

HEART OF THE SUNSET

By Rex Beach

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ALAIRE AUSTIN AROUSES THE BRUTAL COVETOUSNESS IN GENERAL LONGORIO'S NATURE AND HE BEGINS TO PLAN ACCORDINGLY

Mrs. Alaire Austin, a handsome young matron, mistress of Las Palmas ranch, gets lost in the Texas desert and after an all-day struggle wanders into the little camp of David Law, a ranger, hunting a Mexican murderer. Circumstances force her to stay 24 hours in the camp. Law catches his man, kills another and escorts her home. "Young Ed" Austin, drunken wastrel, berates his wife and makes insinuations about the ranger. Austin is secretly in league with Mexican rebels. Alaire starts for her ranch La Feria, in federal Mexican territory, to secure damages for cattle confiscated by soldiery.

CHAPTER V—Continued.

"I was coming to that. Your husband, senora, is an active Candelista."

For a moment Alaire was at a loss; then she replied with some spirit: "We are two people, he and I. La Feria belongs to me."

"Nevertheless his conduct is regrettable," Longorio went on. "Probably evil men have lied to him."

For the first time Dolores stirred. She had watched her countryman with a peculiar fascination. Now she said, as if freed from a spell:

"Fah! Nobody pays heed to Senor Ed. We do not consider him."

Alaire turned upon her with a sharp exclamation, conscious meanwhile that the woman's tone, even more than her words, had enlightened Longorio to some extent. His lifted brows were eloquent of surprise and curiosity, but he held his tongue.

"Am I to understand, then, that you rob me because of my husband's action?" Alaire asked.

"No. I shall help," Longorio beamed enthusiastically. "It shall be the object of my life to serve you, and you and I shall arrange this matter satisfactorily. I have influence, believe me. Duty calls me to Nuevo Pueblo, and you shall return with me as the guest of my government." He rose to his feet, but his eagerness soon gave place to disappointment.

"Thank you," said Alaire, "but I must first go to La Feria and get all the facts."

"Senora! It is a wretched journey. See!" He waved a contemptuous gesture at the car, crowded to congestion.

"There is no food; you have no one to wait upon you. In my company you will be safe. Upon my honor, you will enjoy the highest courtesy—"

"Of course. But I must go on. I have Dolores and Jose to look after me." Alaire indicated Sanchez, who had edged his way very close and now stood with admiring eyes fixed upon his hero.

"Yes, mi general," Jose exclaimed, eagerly. "I am here."

Longorio scrutinized the horse-breaker critically. "Your name is—?"

"Jose Sanchez."

"You look like a brave fellow."

Jose swelled at this praise, and no doubt would have made suitable answer, but his employer held out her hand, and General Longorio bent over it, raising it to his lips. He called one of his subordinates closer and ordered that a lieutenant and six soldiers be detached to act as an escort to Mrs. Austin's party. "Senora, the hours will drag until I may see you again and be of further service. Meanwhile I shall be tortured with radiant dreams. Go with God!" For a second time he bowed and kissed the hand held, then, taking Jose Sanchez intimately by the arm, he turned to the door.

Dolores collapsed into her seat with an exclamation. "Caramba! The man is a demon! And such eyes. Uf!"

Dolores was interrupted by Longorio's voice beneath the open window. The general stood, cap in hand, holding up to Alaire a solitary wildflower which he had plucked beside the track.

"See!" he cried. "It is the color of your adorable eyes—blue like the sapphire gem." He placed the delicate bloom in Alaire's fingers and was gone.

"Quidado!" breathed Dolores. "There is blood in it; the blood of innocents. He will burn for a million years in hell, that man."

Jose Sanchez came plowing into Alaire's car, tremendously excited. "Look, senora!" he cried. "Look what the general gave me," and he proudly displayed Longorio's service revolver. Around Jose's waist was the cartridge belt and holster that went with the weapon. "With his own hands he buckled it about me, and he said, 'Jose, something tells me you are a devil for bravery. Guard your mistress with your life, for if any mishap befalls her I shall cut out your heart with my own hands.' Those were his very words, senora. Caramba! There is a man to die for."

Nor was this the last of Longorio's dramatic surprises. Shortly after the train had got under way the lieutenant in command of Alaire's guard brought her a small package, saying:

"The general commanded me to hand

you this, with his deepest regard."

