DESERT GOLD by Zane Grey

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

Copyright by Harper & Brothers.

CHAPTER X—Continued.

—11—

Belding paced up and down the room. Jim and Ladd whispered together. Gale walked to the window and looked out at the distant group of bandits, and then turned his gaze to rest upon Mercedes. She was conscious now, and her eyes seemed all the larger and blacker for the whiteness of her face. No one but Gale saw the Yaqui in the background looking down upon the Spanish girl. All of Yaqui's looks were strange; but this was singularly so. Gale wondered if the Indian were affected by her loveliness, her helplessness, or her terror.

Presently Belding called his rangers to him, and then Thorne.

"Listen to this," he said, earnestly. "I'll go out and have a talk with Rojas. I'll try to reason with him; tell him to think a long time before he sheds blood on Uncle Sam's soil. That he's now after an American's wife! I'll not commit myself, nor will I refuse outright to consider his demands, nor will I show the least fear of him. I'll play for time. If my bluff goes through . . . well and good. . . . After dark the four of you, Laddy, Jim, Dick and Thorne, will take Mercedes and my best white horses, and, with Yaqui as guide, circle round through Altar valley to the trail, and head for Yuma. I want you to take the Indian, because in a case of this kind he'll be a godsend. If you get headed or lost or have to circle off the trail, think what it'd mean to have a Yaqui with you. He knows Sonora as no Greaser knows it. He could hide you, find water and grass, when you would absolutely believe it impossible. The Indian is loyal. He has his debt to pay, and he'll pay it, don't mistake me. When you're gone I'll hide Nell so Rojas won't see her if he searches the place. Then I think I could sit down and wait without any particular worry."

The rangers approved of Belding's plan, and Thorne went to the side of his wife.

"Mercedes, we've planned to outwit Rojas. Will you tell us what he wrote?"

"Rojas swore—by his saints and his Virgin—that if I wasn't given—to him—in twenty-four hours—he would set fire to the village—kill the men—carry off the women—hang the children on cactus thorns!"

A moment's silence followed her last halting whisper.

Then the Yaqui uttered a singular cry. Gale had heard this once before, and now he remembered it was at the Papago well.

"Look at the Indian," whispered Belding, hoarsely. "D—n if I don't believe he understood every word Mercedes said. And, gentlemen, don't mistake me, if he ever gets near Señor Rojas there'll be some gory Aztec knife work."

Yaqui had moved close to Mercedes, and stood beside her as she leaned against her husband. She seemed impelled to meet the Indian's gaze, and evidently it was so powerful or hypnotic that it wrought irresistibly upon her. But she must have seen or divined what was beyond the others, for she offered him her trembling hand. Yaqui took it and laid it against his body in a strange motion, and bowed his head. Then he stepped back into the shadow of the room.

Belding went outdoors while the rangers took up their former position at the west window. Each had his own somber thoughts, Gale imagined, and knew his own were dark enough. He saw Belding halt at the corrals and wave his hand. Then the rebels mounted and came briskly up the road, this time to rein in abreast.

Wherever Rojas had kept himself upon the former advance was not clear; but he certainly was prominently in sight now. He made a gaudy, almost a dashing figure. Rojas dismounted and seemed to be listening. Belding made gestures, vehemently bobbed his big head, appeared to talk with his body as much as with his tongue. Then Rojas was seen to reply, and after that it was clear that the talk became painful and difficult. It ended finally in what appeared to be mutual understanding. Rojas mounted and rode away with his men, while Belding came tramping back to the house.

As he entered the door his eyes were shining, his big hands were clenched, and he was breathing audibly.

"You can rope me if I'm not locoed!" he burst out. "I went out to conciliate a red-handed little murderer, and d—n me if I didn't meet a—a—well, I've no suitable name handy. I started my bluff and got along pretty well, but I forgot to mention that Mercedes was Thorne's wife. And what do you think? Rojas swore he loved Mercedes—swore he'd marry her right here in Forlorn River—swore he would give up robbing and killing people, and take her away from Mexico. He has gold—jewels. He swore if he didn't get her nothing mattered. He'd die anyway without her. . . . And here's the strange thing. I believe him! He was cold as ice, and all h—l inside. Never saw a Greaser like him. Anyway, without my asking he said for me to think it over for a day and then we'd talk again."

"Shore we're born lucky!" ejaculated Ladd.

"I reckon Rojas'll be smart enough to string his outfit across the few trails out of Forlorn River," remarked Jim.

