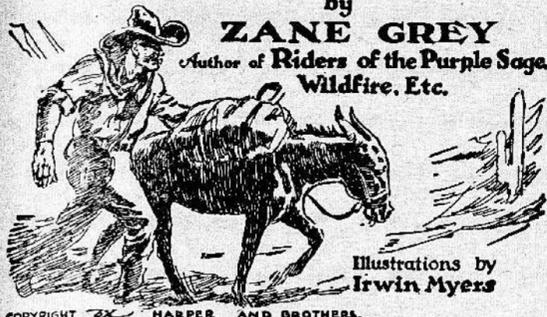


DESERT GOLD

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



Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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SYNOPSIS

PROLOGUE—Seeking gold in the desert, Cameron, a 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.

CHAPTER I—Richard Gale, adventurer, in Casita, Mexican border town, meets George Thorne, lieutenant in the North cavalry, old college friend. Thorne tells Gale he is there to save Mercedes Castaneda, Spanish girl, affianced wife, from Rojas, Mexican bandit.

CHAPTER II—Gale, "roughhouse" Rojas and his gang, with the help of two American cowboys, and Mercedes and Thorne escape. A bugle call from the fort orders Thorne to his regiment. He leaves Mercedes under Gale's protection.

CHAPTER III—The pair, aided by the cowboys who had assisted Gale in the escape, Charlie Ladd and Jim Lash, arrive in safety at a ranch known as Forlorn River, well across the border.

CHAPTER IV—The fugitives are at Tom Belding's home. Belding is immigration inspector. Ladd and Jim are his wife and stepdaughter, Nell Burton. Gale, with Ladd and Lash, take service with Belding as rangers. Gale telling Belding the cause of his being a wanderer, a misunderstanding with his father concerning the son's business affairs.

CHAPTER V—Mercedes gets word of Thorne's her safety. Dick also writes to his parents, informing them of his whereabouts. Nell's personality, and her kindness, attract Gale.

CHAPTER VI—Riding the range, Gale meets in with a party of three Mexican raiders encamped at a water hole. Watching his opportunity to out them, he sees two Indians ride into the camp. One of them, Yaqui, is evidently badly wounded, and the Mexicans seek to kill him in a cruel way. Dick drives them off, conveying the wounded Yaqui to Belding's ranch.

CHAPTER VII—The Indian is taken in, cared for and remains in Belding's services, becoming Dick's ardent admirer. Gale's admiration for Nell increases, and he believes she is not adverse to his attentions. Belding's horses, thoroughbred, the pride of his life, after his wife and stepdaughter, are run off by Mexicans.

CHAPTER VIII—Gale, with Ladd, Lash and the Yaqui, pursue the raiding party over the desert, finally cornering them. Five of the six thieves are killed and the party of whites, with the recovered horses, return to the ranch in triumph.

CHAPTER IX—Gale secures from Mrs. Belding what he feels is the best prospect to allow him to seek Nell for a wife. He begins his courtship with energy, confident that he can win her.

CHAPTER X

Rojas.

No word from George Thorne had come to Forlorn River in weeks. Gale grew concerned over the fact, and began to wonder if anything serious could have happened to him. Mercedes showed a slow, wearing strain.

Thorne's commission expired the end of January, and if he could not get his discharge immediately, he surely could obtain leave of absence. Therefore, Gale waited, not without growing anxiety, and did his best to cheer Mercedes. The first of February came bringing news of rebel activities, and hindering operations in and around Casita, but not a word from the cavalryman.

A dozen times Gale declared he would ride in to Casita and find out why they did not hear from Thorne; however, older and wiser heads prevailed over his impetuosity. Belding and the rangers and the Yaqui held a consultation. Not only had the Indian become a faithful servant to Gale, but he was also of value to Belding. Yaqui had all the craft of his class, and superior intelligence. His knowledge of Mexicans was second only to his hate of them. And Yaqui, who had been scouting on all the trails, gave information that made Belding decide to wait some days before sending anyone to Casita.