Alaire accepted the object curiously. It was small and heavy and wrapped in several leaves torn from a notebook, and it proved to be nothing less than the splendid diamond-and-ruby ring she had admired.

"God protect us, now!" murmured Dolores, crossing herself devoutly.

CHAPTER VI.

Blaze Jones and His Neighbors. Blaze Jones rode up to his front gate and dismounted in the shade of the big ebony tree. He stepped back and ran an approving eye over another animal tethered there. Of course the youths of this day were nothing like the youths of his own, and yet—Blaze let his gaze linger fondly on the highbred mare and her equipment—here at least was a person who knew a good horse, a good saddle and a good gun.

As he came up the walk he heard Paloma laugh, and his own face lightened, for his daughter's merriment was contagious. Then as he mounted the steps and turned the corner of the "gallery" he uttered a hearty greeting.

"Dave Law! Where in the world did you drop from?"

Law uncoiled himself and took the ranchman's hand. "Hello, Blaze! I been ordered down here to keep you straight."

"Ishaw! Now who's been giving you orders, Dave?"

"Why, I'm with the Rangers."

"Never knew a word of it. Last I heard you was filibustering around with the Maderistas."

Blaze seated himself with a grateful sigh where the breeze played over him. He was a big, bearlike, swarthy man with the square-jawed, deep-lined face of a tragedian, and a head of long, curly hair, which he wore parted in a line over his left ear. Jones was a character, a local landmark. This part of Texas had grown up with Blaze, and he possessed a splendid indifference to the artificial fads of dress and manners. He was plainly an outdoor man.

"So you're a Ranger, and got notches on your gun." Blaze rolled and lit a tiny cigarette, scarcely larger than a wheat straw. "Well, you'd ought to make a right able thief-catcher, Dave, only for your size—you're too long for a man and you ain't long enough for a snake. Still, I reckon a thief would have trouble getting out of your reach, and once you got close to him—How many men have you killed?"

"Counting Mexicans?" Law inquired with a smile.

"Nobody counts them."

"Not many."

"That's good." Blaze nodded and relit his cigarette, which he had permitted promptly to smolder out. "The force ain't what it was. Most of the boys nowadays join so they can ride a horse cross-lots, pack a pair of guns, and give rein to the predilections of a vicious ancestry. They're bad rams, most of 'em."

"There aren't many," said Paloma. "Dave tells me the whole force has been cut down to sixteen."

"That's plenty," her father averred. "It's like when Cap'n Bill McDonald was sent to stop a riot in Dallas. He came to town alone, and when the citizens asked him where his men was, he said 'Ain't I enough? There's only one riot.' Are you workin' up a case, Dave?"

"Um-m—yes! People are missing a lot of stock hereabouts."

"It's these blamed refugees from the war! A Mexican has to steal something or he gets run down and pore. If it ain't stock, it's something else."

Dave Law's duties as a Ranger rested lightly upon him; his instructions were vague, and he had a leisurely method of "working up" his evidence. Since he knew that Blaze possessed a thorough knowledge of this section and its people, it was partly business which had brought him to the Jones home this afternoon.

Strictly speaking, Blaze was not a rancher. He had speculated heavily in raw lands, and for several years past he had devoted his energies to a gigantic colonization scheme. It was by no means a small operation in which he was engaged. The venture had taken foresight, courage, infinite hard work; Blaze was burdened with responsibilities that would have broken down a man of weaker fiber.

But his pet relaxation was reminiscence. His own experience had been wide, he knew everybody in his part of the state, and although events in his telling were sometimes colored by his rich imagination, the information he could give was often of the greatest value—as Dave Law knew.

After a time the latter said, casually, "Tell me something about Tad Lewis."

Blaze looked up quickly. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything. Everything."

"Tad owns a right nice ranch between here and Las Palmas," Blaze said cautiously.

Paloma broke out impatiently. "Why don't you say what you think?" Then to Dave: "Tad Lewis is a bad neighbor, and always has been. There's a ford on his place, and we think he knows more about 'wet' cattle than he cares to tell."

