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Amber's Mirage

By ZANE GREY

Illustrated by N.C. Wyeth

WITH the return of spring, old Jim Crawford, prospector, harks again to the call of the desert. He is eager to resume the search for gold, but he is greatly disturbed over the love affair of his young friend, Alvin Shade, who has given his heart to pretty, red-haired Ruby Low. For Jim believes her to be a flirt and that only unhappiness is in store for Al. He persuades the boy to accompany him on what is planned to be the greatest effort of the prospector's long and active career. Al makes provision for the care of his widowed mother, and Ruby, sobered by the thought of losing him, pledges her devotion. The old man and his companion set forth into the desert for an indefinite destination, Three Round Hills, far down in Sonora, back from the Gulf of California. Round their first campfire Jim tells Al the story of Amber's mirage, for where that old-time prospector saw a mirage and died, there, Jim firmly believes, gold will be found—a strike to stagger the imagination.

II.

IT WAS June and Jim Crawford had been lost in the desert for more than a week. At first he had endeavored to conceal the fact from his young companion, but Al had evidently known from the hour of the calamity.

One morning from the black slope of desolate Pinacate the old prospector had located the dim blue Gulf, and the mountain, San Pedro del Martir, and then, away to the southward, three round hills. He had grown tremendously excited and nothing could have held him back. These colorful hills

seemed far away to the younger man, who ventured a suggestion that it might be wise to make for the cool altitudes instead of taking a risk of being caught in that stark and terrific empire of the sun. Even now at midday the naked hand could not bear contact with the hot rock.

They went on down into the labyrinth of black craters and red canyons, and across fields of cactus, ablaze with their varied and vivid blossoms. The *paloverde* shone gold in the sun, the *ocotillo* scarlet, and the dead *palo christi* like soft clouds of blue smoke in the glaring sand washes. The magnificent luxuriance of the desert growths deceived the eye, but at every end of a maze of verdure there loomed the appalling desolation and decay of the rock fastnesses of the earth.

From time to time the gold seekers caught a glimpse of the three round hills that began to partake of the deceitfulness of desert distance. They grew no closer, apparently, but higher, larger, changing as if by magic into mountains. These glimpses spurred Crawford on, and the young prospector, knowing that they were lost, grew indifferent to the peril and gave himself fully to the adventure.

They had been marvelously fortunate about locating water holes. Crawford had all the desert rat's keenness of

sight and the judgment of experience. Added to this was the fact that one of his burros, Jenester, could scent water at incredible distances. But one night they had to make dry camp. The next day was hot. It took all of it to find water. And that day Three Round Hills, as they had come to call them, disappeared as if the desert had swallowed them. Cool, sweet desert dawn, with a menacing red

in the east, found the adventurers doubly lost, for now they did not even have a landmark to strive for. All points of the compass appeared about the same—barren mountains, dark cones, stark and naked shining ridges, blue ranges in the distance.

BUT Crawford pushed on south, more bowed every day, and lame. The burros became troublesome to drive. Jenester wanted to turn back, and the others were dominated by her instinct. Crawford, however, was ruthless and unquenchable. Al watched him, no longer with blind faith, but with the perturbation of one who saw a man guided by some sixth sense.

Nevertheless soon he changed their order of travel, in that they slept in the daytime and went on at night. The early dawns, soft and gray and exquisite, the glorious burst of sunrise, seemed to hold the younger man enthralled, as did the gorgeous sunsets, and the marvelous creeping twilights. As for the other hours, he slept in the shade of an ironwood tree, bathed in sweat and tortured by nightmares, or he stalked silently after the implacable prospector.

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"LOOK!" CRIED CRAWFORD EXULTANTLY. "WHAT YOU SEE? . . . JIM!" "AMBER'S MIRAGE!"

Amber's Mirage

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They talked but little. Once Crawford asked how many days were left in June, and Al replied that he guessed about half.

"August is the hot month. We can still get out," said the prospector, rolling the pebble in his mouth. And by that he probably meant they could find gold and still escape from the fiery furnace of the desert. But he had ceased to pan sand in the washes or pick at the rocks.

The days multiplied. But try as Crawford might he could not drive the burros in a straight line. Jenester edged away to the east, which fact was not manifest until daylight.

