Desert Gold

By ZANE GREY

Riders of the Purple Sage, Wildfire, Etc.

ROUGH-HOUSE!

SYNOPSIS.-Seeking gold in the desert, "Cameron," solitary prospector, forms a partnership with an unknown man whom he later learns is Jonas Warren, father of a girl whom Cameron wronged, but later married, back in Illinois. Cameron's explanations appease Warren, and the two proceed together. 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 documents. 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 Castadena, Spanish girl, his afflanced wife, from Rojas, Mexican bandit.

CHAPTER I .- Continued.

"Dick, think, think! With Mercedes also it was love at first sight. My plan is to marry her and get her farther to the interior, away from the border. It may not be easy. She's watched. So am I. Rojas must have got word to his friends here; yesterday his gang of cutthroat rebels arrived, and today he came. When I learned that, I took my chance and left camp; I hunted up a priest. He promised to come here. It's time he's due. But I'm afraid he'll be stopped. You see, we're over the line-"

"Are we in Mexican territory now?" queried Gale, sharply.

"I guess yes, old boy. That's what complicates it. Rojas and his rebels have Cusita in their hands. If Mercedes is really watched-if her identity is known, which I am sure is the case-we couldn't get far from this house before I'd be knifed and she seized."

"Good heavens! Thorne, can that sort of thing happen less than a stone's throw from the United States line?" asked Gale, incredulously.

"It can happen, and don't you forget it. You don't seem to realize the power these guerrilla leaders, these rebel captains, and particularly these bandits, exercise over the mass of Mexicans. I've seen Rojas. He's a handsome, bold, sneering devil, vainer than any peacock. He decks himself in gold lace and silver trappings, in all the finery he can steal. He spends gold like he spills blood. But he is chiefly famous for abducting women. The peon girls consider it an honor to be ridden off with: Rojas has shown a penchant for girls of the bet-

Thorne wiped the perspiration from his pale face and bent a dark gaze out of the window before he resumed

"Consider what the position of Mercedes really is. Rojas can turn all the hidden underground influences to his ends. Unless I thwart him he'll get Mercedes as easily as he can light a cigarette. But I'll kill him or some of his gang or her before I let him get her. . . . This is the situation, old friend. I've little time to spare. I face arrest for desertion. Rojas is in town. I think I was followed to this hotel. The priest has betrayed me or has been stopped, Mercedes is here alone, waiting, absolutely dependent upon me to save her fromfrom . . . She's the sweetest, loveliest girl! . . . In a few momentssooner or later there'll be hell here! Dick, are you with me?"

Dick Gale drew a long, deep breath. A coldness, a lethargy, and indifference that had weighed upon him for months had passed out of his being. On the instant he could not speak, but his hand closed powerfully upon his friend's. Thorne's face changed wonderfully, the distress, the fear, the appeal all vanishing in a smile of passionate gratefulness.

Then Dick's gaze attracted by some slight sound, shot over his friend's shoulder to see a face at the window -a handsome, bold, sneering face, with glittering dark eyes that flashed in sinister intentness.

Dick stiffened in his seat. Thorne, with sudden clenching of hands, wheeled toward the window. "Rojas!" he whisperea.

CHAPTER II

Mercedes Castaneda.

The dark face vanished. Dick Gale heard footsteps and the tinkle of spurs. He strode to the window, and was in time to see a Mexican swagger into the front door of the saloon. There were men passing in the street. several Mexicans lounging against the hitching rail at the curb.

"Did you see him? Where did he go?" whispered Thorne, as he joined Gale. "Those Greasers out there with the cartridge belts crossed over their breasts-they are rebels. I'm afraid Rojas has the house spotted."

"If we could only be sure."

the other side of the house." Gale followed Thorne out of the restaurant into the high-ceiled corridor

lamps flickered. Thorne entered a love and happiness for us. It's life or huge chamber which was even more poorly lighted than the hall. It contained a table littered with papers, a few high-backed chairs, a couple of

couches, and was evidently a parlor. "Mercedes has been meeting me here," said Thorne. "At this hour she comes every moment or so to the head of the stairs there, and if I am here she comes down. Mostly there are people in this room a little later. We go out into the plaza. It faces the dark side of the house, and that's the place I must slip out with her if there's any chance at all to get away."

