

DESERT GOLD

CHAPTER XVI
—16—
Mountain Sheep.

What Gale might have thought an appalling situation, if considered from a safe and comfortable home away from the desert, became now that he was shut in by the red-ribbed lava walls and great dry wastes, a matter calmly accepted as inevitable. So he imagined it was accepted by the others. Not even Mercedes uttered a regret. No word was spoken of home. If there was thought of loved ones, it was locked deep in their minds.

By tacit agreement Ladd again became the leader of the party. The first thing he asked was to have the store of food that remained spread out upon a tarpaulin. Assuredly, it was a slender enough supply. It was impossible to read the gravity of Ladd's face, for he still looked like a dead man, but the slow shake of his head told Gale much. There was a grain of hope, however, in the significance with which he touched the bags of salt and said, "Shore it was sense packin' all that salt!"

Then he turned to face his comrades.

"That's little grub for six starvin' people corralled in the desert. But the grub end ain't worryin' me. Yaqui can get sheep up the slopes. Water! That's the beginnin' an' middle an' end of our case."

"Laddy, I reckon the waterhole here never goes dry," replied Jim.

"Ask the Indian."

Upon being questioned, Yaqui spoke of the dreaded ano seco of the Mexicans. In a dry year this waterhole failed.

"Dick, take a rope an' see how much water's in the hole."

Gale could not find bottom with a thirty-foot lasso. The water was as cool, clear, sweet as if it had been kept in a shaded iron receptacle.

Ladd welcomed this information with surprise and gladness. "Let's see. Last year was shore pretty dry. Maybe this summer won't be. Maybe our wonderful good luck'll hold. Ask Yaqui if he thinks it'll rain."

Mercedes questioned the Indian.

"He says no man can tell surely. But he thinks the rain will come," she replied.

"Shore it'll rain, you can gamble on that now," continued Ladd. "If there's only grass for the hosses! We can't get out of here without hosses. Dick, take the Indian an' scout down the arroyo. Today I seen the hosses were gettin' fat. Gettin' fat in this desert! But maybe they've about grazed up all the grass. Go an' see, Djek. An' may you come back with more good news!"

Gale found that the arroyo widened as it opened. Near the head, where it was narrow, patches of gray grass grew everywhere. Gale began to wonder where the horses were. Finally the trees and brush thinned out, and a mile-wide gray plain stretched down to reddish sand dunes. Over to one side were the white horses, and here was grass enough for many; the arroyo was indeed an oasis.

Ladd and the others were awaiting Gale's report, and they received it with calmness, yet with a joy no less evident because it was restrained. Gale, in his keen observation at the moment, found that he and his comrades turned with glad eyes to the woman of the party.

"Senor Laddy, you think—you believe—we shall—?" she faltered, and her voice failed.

"Mercedes, no white man can tell what'll come to pass out here," said Ladd, earnestly. "Shore I have hopes now I never dreamed of. I was pretty near a dead man. The Indian saved me. Beldin had it right. Yaqui's our godsend. Now, as to the future, I'd like to know maybe as well as you if we're ever to get home. Only beln' what I am, I say, Quien sabe? But somethin' tells me Yaqui knows. Ask him, Mercedes. Make him tell. He's a silent Indian, but make him tell."

Mercedes called to Yaqui. At her bidding there was always a suggestion of hurry, which otherwise was never manifest in his actions. She put a hand on his bare muscular arm and began to speak in Spanish. Her voice thrilled Gale, though he understood scarcely a word she said. He did not need translation to know that here spoke the longing of a woman for life, love, home, the heritage of a woman's heart.

"Si!" rolled out the Indian's reply, full of power and depth.

Mercedes drew a long breath, and her hand sought Thorne's.

"He says yes," she whispered. "He answers he'll save us; he'll take us all back—he knows!"

The Indian turned away to his tasks, and the silence that held the little group was finally broken by Ladd.

"Shore I said so. Now all we've got to do is use sense. Friends, I'm the commissary department of this outfit, an' what I say goes. You all won't eat except when I tell you. Maybe it'll not be so hard to keep our health. Starved beggars don't get sick. But there's the best comin', an' we can all go home, you know. To pass the time! Lord, that's our problem. Now, if you all only had a hankerin' for checkers. Shore I'll make a board an' make you play. Thorne, you're the luckiest. You've got your girl, an' this tent as a honeymoon. Now with a few tools an' little material see what a good house you can build for your wife. Ah, you're back, see. You

By ZANE GREY

Author of

The Riders of the Purple Sage, Wildfire, Etc.

