

HEART of the SUNSET BY REX BEACH

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"The Silver Horde," Etc.



Phil Strange met the lovers as they turned the corner of the porch, and warmly shook Dave's hand. "Teeny—my wife—told me you was better," he began, "so I beat it out here. I hung around all day yesterday, waiting to see you, but you was batty."

"I was pretty sick," Dave acknowledged. "Mrs. Strange was mighty kind to me."

"Sick people get her goat. She's got a way with 'em and with animals, too. Why, Rajah, the big python with our show, took sick one year, and he'd have died sure only for her. Same with a lot of the other animals. She knows more'n any vet I ever saw."

"Perhaps I needed a veterinary instead of a doctor," Dave smiled. "I guess I've got some horse blood in me. See!" Montrosa had thrust her head under his arm and was waiting for him to scratch her ears.

"Well, I brought you some mail," Strange fumbled in his pocket for a small bundle of letters, explaining: "Blaze gave me these for you as I passed the post office."

Dave took the letters with a word of thanks, and thrust them carelessly into his pocket. "What seems to be the trouble?" he inquired.

"You remember our last talk? Well, them Mexicans have got me rattled. I've been trying everywhere to locate you. If you hadn't come home I'd have gone to the prosecuting attorney, or somebody."

"Then you've learned something more?"

Phil nodded, and his sallow face puckered with apprehension. "Rosa Morales has been to see me regular."

Dave passed an uncertain hand over his forehead. "I'm not in very good shape to tackle a new proposition, but—what is it?"

"We've got to get Mrs. Austin away from here."

"We? Why?"

"If we don't they'll steal her."

"Steal her?" Dave's amazement was patent. "Are you crazy?"

"Sometimes I think I am, but I've pumped that Morales girl dry, and I can't figure anything else out of what she tells me. Her and Jose expect to make a lump of quick money, jump to Mexico, get married, and live happy ever after. Take it from me, it's Mrs. Austin they aim to cash in on."

"Why—the idea's ridiculous!"

"Maybe it is and maybe it ain't," the fortune-teller persisted. "More than one rich Mexican has been grabbed and held for ransom along this river; yes, and Americans, too, if you can believe the stories. Anything goes in that country over there."

"You think Jose is planning to kidnap her? Nonsense! One man couldn't do such a thing."

"I didn't say he could," Phil defended himself, sulkily. "Remember, I told you there was somebody back of him."

"Yes, I remember, but you didn't know exactly who."

"Well, I don't exactly know yet. I thought maybe you might tell me."

There was a brief silence, during which Dave stood frowning. Then he appeared to shake himself free from Phil's suggestions.

"It's too utterly preposterous. Mrs. Austin has no enemies; she's a person of importance. If by any chance she disappeared—"

"She's done that very little thing," Strange declared.

"What?"

"She's disappeared—anyhow, she's gone. Yesterday when I saw you was laid up and couldn't help me, I phoned her ranch; somebody answered in Spanish, and from what I could make out they don't know where she is."

Dave wondered if he had understood Strange aright, or if this could be a trick of his own tired brain. Choosing his words carefully, he said: "Do you mean to tell me that she's missing and they haven't given an alarm? I reckon you didn't understand the message, did you?"

Strange shrugged. "Maybe I didn't. Suppose you try. You sabe the lingo."

Dave went to the telephone, leaving Phil to wait. When he emerged from the house a few moments later, it was with a queer, set look upon his face.

"I got 'em," he said. "She's gone—left three days ago."

"Where did she go?"

"They wouldn't tell me."

"They wouldn't?" Strange looked up sharply.

"Wouldn't or couldn't." The man

eyed each other silently; then Phil inquired:

"Well, what do you make of it?"

"I don't know. She wasn't kidnaped, that's a cinch, for Dolores went with her. I—think we're exciting ourselves unduly."

The little fortune-teller broke out excitedly: "Yes we are! Why do you suppose I've been playing that Morales girl? I tell you there's something crooked going on. Don't I know? Didn't I wise you three weeks ago that something like this was coming off?"

It was plain that Phil put complete faith in his powers of divination, and at this moment his earnestness carried a certain degree of conviction. Dave made an effort to clear his tired brain.

"Very well," he said. "If you're so sure, I'll go to Las Palmas. I'll find out all about it, and where she went. If anybody has dared to—"

He drew a deep breath and his listlessness vanished; his eyes gleamed with a hint of their customary fire. "I reckon I've got one punch left in me." He turned and strode to his room.

As Dave changed into his service clothes he was surprised to feel a new vigor in his limbs and a new strength of purpose in his mind. When he stood in his old boots and felt the familiar drug of his cartridge-belt, when he tested his free muscles, he realized that he was another man. Even yet he could not put much faith in Phil Strange's words—nevertheless, there might be a danger threatening Alaire; and if so, it was time to act.