They peered out of the open window. In a moment, however, Gale made out a slow-pacing dark form on the path. Farther down there was another. No particular keenness was required to see in these forms a sentinel-like stealthiness.

Gripping Gale's arm, Thorne pulled back from the window.

"You saw them," he whispered. "It's just as I feared. Rojas has the place surrounded. I should have taken Mercedes away. But I had no time-no chance! I'm bound! . . . There's Mercedes now! My G-d! . . Dick, think, think-think if there's a way to get her out of this trap!"

Gale turned as his friend went down the room. In the dim light at the head of the stairs stood the slim, muffled figure of a woman. When she saw Thorne she flew noiselessly down the stairway to him. He caught her in his arms. Then she spoke softly, brokenly, in a low, swift voice. It was a mingling of incoherent Spanish and English; but to Gale It was mellow, deep, unutterably tender, a voice full of joy, fear, passion, hope and love. Upon Gale it had an unaccountable effect. He found himself thrilling, wondering.

Thorne led the girl to the center of the room, under the light where Gale

"Mercedes-Dick Gale, an old friend -the best friend I ever had." -

She swept the mantilla back over her head, disclosing a lovely face, strange and striking to Gale in its pride and fire, its intensity.

"Senor Gale-ah! I cannot speak my happiness. His friend!"

"Yes, Mercedes; my friend and yours," said Thorne, speaking rapidly. "We'll have need of him. Dear. there's bad news and no time to break it gently. The priest did not come. He must have been detained. And listen-be brave, dear Mercedes-Rojas is here!"

She uttered an inarticulate cry, the poignant terror of which shook Gale's nerve, and swayed as if she would faint. Thorne caught her and in husky voice importuned her to bear

"My darling! For God's sake don't faint-don't go to pieces! We'd be lost! We've got a chance. We'll think of something. Be strong! Fight!" It was plain to Gale that Thorne

was distracted. He scarcely knew what he was saying. Pale and shaking, he clasped Mercedes to him. She cried out in Spanish, beseech-

ing him; and as he shook his head, she changed to English: "Senor, my lover, I will be strong-

I will fight-I will obey. But swear



But Swear by My Virgin, If Need Be to Save Me From Rojas-You Will

by my Virgin, if need be to save me from Rojas-you will kill me!"

"Mercedes! Yes, I'll swear," he replied, hoarsely. "I know-I'd rather have you dead than- But don't give up. Rojas can't be sure of you, or he wouldn't wait. He's in there. He's after him. Then Gale swerved, stag- and went on. Not for some distance "I'm sure, Dick. Let's cross the got his men there—all around us. But gering along, brushed against the beyond, where the street ended in hall; I want to see how it looks from he hesitates. A beast like Rojas tables, kicked over the empty chairs. open country, did they halt to wait. doesn't stand idle for nothing. I tell The hum of the many voices grew you we've a chance. Dick, here, will think of something. We'll slip away, against a table, overturning it and which evidently divided the hotel. Then he'll take you somewhere. Only spilling glasses into the laps of sevopening into the street and running -speak to him-show him you won't eral Mexicans, there arose a shrill cry. replied Gale.

She became quiet, and slowly recovered control of herself. She wheeled to face Gale with proud dark eyes, tragic sweetness of appeal, an exquisite grace.

"Senor, you are an American. You cannot know the Spanish blood-the peon bandit's hate and cruelty. I wish to die before Rojas' hand touches me. If he takes me alive, then the hour, the little day that my life lasts afterward will be torture-torture of hell. If I live two days his brutal men will have me. If I live three, the dogs of his camp . . . Senor, have you a sister whom you love? Help Senor Thorne to save me. He is a soldier. He is bound. He must not betray his honor, his duty, for me. . . Now, let me waste no more precious time. I am ready. I will be brave."

her white hands, a woman all fire and soul and passion. To Gale she was wonderful. His heart leaped. As he bent over her hands and kissed them he seemed to feel himself renewed,

She came close to Gale, holding out

"Senorita," he said, "I am happy to be your servant. I can conceive of no greater pleasure than giving the service you require."