"That needn't worry us. All we want is dark to come," replied Belding. "Yaqui will slip through. If we thank any lucky stars let it be for the Indian. You may go to Yuma in six days and maybe in six weeks. You may have a big fight. Laddy, take the .405. Dick will pack his Remington. All of you go gunned heavy. But the main thing is a pack that'll be light enough for swift travel, yet one that'll keep you from starving on the desert."

The rest of that day passed swiftly. The sun set, twilight fell, then night closed down, fortunately a night slightly overcast. Gale saw the white horses pass his door like silent ghosts. Even Blanco Diablo made no sound, and that fact was indeed a tribute to the Yaqui. Gale went out

"If I Come Back—No—When I Come Back, Will You Marry Me?"

to put his saddle on Blanco Sol. The horse rubbed a soft nose against his shoulder. Then Gale returned to the sitting room. There was nothing more to do but wait and say good-by. Mercedes came clad in leather chaps and coat, a slim stripling of a cowboy, her dark eyes flashing. Her beauty could not be hidden, and now hope and courage had fired her blood.

Gale drew Nell into his arms.

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

"Dick, do—don't say it," sobbed Nell, with her head on his breast.

"I might never come back," he went on, steadily. "I love you—I've loved you ever since the first moment I saw you. Do you love me?"

"Yes, yes. Oh, I love you so! I never knew it till now. I love you so. Dick, I'll be safe and I'll wait—and hope and pray for your return."

"If I come back—no—when I come back, will you marry me?"

"I—I—oh yes!" she whispered, and returned his kiss.

Belding was in the room speaking softly.

"Nell, darling, I must go," said Dick.

"I'm a selfish little coward," cried Nell. "It's so splendid of you all. I ought to glory in it, but I can't. . . . Fight if you must, Dick. Fight for that lovely persecuted girl. I'll love you—the more. . . . Oh! Good-by! Goodby!"

With a wrench that shook him, Gale let her go. He heard Belding's soft voice.

"Yaqui says the early hour's the best. Trust him, Laddy. Remember what I say—Yaqui's a godsend."

Then they were all outside in the pale gloom under the trees. Yaqui mounted Blanco Diablo; Mercedes was lifted upon White Woman; Thorne climbed astride Queen; Jim Lash was already upon his horse, which was as white as the others but bore no name; Ladd mounted the stallion Blanco Torres, and gathered up the long halters of the two pack horses; Gale came last with Blanco Sol.

As he toed the stirrup, hand on mane and pommel, Gale took one more look in at the door. Nell stood in the gleam of light, her hair shining, face like ashes, her eyes dark, her lips parted, her arms outstretched. That sweet and tragic picture etched its cruel outlines into Gale's heart. He waved his hand and then fiercely leaped into the saddle.

Blanco Sol stepped out.

Before Gale stretched a line of moving horses, white against dark shadows. He could not see the head of that column; he scarcely heard a soft hoofbeat. A single star shone out of a rift in thin clouds. There was no wind. The air was cold. The dark space of desert seemed to yawn. To the left across the river flickered a few campfires. The chill night, silent and mystical, seemed to close in upon Gale; and he faced the wide, quivering, black level with keen eyes and grim intent, and an awakening of that wild rapture which came like a spell to him in the open desert.

CHAPTER XI

—

Across Cactus and Lava.

At the far corner of the field Yaqui halted, and slowly the line of white horses merged into a compact mass. Yaqui slipped out of his saddle. He ran his hand over Diablo's nose and spoke low, and repeated this action for each of the other horses. Gale had long ceased to question the strange Indian's behavior. There was no explaining or understanding many of his maneuvers. But the results of them were always thought-provoking. Gale had never seen horses stand so silently as in this instance; no stamp—no champ of bit—no toss of head—no shake of saddle or pack—no heave or snort! It seemed they had become imbued with the spirit of the Indian.

Yaqui moved away into the shadows as noiselessly as if he were one of them. The darkness swallowed him. He had taken a direction parallel with the trail. Gale wondered if Yaqui meant to try to lead his string of horses by the rebel sentinels.

The Indian appeared as he had vanished. He might have been part of the shadows. But he was there. He started off down the trail leading Diablo. Again the white line stretched slowly out. Gale fell in behind. Peering low with keen eyes, he made out three objects—a white sombrero, a blanket and a Mexican lying face down. The Yaqui had stolen upon this sentinel like a silent wind of death.