Copyright by Harper & Brothers.

like to hunt, an' up there you'll find the finest bighorn huntin' in the West. Take Yaqui and the .405. We need the meat, but while you're gettin' it have your sport. Rustle now, son. Get some enthusiasm. For shore you'll need it for yourself an' us."

Gale climbed the lava slope, away round to the right of the arroyo, along an old trail that Yaqui said the Papagos had made before his own people hunted there. From the crests Yaqui's searching falcon gazed roved near and far for signs of sheep. Suddenly he grasped Gale and pointed across a deep, wide gully.

With the aid of his glass Gale saw five sheep. They were looking in his direction. Remembering what he had heard about the wonderful eyesight of these mountain animals, Gale could only conclude that they had seen the hunters.

Then Yaqui's movements attracted and interested him. The Indian had brought with him a red scarf and a mesquite branch. He tied the scarf on the stick, and propped this up in a crack of the lava. The scarf waved in the wind. That done, the Indian bade Gale watch.

Once again he leveled the glass at the sheep. All five now were motionless, standing like statues, heads pointed across the gully. They were more than a mile distant. When Gale looked without his glass they merged into the roughness of the lava. He was intensely interested. Did the sheep see the red scarf? It seemed incredible, but nothing else could account for that statuesque alertness. The sheep held this rigid position for perhaps fifteen minutes. Then the leading ram started to approach. The others followed. He took a few steps, then halted. He held his head up, nose pointed.

"By George, they're coming!" exclaimed Gale. "They see that flag. They're hunting us. They're curious. If this doesn't beat me!"

Evidently the Indian understood, for he grunted.

Gale found difficulty in curbing his impatience. The approach of the sheep was slow. The big ram led on with regular persistence, and in half an hour's time he was in the bottom of the great gulf, and soon he was facing up the slope. Gale knew then that the alluring scarf had fascinated him. The animals disappeared behind another ridge. Gale kept watching, sure they would come out farther on. A tense period of waiting passed,



Suddenly He Grasped Gale and Pointed Across a Deep, Wide Gully.

then a sudden electrifying pressure of Yaqui's hand made Gale tremble with excitement.

Very cautiously he shifted his position. There, not fifty feet distant upon a high mound of lava, stood the leader of the sheep. As Gale watched, the second ram leaped lightly upon the mound, and presently the three others did likewise.

The splendid leader stepped closer, his round, protruding amber eyes, which Gale could now plainly see, intent upon that fatal red flag. Like automatons the other four crowded into his tracks. A few little slow steps, then the leader halted.

At this instant Gale's absorbed attention was directed by Yaqui to the rifle, and so to the purpose of the climb. He reached for the .405, and as he threw the shell into the chamber the slight metallic click made the sheep jump. Then he rose quickly to his feet.

The noble ram and his band simply stared at Gale. They had never seen a man. They showed not the slightest indication of instinctive fear. Gale imagined that they were going to step still closer. He did not choose to wait to see if this were true. Certainly it already took a grim resolution to raise the heavy .405.

His shot killed the big leader. The others bounded away with remark-

able nimbleness. Gale used up the remaining four shells to drop the second ram, and by the time he had re-loaded the others were out of range.

The Yaqui's method of hunting was sure and deadly and saving in energy, but Gale never would try it again. He chose to stalk the game. After being hunted a few times and shot at, the sheep became exceedingly difficult to approach. He failed often. The stalk called forth all that was in him of endurance, cunning, speed. And like a shadow the faithful Yaqui tried ever to keep at his heels.

One morning Yaqui spied a flock of sheep far under the curved, broken rim of the main crater. Then began the stalk. Hiding, slipping, creeping, crawling, Gale closed in upon his quarry until the long rifle grew like stone in his grip, and the whipping "spang" ripped the silence, and the strange echo boomed deep in the crater, and rolled around, as if in hollow mockery at the hopelessness of escape.

He waited beside his quarry, and breathed deep, and swept the long slopes with searching eyes of habit. When Yaqui came up they set about the hardest task of all, to pack the best of that heavy sheep down miles of steep, ragged, choya-covered lava.