"And what is that?" inquired Thorne hurriedly.

"That of incapacitating Senor Rojas for tonight, and perhaps several nights to come," replied Gale. "I'll make a row in that saloon. I'll start something. I'll rush Rojas and his crowd. I'll-"

"Lord, no; you mustn't, Dickyou'll be knifed!" cried Thorne.

"I'll take a chance. Maybe I can surprise that slow Greaser bunch and get away before they know what's happened. . . You be ready watching at the window. When the row starts those fellows out there in the plaza will run into the saleon. Then you slip out, go straight through the plaza down the street. It's a dark street, I remember. I'll catch up with you before you get far."

Thorne gasped, but ded not say a word. Mercedes leaned against him. her white hands now at her breast, her great eyes watching Gale as he went out.

In the corridor Gale stopped long enough to pull on a pair of heavy gloves, to muss his hair, and disarrange his collar. Then he stepped into the restaurant, went through, and halted in the door leading into the saloon. No one appeared to notice him. Gale's roving glance soon fixed upon the man he took to be Rojas. The Mexicanis face was turned aside. He was in earnest, excited colloquy with a dozen or more comrades, most of whom we sitting round a table. They were listening, talking, drinking. The fact that they wore cartridge belts crossed over their breasts satisfied Gale that these were the rebels. He became conscious of an inward fire that threatened to overrun his coolness. Other emotions harried his selfcontrol. It seemed as it sight of the man liberated or created a devil in Gale. And at the bottom of his feelings there seemed to be a wonder at himself, a strange satisfaction for the something that had come to him.

He stepped out of the doorway. down the couple of steps to the floor of the saloon, and he staggered a little, simulating drunkenness. He fell over the pool tables, jostled Mexicans at the bar, laughed like a maudlin fool, and, with his hat slouched down. crowded here and there. Presently his eye caught sight of the group of cowboys whom he had before noticed with such interest.

They were still in a corner somewhat isolated. With fertile mind working, Gale lurched over to them. If he were to get any help from these silent aloof rangers it must be by striking fire from them in one swift stroke. Planting himself squarely before the two tall cowboys who were standing, he looked straight into their lean, bronzed faces. He spared a full moment for that keen, cool gaze before he spoke.

"I'm not drunk. I'm throwing a bluff, and I mean to start a rough house. I'm going to rush that d-d bandit Rojas. It's to save a girl-to he saw two dark figures. He ran give her lover, who is my friend, a faster, and soon reached the street. chance to escape with her. She's in The uproar back in the hotel began the house. Rojas is here to get her. When I start a row my friend will try to slip out with her. Every door and window is watched. I've got to raise h-l to draw the guards in. . . . Well, you're my countrymen. We're

in Mexico. A beautiful giri's honor and life are at stake. Now, gentlemen, watch me!"

One cowboy's eyes narrowed, blinking a little, and his lean jaw dropped; the other's hard face rippled with a

fleeting smile. Gale backed away, and his pulse leaped when he saw the two cowboys, louder, and when Dick lurched back to a patio. A few dim, yellow weaken. Mercedes, this is more than He had succeeded in attracting at-

tention; almost every face turned his way. One of the insulted men, a little tawny fellow, leaped to confront Gale, and in a frenzy screamed a volley of Spanish, of which Gale distinguished "Gringo!" Dick swung his leg and with a swift side kick knocked the fellow's feet from under him, whirling him down with a thud.

The action was performed so suddenly, so adroitly, it made the Mexican such a weakling, so like a tumbled tenpin, that the shrill jabbering hushed. Gale knew this to be the significant moment.

Wheeling, he rushed at Rojas. It was his old line-breaking plunge. Neither Rojas nor his men had time to move. The black-skinned bandit's



Turned a Dirty White.

face turned a dirty white; his jaw dropped; he would have shrieked if Gale -had not hit him. The blow swept him backward against his men. Then Gale's heavy body, swiftly following with the momentum of that rush, struck the little group of rebels. They went down with the table and chairs in a sliding crash.

