

1944

Blue Is the South

Paul-Louis Faye

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Faye, Paul-Louis. "Blue Is the South." *New Mexico Quarterly* 14, 4 (1944). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol14/iss4/10>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

BLUE IS THE SOUTH

Paul-Louis Faye

NAKHAI DATSEH, that's my name. It means something, too, in my language. "Perhaps-A-Mexican," that's what it means. Sounds funny, doesn't it? But she was a Mexican, they say. They caught her in the early days when they had slaves, like the whites; they made a slave of her. I am talking about my grandmother. She seemed to like me more than the others, so they gave me that name. I am more of a Mexican than a Navaho. That's why I left the reservation, I guess, when I was a young man and went roaming all over Arizona. Most of my time, however, I spent among the whites working on their farms, running after cattle, herding sheep. I even worked in a sawmill. And then I happened to steal that horse. That's what I did.

When I left Dave—I had been working for him, baling hay—I wanted very much to return to my people. Oh! I kept looking toward the North, beyond Flagstaff, even beyond Tuba City. Every day my heart went to the North. Yes, it would be good to be there with my mother and relatives, in the valley at the foot of the cliffs, where even in winter it is snug and warm, and wait until the spring when a young man can go out and find work to do. It was November when I began saying that. Many times I had said to myself, and I said it to Dave, too, "I am going back," I said, and always something happened. It was now past Christmas. I thought I would make it this time. I had some money saved, enough to live on during the rest of the winter. So one day I said good-bye to the family and I left.

I had a horse Dave had traded me for part of my time, but he was old. I had tried him, and on short runs he was not so bad; but after five or six miles, climbing up, he began to slow down and I could not get any go out of him. The next day I bought a pair of spurs and used

them on him, but to no good. I believe he had been locoed once. The second night I slept on the range. As I was going to lie down, a little pony with his winter hair on came to drink at the pool I had stopped by. When he had drunk, he walked up to my horse to sniff and make friends with him. Then he came toward me as though expecting some grain. There was a gentle horse. I had no grain to give him, so I patted him on the nose. Then an idea shot through my mind. Why not take him and ride him home? But if I left the old horse behind he would surely go back to the ranch and people would wonder what had become of me. They would get on my trail. What could I do? I took the old horse behind a boulder and shot him. I put the saddle on my new horse and rode away.

Strange things immediately began to happen to me. Instead of going north as I intended, I headed south. I was doing exactly the contrary of what I had meant. What happened to me? I don't know. For a moment I felt as if a whirlwind was passing through my head. I think I had been away from my people too long. It is not good for a man; he loses his "ways." It is easy to get away from one's people, but to tie up with another people, that is what few men can do, and even when they do it, the better part of them is crushed out. All the time he remembers the man he was, and he cannot be the man he wants. Then something goes wrong in him; he doesn't know what to do. That's what happened to me.

Instead of riding through Palo Verde I skirted along the hills, following a trail that took me down through a fine grassy country. The moon was shining. I reached a house by a pool of water in the bed of a little canyon. There wasn't any cattle around. On a board I read: U. S. Forest Service. It was a ranger's station. I went round the house; not a light, not a sound, not a horse in the pasture. As I reached the other gate to the south I read on a post: Phoenix. I don't remember how many miles. Phoenix! All the things Dave had told me about that town flashed through my mind. He had been there when a young man. He had seen many things, bad things, and he told about them—and me listening with both ears! I remember him saying he had seen women lying drunk on tables in poolrooms. When he said that I laughed. He looked at me and said: "How would you like to see your mother lying drunk on a pool table?" It's a white man that talks that way. I knew what he meant, but all the same I wanted to see the things he had seen. Before I knew it I had got off my horse and opened the

gate. I heard it closing behind me as in a dream. Next I was on my horse again, going south.