Another dry camp, with the last of the water in their canteens used up, brought the wanderers to extremity. Crawford had pitted his judgment against the instinct of Jenester, and catastrophe faced them.

Darkness brought relief from the sun, if not from overwhelming dread. The moon came up from behind black hills and the desert became a silvered chaos, silent as death, unreal and enchanting in its beauty.

THIS night Crawford gave Jenester her head and with ears up she led to the east. The others followed eagerly. They went so fast that the men had to exert themselves to keep up. At midnight Al was lending a hand to the older man, and when dawn broke the young man was half supporting the old prospector.

But sight of a jack rabbit and the sound of a mocking bird in melodious song saved him from collapse. Where these living creatures were it could not be far to water.

Crawford sank less weightily upon Al's strong arm. They climbed, trailing the tracks through the aisles between the cactus thickets, round the corners of cliffs, up a slow rising ridge above the top of which three round peaks peeped, and rose and loomed. Crawford pointed with a shaking hand and cried out unintelligibly. His spirit was greater than his strength; it was Al's sturdy arm that gained the summit for him.

"Look, old-timer!" panted Al hoarsely. Three symmetrical mountains, singular in their sameness of size and contour and magnifying all the mystery and glory of reflected sunrise, dominated a wild and majestic reach of desert.

But the exceeding surprise of this sudden and totally unexpected discovery of the three peaks that had lured and betrayed the prospectors instantly gave way to an infinitely more beautiful sensation—the murmur of running water. A little below them ran a swift, shallow stream.

Crawford staggered to the shade of a shelving rock and fell with a groan that was not all thanksgiving. Al, with a thick whoop, raced down the gentle declivity.

THE water was cold and sweet. It flowed out of granite or lava somewhere not far away. Al filled his canteen and hurried back to his comrade, who lay with closed eyes and pallid, moist face.

"Sit up, Jim. Here's water, an' it's good," said Al, kneeling. But he had to lift Jim's head and hold the canteen to his lips. After a long hold the old prospector smiled wanly.

"Reckon—we didn't—find it any—too soon," he said in a weak but clear voice. "Another day would have cooked us."

"Old-timer, we're all right now, thanks to Jenester," replied Al heartily. "Even if we are lost."

"We're not lost, son. We've found our Three Round Hills."

"Is that so? Well, it's sure great to know. But if my eyes aren't deceivin' me they're sure darned big for hills," rejoined Al, gazing up at the three peaks.

"Make camp here; we'll rest," said Crawford.

"You take it easy, Jim. I'll unpack."

The old prospector nodded with the reluctant air of a man who had no alternative.

By stretching a tarpaulin from the shelving rock where Crawford reclined Al made an admirable shelter. He unrolled his comrade's bed and helped him on it. Then he unpacked utensils and some food supplies, whistling at his work. The whole world bore a changed aspect. What a miracle water could perform!

HE BUILT up a stone fireplace, and then, ax on his shoulder, he sallied down in search of wood.

Late in the afternoon Al discovered his companion wide awake, lying with head propped high.

"Gee! I feel like I'd been beaten," exclaimed Al. He was wet and hot. "Howdy, Old Rainbow Chaser. Are you hungry?"

"Reckon I am," replied Crawford.

"Gosh, I am too. I'll rustle a meal pronto. Whew! Strikes me it's warm here."

"Al, looks like the hot weather is comin' early," rejoined Crawford seriously.

"Comin'? Say, I think it's been with us for days."

"Wai, what I meant was hot."

"Jim, you're a queer one. What's the difference between hot an' hot?"

"Son, when it's hot you can't travel." Al stared at his old friend. What was he driving at? On the moment the idea of travel apparently refused to stay before Al's consciousness. But a sober cast fell upon his countenance. Without more ado he got up and busied himself around the fireplace.

When the meal was ready, he spread it on a canvas beside Crawford's bed. The old man could not sit up far, and he had to be waited upon, but there was nothing wrong with his appetite. This pleased Al and reacted cheerfully upon him. While they were eating, the burro Jenester approached, her bell tinkling.

"I'll be darned. There's Jen. She's sure well trained," said Al.