Gale, carried by his plunge, went with them. Like a cat he landed on top. As he rose his powerful hands fastened on Rojas. He jerked the little bandit off the tangled pile of struggling, yelling men, and, swinging him with terrific force, let go his hold. Rojas slid along the floor, knocking over tables and chairs. Gale bounded back, dragged Rojas up, handling him as if he were a limp sack.

A shot rang out above the yells. Gale heard the jingle of breaking glass. The room darkened perceptibly. He flashed a glance backward. The two cowboys were between him and the crowd of frantic rebels. One cowboy held two guns low down, level in front of him. The other had his gun raised and aimed. On the instant it spouted red and white. With the crack dame the crashing of glass, another darkening shade over the room. With a cry Gale slung the bleeding Rojas from him. The bandit struck a table, toppled over it, fell, and lay

Another shot made the room full of moving shadows, with light only back of the bar. A white-clad figure rushed at Gale. He tripped the man, but had to kick hard to disengage himself from grasping hands. Another figure closed in on Gale. This one was dark, swift. A blade glinted-described a circle aloft. Simultaneously with a close, red flash the knife wavered; the man wielding it stumbled backward. Then partiemonium broke loose. The din became a roar. Gale heard shots that sounded like dull spats in the distance. The big lamp behind the bar seemingly split, then sputtered and went out, leaving the room in darkness.

Gale leaped toward the restaurant door, which was outlined faintly by the yellow light within. Right and left he pushed the groping men who jostled with him: He vaulted a pool table, sent tables and chairs flying, and gained the door, to be the first of a wedging mob to squeeze through. One sweep of his arm knocked the restaurant lamp from its stand; and he ran out, leaving darkness behind him. A few bounds took him into the parlor. It was deserted. Thorne had gotten away with Mercedes!

It was then Gale slowed up. For the space of perhaps sixty seconds he had been moving with startling velocity. He peered cautiously out into the plaza. Under a street lamp at the far end of the path he thought to diminish, or else he was getting out of hearing. The few people he saw close at hand were all coming his way, and only the foremost showed any excitement. Gale walked swiftly. peering ahead for two figures. Presently he saw them-one tall, wearing a cape; the other slight; mantled. Gale drew a sharp breath of relief. Thorne and Mercedes were not far dhead.

He began to overhaul them; and soon, when the last lamp had been passed and the street was dark, he ventured a whistle. Thorne heard as if with one purpose, slowly stride it, for he turned, whistled a low reply, Then he came up with the fugitives.

Thorne, grasping Gale.

"Good! Good!" choked Thorne. "I ing the forests.

was scared-helpless. . it worked splendidly. We had no trouble. What on earth did you do?" "I made the row, all right," said Dick. "While I was rushing Rojas a couple of cowboys shot out the lamplights. A Mexican who pulled a

knife on me got hurt, I guess. Then

I think there was some shooting from

the rebels after the room was dark." Mercedes pressed close to him, touched his hands, looked up into his face with wonderful eyes. He thought he would not soon forget their beauty -the shadow of pain that had been the hope dawning so fugitively.

"Dear lady," said Gale, with voice not wholly steady, "Rojas himself will hound you no more tonight, nor for many nights."

She seemed to shake, to thrill, to rise with the intelligence. She pressed his hand close over her heaving breast. Gale felt the quick throb of her heart.

"Senor! Senor Dick!" she cried. Then her voice failed. But her hands flew up; quick as a flash she raised her face-kissed him. Then she turned and with a sob fell into Thorne's arms.

There ensued a silence broken only by Mercedes' sobbing. Gale walked some paces away. If he were not stunned, he certainly was agitated. The strange, sweet fire of that girl's lips remained with him. On the spur of the moment he imagined he had a jealousy of Thorne. But presently this passed. What remained with him was the splendid glow of gladness that he had been of service to Thorne.

"Dick, Dick, come here!" called Thorne softly. "Let's pull ourselves together now. We've got a problem yet. What to do? Where to go? How to get any place? We're on good old U. S. ground this minute, but we're not out of danger."