It was upon Gale's coming from this conference that he encountered Nell. Since the interrupted siesta episode she had been more than ordinarily elusive, and about all he had received from her was a tantalizing smile from a distance. He got the impression now, however, that she had awaited him. When he drew close to her he was certain of it, and he experienced more than surprise.

"Dick," she began, hurriedly, "Mercedes is dying by inches. Can't you see what all this is? It's more than love or fear. It's uncertainty—suspense. Oh, can't we find out for her?"

"Nell, I feel as badly as you about her. I wanted to ride to Casita. Belding shut me up quick, the last time." Nell came close to Gale, clasped his arm. There was no color in her face. Her eyes held a dark, eager excitement.

"Dick, will you slip off without Dad's consent? Risk it! Go to Casita and find out what's happened to Thorne—at least if he ever started for Forlorn River?"

"No, Nell, I won't do that." She drew away from him with passionate suddenness.

"Are you afraid?"

"This certainly was not the Nell Burton that Gale knew."

"No, I'm not afraid," Gale replied, a little nettled.

"Will you go—for my sake?" Like lightning her mood changed and she was close to him again, hands on his, her face white, her whole presence sweetly alluring.

"Nell, I won't disobey Belding," protested Gale. "I won't break my word."

"Dick, it'll not be so bad as that."

But—what if it is? . . . Go, Dick, if not for poor Mercedes' sake, then for mine—to please me, I'll—I'll . . . you won't lose anything by going. I think I know how Mercedes feels. Just a word from Thorne or about him would save her. Take Blanco Sol and go, Dick. What rebel outfit could ever ride you down on that horse? Why, Dick, if I was up on Sol I wouldn't be afraid of the whole rebel army."

Gale could only stare at this transformed girl.

"Dick, listen! . . . If you go—if you fetch some word of Thorne to comfort Mercedes, you—well, you will have your reward. Dick, will you go?"

"No—no!" cried Gale, in violence, struggling with himself. "Nell Burton, I'll tell you this. To have the reward I want would mean pretty near heaven for me. But not even for that will I break my word to your father."

She seemed the incarnation of girlish scorn and willful passion.

"Gracias, señor," she replied, mockingly. "Adios." Then she flashed out of his sight.

Gale went to his room at once, disturbed and thrilling, and did not soon recover from that encounter.

The following morning at the breakfast table Nell was not present. "She's in one of her tantrums lately," said Belding. "Wouldn't speak to me this morning. Let her alone, mother. She's spoiled enough, without running after her. She's always hungry. She'll be on hand presently, don't mistake me."

Notwithstanding Belding's conviction, which Gale shared, Nell did not appear at all during the hour. Perhaps half an hour afterward, as Gale was leaving his room, he saw the Yaqui running up the path from the house. Gale wondered what was the matter. Yaqui ran straight to Belding, who was at work at his bench under the wagon shed. In less than a moment Belding was following for his rangers. Gale got to him first, but Ladd and Lash were not far behind.

"Blanco Sol gone!" yelled Belding, in a rage.

"Raiders!" exclaimed Jim Lash. "Lord only knows, Yaqui says it wasn't raiders."

"Send Yaqui to find the hoss' trail, an' let's figger," said Ladd. "Shore this 's no rider job."

In the swift search that ensued Gale did not have anything to say; but his mind was forming a conclusion. When he found his old saddle and bridle missing from the peg in the barn his conclusion became a positive conviction, and it made him, for the moment, cold and sick and speechless.

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

then resurged when he saw a limp form in Jim Lash's arms. Ladd was supporting a horseman who wore a military uniform.

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

Lash handed down a ragged, travel-stained, war girl into Belding's arms. "Dad! Mamma!"

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

"Hello—Dick."

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

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

Gale turned to greet his friend. Indeed, it was but a haggard ghost of the cavalryman. Thorne looked ill or wounded. Gale's greeting was also a question full of fear.

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

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

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

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

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

"Some soldier took me to an officer's tent. Nell was there, some white an' all in. She just said, 'Laddy!'"

once he tumbled out of his saddle. We got him back, an' Lash held him on. Nell didn't give out till daybreak."