The torrid summer heat came imperceptibly, or it could never have been borne by white men. It changed the lives of the fugitives, making them partly nocturnal in habit. The nights had the balmy coolness of spring, and would have been delightful for sleep, but that would have made the blagging days unendurable.

As Ladd had said, one of their greatest problems was the passing of time. The nights were interminably long, but they had to be passed in work or play or dream—anything except sleep. That was Ladd's most inflexible command. He gave no reason. But not improbably the ranger thought that the terrific heat of the day spent in slumber lessened a wear and strain, if not a real danger of madness.

Accordingly, at first the occupations of this little group were many and various. They worked if they had something to do, or could invent a pretext. They told and retold stories until all were wearisome. They sang songs. Mercedes taught Spanish. They played every game they knew. They invented others that were so trivial children would scarcely have been interested, and these they played seriously. In a word, with intelligence and passion, with all that was civilized and human, they fought the ever-infringing loneliness, the savage solitude of their environment.

Gale believed himself the keenest of the party, the one who thought most, and he watched the effect of the desert upon his companions. For hours, it seemed, Ladd would bend over his checkerboard and never make a move. It mattered not now whether or not he had a partner. Jim Lash, the calmest, coolest, most nonchalant, best-humored westerner Gale had ever met, had by slow degrees, lost that cheerful character which would have been of such infinite good to his companions, and always he sat brooding, silently brooding. Jim had no ties, few memories, and the desert was claiming him.

Thorne and Mercedes, however, were living, wonderful proof that spirit, mind, and heart were free—free to soar in scorn of the colossal barrenness and silence and space of that terrible hedging prison of lava. They were young; they loved; they were together; and the oasis was almost a paradise. Thorne and Mercedes had forgotten the outside world. If they had been existing on the burned-out desolate moon they could hardly have been in a harsher, grimmer, lonelier spot than this red-walled arroyo.

Although the Yaqui was as his shadow, Gale reached a point when he seemed to wander alone at twilight, in the night, at dawn. At night he had formed a habit of climbing up the lava slope as far as the smooth trail extended, and there on a promontory he paced to and fro, and watched the stars, and sat stone-still for hours looking down at the vast void with its moving, changing shadows. He came at length to realize that the desert was a teacher. He did not realize all that he had learned, but he was a different man. And when he decided upon that, he was not thinking of the slow, sure call to the primal instincts of man; he was thinking that the desert, as much as he had experienced and no more, would absolutely overturn the whole scale of a man's values, break old habits, form new ones, remake him. More of desert experience, Gale believed, would be too much for intellect. The desert did not breed civilized men.

Thus the nights passed, endlessly long, with Gale fighting for his old order of thought, fighting the fascination of that infinite sky, and the gloomy insulating whirl of the wide shadows, fighting for belief, hope, prayer, fighting against the terrible ever-recurring idea of being lost, lost in the desert, fighting harder than any other thing the instincts, pushing, thrusting, watching and that

was coming between him and his memory.

He felt he was losing the battle, losing his hold on tangible things, losing his power to stand up under this ponderous, merciless weight of desert space and silence.

At the moment he was alone on the promontory. The night was far spent. A ghastly moon haunted the black volcanic spurs. The winds blew silently. Was he alone? No, he did not seem to be alone. The Yaqui was there. Suddenly a strange, cold sensation crept over Gale. It was new. He felt a presence. Turning, he expected to see the Indian, but instead, a slight shadow, pale, almost white, stood there, not close nor yet distant. It seemed to brighten. Then he saw a woman who resembled a girl he had seemed to know long ago. She was white-faced, golden-haired, and her lips were sweet, and her eyes were turning black. Nell! He had forgotten her. Over him flooded a torrent of memory. There was tragic woe in this sweet face. Nell was holding out her arms—she was crying aloud to him across the sand and the cactus and the lava. She was in trouble, and he had been forgetting.

That night he climbed the lava to



He Came at Length to Realize That the Desert Was a Teacher.

the topmost cone, and never slipped on a ragged crust nor touched a choya thorn. A voice had called to him. He saw Nell's eyes in the stars, in the velvet blue of sky, in the blackness of the engulfing shadows. She was with him, a slender shape, a spirit, keeping step with him, and memory was strong, sweet, beating, beautiful. Far down in the west, faintly golden with light of the sinking moon, he saw a cloud that resembled her face. A cloud on the desert horizon! He gazed and gazed. Was that a spirit face like the one by his side? No—he did not dream.