IRECKON. But if you'd lived with burros on the desert long as I have you'd see more in it."

"Aw, she's only lookin' for some tin cans to lick," replied Al.

Nevertheless, the covert significance Crawford attached to the act of the burro seemed not to be lost upon Al. While doing the camp chores he no longer whistled. The sun grew dusky red and when it sank behind the mountains it was as if a furnace door had been closed. Presently with the shadows a cool air came across the desert. Then twilight fell. Silence and loneliness seemed accentuated.

The old prospector lay propped up, his bright eyes upon the peaks. Al sat with his back to the rock, gazing out to see the moon come up over the weird formations of desert.

"Jim," said Al suddenly, as if a limit had been passed. "We spent weeks gettin' to your three old hills. Now what're we goin' to do that we are here?"

"Son, we used up our precious time," replied Crawford sadly. "We got lost. We're lucky to be alive."

"Sure I'm thankful. But I'm hopin' you'll be up tomorrow, so we can look around."

If Crawford nursed a like hope he did not voice it, which omission drew a long, steady look from the younger man. In the gloaming, however, he could not have gleaned much from his observation.

"Old-timer, I hope, too, that you had more in mind than Amber's mirage when you headed for these triplet hills."

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LADY BROWNIES' HOME

(Continued from Page 73)

If Al expected his sole reproach to stir Crawford he reckoned without his host, for the old prospector vouchsafed no word on that score. Al's attempt to foster conversation, to break the oppressive silence, resulted in failure. Crawford was brooding, aloof.

Another day dawned and with it unrest. After breakfast Crawford called his young companion to his bedside.

"Set down an' let's talk," he said. "Sure, an' I'll be darn glad to," returned Al cheerfully, though his scrutiny of his friend's face noted a subtle change.

"SON, you've a lot on your mind," began Jim with a fleeting smile that was like a light on the dark worn face. "Ahuh. I just found it out," replied Al soberly.

"Worried about bein' lost?"

"Sure. An' a hundred other things."

"Ruby, for one?"

"Well, no, I can't say that. Ruby seems sort of far off—an' these close things are botherin' me."

"Wal, we'll dispose of them one at a time. First, then, about bein' lost. We are an' we aren't."

"I don't savvy, old-timer."

"Listen: I know where we are now, though I've never been anyways near here. You recall the prospector who told me about these Three Round Hills? Wal, he seen them from a ridge top down near the Gulf. He sure described them to a t. An' I reckon now he wasn't ten mile from them. The wash he dry-panned so much gold from is almost certainly this one we're on. Water is scarce down here. An' he said water ran down that wash in the flood season. So I reckon we're now less than ten miles from the Gulf. This stream peters out, of course, in the sand below here some place. Probably halfway down, I reckon."

"Ahuh. An' what of all this?" queried Al suspiciously.

"Wal, a fellow could mosey on down, stoppin' in likely places to shake a pan of gold, an' in a few days reach the Gulf with at least a couple thousand dollars' worth. Then he'd have, I reckon, about six days' travel along the Gulf, bein' careful to go only by night an' at low tide, to the mouth of the Colorado. Then Yuma, where he could cash his gold dust. An' then if he happened to live in Arizona he could get home pronto by stage."

"Sure would be wonderful for that particular fellow," returned Al, almost with sarcasm. "Funny, old-timer, now we're sittin' right under these amazin' Three Round Hills, that we don't give a damn much about the gold diggin's they're supposed to mark?"

"NOT funny, son," reproved the grave old prospector, "but sure passin' strange. Gold makes men mad, usually. Though I could never see that I was, myself. . . . If we'd only had good luck!"

"To my notion we're most darned lucky," declared Al vehemently.

"No. If that were so we'd got here weeks ago an' I wouldn't be on my back. We'd have had time to fill some sacks an' then get out before the hot weather came."

"Oh, I see, the hot weather."

"It takes a while to heat up this old desert. Then after a while the rock an' sand hold the heat over an' every day grows hotter, until it's a torrid blazin' hell, an' white men don't dare exert themselves."

"Ahuh. Then I'd say we haven't many days to waste," said Al significantly.

"You haven't, son," replied the other gently.

"Me!"

"Yes, you, Al."

