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The Heritage of the Desert

—BY—
ZANE GREY

Author of

Riders of the Purple Sage, The Desert of Wheat, The Border Legion, Etc.

While Hare watched and thought the hours sped by. Holderness lounged about and Snap kept silent guard. The rustlers smoked and moved about the day waned and the shadow of the cliff crept over the cabin. To Hare the time had been as a moment; he was amazed to find the sun had gone down behind Coconina. If August Naab had left the oasis at dawn he must now be near the divide, unless he had been delayed by a wind-storm at the strip of sand. Hare longed to see the roan charger come up over the crest; he longed to see a file of Navajos, plumes waving, dark mustangs gleaming red in the light, sweep down the stong ridge toward the cedars. "If they come," he whispered, "I'll kill Holderness and Snap and any man who tries to open that cabin door."

So he waited in tense watchfulness, his gaze alternating between the wavy line of the divide, and the camp glade. Out in the valley it was still daylight, but under the cliff twilight had fallen. All day Hare had strained his ears to hear the talk of the rustlers, and it now occurred to him that if he climbed down through the split in the cliff to the bench where Dave and George had always hidden to watch the spring he would be just above the camp. This descent involved risk, but since it would enable him to see the cabin door when darkness set in, he decided to venture. The moment was propitious, for the rustlers were bustling around, cooking dinner, unrolling blankets, and moving to and fro from spring and corral. Hare crawled back he reached the split. It was a narrow

a few yards and along the cliff until steep crack which he well remembered. Going down was attended with two dangers—losing his hold, and the possible rattling of stones. Face foremost he slipped downward with the gliding, sinuous movement of a snake, and reaching the grassy bench he lay quiet. Jestful voices and loud laughter from below reassured him. He had not been heard. His new position afforded every chance to see and hear, and also gave means of rapid, noiseless retreat along the bench to the cedars. Lying flat he crawled stealthily to the bushy fringe of the bench.

A bright fire blazed under the cliff. Men were moving and laughing. The cabin door was open. Mescal stood leaning back from Snap Naab struggling to release her hands.

"Let me untie them, I say," growled Snap.

Mescal tore loose from him and stepped back. Her hands were bound before her, an twisting them outward she warded him off. Her disbelieved hair almost hid her dark eyes. They burned in a level glance of hate and defiance. She was a little lioness, quivering with fiery life, fight in every line of her form.

"All right, don't eat then—starve!" said Snap.

"I'll starve before I eat what you give me."

The rustlers laughed. Holderness blew out a puff of smoke and smiled. Snap glowered upon Mescal and then upon his amiable companions. One of them a ruddy-faced fellow, walked toward Mescal.

said, "We're not goin' to stand for a girl starvin'. She ain't eat a bite yet. Here, Miss, let me untie your hands—there . . . Say! Naab, d—n you, her wrists are black and blue!"

"Look out! Your gun!" yelled Snap. With a swift movement Mescal snatched the man's Colt from his holster and was raising it when he grasped her arm. She winced and dropped the weapon.

"You little Indian devil!" exclaimed the rustler, in a rapt admiration. Sorry to hurt you, an' more sorry to spoil your aim. That wasn't kind to throw my gun on me, jest after I'd played the gentleman, now was it?"

"I didn't intend—to shoot you," panted Mescal.

"Naab, if this's your Mormon kind of wife—excuse me! Though I ain't denyin' she's the sassiest an' sweetest little cat I ever seen!"

"We Mormons don't talk about our women or hear any talk," returned Snap, a dancing fury in his pale eyes. "You're from Nebraska?"

"Yep, jest a plain Nebraska rustler, catt-e-thief, an' all round no-good customer, though I ain't taken to houndin' women yet."

For answer Snap Naab's right hand slowly curved upward before him and stopped taut and inflexible, while his straggled eyes seemed to shoot sparks.

"See here Naab, why do you want to throw a gun on me?" asked the rustler, coolly. "Hevn't you shot enough of your friends yet? I reckon I've no right to interfere in your affairs. I was only protestin' friendly like, for the little lady. She's game, and she's a Cain' your hand. An' it's not a straight hand. Thets all, an' d—n if I care whether you are a Mormon or not. I'll bet a hoss Holderness will back me up."

"Snap, he's right," put in Holderness, smoothly. "You needn't be so touchy about Mescal. She's showed what little use shes got for you. If you must rope her around you like a mustang, be easy about it. Let's have supper. Now Mescal, you sit here on the bench and behave yourself. I don't want you shooting up my camp."

Snap turned sullenly aside while Holderness seated Mescal near the door and fetched her food and drink. The rustlers squatted round the campfire, and conversation ceased in the business of the meal.

