HEART of the SUNSET

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—Set afoot and alone by an accident in the desert near the Rio Grande Mrs. Alaire Austin, mistress of Las Palmas and La Feria ranches, meets Dave Law, Texas Ranger, at a water hole and is compelled to spend the night there with him, as he is in ambush for a murderer and cannot leave his post.

CHAPTER II—Next day at evening the murderer appears with a companion.

CHAPTER III—Law captures the murderer but is compelled to kill his companion, Panfilo Sanchez, who happens to be a cousin of Mrs. Austin's horsebreaker, Jose Sanchez.

CHAPTER IV—At Las Palmas Alaire tells her husband, Ed, that his carousals and inebriety must stop. Her cattle at La Feria, the Mexican ranch, are confiscated by Longorio, Mexican federal general, and she finds that it is because Ed has been helping the rebel junta.

(Continued)

CHAPTER V.

A Journey, and a Dark Man.

Alaire's preparations for the journey to La Feria were made with little delay. Owing to the condition of affairs across the border, Ellsworth had thought it well to provide her with letters from the most influential Mexicans in the neighborhood; what is more, in order to pave her way toward a settlement of her claim he succeeded in getting a telegram through to Mexico City—Ellsworth's influence was not bounded by the Rio Grande.

Alaire took Dolores with her, and for male escort she selected, after some deliberation, Jose Sanchez, her horsebreaker. Benito could not well be spared. Sanchez had some force and initiative, at least and Alaire had no reason to doubt his loyalty. The party went to Pueblo by motor. On the following day, Alaire secured her passports from the federal headquarters across the Rio Grande, while Jose attended to the railroad tickets. On the second morning after leaving home the party was borne southward into Mexico.

The revolution had ravaged most of northern Mexico; long rows of rusting trucks and twisted car skeletons beside the track showed how the railway's rolling stock had suffered in this particular vicinity; and as the train penetrated farther south temporary trestles and the charred ruins of station houses spoke even more eloquently of the struggle. Now and then a steel water tank, pierced with loopholes and ripped by cannon balls, showed where some detachment had made a stand. There was a military guard on the train too—a dozen unkempt soldiers loaded down with rifles and bandoliers of cartridges, and several officers, neatly dressed in khaki, who rode in the first-class coach and occupied themselves by making eyes at the women.

At its frequent stops the train was besieged by the customary crowd of curious peons; the same noisy hucksters dealt out enchiladas, tortillas goat cheeses and coffee from the same dirty baskets and pails; even their outstretched hands seemed to bear the familiar grime of ante-bellum days. The coaches were crowded; women fanned themselves unceasingly; their men snored, open-mouthed, over the backs of the seats, and the aisles were full of squalling, squabbling children.

As for the country itself, it was dying. The ranches were stripped of stock, no carts creaked along the highways, and the roads, like the little farms, were growing up to weeds. Stores were empty, the people were idle. Over all was an atmosphere of decay, and, what was far more significant, the people seemed content.

All morning the monotonous journey continued—a trial to Alaire and Dolores, but to Jose Sanchez a red-letter experience. He covered the train from end to end, making himself acquainted with everyone and bringing to Alaire the gossip that he picked up.

It was not until midday that the first interruption occurred; then the train pulled in upon a siding, and after an interminable delay it transpired that a northbound troop-train was expected.

Jose brought this intelligence: "Soon you will behold the flower of the Mexican army," he told Alaire. "You will see thousands of Longorio's veterans, every man of them a very devil for blood. They are returning to Nuevo Pueblo after destroying a band of those rebels. They had a great victory at San Pedro—thirty kilometers from La Feria. Not a prisoner was spared, senora."

"Is General Longorio with them?" Alaire inquired quickly.

"That is what I came to tell you. It is believed that he is, for he takes his army with him wherever he goes. He is a great fighter; he has a nose for it, that man, and he strikes like the lightning — here, there, anywhere." Jose, it seemed, was a rabid Potosista.

"When the train arrives," she told her horse-breaker. "I want you to find General Longorio and ask him to come here."

"But, senora!" Jose was dumfounded, shocked. "He is a great general—"

"Give him this note." Quickly writing a few lines on a page from her notebook, she gave him the scrap of paper, which he carefully placed in his hat; then, shaking his head doubtfully, he left the car.

Flushed with triumph, Dolores took the first occasion to enlarge upon her theme.

"You will see what a monster this Longorio is," she declared. "It was like him to steal your beautiful cattle; he would steal a crucifix."

"I've heard that," Alaire said gravely.

In the course of time the military train came creaking along on the main track and stopped, to the great interest of the south-bound travelers. It was made up of many stock cars crowded with cavalry horses, and penned in with them were the women and the children. The soldiers themselves were clustered thickly upon the car roofs. Far down at the rear of the train was a rickety passenger coach, and toward this Jose Sanchez made his way.

There began a noisy interchange of greetings between the occupants of the two trains, and meanwhile the hot sun glared balefully upon the huddled figures on the car tops. A half-hour passed, then occurred a commotion at the forward end of Alaire's coach.

A group of officers climbed aboard, and among them was one who could be none other than Luis Longorio. As he came down the passageway Alaire identified him without the aid of his insignia, for he stood head and shoulders above his companions and bore himself with an air of authority. He was unusually tall, at least six feet three, and very slim, very lithe; a young man; his cheeks were girlishly smooth and of a clear, pale, olive tint; his eyes were large, bold, brilliant; his nostrils thin and sensitive, like those of a blooded horse. Disdain, hauteur, impatience, were stamped upon the general's countenance as he pushed briskly through the crowd, turning his head from side to side in search of the woman who had summoned him.

