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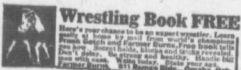
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The Heart of the Desert

(Continued from page 14.)

Rhoda took the towel silently, and the young Indian, after waiting a minute as if in hope of a word from her, left the girl to her difficult toilet. When Rhoda had finished she picked up the field glasses that Kutie had left on her blankets and with her rock to watch the Indians sat down on a

The sordid discomforts of the camp seemed to her unbearable. She hated the life of the desert below and beyond her. She hated the very ponies that Alchise was leading up from water. It was the fourth day since her abduction. Rhoda could not understand why John and the Newmans were so slow to overtake her. She knew nothing as yet of the skill of her abductors. She was like an ignorant child placed in a new world whose very A B C was closed to her. After always having been cared for and protected, after never having known a hardship, the girl suddenly was thrust into existence whose savage simplicity was sufficient to try the hardest man.

Supper was eaten in silence, Kutie finally giving up his attempt to make conversation. It was dusk when they mounted and rode up the mountain. Near the crest a whirling cloud of mist enveloped them. It became desperately cold and Rhoda shivered beneath her Navaho but Kutie gave no heed to her. He led on and on, the horses slipping, the cold growing every minute more intense. At last they appeared before them a flickering light. Kutie halted his party and rode forward. Rhoda saw the dim figure rise hastily and after a short time Kutie called back:

"Come ahead!"

The little camp was only an open space at the canon edge, with a sheepskin shelter over a tiny fire. Beside the fire stood a sheepherder, a swarthy figure wrapped from head to foot in sheepskins. Over in the darkness by the mountain wall were the many nameless sounds that tell of animals herding for the night. The shepherd greeted them with the perfect courtesy of the Mexican.

"Senora, the camp is yours!"

Kutie lifted the shivering Rhoda from her horse. The rain was lessening but the cold was still so great that Rhoda hugged gratefully by the little fire under the sheepskin shelter. Kutie refused the Mexican's offer of tortillas and the man sat down to enjoy their society. He eyed Rhoda keenly.

"Ah! It is a senorita!" Then he gasped. "It is perhaps the Senorita Rhoda Tuttle!"

Rhoda jumped to her feet.

"Yes! Yes! How did you know?"

Kutie glared at the harder menacingly, but the little fellow did not see. He spoke up bravely, as if he had a message for Rhoda.

"Some people told me yesterday. They look for her everywhere!"

Rhoda's eyes lighted joyfully.

"Who? Where, she cried. Kutie spoke conclusively.

"You know nothing!" he said. The Mexican looked into the Apache's eyes and shivered silently.

"Nothing, of course, Senor," he replied.

But Rhoda was not daunted.

"Who were they?" she repeated. "What did they say? Where did they go?"

The herder glanced at Rhoda and shook his head.

"Guten nacht!" Rhoda turned to Kutie in anger.

"Don't be more brutal than you have to be!" she cried. "What harm can it do for this man to give me word of my friends?"

Kutie's eyes softened.

"Answer the senorita's questions, amico," he said.

The Mexican began eagerly.

There were three. They rode up the trail one day ago. They called the dark man Porter, the big blue-eyed one DeWitt, and the yellow-haired one Newman."

Rhoda clasped her hands with a little murmur of relief.

"The blue-eyed one acted as if located. They cursed much at a name, Kutie. But otherwise they talked little. They went that way," pointing back over the trail. They had found a scarf with a stone tied in it."

"What's that?" interrupted Kutie sharply.

Rhoda's eyes shone in the firelight.

"Not an overturned pebble escapes his eye," she said serenely.

"Butly for you!" exclaimed Kutie, smiling at Rhoda in understanding.

"However, I guess we will move on, having gleaned this interesting news!"

He remounted his little party. Rhoda reeled a little but she made no protest. As they took to the trail again the sheepherder stood by the fire, watching, and Rhoda called to him:

"If you see them again tell them that I'm all right; but that they must hurry!"

Rhoda felt new life in her veins after the meeting with the sheepherder and finished the night's trail in better shape than she had done before. Yet not the next day nor for many days did they sight pursuers. With incertainty that seemed diabolical, Kutie laid his course. He seldom moved hurriedly. Indeed, except for the fact that the travelling was by night, the expedition had every aspect of unlimited leisure.

As the days passed, Rhoda forced herself to the calm of desperation. Slowly she realized that she was in the hands of the masters of the art of flight, an art that the very cruelty of the country abetted. But to her utter astonishment her delirium of physical misery began to lift. Saddle stiffness after the first two weeks left to the saddle by the waist strap and so during the night's ride, the hours in the saddle ceased to tax her strength. She was surprised to find that she could out-ride the wretched cook of the senora.

At last she laid out a definite course for herself. Every night on the trail and at every camp she tried to leave some mark for the whites—a scratch on pebble or stone, a bit of marked yucca or a twisted cane-claw. She ceased entirely to speak to Kutie, trusting him with the contentious silence that was torturing to the Indian though he gave no outward sign.

Molly was her devoted friend and Rhoda derived great comfort from the faithful servant. Rhoda sat in the camp one afternoon with the two senoras while Kutie and Alchise were off on a turkey hunt. Some of the girl's sorrow had gone away to a delicate tan. The dark circles about her eyes had lightened a little. Molly was busily pounding craneseeds between two stones. Rhoda watched her stir. Swiftly a new life set the blood to her thin cheeks.

Why shouldn't she learn to make good meal, to catch and cook rabbits, to distinguish edible cactus from inedible? Then indeed she would be able to care for herself on the trail! To Rhoda, who never had worked with her hands, who indeed had come to look on manual labor as beneath her, the idea was revolutionary. For a long time she turned it over in her mind, watching Molly the while. The most violent housewifely task that Rhoda had undertaken had been the concocting of chafing-dish remedies at school.

"Molly," she said suddenly, "teach me how to do that!"

(To be continued.)

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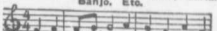
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