

HEART OF THE SUNSET

By Rex Beach

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In this serial we are given an intimate view of conditions that have prevailed on the border for a long time. Newspaper reports apparently have not gone to the bottom of the situation. Trouble-making circumstances between the Mexican and American peoples are deeper than one or two or half a dozen raids on border towns by outlaw gangs, and these circumstances won't work themselves out satisfactorily in a week or a month or a year. Yes, Mr. Beach has given us a picture of conditions. But in "Heart of the Sunset" he has given us also a charming love story, one of the best this paper has printed; and we feel confident that all of you will enjoy it thoroughly.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

The Water-Hole.

A fitful breeze played among the mesquite bushes. The naked earth, where it showed between the clumps of grass, was baked plaster hard. Although the sun was half-way down the west, its glare remained untempered, and the tantalizing shade of the sparse mesquite was more of a trial than a comfort to the lone woman who, refusing its deceitful invitation, plodded steadily over the waste. Stop, indeed, she dared not. In spite of her fatigue, regardless of the torture from feet and limbs unused to walking, she must, as she constantly assured herself, keep going until strength failed. Somewhere to the northward, perhaps a mile, perhaps a league distant, lay the water-hole.

Desert travel was nothing new to her; thirst and fatigue were old acquaintances. She readjusted the strap of the empty water bag over her shoulder and the loose cartridge belt at her hip, then set her dusty feet down the slope. The sun had grown red and huge when at last in the hard-baked earth she discovered fresh hoofprints. She followed them gladly, encouraged when they were joined by others. A low bluff rose on her left, and along its crest scattered Spanish daggers were raggedly silhouetted against the sky. She tried to run, but her legs were heavy; she stumbled a great deal, and her breath made strange, distressing sounds as it issued from her open lips. Rounding the steep shoulder of the ridge, she hastened down a declivity into a knot of scrub oaks and ebony trees, then halted, staring ahead of her. Nestling in a shallow, flinty bowl was a pool of water, and on its brink a little fire was burning.

It was a tiny fire, overhung with a blackened pot; the odor of greasewood and mesquite smoke was sharp. A man, rising swiftly to his feet at the first sound, was staring at the newcomer; he was as alert as any wild thing. But the woman staggered directly toward the pond, seeing nothing after the first glance except the water. She would have flung herself full length upon the edge, but the man stepped forward and stayed her, then placed a tin cup in her hand. She mumbled something in answer to his greeting and the hoarse, ravenlike croak in her voice startled her; then she drank, with trembling eagerness, drenching the front of her dress. The water was warm, but it was clean and delicious.

"Easy now. Take your time," said the man, as he refilled the cup. "It won't give out."

She knelt and wet her face and neck. Felt the stranger's hands beneath her arms, felt herself lifted to a more comfortable position. Without asking permission, the stranger unlaced first one, then the other of her dusty boots, seeming not to notice her weak attempt at resistance. Once he had placed her bare feet in the water, she forgot her resentment in the intense relief.

The man left her seated in a collapsed, semiconscious state, and went back to his fire. It was dark when for the first time she turned her head toward the camp fire and stared curiously at the figure there. The appetizing odor of broiling bacon had drawn her attention, and as if no move went unnoticed the man said, without lifting his eyes:

"Supper will be ready directly. How'd you like your eggs—if we had any?"

He spoke with an unmistakable Texas drawl; the woman put him down at once for a cowboy. Well back from the fire he had arranged a seat for her, using a saddle blanket for a covering, and upon this she lowered herself willy.

"I suppose you wonder how I happen to be here," she said.

"Now don't talk 'til you're rested, miss. This coffee is strong enough to walk on its hands, and I reckon about two cups of it 'll rattle you into shape." As he raised the tin mug to her lips he waved a hand and smiled. "Drink

hearty!" He set a plate of bread and bacon in her lap, then opened a glass jar of jam.

The woman ate and drank slowly. She was too tired to be hungry, and meanwhile the young man squatted upon his heels and watched her through the smoke from a husk cigarette.

"Have you had your supper?" she finally inquired.

"Who, me? Oh, I'll eat with the help." He smiled, and when his flashing teeth showed white against his leathery tan the woman decided he was not at all bad-looking. He was very tall and quite lean, with the long legs of a horseman—this latter feature accentuated by his high-heeled boots and by the short canvas cowboy coat that reached only to his cartridge belt. His features she could not well make out, for the fire was little more than a bed of coals, and he fed it, Indian-like, with a twig or two at a time.

"I beg your pardon, I'm selfish." She extended her cup and plate as an invitation for him to share their contents. "Please eat with me."

But he refused. "I ain't hungry," he affirmed. "Honest!"

Accustomed as she was to the diffidence of ranch hands, she refrained from urging him, and proceeded with her repast. When she had finished she lay back and watched him as he ate sparingly.