Not until she rose did he discover Alaire; then he halted; his eyes fixed themselves upon her with a start of startled amazement.

Alaire felt herself color faintly, for the man seemed to be scanning her from head to foot, taking in every detail of her face and form, and as he did so his expression remained unaltered. For what seemed a full minute Longorio stood rooted; then the stiff-vizored cap was swept from his head; he bowed with the grace of a courtier until Alaire saw the part in his oily black hair.

"Senora! A thousand apologies for my delay," he said. "Caramba! I did not dream—I did not understand your message." He continued to regard her with that same queer intensity.

"You are General Longorio?" Alaire was surprised to note that her voice quavered uncertainly, and annoyed to feel her face still flushing."

"Your obedient servant."

Longorio, with a brusque command routed out the occupants of the seat ahead, and, reversing the back, took a position facing Alaire. Another order and the men who had accompanied him withdrew up the aisle. There was no mistaking his admiration. He seemed enchanted by her pale beauty her rich, red hair held him fascinated and with Latin boldness he made his feelings crassly manifest.

"You probably know why I wished to see you," Alaire began.

Longorio shook his head in vague denial.

"It is regarding my ranch, La Feria." Seeing that the name conveyed nothing, she explained, "I am told that your army confiscated my cattle."

"Ah, yes! Now I understand." The Mexican nodded mechanically, but it was plain that he was not heeding her words in the least. As if to shut out a vision or to escape some dazzling sight, he closed his eyes. Alaire wondered if the fellow had been drinking. She turned to Dolores to find that good woman wearing an expression of stupefaction. It was very queer; it made Alaire extremely ill at ease.

Longorio opened his eyes and passed a brown hand across his brow as if to brush away perverse fancies that interfered with his thoughts. Alaire noticed that one of his fingers was decorated with a magnificent diamond-and-ruby ring, and this interested her queerly. No ordinary man could fittingly have worn such an ornament, yet on the hand of this splendid barbarian it seemed not at all out of keeping.

"Dios!" Longorio continued. "Your ranch has been destroyed; your cattle stolen, eh? We will shoot the perpetrators of this outrage at once. Bueno!"

"No, no! I don't want to see anyone punished. I merely want your government to pay me for my cattle." Alaire laughed nervously.

"Ah! But a lady of refinement should never discuss such a miserable business. It is a matter for men."

She endeavored to speak in a brisk, businesslike tone. "La Feria belongs to me. I am a woman of affairs, General Longorio, and you must talk to me as you would talk to a man. When I heard about this raid I came to look into it—to see you, or whoever is in charge of this district, and to make a claim for damages."

"Valgame Dios! This is amazing."

"There is nothing extraordinary about it, that I can see."

"You consider such a woman as yourself ordinary? The men of my country enshrine beauty and worship it. They do not discuss such things with their women. Now this sordid affair is something for your husband—"

"Mr. Austin's business occupies his time; this is my own concern. I am not the only practical woman in Texas."

Longorio appeared to be laboriously digesting this statement. "So!" he said at last. "When you heard of this—you came, eh? You came alone into Mexico, where we are fighting and killing each other? Well! That is spirit. You are wonderful, superb!" He smiled, showing the whitest and evenest teeth.

Such extravagant homage was embarrassing, yet no woman could be wholly displeased by admiration so spontaneous and intense as that which Longorio manifested in every look and word. Alaire knew the susceptibility of Mexican men, and was immune to ordinary flattery; yet there was something exciting about this martial hero's complete captivation. To have charmed him to the point of bewilderment was a unique triumph, and under his hungry eyes she felt an adventurous thrill.

While he and Alaire were talking the passengers had returned to their seats; they were shouting good-bys to the soldiers opposite; the conductor approached and informed the general of his train orders.

Longorio favored him with a slow stare. "You may go when I leave," said he.

"Si, senor. But—"

The general uttered a sharp exclamation of anger, at which the conductor backed away, expressing by voice and gesture his most hearty approval of the change of plan.

"We mustn't hold the train," Alaire said quickly. "I will arrange to see you in Nuevo Pueblo when I return."

Longorio smiled brilliantly and lifted a brown hand. "No, no! I am a selfish man; I refuse to deprive myself of this pleasure. Now about these cattle." He thought for a moment, and his tone altered as he said: "Senora, there seems to be an unhappy complication in our way, and this we must remove. First, may I ask, are you a friend to our cause?"

"I am an American, but what has that to do with my ranch and my cattle? This is something that concerns no one except you and me."

Longorio was plainly flattered by her words, and took no trouble to hide his pleasure. "Ah! If that were only true! We would arrange everything to your satisfaction without another word." His admiring gaze seemed to envelop her, and its warmth was unmistakable.

"Why Did You Take My Cattle?"

"Why did you take my cattle?" she demanded, stubbornly.

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

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:

"Pah! 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 Sanches, 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 horsebreaker 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 he 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.

"Cuidado!" breathed Dolores. "There is blood on 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."

"Pshaw! 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-hewn, 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."

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

"Sure! And him and the Lewis outfit are amigos. If you go pirootin' around Tad's place you're more'n apt to make yourself unpopular, Dave. I'd grieve some to see you in a wooden kimono. 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 sold 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."

(Continued next week)