In the hot, sultry morning Yaqui appeared at camp, after long hours of absence, and he pointed with a long, dark arm toward the west. A bank of clouds was rising above the mountain barrier.

"Rain!" he cried; and his sonorous voice rolled down the arroyo.

Those who heard him were as shipwrecked mariners at sight of a distant sail.

Dick Gale, silent, grateful to the depths of his soul, stood with arm over Blanco Sol and watched the transforming west, where clouds of wondrous size and hue piled over one another, rushing, darkening, spreading, sweeping upward toward that white and glowing sun.

"Oh! I felt a drop of rain on my face!" cried Mercedes; and, whispering the name of a saint, she kissed her husband.

Ladd, gaunt, old, bent, looked up at the maelstrom of clouds, and he said, softly, "Shore we'll get in the hosses, an' pack light, an' hit the trail, an' make night marches!"

Then up out of the gulf of the west swept a bellowing wind and a black pall and terrible flashes of lightning and thunder like the end of the world—fury, blackness, chaos, the desert storm.

CHAPTER XVII

The Whistle of a Horse.

At the ranch-house at Forlorn River Belding stood alone. He took up the gun belt from his table and with slow hands buckled it around his waist. He seemed to feel something familiar and comfortable and inspiring in the weight of the big gun against his hip. He faced the door as if to go out, but hesitated, and then began a slow, plodding walk up and down the length of the room. Presently he halted at the table, and with reluctant hands he unbuckled the gun belt and laid it down.

The action did not have an air of finality, and Belding knew it. He had been a sheriff when the law in the West depended on a quickness of wrist; he had seen many a man lay down his gun for good and all. His own action was not final. Of late he had done the same thing many times, and this last time it seemed a little harder to do, a little more indicative of resignation. There were reasons why Belding's gun held for him a gloomy fascination.

The Chases, those grasping and scienceless agents of a new force in the development of the West, were bent upon Belding's ruin, and so far as his fortunes at Forlorn River were concerned, had almost accomplished it. One by one he lost points for which he contended with them. He carried into the Tucson courts the matter of the staked claims, and mining claims, and water claims, and he lost all. Following that, he lost his government position as inspector of immigration; and this fact, because of what he considered its injustice, had been a hard blow. He had been made to suffer a humiliation equally as great. It came about that he actually had to pay the Chases for water to irrigate his alfalfa fields. The never-falling spring upon his land answered for the needs of household and horses, but no more.

These matters were unfortunate for Belding, but not by any means wholly accountable for his worry and unhappiness and brooding fate. He believed Dick Gale and the rest of the party taken into the desert by the Yaqui had been killed or lost. Two months before a string of Mexican horses, riderless, saddled, starved for grass and wild for water, had come to Forlorn River. They were a part of the horses belonging to Rojas and his band. Their arrival complicated the mystery and strengthened convictions of the loss of both pursuers and pursued.

Belding's unhappiness could hardly be laid to material loss. He had been rich and was now poor, but change of fortune such as that could not have made him unhappy. Something more somber and mysterious and sad than the loss of Dick Gale and their friends had come into the lives of his wife and Nell. He dated the time of this change back to a certain day when Mrs. Belding recognized in the elder Chase an old schoolmate and a rejected suitor. It took time for slow-thinking Belding to discover anything wrong in his household, but gradually he had forced on him the fact of some secret cause for grief other than Gale's loss. He was sure of it when his wife signified her desire to make a visit to her old home back in Peoria.

A letter she had received contained news that may or may not have been authentic; but it was enough, Belding thought, to interest his wife. An old prospector had returned to Peoria, and he had told relatives of meeting Robert Burton at the Sonoyta oasis fifteen years before, and that Burton had gone into the desert never to return. To Belding this was no surprise, for he had heard that before his marriage. There appeared to have been no doubts as to the death of his wife's first husband. The singular thing was that both Nell's father and grandfather had been lost somewhere in the Sonora desert.

Belding did not oppose his wife's desire to visit her old home. He thought it would be a wholesome trip for her, and did all in his power to persuade Nell to accompany her. But Nell would not go.