Once under the dark lee of the river bank Yaqui caused another halt, and he disappeared as before. Moments passed. The horses held heads up, looked toward the glimmering campfires and listened. Gale thrilled with the meaning of it all—the night—the silence—the flight—and the wonderful Indian stealing with the slow inevitableness of doom upon another sentinel.

Suddenly the Indian stalked out of the gloom. He mounted Diablo and headed across the river. Once more the line of moving white shadows stretched out. Gale peered sharply along the trail, and, presumably, on the pale sand under a cactus, there lay a blanketed form, prone, outstretched, a carbine clutched in one hand, a cigarette, still burning, in the other.

The cavalcade of white horses passed within five hundred yards of campfires, around which dark forms moved in plain sight. The lights disappeared from time to time, grew dimmer, more flickering, and at last they vanished altogether. Belding's fleet and tireless steeds were out in front; the desert opened ahead wide, dark, vast. Rojas and his rebels were behind, eating, drinking, careless. The somber shadow lifted from Gale's heart. He held now an unquenchable faith in the Yaqui. Belding would be listening back there along the river. He would know of the escape. He would tell Nell, and then hide her safely. As Gale had accepted a strange and fatalistic foreshadowing of toil, blood and agony in this desert journey, so he believed in Mercedes' ultimate freedom and happiness, and his own return to the girl who had grown dearer than life.

* * * * * * *

A cold, gray dawn was fleeing before a rosy sun when Yaqui halted the march at Papago well. The horses were taken to water, then led down the arroyo into the grass. Here packs were slipped, saddles removed. Jim Lash remarked how cleverly they had fooled the rebels.

"Shore they'll be comin' along," replied Ladd.

They built a fire, cooked and ate. The Yaqui spoke only one word: "Sleep." Blankets were spread. Mercedes dropped into a deep slumber, her head on Thorne's shoulder. Excitement kept Thorne awake. The two rangers dozed beside the fire. Gale shared the Yaqui's watch. At the end of three hours the rangers grew active, Mercedes was awakened; and soon the party faced westward, their long shadows moving before them. Yaqui led with Blanco Diablo in a long, easy lope. The heated air lifted, and incoming currents from the west swept low and hard over the barren earth. In the distance, all around the horizon, accumulations of dust seemed like ranging, mushrooming yellow clouds.

Yaqui was the only one of the fugitives who never looked back. Gale had a conviction that when Yaqui gazed back toward the well and the shining plain beyond, there would be reason for it. But when the sun lost its heat and the wind died down Yaqui took long and careful surveys westward from the high points on the trail. Sunset was not far off, and there in a bare, spotted valley lay Coyote tanks, the only waterhole between Papago well and the Sonoyta oasis. Gale used his glass, told Yaqui there was no smoke, no sign of life; still the Indian fixed his falcon eyes on distant spots and looked long. No further advance was undertaken. The Yaqui headed south and traveled slowly, climbing to the brow of a bold height of weathered mesa. There he sat his horse and waited. No one questioned him. The rangers dismounted to stretch their legs, and Mercedes war lifted to a rock, where she rested. Thorne had gradually yielded to the desert's influence for silence. He spoke once or twice to Gale, and occasionally whispered to Mercedes. Gale fancied his friend would soon learn that necessary speech in desert travel meant a few greetings, a few words to make real the fact of human companionship, a few short, terse terms for the business of the day or night, and perhaps a stern order or a soft call to a horse.

The sun went down, and the golden, rosy veils turned to blue and shaded darker till twilight was there in the valley. Darkness approached, and the clear peaks faded. The horses stamped to be on the move.

"Malo!" exclaimed the Yaqui.

He did not point with arm, but his falcon head was outstretched, and his piercing eyes gazed at the blurring spot which marked the location of Coyote tanks.

"Jim, can you see anything?" asked Ladd.

"Nope, but I reckon he can."

Then Ladd suddenly straightened up, turned to his horse, and muttered low under his breath.

"I reckon so," said Lash, and for once his easy, good-natured tone was not in evidence. His voice was harsh.

Gale's eyes, keen as they were, were last of the rangers to see tiny needle-points of light just faintly perceptible in the blackness.

"Laddy! Campfires?" he asked, quickly.

"Shore's you're born, my boy."

"How many?"

Ladd did not reply; but Yaqui held up his hand, his fingers wide. Five campfires! A strong force of rebels or raiders or some other desert troop was camping at Coyote tanks.