"My horse fell crossing the Arroyo Grande," she announced, abruptly. "He broke a leg, and I had to shoot him."

"Is there any water in the Grande?" asked the man.

"No. They told me there was plenty. I knew of this charco, so I made for it."

"Who told you there was water in the arroyo?"

"Those Mexicans at the little goat-ranch."

"Balli. So you walked in from Arroyo Grande. It's a good ten miles straightaway, and I reckon you came crooked, eh?"

"Yes. And it was very hot. I was never here but once, and—the country looks different when you're afoot."

"It certainly does," the man nodded. Then he continued, musingly: "No water here, eh? I figured there might be a little." The fact appeared to please him, for he nodded again as he went on with his meal. "Not much rain down here, I reckon."

"Very little. Where are you from?"

"Me? Hebronville. My name is Law."

Evidently, thought the woman, this fellow belonged to the East, or to some of the other big cattle ranches in the Hebronville district. Probably he was a range boss or a foreman. After a time she said, "I suppose the nearest ranch is that Balli place?"

"Yes'm."

"I'd like to borrow your horse."

Mr. Law stared into his plate. "Well, miss, I'm afraid—"

She added, hastily, "I'll send you a fresh one by Balli's boy in the morning."

Law shook his head. "I can't loan



"How'd You Like Your Eggs—If We Had Any?"

you my horse, miss. I got to meet a man here."

"When will he come?"

"He'd ought to be here at early dark tomorrow evening." Heedless of her dismay, he continued, "Yes'm, about sundown."

"But—I can't stay here. I'll ride to Balli's and have your horse back by afternoon."

"My man might come earlier than I expect," Mr. Law persisted.

"Really, I can't see what difference it would make. It wouldn't interfere with your appointment to let me—"

Law smiled slowly, and setting his plate aside, selected a fresh cigarette; then, as he reached for a coal, he explained:

"I haven't got what you'd call exactly an appointment. This feller I'm

expectin' is a Mexican, and day before yesterday he killed a man over in Jim Wells county. They got me by 'phone at Hebronville and told me he'd left. He's headin' for the border, and he's due here about sundown, now that Arroyo Grande's dry. I was admint' to let you ride his horse."

"Then—you're an officer?"

"Yes'm, Ranger. So you see I can't help you to get home till my man comes. Do you live around here?" The speaker looked up inquiringly, and after an instant's hesitation the woman said quietly:

"I am Mrs. Austin." She was grateful for the gloom that hid her face. "I rode out this way to examine a tract of grazing land."

It seemed fully a minute before the Ranger answered; then he said, in a casual tone, "I reckon Las Palmas is quite a ranch, ma'am."

"Yes. But we need more pasture." "I know your La Feria ranch, too. I was with General Castro when we had that fight near there."

"You were a Maderista?"

"Yes'm. Machine-gun man. That's a fine country over there. Seems like the Almighty got mixed and put the Mexicans on the wrong side of the Rio Grande. But I reckon you haven't seen much of La Feria since the last revolution broke out."

"No. We have tried to remain neutral, but—" Again she hesitated. "Mr. Austin has enemies. Fortunately both sides have spared La Feria."

Law shrugged his broad shoulders. "Oh, well, the revolution isn't over! A ranch in Mexico is my idea of a bad investment." He rose and, taking his blanket, sought a favorable spot upon which to spread it. Then he helped Mrs. Austin to her feet—her muscles had stiffened until she could barely stand—after which he fetched his saddle for a pillow. He made no apologies for his meager hospitality, nor did his guest expect any.

When he had staked out his horse for the night he returned to find the woman rolled snugly in her covering, as in a cocoon. The dying embers flickered into flame and lit her hair redly. She had laid off her felt hat, and one loosened braid lay over her hard pillow. Thinking her asleep, Law stood motionless, making no attempt to hide his expression of wonderment until, unexpectedly, she spoke.

"What will you do with me when your Mexican comes?" she said.

"Well, ma'am, I reckon I'll hide you out in the brush till I tame him."

"Thank you, I'm used to the open." He nodded as if he well knew that she was; then, shaking out his slicker, turned away.

As he lay staring up through the thorny mesquite branches that roofed him inadequately from the dew, he marveled mightily. A bright, steady-burning star peeped through the leaves at him, and as he watched it he remembered this red-haired woman with the still, white face was known far and wide through the lower valley as "The Lone Star." Well, he mused, the name fitted her; she was, if reports were true, quite as mysterious, quite as cold and fixed and unapproachable, as the title implied. Knowledge of her identity had come as a shock, for Law knew something of her history, and to find her suing for his protection was quite thrilling. Tales of her pale beauty were common and not tame, but she was all and more than she had been described.