Phil watched his friend saddle the bay mare, then as Dave tied his rifle scabbard to its thong he laughed nervously.

"You're loaded for bear."

"The horseman answered, grimly: 'I'm loaded for Jose Sanchez. If I see hands on him I'll learn what he knows.'"

"You can't get nothing out of a Mexican."

"No? I've made Filipinos talk. Believe me, I can be some persuasive when I try." With that he swung a leg over Montrosa's back and rode away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A Surprise.

Law found it good to feel a horse between his knees. He had not realized until now how long Montrosa's saddle had been empty. The sun was hot and friendly, the breeze was sweet in his nostrils as he swept past the smiling fields and out into the mesquite country. Heat waves danced above the patches of bare ground; insects sang noisily from every side; far ahead the road ran a wavering course through a deceitful mirage of rippling ponds. It was all familiar, pleasant; it was home. With every mile he covered his strength and courage increased.

Such changes had come into his life since his last visit to Las Palmas that it gave him a feeling of unreality to discover no alteration in the ranch. He had somehow felt that the buildings would look older, that the trees would have grown taller, and so when he finally came in sight of his destination he reined in to look.

Behind him he heard the hum of an approaching motor, and he turned to behold a car racing along the road he had just traveled. The machine was running fast, as a long streamer of choking dust gave evidence, and Dave soon recognized it as belonging to Jonesville's prosecuting attorney. As it tore past him its owner shouted something, but the words were lost. In the automobile with the driver were several passengers, and one of these likewise called to Dave and seemed to motion him to follow. When the machine slowed down a half-mile ahead and veered abruptly into the Las Palmas gateway, Dave lifted Montrosa to a run, wondering what pressing necessity could have induced the prosecuting attorney to risk such a reckless burst of speed.

Dave told himself that he was unduly apprehensive; that Strange's warnings had worked upon his nerves. Nevertheless, he continued to ride so hard that almost before the dust had settled he, too, turned into the shade of the palms.

Yes, there was excitement here; something was evidently very much amiss, judging from the groups of ranch-hands assembled upon the porch. They were clustered about the doors and windows, peering in. Briefly they

turned their faces toward Law; then they crowded closer, and he perceived that they were not talking. Some of them had removed their hats and held them in their hands.

Dave's knees shook under him as he dismounted; for one sick, giddy instant the scene swam before his eyes; then he ran toward the house and up the steps. He tried to frame a question, but his lips were stiff with fright. Heedless of those in his path, he forced his way into the house, then down the hall toward an open door, through which he saw a room full of people. From somewhere came the shrill wailing of a woman; the house was full of hushed voices and whisperings. Dave had but one thought. From the depths of his being a voice called Alaire's name until his brain rang with it.

A bed was in the room, and around it was gathered a group of white-faced people. With rough hands Law cleared a way for himself, and then stopped, frozen in his tracks. His arms relaxed,



Dave Stood Staring at the Master of Las Palmas.

his fingers unclenched, a great sigh whistled from his lungs. Before him, booted, spurred, and fully dressed, lay the dead body of Ed Austin.

Dave was still staring at the master of Las Palmas when the prosecuting attorney spoke to him.

"God! This is terrible, isn't it?" he said. "He must have died instantly."

"Who—did it?"

"We don't know yet. Benito found him and brought him in. He hasn't been dead an hour."

Law ran his eyes over the room, and then asked, sharply, "Where is Mrs. Austin?"

He was answered by Benito Gonzalez, who had edged closer. "She's not here, senor."

"Have you notified her?"

Benito shrugged. "There has been no time, it all happened so quickly—"

Someone interrupted, and Dave saw that it was the local sheriff—evidently it was he who had waved from the speeding machine a few moments before.

"I'm glad you're here, Dave, for you can give me a hand. I'm going to round up these Mexicans right away and find out what they know. Whoever did it hasn't gone far; so you act as my deputy and see what you can learn."

When Dave had gained better control of himself he took Benito outdoors and demanded full details of the tragedy. With many lamentations and incoherencies the range boss told what he knew.

Ed had met his death within a half-mile of Las Palmas as he rode home for dinner. Benito, himself on his way to the house, had found the body, still warm, near the edge of the pecan grove. He had retained enough sense to telephone at once to Jonesville, and then—Benito hardly knew what he had done since then, he was so badly shaken by the tragedy.

"What time did it happen?"

"It was noon when I came in."

Dave consulted his watch, and was surprised to discover that it was now only a few minutes past one. It was evident, therefore, that Benito had indeed lost no time, and that his alarm had met with instant response.

"Now tell me, who did it?"

Benito flung his hands high. "God knows! Some enemy, of course; but Don Eduardo had many."

"Not that sort of enemies. There was nobody who could wish to kill him."

"That is as it is."

"Haven't you any suspicions?"

"No, senor."

"You say Mrs. Austin is gone?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

Dave spoke brusquely: "Come, Benito; you must know, for your wife went with her. Are you trying to keep something back?"

