

DOINGS OF THE VAN LOONS



There is a pleasant surprise in store for Father besides

HEART of the SUNSET by REX BEACH

Author of "The Spoilers," "The Iron Trail," "The Silver Horde," Etc.



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 horse-breaker, Jose Sanchez.

Chapter IV—At Las Palmas Alaire tells her husband, Ed, that his carousal 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.

Chapter V—On her way to La Feria in Mexico Alaire meets Longorio, who falls in love with her and agrees to settle for the confiscated stock.

Chapter VI—Entertained at their home by Blase Jones and his daughter Paloma, Dave hears something about the Tad Lewis outfit which is suspected of cattle stealing. With Ricardo Guzman and his boys Dave and Blase go on a scout after cattle thieves.

CHAPTER VII.

A Ranger's Horse.

Onward through the dense foliage the two friends went. Now and then they stopped to listen, but the rain was heavy enough to drown all other noises. Encountering fresh tracks finally, Dave leaned from his saddle and studied them. He had gone perhaps half a mile when Bessie Belle raised her head, and he noted that her nostrils were working sensitively. Law fancied that he could detect the smell of a wood fire. Farther along they came to a place where the brush was low, and there, rising through the treetops beyond, he saw a wavering plume of blue smoke.

The ranger rode into sight of the branding fire with his repeater across his saddle horn and his thumb upon the hammer; what followed came with almost the blinding suddenness of a lightning crash. First there was the picture of a sandy glade, in the center of which burned a fire



With the First Jerk of His Horse's Head His Own Gun Leaped to His Shoulder.

with branding irons in it, and a spotted calf tied to a tree, but otherwise no sign of life. Then, without warning, Bessie Belle threw up her head in that characteristic trick of hers, and simultaneously Dave saw a figure rise out of the grass. "What shall we do with this hombre,

rifle leveled." With the first jerk of his horse's head his own gun had leaped to his shoulder—he was not conscious of having willed it to do so—and even as he pressed the trigger he felt Bessie Belle give way. The next instant his feet, still in the stirrups, were on the ground and his horse lay between them, motionless. That nervous fling of her head had saved Dave's life, for the rustler's bullet had shattered her skull in its flight, and she lay prone, with scarcely a muscular twitch, so sudden had been her end.

For a moment the "Ranger" was amazed. He stood staring down at his pet; then the truth engulfed him. He realized that he had ridden her to her death, and at the thought he became like a woman bereft of her child, like a lover who had seen his sweetheart slain.

A shout—it was a hoarse, inarticulate cry; a swift, rapturous scrutiny that searched the sudden scene of the ambush; then he was down beside the mare, calling her name heartbrokenly, his arms around her neck, his face against her warm, wet, velvet hide.

Law knew that two men had entered the thicket, and therefore one still remained to be reckoned with, but he gave no thought to that. From the corner of his eye he could see a pair of bootsoles staring at him out of the grass, and they told him there was not need for investigation. Near the body he heard the calf stirring, but he let it struggle.

Bessie Belle's bright eyes were glancing; she did not hear her lover's voice. Don Ricardo and his son burst out of the brush from opposite directions almost at the same moment, to find the Ranger with his face buried in his horse's mane.

"Caramba! What is this?" The old man flung himself from the saddle and came running. "You are injured?"

Pedro, too, bent over the officer, his brown face pale with apprehension. "Mother of God!" breathed the latter. "It was a wild thing to do, to ride alone—"

"I'm all right," Law said, rising stiffly, whereupon both Mexicans voiced their relief.

"The saints be praised!"

"SI! What happened? There was a shot! Did you see nothing?" Law jerked his head in the direction of the fallen man at his back and Pedro uttered a loud cry.

"Look!" Father and son ran through the grass, then recoiled and broke into a jargon of oaths and exclamations.

"Right in the mouth! The fellow was in death before he realized it."

"See! It is as we thought, Pedro; one of Lewis'! Tse! Tse! Tse! What a sight!"

senor? Pedro has found his horse." Law roused himself. With his own hands he gently removed Bessie Belle's saddle, bridle and blanket, then he gave his orders.

"I'll take your horse, Ricardo, and you take that fellow's. Get a wagon and move him to Jonesville."

"And you?"

"I'm going to follow that man on the sordel."

The dead man's saddle was left beside the body; then when the exchange of mounts had been effected, and all was ready, Law made a request that amazed both father and son.

"If I'm not back by morning, I want you to bury my mare." His voice broke; he turned away his face. "Bury her deep, Ricardo, so—the coyotes can't dig her up; right where she fell. I'll be back to see that it's done right. Understand?"

"Bueno! I understand perfectly. She was a pretty horse. She was your—bonita, eh? Well, you have a big heart, senor, as a brave man should have. Everything shall be done as you wish; I give you my hand on it." Ricardo reached down and gripped Law's palm. "We will name our pasture for her, too, because it is plain you loved her dearly. So, then, until tomorrow."