"I don't get your hunch, old-timer. You strike me queer lately."

"Wal, even if I do, I've a clear mind now, an' you may be grateful for it some

day. It may have been my dream of gold that made me drag you into this hellhole, but I've got intelligence now to get you out."

"Me! What about yourself?" demanded Al sharply.

"Too late, Al. I will never get out."

The younger man rose with passionate gesture and bent eyes of blue fire down upon his reclining comrade.

"So that's it, old-timer!" he asserted fiercely, clenching his fist.

"What's it, son?" queried Crawford.

"You're knocked out an' need days to rest up. But you don't want me to risk waitin', so you'd send me on ahead."

"Al, I meant to lie to you an' tell you that. But I can't do it, now I face you."

"What you mean?" flashed Al suddenly, dropping back on his knees.

"Wal, son, I mean I couldn't follow you out."

"Why couldn't you?"

"Because the rest up I'm to do here will be forever," replied Crawford.

"Jim, you're talkin' queer again," faltered Al, plucking at his friend.

"No, son. I overreached my strength. My body was not up to my spirit. I cracked my heart. . . . An' now, Al, pretty soon I'm goin' to die."

"Aw, my God! . . . Jim, you're only out of my mind," cried Al.

THE old prospector shook his shaggy head. He scarcely needed to deny Al's poignant assertion. "Listen," he went on: "You put water beside me here. Then pack Jenester an' one other burro. Pack light. But take both canteens. Start tonight an' keep in the stream bed. In the mornin' early pan some gold. But don't let the madness seize on you. It might. That yellow stuff has awful power over men. An' remember when you reach the Gulf to travel at low tide after dark."

"Jim, I couldn't leave you," rejoined Al, mournfully shaking his head.

"But you must. It's your only chance. I'm a tough old bird an' I may live for days."

"I won't do it, old-timer," returned Al, his voice gaining.

"Son, you'll make my last days ones of grief an' regret."

"Jim, you wouldn't leave me," said Al stubbornly.

"That would be different. You have everythin' to live for an' I have nothin'."

"I don't care. I won't—I can't do it."

"There's your mother to think of."

"She'd be the last to want me to desert my friend."

"An' Ruby. You mustn't forget that little red-headed darlin'!"

Al dropped his face into his hands and groaned.

"Perhaps I misjudged Ruby. She really loves you. An' you can't risk losin' her."

"Shut up, Jim!"

"Al, if you don't go now, soon it'll be too late. I won't last long. Then you'll be stuck here. You couldn't stand the torrid months to come. You'll go mad from heat an' loneliness. But if you did survive them an' started out in the rainy season you'd be killed by the Seris."

"I'll stick," rasped on his pallid brow.

"Ruby loves you, but she'll never wait that long," declared Crawford, ruthless in his intent.

Al's gesture was one of supplication.

"RUBY won't wait even as long as she promised," went on Crawford inexorably. "That Joe Raston will get round her. He'll persuade her you're lost. An' then he'll marry her."

"Aw, Ruby will wait," rejoined Al, swallowing hard.

"Not very long. She's weak an' vain. She needs you to bring out the good in her. Joe Raston or some other flash cowboy will work on that, if you don't hurry home."

"You're lyin', old-timer," replied Al huskily.

"I saw Raston gettin' her kisses," said Crawford. "That very day before we left."

"Honest, Jim?" whispered Al.

"I give the word of a dyin' man."

Al leaned against the rock and wrestled with his demon. Presently he turned again, haggard and wet of face.

"All right. I always was afraid. But we weren't really engaged till that Saturday night."

"She can't be true to you unless you're there to hold her. Go home now, Al."

"No. I'll stand by you an' I'll trust Ruby."

"Go, Al. I'm beggin' you."

"No."

"For your mother's sake."

"No!"

"THEN for Ruby's."

An' for those kisses you'll never—never get—unless you go—now," shouted Crawford as, spent with passion, he sank back on his pillow.

"No!" yelled Al ringingly, and strode away down into the desert.

