gamble Yaqui'll kill the Papago. That traitor Indian knows these sheep haunts. He's tellin' Rojas-"

A sharp rifle shot rang out. "Laddy's right," called Gale. The Papago's hit—his arm falls. There,

TO BE CONTINUED.

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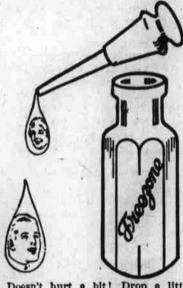
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