The country I went through at the start was very broken. I did not mind that. It kept me out of sight of ranches. I could avoid meeting people as long as the feed was good, but when I reached the lower country I had to buy hay for my horse. I bought a bale at Bumblebee. And how that woman, the owner of the station, looked at my horse! Later, they told me she always did that to strangers: she looked at the brand and asked them if the horse had been vented. Then she laughed if they seemed to get mad. I did not give her time to practice on me. The next day I was at New Water, where I camped before entering Phoenix. There the Agua Fria sinks into the ground. A couple of men, whose looks I didn't like, were camping among the bushes. So I went farther down, about a mile, and tied my horse to a clump of brush in the bed of the stream. No feed, of course, but I had saved half of my bale of hay. I slept with the end of the rope around my wrist. I made Phoenix the next day and put up at Pat's corral. That's where Dave told me he stopped when in Phoenix. In his stories, Dave always seemed to be coming from some place and going to a new one.

I liked Phoenix very much. I felt like a new man there. I was not homesick. I had ceased to think about my people and I looked at myself as a Mexican. I spoke only little Mexican, though. There were men of all kinds in Phoenix, whites, Mexicans, Indians. They all wore fine blue overalls and clean yellow shirts and painted scarfs. I got myself an outfit like theirs and began to pace up and down Washington Street. But I could not get any whiskey. The bartenders did not want to take a chance on me. In the saloons there was gambling and dancing. There were girls too, with their high heels and nice clothes. Some had hair like gold. But I did not dance, so I went to the gambling table. They had games of all sorts. They were shooting craps; they had big wheels with dollar bills stuck all over. They had faro tables, and tables where they played monte, and tables where they played twenty-one. They had roulette tables too. But I did not think I would bet, for I did not understand the games. However, I liked to see the cards pass. I stood behind the players watching their game. Then I watched a man playing red and black at a roulette table. He won. It seemed dead easy. Several times I guessed the colors before the ball would stop. Then I put a dollar on the black. I lost it. I doubled on the black again. I won. I put a dollar on the red and I won. I was started,

as I see now. I had made about ten dollars when I lost the whole pile. Then I bet a five. I lost it. I had a twenty left. I had it in a wallet hung to my neck, between my shirt and my skin. I had to leave the room to get at it. That gave me time to think: I did not take it. But it was very hard for me not to take it. I felt very bad about it. I felt that I should go right on playing. Gambling is like dancing; it is not well to stop before the end. The man who stops in the midst of a dance must be awfully strong. I could not have done it among my own people. But I was among strangers and I took a risk. It was hard.

When I left the gambling hall, I returned to Pat's corral. There I found a man who was looking for a sheep-herder. He spoke to me. He was paying thirty dollars a month. I put my horse in a pasture for two dollars and a half a month and went out to the herd with my new boss. He kept his sheep on the river near Phoenix. There was plenty of browsing, but it was a poor place to lamb and the lambs were already coming. They lamb early there; it was in February. Many ewes miscarried. My camp-mover was very lazy. He had a girl somewhere around and was never there to cook. Two weeks after, I called for my wages and went to get my horse. But in the meantime some things happened to me that I want to tell about.

While I was herding for that man around Phoenix, I saw some Indians that live there, near the city. Their women wear clothes like the whites, but they lose their shoes as they walk and their blouses are always open at the back. They use Spanish a great deal even when they talk. They do among themselves; I have heard them. They had ranches on the Gila River, and they seemed to have something sown and my sheep ran over it. They did not speak to me about it, but the next day the bells on my burros were missing. That is what these people are like.

The same afternoon, I was herding when I saw two women coming toward me. They seemed to be picking firewood. I knew they were Indian women. I expected them to pass before me, but instead, as they were nearing me, they took to the brush and disappeared. The next day I saw them again. I was sitting on the edge of a road, over a culvert, watching my sheep. It was easy work. They were between the river and the road. All I had to do was to send my dog to the right and to the left to keep the strayers out of the road. The women parted. One went out of sight. The other came on the road toward me. As she passed she looked at me. I said, "Buenos dias, señora." "Señorita,

señor," she corrected me, and a little of her teeth cleared. I did not have much to say. I wonder why I even spoke to her. Really, I wonder how all this ever happened. She went on, "Onde viene 'sted?" I made a motion, "Muy lejo." "Indio?" I said I was a Navaho. It was the first time I owned myself a Navaho since I had left the North. She looked surprised. "Ha, quel!"