It was after Mrs. Belding's departure that Belding discovered in Nell a condition of mind that amazed and distressed him. She had suddenly become strangely wretched. She would tell him nothing. But after a while, when he had thought it out, he dated this deplorable change in Nell back to a day on which he had met Nell with Radford Chase. This indefatigable wooer had not in the least abandoned his suit. A slow surprise gathered upon Tom Belding when he saw that Nell, apparently, was accepting young Chase's attentions. At least, she no longer hid from him. Belding could not account for this, because he was sure Nell cordially despised the fellow. And toward the end he divined, if he did not actually know, that these Chases possessed some strange power over Nell, and were using it. That stirred a hate in Belding—a hate he had felt at the first and had manfully striven against, which now gave him over to dark brooding thoughts.

Midsummer passed, and the storms came late. But when they arrived they made up for tardiness. Belding did not remember so terrible a storm of wind and rain as that which broke the summer's drought.

The Chases had extended a main irrigation ditch down to Belding's farm, skipped the width of his ground, then had gone on down through Altar valley. They had exerted every influence to obtain right to connect these ditches by digging through his land, but Belding had remained obdurate. He refused to have any dealings with them. It was therefore with some curiosity and suspicion that he saw a gang of Mexicans once more at work upon these ditches.

At daylight next morning a tremendous blast almost threw Belding out of his bed. It cracked the adobe walls of his house and broke windows and sent pans and crockery to the floor with a crash. Belding's idea was that the store of dynamite kept by the Chases for blasting had blown up. Hurriedly getting into his clothes, he went to Nell's room to reassure her; and, telling her to have a thought for their guests, he went out to see what had happened.

A great yellow cloud, like smoke, hung over the river. This appeared to be at the upper end of Belding's plot, and close to the river. When he reached his fence the smoke and dust were so thick he could scarcely breathe, and for a little while he was unable to see what had happened. Presently he made out a huge hole in the sand just about where the irrigation ditch had stopped near his line. For some reason or other, not clear to Belding, the Mexicans had set off an extraordinarily heavy blast at that point.

NERVOUS WOMAN COMPLETE WRECK

Tells How She Was Made Well by Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound

Indianapolis, Indiana.—"Now I want to tell you just what induced me to take your medicine. It seemed that I had some kind of weakness so that I could not carry a child its full time. The last time I was troubled this way I had a nervous breakdown and was a complete wreck. The doctor thought I would not live, and if I did that I would never be well and strong again. But I told them I was going to get well, that I was not going to die just then. My husband got me Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound and I took six bottles of it. I soon got strong again and had three more children. I have recommended the Vegetable Compound ever since, and if you could see me now you would think I had always been well."—Mrs. MARY E. HAMMILL, 234 Detroit St., Indianapolis, Ind.

Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound is an excellent medicine for expectant mothers and should be taken during the entire period. It has a general effect on the reproductive system, so that it may work in every respect naturally as nature intends.

CORNS

Lift Off with Fingers



Doesn't hurt a bit! Drop a little "Freezone" on an aching corn, instantly that corn stops hurting, then shortly you lift it right off with fingers. Truly!

Your druggist sells a tiny bottle of "Freezone" for a few cents, sufficient to remove every hard corn, soft corn, or corn between the toes, and the calluses, without soreness or irritation.

A Freak.
From a story—"She had an exquisitely molded face, of which two dark brown eyes were the central feature." Usually the nose occupies that position.—Boston Transcript.

Baby Was Pale and He Did Not Seem to Grow

If the baby's stomach is out of order he does not assimilate his food and stops growing. This was the trouble with Mrs. A. L. Williams' baby. Mrs. Williams lives at Racepond, Ga., and writes:

"My baby never seemed to grow and was pale and sallow. My sister told me to give him Teethina, as she gave it to her baby, who is as fat as a pig. I took her advice, and in a week my baby was completely changed. His complexion cleared up and he started growing."

Teethina corrected her baby's stomach trouble so he could digest and assimilate his food, which is absolutely essential to baby's health and growth.

Teethina is sold by all druggists, or send 30c to the Moffet Laboratories and get a package of Teethina and a wonderful free booklet about Baby.—Advertisement.

Flavoring Roquefort Cheese.
Holes in Roquefort cheese are placed there by machinery to admit air and enable the mold to grow, thus giving the desired flavor.

Losing Weight—In Butter.
"You don't look as fat as you were."
"Well, I lost two pounds the other day."
"Dear, dear!"
"Yes, it was dear. I left a parcel of butter on the train rack."—London Tit-Bits.

Sure Relief FOR INDIGESTION

BELLEVUE'S Hot Water Sure Relief