To Hare the scene had brought a storm of emotions. Joy at the sight of Mescal, blessed relief to see her unscathed, pride in her fighting spirit—these came side by side with gratitude to the kind Nebraska rustler, strange deepening insight into Holderness's game, unextinguishable white-hot hatred of Snap Naab. And binding all was the ever-mounting will to rescue Mescal, which was held in check by an inexorable judgment; he must continue to wait. And he did wait with blind faith in the something to be, keeping ever in mind the last resort—the rifle he clutched with eager hands. Meanwhile the darkness descended, the fire sent forth a brighter blaze, and the rustlers finished their supper. Mescal arose and stepped across the threshold of the cabin door.

"Hold on!" ordered Snap, as he approached with swift strides. "Stick out your hands!"

Some of the rustlers grumbled; and one blurted out: "Aw no, Snap, don't tie her up—no!"

"Who says so?" hissed the Mormon with snapping teeth. As he wheeled upon them his Colt seemed to leap forward, and suddenly quivered at arm's length, gleaming in the ruddy fire-rays.

Holderness laughed in the muzzle of the weapon. "Go ahead, Snap, tie up your lady love. What a tame little wife she's going to make you! Tie her up, but do it without hurting her."

The rustlers growled or laughed at their leader's order. Snap turned to his task. Mescal stood in the doorway and shrinkingly extended her clasped hands. Holderness whirled to the fire with a look which betrayed his game. Snap bound Mescal's hands securely, thrust her inside the cabin, and after hesitating for a long moment, finally shut the door.

"It's funny about a woman, now, ain't it?" said Nebraska, confidentially to a companion. "One minnit she'll snatch you bald-headed; the next, she'll melt in your mouth like sugar. An' I'll be darned if the changeablest one ain't the kind to hold a feller longest. But it's he—l. I was married oncet. Not any more for mine! A pal I had used to say that whiskey riled him, that rattlesnake pisen het up his blood some, but it took a woman to make him plumb bad. D—n if it ain't so. When there's a woman around there's somethin' alius comin' off."

But the strain, instead of relaxing, became portentous. Holderness suddenly showed he was ill at ease; he appeared to be expecting arrivals from the direction of Sleeping Springs. Snap Naab leaned against the side of the door, his narrow gaze cunningly studying the rustlers before him. More than any other he had caught a fore-shadowing. Like the desert-hawk he could see afar. Suddenly he pressed back against the door, half opening it, while he faced the men.

"Stop!" commanded Holderness. The change in his voice was as if it had come from another man. You don't go in there!"

"I'm going to take the girl and ride to White Sage," replied Naab, in slow deliberation.

"Bah! You say that only for the ex-

cue to get into the cabin with her. You tried it last night and I blocked you. Shut the door, Naab, or something'll happen."

"There's more going to happen than ever you think of, Holderness. Don't interfere now, I'm going."

"Well, go ahead—but you won't take the girl!"

Snap Naab swung off the step, slamming the door behind him.

"So—ho!" he exclaimed, sneeringly. "That's why you've made me foreman, eh?" His claw-like hand moved almost imperceptibly upward, while his pale eyes strove to pierce the strength behind Holderness's efrontery. The rustler chief had a trump card to play; one that showed in his sardonic smile.

"Naab, you don't get the girl."

"Maybe you'll get her?" hissed Snap. "I always intended to."

Surely never before had passion driven Snaps hand to such speed. His Colt gleamed in the camp-fire light. Click! Click! Click! The hammer fell upon empty chambers.

"H—!" he shrieked.

Holderness laughed sarcastically. "That's where you're going!" he cried. "Here's to Naab's trick with a

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AFTER ALL There's Nothing To Equal Zam-Buk FOR THE SKIN!

gun—Bah! And he shot his foreman through the heart.

Snap plunged upon his face. His hands beat the ground like the shuffling wings of a wounded partridge. His fingers gripped the dust, spread convulsively, straightened and sank back limp.

Holderness called through the door of the cabin. "Mescal, I've rid you of your would-be-husband. Cheer-up!" Then, pointing to the fallen man, he said to the nearest bystanders: "Some of you drag that out for the coyotes."

Continued on Page Four

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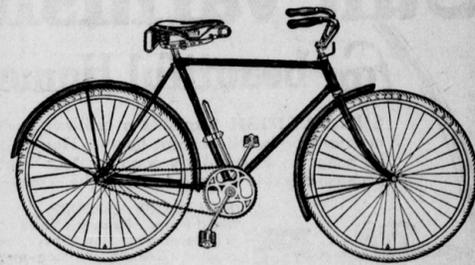
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