Then I asked her, "Que gente usted?" She said she was a Maricopa. She told me that her people lived on a little farm by the river. They had never met a Navaho. She said they would like to have me go to their house; they would be glad to see a Navaho. She was a fat girl of about twenty, I would say. She wore a corset; I could see the lacing in the back, something new to me. She also wore shoes and an apron. She was very much darker in complexion than the women of my people. I said I could not leave my sheep. "Why not come at night?" she said.

At that moment my dog began to act uneasy. He barked in a muffled tone. This is what those collies do when they want to warn the shepherd and not disturb the sheep. I spoke to him. He rose, wagging his tail. I said to the girl, "Something is the matter with my sheep. I must go." She looked at me in a sort of way; she said, "Ha, que bueno muchacho!" I could not tell if she was making fun of me. I followed my dog. He leaped straight ahead. I came onto new tracks, the tracks of two men. As I went around I saw the two men getting away. I could not tell whether they were Indians or Mexicans. I went round their tracks and made sure that they had not driven any of my sheep away.

When I came back to where I had left the Maricopa girl, she was gone. I saw her again the next day. She came around to pick wood. She had another woman with her. She asked me many things about my people. I thought that she had taken quite a fancy to me. I managed to speak to her alone. She asked me if I ever went to the movies. I said, "No. How could I?" "But can't you go at night?" "I could," I said, "but my *campero* does not always stay with me at night." "You are working too hard. All the boys get jobs in the city and in the evening they take their girls to the *vistas*."

I began to wish very much I could go to the movies with her. I knew I could not leave my sheep. My *campero*, who should have watched them at night, was himself taking his girl to the movies. I thought I was easy. I told the girl I would speak to the *campero* at night when he came. She asked, "Then, you will take me to the movies?"

"Seguro," I said. She added, "I know where I can get booze. There is an old woman peddles it to us. Good stuff, too." I said, "Where shall I find you?" "I'll wait for you under the bridge."

When the *campero* came I told him that I was going to take the night off. "Nothing doing," he said; "I must milk the cows for the old man." "Well, suppose you come back after supper?" He grumbled for a while, saying that he had too much to do. I said, "You tell that to the old man. My work here stops when the sheep are bedded down. I am going to town tonight; you may lay on that." "Is that so?" he said and made for to leave. He was surly. When he left I was going to ask him if he would come back. Then I thought, "Better not. He might think he can stay, that I would not go to town after all." I ate my supper and waited. Time passed and he did not come. I was thinking of that woman waiting for me under the bridge. I was afraid we would be too late for the movies. It was a two-mile walk to the city. She might lose heart and go home. More time passed. I could see the lights in Phoenix. My man did not come. I wanted to leave the sheep. In the meantime the *campero* was making a fool of me. How I hated him! I cursed him. To keep from fretting I went again around the sheep. They were all right. More than ever I wanted to go. But then I thought that if anything happened, the boss would get even with me and hold my check. I had in mind to quit him soon. But I did not want to lose what money was coming to me. I wanted that money.

At last the *campero* came. We hardly spoke to one another. I took straight through the thickets. I found the woman under the bridge. "My, you are late," she said; "has your *campero* come?" "Yes, he has come." "So, he has come?" she said again. She did not seem to be in a hurry now to go to the movies. "Oh, it is too late," she said. I think we could have got there for the second show. She said, "I want to go home." "What did you make me come here for?" I said. Then she began to argue. She made a motion as if to go. I caught her by the arm. "Let me go," she said. I began to kiss her. Indian people don't do much kissing, but she was not a woman of my tribe. She pulled my hair and scratched my neck, but pretty soon she gave in.

Then I said, "Where is your home?" "I'll show you," she said with a voice like a little girl. As we walked through the brush we were attacked by a pack of wild dogs. I shot my gun twice. She was very scared. She clung to me and I had to hold her in my arms. All the same, I was watching all the time for fear somebody would hit me from

behind while I was walking with her. Where I left her was a shack. No light. We kissed again and she promised to come back the next day.