Yaqui sat his horse for a moment motionless as stone, his dark face immutable and impassive. Then he stretched his right arm in the direction of No Name mountains, now losing their last faint traces of the afterglow, and he shook his head. He made the same impressive gesture toward the Sonoyta oasis with the same somber negation.

Thereupon he turned Diablo's head to the south and started down the slope. His manner had been decisive, even stern. Lash did not question it, nor did Ladd. Both rangers hesitated, however, and showed a strange, almost a sullen reluctance which Gale had never seen in them before. Raiders were one thing, Rojas was another; Camino del Diablo still another; but that vast and desolate and unwatered waste of cactus and lava, the Sonora desert, might appall the stoutest heart. Gale felt his own sink—felt himself flinch.

"Oh, where is he going?" cried Mercedes. Her poignant voice seemed to break a spell.

"Shore, lady, Yaqui's goin' home," replied Ladd gently. "An' considerin' our troubles, I reckon we ought to thank God he knows the way."

They mounted and rode down the slope toward the darkening south.

Not until night travel was obstructed by a wall of cactus did the Indian halt to make a dry camp. Water and grass for the horses and fire to cook by were not to be had. Mercedes bore up surprisingly; but she fell asleep almost the instant her thirst had been allayed. Thorne laid her upon a blanket and covered her. The men ate and drank. Gale lay down weary of limb and eye. He heard the soft thump of hoofs, the sough of wind in the cactus—then no more.

Day dawned with the fugitives in the saddle. A picketed wall of cactus hedged them in, yet the Yaqui made a tortuous path, that, zigzag as it might, in the main always headed south.

The Yaqui, if not at fault, was yet uncertain. His falcon eyes searched and roved, and became fixed at length at the southwest, and toward this he turned his horse. The great, fluted saguaros, fifty, sixt, feet high, raised columnal forms, and their branching limbs and curving lines added a grace to the desert. It was the low-bushed cactus that made the toil and pain of travel. Yet these thorny forms were beautiful.

In the basins between the ridges, to right and left along the floor of low plains the mirage glistened, wavered, faded, vanished—lakes and trees and clouds. Inverted mountains hung suspended in the lilac air and faint tracery of white-walled cities.

At noon Yaqui halted the cavalcade. He had selected a field of bisnagi cactus for the place of rest. Presently his reason became obvious. With long, heavy knife he cut off the tops of these barrel-shaped plants. He scooped out soft pulp, and with stone and hand then began to pound the deeper pulp into a juicy mass. When he threw this out there was a little water left, sweet, cold water which man and horse shared eagerly. Thus he made even the desert's fiercest growths minister to their needs.

But he did not halt long. Miles of gray-green spiked walls lay between him and that line of ragged, red lava which manifestly he must reach before dark. The travel became faster, straighter. And the glistening thorns clutched and clung to leather and cloth and flesh. The horses reared, snorted, balked, leaped—but they were sent on. Only Blanco Sol, the patient, the plodding, the indomitable, needed no goad or spur. Mercedes reeled in her saddle. Thorne bade her drink, bathed her face, supported her, and then gave way to Ladd, who took the girl with him on Torres' broad back. The middle of the afternoon saw Thorne reeling in his saddle, and then, wherever possible, Gale's powerful arm lent him strength to hold his seat.

The fugitives were entering a desolate, burned-out world. The waste of sand began to yield to cinders. The horses sank to their fetlocks as they toiled on. A fine, choking dust blew back from the leaders and men coughed and horses snorted. But the sun was now behind the hills. In between ran the stream of lava. It was broken, sharp, dull rust color, full of cracks and caves and crevices, and everywhere upon its jagged surface grew the white-thorned choya.

Again twilight encompassed the travelers. But there was still light enough for Gale to see the constricted passage open into a wide, deep space where the dull color was relieved by the gray of gnarled and dwarfed mesquite. Blanco Sol, keenest of scent, whistled his welcome herald of water. The other horses answered, quickened their gait. Gale smelled it, too, sweet, cool, damp on the dry air.

Yaqui turned the corner of a pocket in the lava wall. The file of white horses rounded the corner after him. And Gale, coming last, saw the pale, glancing gleam of a pool of water beautiful in the twilight.

Next day the Yaqui's relentless driving demand on the horses was no longer in evidence. He lost no time, but he did not hasten. His course wound between low cinder dunes which limited their view of the surrounding country. These dunes finally sank down to a black floor as hard as flint, with tongues of lava to the left, and to the right the slow descent into the cactus plain. Yaqui was now traveling due west. It was Gale's idea that the Indian was skirting the first sharp-toothed slope of a vast volcanic plateau which formed the western half of the Sonora desert and extended to the Gulf of California. Travel was slow, but not exhausting for rider or beast.