She had not been too proud and cold to let him help her. In her fatigue she had allowed him to lift her and to make her more comfortable. Not against his palms—palms unaccustomed to the touch of a woman's flesh—he felt the contact of her naked feet, as at the moment when he had placed them in the cooling water. Her feeble resistance had only called attention to her sex—to the slim whiteness of her ankles beneath her short riding skirt.

Following his first amazement at beholding her had come a fantastic explanation of her presence—for a moment or two it had seemed as if the fates had taken heed of his yearnings and had sent her to him out of the dusk—wild fancies, like these, bother men who are much alone.

CHAPTER II.

The Ambush.

Alaire Austin, like most normal women, had a surprising amount of endurance, both nervous and muscular, but, having drawn heavily against her reserve force, she paid the penalty. During the early hours of the night she slept hardly at all; as soon as her bodily discomfort began to decrease her mind became unruly, and it was not until nearly dawn that she dropped off into complete unconsciousness. She was awakened by a sunbeam which pierced her leafy shelter.

It was still early; the sun had just cleared the valley's rim and the ground was damp with dew. Somewhere near by an unfamiliar bird was sweetly trilling. Alaire listened dreamily until the bird-crowd changed to the air of a familiar cowboy song, then she sat up, queerly startled.

David Law was watering his horse, grooming the animal meanwhile with a burlap cloth. It was a beautiful blood-bay mare, and as the woman looked it lifted its head, then with wet, trembling muzzle caressed its owner's cheek. Undoubtedly this attention was meant for a kiss, and was as daintily conferred as any woman's favor. It brought a reward in a lump of sugar.

"Good morning," said Mrs. Austin.

Law lifted his hat in a graceful salute as he approached around the edge of the pool, his spurs jingling musically. The mare followed.

"You have a fine horse there."

"Yes'm. Her and me get along all right. I hope we didn't wake you, ma'am."

"No. I was too tired to sleep well."

"Of course. I heard you stirring about during the night." Law paused,



"Sometimes I go without sugar, but Bessie Belle never does."

and the mare, with sharp ears cocked forward, looked over his shoulder inquisitively. "Tell the lady good morning, Bessie Belle," he directed. The animal flung its head high, then stepped forward and, stretching its neck, sniffed doubtfully at the visitor.

"What a graceful bow!" Mrs. Austin laughed. "You taught her that, I presume."

"Yes'm! She'd never been to school when I got her; she was plumb ignorant. But she's got all the airs of a fine lady now. Sometimes I go without sugar, but Bessie Belle never does."

"And you with a sweet tooth!"

The Ranger smiled pleasantly. "She's as easy as a rockin' chair. We're kind of sweethearts. Ain't we, kid?" Again Bessie Belle tossed her head high. "That's 'yes,' with the reverse English," the speaker explained.

He would not permit her to help with the breakfast, so she lay back watching her host, whose personality, now that she saw him by daylight, had begun to challenge her interest. Physically Law was of an admirable make—considerably over six feet in height, with wide shoulders and lean, strong limbs. Although his face was schooled to mask all but the keenest emotions, a pair of blue-gray, meditative eyes, with a whimsical fashion of wrinkling half-shut when he talked, relieved a countenance that otherwise would have been a trifle grim and somber. The nose was prominent and boldly arched, the mouth was thin-lipped and mobile. In his face there was nothing animal in a bad sense. Certainly it showed no grossness. The man, despite his careless use of the plains vernacular, seemed to be rather above the average in education and intelligence. On the whole, she rather resented the good impression Law had made upon her, for on general principles she chose to dislike and distrust men. Rising, she walked painfully to the pond and made a leisurely toilet.

Breakfast was ready when she returned, and once more the man sat upon his heels and smoked while she ate. After a while she remarked: "I'm glad to see a Ranger in this country. There has been a lot of stealing down our way, and the association men can't seem to stop it. Perhaps you can."

"The Rangers have a reputation in that line," he admitted. "But there is stealing all up and down the border, since the war."

"The ranchers have organized. They have formed a sort of vigilance committee in each town, and talk of using bloodhounds."

The ranger has a serious encounter with enemies, and a curious relationship springs up between him and the lady—be sure to read the next installment. See what your friends think of the story.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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"I overheard Miss Oldun ask you to guess her age. Did you?"

"Yes, but I didn't tell her what I guessed."—Puck.

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O'Rourke—Oh, Dinnis, Dinnis, me heart's broke! Me boy Mike's run away and enlisted. It was the fightin' blood in him.

McIntyre—Well, what's the use worryin', Pat? I always told yez the boy took after his mother.

When the police arrived, both were disabled.

Almost the Same.

"You're crazy about George, aren't you, sis?"

"Huh! Mother says I'm crazy to have him about."

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