The next day she did not show up. Two days later I quit that outfit. But in Phoenix I kept thinking about that girl. Every time I would see a rig pull in with a load of wood and a bunch of Maricopa women on top I looked up, thinking I recognized her. For a while, my head swam so much thinking of her that I thought she must have rubbed something bad on my kettles when I was not in camp. They know a lot about magic, those people. She was a bad sort, anyway. She stole all I had in my hip pocket while I was sitting under the bridge with her. I had a ball of cotton twine and a little book of paper in my pocket. I wondered: "Why has she stolen these?" I did not like the idea of her having anything mine.

One day, while strolling down a street in Phoenix, I chanced to stop before a curio store, and there in the window I saw a big blanket of a pattern I knew. I had seen women of my clan, my mother herself, weave that pattern. Then I saw the broad bands of earth and stone of various colors as they appear in the cliffs, and I grew homesick. Then I said good-bye to the mountains of the South, and I left Phoenix for home. I thought I was going home this time.

It was dull traveling at first. I kept following the railroad till I reached a place called Ambrose Junction. All the towns I went through were mining towns. There were saloons in every one of them. In Consolation I got into a poker game, but they played too hard for me. I quit in time. They had a girl there who lived in a shack on the other side of the road, opposite the store. But I left the next morning, even before dawn. I wanted to go home. Two days later I reached Ambrose Junction. I heard somebody say something about the Verde River. I asked if it was the same that flowed through Palo Verde. They said yes. Then, all of a sudden, I felt like returning to Dave's place. That was what I wanted to do. I knew I had but to follow the Verde to get there. The next morning I entered a canyon that led me straight into it. It was shallow and I followed the river bed. On the way I sighted several ranches, but I kept clear of them. One night, however, I stayed with two cattlemen in their cabin. They had invited me. They treated me very nice. I think they took me for a rustler. The next night I camped under a bridge near a ranch for whose owner I had been given a letter by one of the cattlemen the night before. I knew I was now in the very country where I might come across the owner of the horse I

was riding. I feared a trap. So I took the letter to the ranchman, late at night, and afoot. I did not let my horse graze that night. The next day I had to leave the river bottom as the water was getting too deep and I took across the hills, trying to make Ambrose City. I went through many fenced places with no way out. I had to retrace my steps and it took an awful amount of time. In some places it was so steep that you could not even go up. At the top, there was a railroad. The train went along nicely, hugging the slopes. I could see the people in the cars; they all put out their heads to see me scramble up the hill-sides. I reached the town at night after losing much time going up and down.

There were many cattlemen in town. Tired as I was I rushed through and camped on the flats below. But before going down from the edge of the town—it is built like a balcony—I took a good look at the country below and spotted the place where I thought Dave's place to be. The next day I sure rode hard. It was like riding blind and yet I did not make a mistake. I went as straight as a bird flies. That country knew me, it seemed; it drew me to it. Then at night I heard a noise of waters where a few months before I knew to be only a dry wash. The snows had thawed on the mountains and the creeks were flowing up. I liked that, the sound of it. By that time I was in sight of the ranch. I entered. They were all asleep. I took my saddle off that horse and led him out of the ranch quite a way. I spoke to him. I told him he had been a good horse to me and I thanked him. I gave him a slap on the rump and off he went, browsing. For a fact, I never saw that horse again. He must have returned to his range or else the cowboys found him for the roundup. Then I took my saddle into the barn and slept on the hay, under my slicker. In the morning Dave found me and we had breakfast. He asked me about my horse. "Horse vamoose," I told him. He never asked me anything more about it.

That's how it went, my friend. I needed that horse and I took him. Many men do that when they need a mount, I had been told, but you are not supposed to do it. There are wild horses on the range these you can catch, but you are not supposed to take branded stock. It was winter time; that horse was so shaggy that, to speak the truth I never saw his brand. Anyway, I always treated him fair.