At length he came to a wide-spreading paloverde where the shade was dense and had a golden tinge. Half the yellow blossoms of this luxuriant tree lay on the ground, and it was that color rather than the shade which had halted Al. He cast himself down here, sure indeed of a mocking loneliness. And in the agony of that hour, when he fought to be true to his passionate denial of Crawford's entreaty, he acted like a man overwhelmed by solitude and catastrophe, yet laboring to victory under the eye of God. It was well indeed that the old prospector, who had brought him to this sad pass, could not likewise see him in his extremity. And what would it have meant to the wayward girl, whom he was losing in that bitter hour, to see him ascend the heights?

When it was over he rose, a man where had been a boy, and retraced his steps to camp. The sun appeared to burn a hole through his hat. He found Crawford asleep, or at least he lay with closed eyes, a tranquillity new to his face transforming it. Al had the first instance of his reward, outside of his conscience.

THAT very day the hot weather Crawford had predicted set in with a vengeance. Al, awaking out of a torpid slumber, sweltered in his wet clothes. And Al began his watchful vigil. That day dispelled any hope, if one had really existed, of his old friend recovering. Crawford drank water often, but he wanted no more food. Al himself found hunger mitigating.

"Al," said Crawford, breaking his silence at sunset, "you're stuck here—till the rains come again."

"Looks like it, old-timer," replied Al cheerfully. "Perhaps that's just as well. Don't you worry."

"Quien sabe?" replied the prospector, as if he pierced the veil of the future.

At night they conversed more freely, as the effort cost less, but neither again mentioned gold or Ruby Low. The oppression of heat was on their minds. Crawford had before given stock of his desert wisdom, but he repeated it. Where he had been violently solicitous for Al to go, now he advised against it.

The days passed, wonderful in spite of their terror. And the nights were a relief from them. Al did not leave the old prospector's side except when absolutely necessary. And as Jim imperceptibly faded away, Al made these times more and more infrequent.

One afternoon upon awakening late, Al became at once aware of a change in the sky. Clouds were rare in this section during the hot dry season, yet the sky appeared obscured by pale, green-yellow, mushrooming clouds through which the sun burned a fierce magenta hue.

Al rubbed his eyes, and watched, as had become his habit. A hard hot wind that

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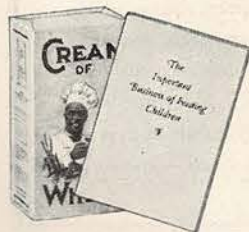
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had blown like a blast from a furnace earlier in the day had gone down with the sinking sun. The yellow rolling canopy was dust and the green tinge a reflection cast by desert foliage.

"What you make of that sky, old-timer?" asked Al, turning to his companion. But Crawford, who was usually awake at this hour and gazing through the wide opening to the desert, did not make any response. Al bent quickly, as had become his wont lately, to scrutinize the masklike face.

Getting up, Al set about his few tasks. But the lure of the sky made him desist from camp work and set him out to drive up the burros.

Meanwhile, the singular atmospheric conditions had augmented. The sun, now duskily gold, set behind Three Round Hills. And the canopy of dust, or whatever it was, had begun to lift, so that it left a band of clear dark air along the desert floor, a transparent medium like that visible after a flash of lightning.

THE phenomenon was so marvelous and new that Al suffered a break in his idle attention. This stirred his consciousness to awe and conjecture as had no other desert aspect he had watched. Presently he thought to ask the old prospector what caused it and what it signified. To this end he hurried back to camp.

Crawford leaned far forward from his bed, his spare frame strung like a whipcord, his long lean bare arm outstretched. He pointed to the west with quivering hand.

Al wheeled in consternation and he called in alarm. "Hold on, old-timer."

"Look!" cried Crawford exultantly.

"What you see? . . . Jim!"

"Amber's mirage!"

Al flashed his gaze from the prospector's transfigured countenance out across the desert to see weird rocks and grotesque cacti exquisitely magnified in the trailing veil of luminous gold.

"Jim, it's only the afterglow of sunset," cried Al, as if to try to convince himself.

The old prospector had fallen back on the bed. Al rushed to kneel beside him.

"Oh, God! He's dead! . . . An' I'm left alone!"

Al crouched there a moment, stricken by anguish. To be prepared for calamity was not enduring it. The sudden sense of his terrific loneliness beat him down like a mace. Presently when the salt blindness passed from his sight he observed that Jim had died with his eyes wide open.