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

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

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

"Rojas and his men vamoose'd without a shot. That ain't surprisin'. There wasn't a shot fired by anybody. The cavalrymen soon found Thorne an' hurried with him back on Uncle Sam's hand. Thorne was half naked, black an' blue all over, thin as a rail. He was given food an' drink. Shore he seemed a starved man. But he picked up wonderful, an' by the time Jim came along he was wantin' to start for Forlorn River. So was Nell. By main strength as much as persuasion we kept the two men quiet till next evenin' at dark."

"Well, we made as sneaky a start in the dark as Jim an' me could manage, an' never hit the trail till we was miles from town. Thorne's nerve held him up for a while. Then all at



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

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

"Shore, it'd knock anybody."

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

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

"Shore I'm not sayin' what I think," added Ladd. "But the look of him was not indicative of a tranquil optimism. Thorne was put to bed in Gale's room. He was very weak, yet he would keep Mercedes' hand and gaze at her with unbelieving eyes. Then, fighting sleep with what little strength he had left, at last he succumbed."

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

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

"Cheer up. Belding will make you a proposition presently. The future smiles, old friend. If this rebel business was only ended!"

round of the fields and looking over the ground marked out in Gale's plan of water development. Thorne was highly enthusiastic, and at once staked out his claim for one hundred and sixty acres of land adjoining that of Belding and the rangers. These five tracts took in all the ground necessary for their operations, but in case of the success of the irrigation project the idea was to increase their squatter holding by purchase of more land down the valley. A hundred families had lately moved to Forlorn River; more were coming all the time; and Belding would be able to see a vision of the whole Altar valley green with farms.

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

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

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

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

"Yaqui," replied the ranger.

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

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

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

"Raiders!" ejaculated Gale. Then he cautioned Yaqui to keep sharp lookout, and, hurriedly returning to the house, he called the men out and told them there were rebels or raiders camping just across the line.

Ladd did not say a word. Belding, with an oath, slammed down his cigar.

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

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

"Laddy's gone over to scout around and try to find out who the outfit belongs to and how many are in it," said Belding. "I don't look for an attack on Forlorn River. I'm afraid it's—"

Belding hesitated and looked with grim concern at the cavalryman.

"What?" queried Thorne.

join his comrades.

Belding looked at whatever it was he held in his hand, shook his curly head, and started swiftly for the house. He came striding into the room holding a piece of soiled paper.

"Can't read it now and don't know as I want to," he said, savagely.

Not one of the men was able to translate the garbled scrawl.

"Shore Mercedes can read it," said Ladd.

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

"My dear, we want you to read what's written on this paper," said Thorne, as he led her to the table.

Mercedes gave the writing one swift glance, then fainted in Thorne's arms. He carried her to a couch, and with Nell and Mrs. Belding began to work over her.

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

"Mebbe twenty. Not more."

"We can lick twice that many Greasers."

"Shore."

Jim Lash removed his pipe long enough to speak. "Let's stave the Greaser off till dark. Then Laddy an' me an' Thorne will take Mercedes an' hit the trail for Yuma."

"Cumbro del Diablo! That awful trail with a woman! Jim, do you forget how many hundreds of men have perished on the Devil's road?"

"I reckon I ain't forgettin' nothin'," replied Jim. "The waterholes are full now. There's grass, an' we can do the job in six days."

"It's three hundred miles to Yuma."

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

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 loosed!" he burst out. "I went out to conciliate a red-handed little murderer, and I—n me if I didn't meet 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 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 in in leather chaps and coat, a slim strippling 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 gone—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—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! Good-by!"

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 goldsinner."

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 tided 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 so vast. To the left across the plain 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.

(Continued next week)

NOTICE.

Don't forget to pay your poll and road tax for 1922. If the poll tax of \$1.00 is not paid before December 31st, 1922, you will be disfranchised for two years; liable from 21 to 60 years.

If the road tax of \$1.00 is not paid before December 31st, 1922, you are subject to prosecution; liable from 18 to 55 years.

Residents of incorporated towns not liable for Parish Road Tax.

WALTER GALATAS, Sheriff and Tax Collector