Thirty miles of easy stages brought the fugitives to another waterhole, a little round pocket under the heaved-up edge of lava. There was spare,

Mercedes Must Ride; but the Others Must Walk.

short, bleached grass for the horses, but no wood for a fire. This night there were question and reply, conjecture, doubt, opinion and conviction expressed by the men of the party. But the Indian, who alone could have told where they were, where they were going, what chance they had to escape, maintained his stoical silence. Gale took the early watch, Ladd the midnight one, and Lash that of the morning. The day broke rosy, glorious, cold as ice. Action was necessary to make useful benumbed hands and feet. Mercedes was fed while yet wrapped in blankets.

It was a significant index to the day's travel that Yaqui should keep a blanket from the pack and tear it into strips to bind the legs of the horses. It meant the dreaded chaya and the knife-edged lava. That Yaqui did not mount Diablo was still more significant. Mercedes must ride; but the others must walk

cro w

Don't Let That Cold Turn Into "Flu"

Rub on Good Old Musterole

That cold may turn into "Flu," Grippe or, even worse, Pneumonia, unless you take care of it at once.

Rub good old Musterole on the congested parts and see how quickly it brings relief.

Colds are merely congestion. Musterole, made from pure oil of mustard, camphor, menthol and other simple ingredients, is a counter-irritant which stimulates circulation and helps break up the cold.

As effective as the messy old mustard plaster, it does the work without the blister.

Just rub it on with your finger-tips. You will feel a warm tingle as it enters the pores, then a cooling sensation that brings welcome relief.

35c and 65c, in jars and tubes.

Better than a mustard plaster

MUSTEROLE WILL NOT BLISTER

RUN DOWN PEOPLE NEED RICH BLOOD

YOU never heard a doctor say, "He is all run down, but his blood is pure and rich."

The best thing—the biggest thing—that Gude's Pepto-Mangan does is to purify and enrich your blood. Then those weary, run down, dragged out feelings will disappear, and the oldtime vim and "pep" come back again. Get Gude's Pepto-Mangan today.

At your druggists—liquid or tablets, as you prefer.

Gude's Pepto-Mangan

Tonic and Blood Enricher

Tutt's Pills

SPEEDY RELIEF FOR CONSTIPATION

Avoid Quarrels.

He that blows the coal in quarrels he has nothing to do with, has no right to complain if the sparks fly in his face.—Franklin.

Mother Tells How to Make A Baby Bright

"If your baby is bad and cross it's a sure sign he needs Teethina," says Mrs. Clair McConnell, of Norman Park, Ga. "That's the way it always was with my little boy. When he was fretting and cross I would give him Teethina and then he was bright and laughing again.

"Teethina is wonderful for them when they get older, too. I give it to my seven-year-old boy and you never saw anything do so much good."

The most frequent cause of fretting, cross babies is painful disorders in their little tender bowels. Give them Teethina. Your mother used it. It's perfectly harmless.

Sold by all druggists, or send 30c to Moffett Laboratories, Columbus, Ga., and get a package of Teethina and a wonderful booklet about Baby. —Advertisement.

Get Rid of Spiders.

If you are troubled with spiders saturate pieces of cotton wool with oil of pennyroyal and place them where you think the spiders are breeding. You will soon be rid of them.

Sure Relief FOR INDIGESTION

BELL-ANS FOR INDIGESTION 25 CENTS

6 BELL-ANS Hot water Sure Relief

BELL-ANS

25¢ AND 75¢ PACKAGES EVERYWHERE

Rheumacide

Eases at the joints from the inside

Have you RHEUMATISM Lumbago or Gout?

Take RHEUMACIDE to remove the cause and drive the poison from the system.

"RHEUMACIDE ON THE INSIDE PUTS RHEUMATISM ON THE OUTSIDE"

At All Druggists

Jas. Baily & Son, Wholesale Distributors Baltimore, Md.

Couldn't Be Done.

"Tell the truth."

"I haven't time; my train starts at six-fifteen."

MURINE FOR YOUR EYES

Night and Morning. Have Strong, Healthy Eyes. If they Tire, Itch, Smart or Burn, if Sore, Irritated, Inflamed or Granulated, use Murine often. Soothes, Refreshes. Safe for Infant or Adult. At all Druggists. Write for Free Eye Book. Murine Eye Remedy Co., Chicago