HE CLOSED the eyelids, to have them fly open again. Al essayed a gentle force, with like result. Horrified, he shut the pale lids down hard. But they popped up.

"Aw!" he exclaimed, breathing hard.

Al had never seen a dead man, much less a beloved friend, who even in death persisted in a ghastly counterfeit of life. Suddenly Al saw strange shadows in the staring eyes. He bent lower. Did he imagine a perfect reflection of the luminous golden effulgence in the sky, with its drifting magnifying veil? Or were there really images there? He wiped the dimness from his own sight. He was like a man whom shock had gravely affected. There was something stamped in Jim's eyes. Perhaps the mirage engraved upon his soul! Or the sensitive iris mirroring in its last functioning moment the golden glow of a rare sunset. Al trembled in his uncertainty.

Then he recalled the story of Amber's mirage. And he sustained another shock. According to Jim the miner Amber had died raving about a mirage of gold, with wide-open eyes in which flamed a proof of his illusion and which would not stay shut.

"It's only the mind," muttered Al. A monstrous trick of the imagination, natural to these mad prospectors, a lie as false as any mirage itself!

But there shone that beautiful light in Crawford's sightless eyes. And the sky had shaded over. The gold had vanished. The mysterious veil might never have transformed the desert. Al covered the old prospector's face with a blanket.

That night Al Shade kept reverent vigil beside the body of his departed friend. The desert seemed a sepulchre.

With the retreat of the somber shadows came a necessity for practical tasks. He ate a meager breakfast. Then he wrapped Jim in his blankets and tarpaulin, and bound them securely. Whereupon he stalked forth to find a grave.

IT WOULD never do to bury Jim in the sand. Of all the desert mediums sand was the most treacherous. It would blow away and so he hunted for a niche in the rocks. He found many, some too large and others too small. At last under a cliff he had overlooked he discovered a deep depression, clean and dry, as fine a last resting place as any man could desire. And it would be sweet to the old prospector! It was sheltered from rain and flying sand, yet it looked out upon the desert. If properly filled and sealed it would last there as long as the rocks.

He carried Jim—now how light a burden!—and tenderly deposited him in the hole. Then Al tried to remember a prayer, but as he could not he made one up.

"To the rocks you loved, old-timer! May God save your soul!"

It was going to take considerable to fill that deep grave.

Small stones, such as he could lift, were remarkably scarce, considering it was a region of stone. It would be necessary to fill the grave full or the scavengers of the desert would dig poor Jim out and strew his old bones over the sands.

AL WENT farther afield in search of rocks. Now he would gather a sack of small ones and then he would stagger back under burden of a heavy one. He performed Herculean labors.

The time came when his task was almost done. Only a few more heavy stones! But where to find them? He had sacked the desert of its loose fragments. While allaying his thirst at the stream he espied the dull yellow gleam of a rock out in a little pool, rather deep.

Al waded out to secure it. His feet sank in the sand, and as the water was knee-deep he had to bend to get the stone. It lifted easily enough, until he heaved it out of the water. Then it felt like lead.

All this toil in the hot sun had weakened him or else the stone, which was not large, had exceeding weight; in fact, it was so burdensome that Al floundered with it and at the shore would have fallen if he had not let it drop.

Bare flat rock edged on the stream there and Al's stone, as it struck, gave forth a curious ring. He gave it a kick with his wet boot, shaking off some of the sand that adhered to it. Dull yellow and white stripes appeared on this queer-looking stone Al had carried out of the stream.

Then he scraped his hob-nailed boot hard on the surface. Bright threads caught the sunlight.

Frantically he crawled into the stream and grasped up handfuls of wet sand. He spread them to the sun, gazed with piercing eyes.

Specks of gold! They were as many as the grains of sand.

Al tore up the bank, his fists shut tight on his precious discovery.

"Jim! Jim!" he shouted, panting with rapture. "Look here! A strike! An' old Three Round Hills—is her name!"

He got no response to his wild outcry.

"Jim!"

Silence and loneliness emanated from the camp. They struck at Al's heart with reality. An empty space marked where Jim's bed had lain in the shade.

(To be Concluded in the July Journal)