"It's a good place to cross stock at low water," her father agreed, "and Lewis' land runs back from the Rio Grande in its old Spanish form. It's a natural outlet for those brush-country ranchos. But I haven't anything against Tad except a natural dislike. He stands well with some of our best people, so I'm probably wrong. I usually am."

"You can't call Ed Austin one of our best people," sharply objected Paloma. "They claim that arms are being smuggled across to the rebels, Dave, and, if it's true, Ed Austin—"

"Now, Paloma," her father remonstrated mildly. "The regulars and the river guards watched Lewis' ranch till the embargo was lifted, and they never saw anything."

"I believe Austin is a strong rebel sympathizer," Law ventured.

"Sure! And him and the Lewis outfit are amigos. If you go pirooting around Tad's place you're more'n apt to make yourself unpopular, Dave. I'd give some to see you in a wooden kimonos. Tad's too well fixed to steal cattle, and if he runs arms it's because he's a 'galvanized Gringo' himself—married a Mexican, you know."

When mealtime drew near, both Jones and his daughter urged their guest to stay and dine with them, and Dave was glad to accept.

"After supper I'm going to show you our town," Blaze declared. "It's the finest city in south Texas, and growing like a weed. All we need is good farmers. Those we've got are mostly back-to-nature students who leaped a drug counter expecting to light in the lap of luxury. In the last outfit we

habit called upon his daughter for verification. "Didn't I, Paloma?"

Miss Paloma's answer was unexpected, and came with equal emphasis: "No, you didn't, father. The miserable thing lost money."

Blaze was only momentarily dismayed. Then he joined his visitor's laughter. "How can a man get along without the co-operation of his own household?" he inquired naively. "Maybe it was next year I was thinking about." Thereafter he confined himself to statements which required no corroboration.

Dave had long since learned that to hold Blaze Jones to a strict accountability with fact was to rob his society of its greatest charm. A slavish accuracy in figures, an arid lack of imagination, reduces conversation to the insipidness of flat wine, and Blaze's talk was never dull. He was a keen, shrewd, practical man, but somewhere in his being there was concealed a tremendous, lopsided sense of humor which took the form of a bewildering imagery. An attentive audience was enough for him, and, once his fancy was in full swing, there was no limit to his outrageous exaggerations. A light of credulity in a hearer's eye filled him with prodigious mirth, and it is doubtful if his listeners ever derived a fraction of the amusement from his fabrications that he himself enjoyed. Paloma's spirit of contradiction was the only fly in his ointment; now that his daughter was old enough to "keep books" on him, much of the story-teller's joy was denied him.

Of course his proclivities occasionally led to misapprehensions; chance acquaintances who recognized him as an artful romancer were liable to consider him generally untruthful. But even in this misconception Blaze took a quiet delight, secure in the knowledge that all who knew him well regarded him as a rock of integrity. As a matter of fact, his genuine exploits were quite as sensational as those of his manufacture.

When, after supper, Blaze had hitched a pair of driving mules to his buckboard, preparatory to showing his guest the glories of Jonesville, Dave said:

"Paloma's getting mighty pretty."

"She's as pretty as a blue-bonnet flower," he father agreed. "And she runs me around something scandalous. I ain't got the freedom of a peon."

Blaze sighed and shook his shaggy head. "You know me, Dave; I never used to be scared of nobody. Well, it's different now. She rides me with a Spanish bit, and my soul ain't my own." With a sudden lightning of his gloom, he added: "Say, you're going to stay right here with us as long as you're in town; I want you to see how I cringe."

In spite of Blaze's plaintive tone it was patent that he was inordinately proud of Paloma and well content with his serfdom.

Jonesville proved to be a typical Texas town of the modern variety, and altogether different to the pictured frontier village. All in all, the effect was much like that of a prosperous, orderly northern farming town. To its happy founder it seemed well-nigh perfect, and its destiny roused his maddest enthusiasm. He pointed out the Odd Fellows hall, the Palace Picture theater, with its glaring orange lights and discordant electric piano; he conducted Law to the First National bank, of which Blaze was a proud but somewhat ornamental director; then to the sugar mill, the ice plant and other points of equally novel interest.

Everywhere he went Jones was hailed by friends, for everywhere seemed to know him and to want to shake his hand.