"No, no! As God is my judge!" Benito declared. "I didn't know they were going until the very last, and even then Dolores would tell me nothing. We were having bad times here at Las Palmas; there were stormy scenes, yonder in the house. Senor Ed

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was drinking again, you understand? The senora had reason to go."

"You think she ran away to escape him?"

"Exactly."

Dave breathed more easily, for this seemed to settle Strange's theory. The next instant, however, his apprehensions were doubled, for Benito added: "No doubt she went to La Feria."

Law uttered an incredulous exclamation. "Not there! Surely she wouldn't go to La Feria at such a time. Why, that country is ablaze. Americans are fleeing from Mexico."

"I hadn't thought of that," Benito confessed. "But if she didn't go there, where did she go? Saints above! It is a fine condition of affairs when a wife keeps secrets from her husband, eh? I suppose Dolores feared I would tell Don Eduardo. God rest his soul! This much I do know, however: not long ago there came a letter from General Longoria, offering settlement for those cattle he stole in his government's name. Dolores told me the senora was highly pleased and was going to Mexico for her money. It was a mark of Longoria's favor, you understand me? He's a great—friend, an ardent admirer." Benito winked. "Dolores told me all about that, too. No, I think they went to La Feria."

Dave remembered his first conversation with Phil Strange and the fortune-teller's insistence that some powerful person was behind Jose Sanchez. More than three weeks ago Strange had forecast something very like this murder of Ed Austin. Dave felt as if he were the victim of an hysterical imagination. Nevertheless, he forced himself to ask, quietly:

"Is Jose Sanchez anywhere about?"

The range boss shrugged. "I sent him to the east pasture this morning."

"Did he go?"

"Eh? So! You suspect Jose of this. God in heaven! Jose is a wild boy—But wait! I'll ask Juan if he saw him; yes, and Victoria, too. That is Victoria you hear squalling in the kitchen. Wait here."

Benito hurried away, leaving Dave a prey to perplexity; but he was back again in a few moments. His face was grave.

"Jose did not go to the east pasture," he said.

"Where is he now?"

"No one seems to know."

Law walked to his horse, mounted, and galloped away. Benito, who watched him, saw that he turned toward the river road which led to the Las Palmas pumping plant.

The more Dave thought about Ed Austin's death, the more certain he became that it was in some way connected with Alaire's disappearance; and the loose end by which the tangle might be unraveled, it seemed to him, lay in the hands of Rosa Morales, Jose's sweetheart. That Sanchez was

the murderer Dave now had little doubt; but since the chance of apprehending him was small, he turned his attention to the girl. He would make Rosa speak, he told himself, if he had to use force—this was no time for gentle methods. If she knew aught of Alaire's whereabouts or the mystery of her departure from Las Palmas, he would find a way to wring the truth from her. Dave's face, a trifle too somber at all times, took on a grimmer aspect now; he felt a slow fury kindling in his breast.

Years of experience had taught him to be always alert, even during his moments of deepest preoccupation, and so, from force of habit, when he came to the pump-house road he carefully scanned it. In the dust were fresh hoof-prints leading toward the river. Now he knew this road to be seldom used, and therefore he wondered who could be riding it at a gallop in this blistering midday heat. A few rods farther on and his quick eye detected something else—some tiny object that brought him from his saddle. Out of the rut he picked a cigarette butt, the fire of which was cold but the paper of which was still wet from the smoker's lips. He examined it carefully; then he remounted and rode on, pondering its significance.

Dave loped out of the thicket and straight across the clearing to the Morales house. Leaving Montrosa's reins hanging, he opened the door and entered without knocking. Rosa appeared in the opening to another room, her eyes wide with fright at this apparition, and Dave saw that she was dressed in her finest, as if for a holiday or for a journey.

"Where's your father?" he demanded. "He's gone to Sangre de Cristo. What do you want?"

"When did he go?"

"This morning, early. He—"

"Who's been here since he left?"

Rosa was recovering from her first surprise, and now her black brows drew together in anger. "No one has come. You are the first. And have you no manners to stride into a respectable house—?"

Dave broke in harshly: "Rosa, you're lying. Jose Sanchez has been here within an hour. Where is he?" When the girl only grew whiter and raised a hand to her breast, he stepped toward her, crying, "Answer me!"

Rosa recoiled, and the breath caught in her throat like a sob. "I'll tell you nothing," she said in a thin voice. Then she began to tremble. "Why do you want Jose?"

"You know why. He killed Don Austin's death, the more certain he became that it was in some way connected with Alaire's disappearance; and the loose end by which the tangle might be unraveled, it seemed to him, lay in the hands of Rosa Morales, Jose's sweetheart. That Sanchez was

"Lies! Lies!" Rosa's voice grew shrill. "Out of this house! I know you. It was you who betrayed Panfilo, and his blood is on your hands, as—
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