As he paused, evidently hoping for a suggestion from Gale, the silence was broken by the clear, ringing peal of a bugle. Thorne gave a violent start.

"It's a call, Dick! It's a call!" he cried.

Gale had no answer to make. Mercedes stood as if stricken. The bugle call ended. From a distance another faintly pealed. There were other sounds too remote to recognize. Then scattering shots rattled out.

"Dick, the rebels are fighting somebody," burst out Thorne excitedly. "The little federal garrison still holds its stand. Perhaps it is attacked again. Anyway, there's something doing over the line. Maybe the crazy Greasers are firing on our camp. We've feared it-in the dark. . . . And here I am, away without leavepractically a deserter!"

"Go back! .Go back, before you're too late!" cried Mercedes.

"Better make tracks, Thorne," added Gale. "It can't help our predicament for you to be arrested. I'll take care of Mercedes."

"No, no, no," replied Thorne. can get away—avoid arrest." Mercedes embraced her lover,

begged him to go. Thorne wavered. "Dick, I'm up against it," he said. "You're right. If only I can run back in time. But, oh, I hate to leave he?! Old fellow, you've saved berd I alread; owe you everlasting gratitude. Keep out of Casita, Dick. The U. S. side might be safe, but I'm afraid to trust it at night. Go out in the desert, up in the mountains, in some safe place. Then come to me in camp. We'll plan. I'll have to confide in Colonel Weede. Maybe he'll help us.

Hide her from the rebels-that's all." He wrung Dick's hand, clasped Mercedes tightly in his arms, kissed her, and murmured low over her, then released her to rush off into the darkness. He disappeared in the gloom. The sound of his dull footfalls gradually died away.

Gale realized that he was between the edge of an unknown desert and the edge of a hostile town. He had to choose the desert, because, though he had no doubt that in Casita there were many Americans who might befriend him, he could not chance the risks of seeking them at night.

He felt a slight touch on his arm, felt it move down, felt Mercedes slip to trembling cold little hand into his. Dick looked at her. If the loneliness, the silence, the desert, the unknown dangers of the night affected him, what must they be to this hunted, driven girl? Gale's heart swelled. He was alone with her. He had no weap on, no money, no food, no drink, no covering, nothing except his two hands. He did not know where to find the railroad, or any road or trail. or whether or not there were towns near or far. It, was a critical, desperate situation. He thought first of the girl, and groaned in spirit, prayed that it would be given him to save her. When he remembered himself it was with the stunning consciousness that he could conceive of no situation which he would have exchanged for this one—where fortune had set him a perilous task of loyalty to a friend, to a helpless girl. "Senor, senor!" suddenly whispered

Mercedes, clinging to him. "Listen! I hear horses coming!"

man, an' he could lick you inin half a second."

"Tom Beldin', he's a gentle-

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Balance,

A railroad purchasing agent writes: "An oak railroad tie lasts twenty years. And it takes twenty years to grow an oak tree to a size suitable for ties. Observe how finely nature "Dick! Are you-all right?" panted balances the thing." We lose that balance, however, when we fail to plant "I'm-out of breath-but-O. K.." a tree for every one cut down. Teach your children the wisdom of conserv

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I was the last to enroll in the English class and the young instructor had copied my name-Dowling-hurriedly as the class bell sounded. He called the roll with much gusto until he came to the badly scribbled

"Darling!" He Exclaimed.

last name. A pause. Then in an uncertain voice he said: "Darling?" Silence. "Darling!" he exclaimed.

"Do you mean me?" I murmured. The ensuing shouts of laughter filled me with greater embarrassment than I ever experienced.-Exchange!

Just as Noisy. Mrs. Johnsing-Ah thought you all

said you was gwine to name your new baby "Victrola," but Ah hears you all done make a change.

Mrs. Moses-Yes, Ah expected it would be a girl an' Ah had decided to name her "Victrola," but she turned out to be a boy, so Ah done name him "Radio."-The Christian Advocate.

Times Change.

"They used to smile at red-headed girls." "And now half the world is using henna."