"Some town and some body of man, eh?" he inquired, finally, and Dave agreed:

"Yes, she's got a grand framework, Blaze. She'll be most as big as Fort Worth when you fatten her up."

Jones waved his buggy whip in a wide circle that took in the miles of level prairie on all sides. "We've got the whole blamed state to grow in. And, Dave, I haven't got an enemy in the place! It wasn't many years ago that certain people allowed I'd never live to raise this town. Why, it used to be that nobody dared ride with me—except Paloma, and she used to sleep with a shotgun at her bedside."

"You sure have been a responsibility to her."

"But I'm as safe now as if I was in church."

"I'm glad to hear Jonesville is prosperous," he told his host. "And they say you're in everything."

"That's right; and prosperity's no name for it. Everybody wants Blaze to have a finger in the pie. I'm interested in the bank, the sugar mill, the hardware store, the ice plant— Say, the ice plant's a luxury for a town this size. D'you know what I made out of it last year?"

"I've no idea."

"Twenty-seven thousand dollars!" The father of Jonesville spoke proudly, impressively, and then through

sol there wasn't three men that knew which end of a mule to put the collar on. But they'll learn. Nature's with 'em, and so am I. God supplies 'em with all the fresh air and sunshine they need, and when they want anything else they come to Old Blaze. Ain't that right, Paloma?"

"Yes, father."

Paloma Jones had developed wonderfully since Dave Law had last seen her. She had grown into a most wholesome and attractive young woman, with an honest, humorous pair of brown eyes. During dinner she did her part with a grace that made watching her a pleasure, and the Ranger found it a great treat to sit at her table after his strenuous scouting days in the mesquite.

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GOSSIP FROM STATE HOUSE

Secretary of State Pool is in St. Louis on business connected with the manufacture of automobile plates.

The April reports of the state institutions show that there were 4,969 inmates in the list at the end of the month.

Threatened inundation of the Platte valley, caused by high water in Wyoming, Colorado and northern Nebraska, is causing some uneasiness in the state engineer's department.

Only a little over \$400 has been spent so far out of the \$50,000 appropriation which the legislature placed at Governor Neville's disposal for enforcement of the prohibition law.

Deputy Revenue Collector Hildebrand says sentiment in Nebraska is strongly in favor of compliance with the new schedule of war taxes, and that they will be met with no attempt at evasion.

The university extension service has called upon every woman and girl in the state to volunteer their services in teaching canning, and schools will be held in twenty-seven towns and cities to drill them in that duty.

More than \$130,000 is being refunded to the oil companies doing business in Nebraska for excess fees collected under the oil inspection law over their protest while the suit which they brought was pending in the supreme court.

Dean Roscoe Pound of Harvard university law college will deliver the commencement address at the state university, taking the place of General Pershing who had to cancel his engagement on account of war duty in France.

Rumors of a campaign against subscriptions to the Liberty loan have caused the state council for defense to issue a statement characterizing the move as treason, and that it will be treated as such and punished to the fullest extent of law.

Valuations of school land in western Nebraska, which will be sold, will be raised an average of \$5 per acre, if the state board of public lands and buildings follows the recommendations of Secretary of State Pool and Land Commission Shumway.

Owing to inability of the railroads to meet traffic demands, it is more than probable that the peace celebration that was to have taken place at Vicksburg this fall will be called off, and many Nebraska veterans of the civil war will suffer decided disappointment.

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FRECKLES

Now Is the Time to Get Rid of These Ugly Spots.

There's no longer the slightest need of feeling ashamed of your freckles, as the prescription ointment—double strength—is guaranteed to remove these homely spots.

Simply get an ounce of ointment—double strength—from your druggist, and apply a little of it night and morning and you should soon see that even the worst freckles have begun to disappear, while the lighter ones have vanished entirely. It is seldom that more than one ounce is needed to completely clear the skin and gain a beautiful clear complexion.

Be sure to ask for the double strength ointment, as this is sold under guarantee of money back if it fails to remove freckles.—Adv.

His Threat.

A month or two after the war started a collier entered a large hotel on Timeside and ordered refreshments, saying: "Big prices now; An might as well be a big man."

On discovering that the waiter was a German, the irate pitman, choking with anger, leaped to his feet, ran the affrighted Teuton to the door, and assisted him