Law watched his two friends ride away, then, with a miserable ache in his throat, he mounted and rode off to pick up the trail of the man on the sordel pony.

The fellow had ridden in the direction of Las Palmas, which Dave judged must be fully twelve miles away, and when they continued to maintain this course the Ranger became doubly interested. He risked his own interpretation of the rider's intent and pushed on without pausing to search out the trail step by step. At the second gate the signs indicated that his man was little more than an hour ahead of him.

The prospect of again seeing the ruddy-haired mistress of Las Palmas stirred Law more deeply than he cared to admit. Nevertheless, he was uncomfortably aware that she had a husband. Not only so, but the sharp contrast in their positions was disagreeable to contemplate; she was unbelievably rich, and a person of influence in the state, while he had nothing except his health, his saddle and his horse—No; no horse now, she was gone.

The mist and an early dusk prevented him from seeing Las Palmas itself until he was well in among the irrigated fields. A few moments later, when he rode up to the outbuildings, he encountered a middle-aged Mexican, who proved to be Benito Gonzalez, the range boss.

Dave made himself known, and Benito answered his questions with apparent honesty. No, he had seen nothing of a sorrel horse or a strange rider, but he had just come in himself. Doubtless they could learn more from Juan, the horse-wrangler, who was somewhere about.

Juan was finally found, but he proved strangely recalcitrant. He admitted that he had seen a horse of the description given. Probably it belonged to some stranger.

Dave changed his tactics. "Oiga! he said, sternly. "Do you want to go to jail?" Juan had no such desire. "Then tell the truth. Where is the horse now?"

Juan insolently declared he didn't care and didn't care.

"Oh, you don't, eh?" Law reached for the boy, and shook him until he yelled. "You will make a nice little prisoner, Juanito, and we shall find a way to make you speak."

Gonzalez was inclined to resent such high-handed treatment of his underling, but respect for the Rangers was deep-rooted, and Juan's behavior was inexplicable.

At last the horseboy confessed. He had seen both horse and rider, but knew neither. Mr. Austin and the stranger had arrived together, and the latter had gone on. That was the truth.

"Bueno!" Law released his prisoner, who slunk away rubbing his shoulder. "Now, Benito, we will find Mr. Austin."

A voice answered from the dusk: "He won't take much finding," and Ed Austin himself emerged from the stable door. "Well, what do you want?"

"You are Mr. Austin, I reckon?"



"I Don't Know Anything About You."

trailed him from where he and his partner cut into your south pasture."

Benito stirred and muttered an oath but Austin was unmoved. "I reckon you must be a bad trailer," he laughed. "We've got no thieves here. What makes you think Guzman lost any calves?"

Dave's temper, never too well controlled at best, began to rise. He could not imagine why a person of Ed Austin's standing should behave in this extraordinary manner, unless, perhaps, he was drunk.

"Well, I saw the calves, and I left the fellow that was branding them with a wet saddle blanket over his face."

"Ed? What's that?" Austin started, and Gonzalez uttered a smothered exclamation. "You killed him? He's dead?"

"Dead enough to skin. I caught him with his horns in the fire and the calves necked up in your pasture. Now I want his companion."

"I—hope you don't think we know anything about him," Ed protested.

"Where's that man on the sordel horse?"

Austin turned away with a shrug. "You rode in with him," Dave persisted.

Ed wheeled quickly. "How do you know I did?"

"Your boy saw you."

The ranchman's voice was harsh as he said: "Look here, my friend, you're on the wrong track. The fellow I was with had nothing to do with this affair. Would you know your man? Did you get a look at him?"

"No. But I reckon Don Ricardo could tell his horse."

"Humph!" Austin granted, disagreeably. "So just for that you come prowling around threatening my help, eh? Trying to frame up a case, maybe? Well, it don't go. I was out with one of Tad Lewis' men."

"What was his name?" Dave managed to inquire.

"Urbina. He had a sorrel under him, but there are thousands of sorrel horses."

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understand me? Will you come to my house for supper?"

"Thank you, but I think I'll ride on to Tad Lewis' and see Urbina."

At this the Mexican shook his head as if apprehensive of the result, but he said nothing more.

Law hesitated as he was about to spur out of the yard. "By the way," he ventured, "you needn't mention this to Mrs. Austin."

"She is not here," Gonzalez told him. "She has gone to La Feria to see about her affairs. She would not permit of this occurrence if she were at home. She is a very fine lady."

"Yes, Good night, Benito." "Good night, senor."

When the Ranger had gone, Gonzalez walked slowly toward his house, with his head bowed thoughtfully.

"It is very strange," he muttered. "How could Don Eduardo have met this Garza at noon when, with my own eyes, I saw him ride away from Las Palmas at three o'clock in the afternoon? It is very strange."

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