HEART OF THE SUNSET

By REX BEACH

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

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CHAPTER XIV—Continued.

—14—

"Heaven knows! Out in the barn or under the house." Taking advantage of the dressmaker's momentary absence from the room, Paloma continued in a whisper: "I wish you'd talk to dad and see what you make of him. He's absolutely—queer. Mrs. Strange seems to have a peculiar effect on him. Why, it's almost as if—"

"What?"

"Well, I suppose I'm foolish, but—I'm beginning to believe in spells. You know, Mrs. Strange's husband is a sort of—necromancer."

"How silly!"

There was no further opportunity for words, as the woman reappeared at that instant; but a little later Alaire went in search of Blaze, still considerably mystified. As she neared the farm buildings, she glimpsed a man's figure hastily disappearing into the barn. The figure bore a suspicious resemblance to Blaze Jones, yet when she followed, he was nowhere to be seen.

"Mr. Jones!" Alaire called. She repeated Blaze's name several times; then something stirred. The door of a harness closet opened cautiously, and out of the blackness peered Paloma's father. He looked more owlish than ever behind his big, gold-rimmed spectacles. "What in the world are you doing in there?" she cried.

Blaze emerged, blinking. He was dusty and perspiring.

"Hello, Miz Austin!" he saluted her with a poor assumption of breeziness. "I was fixin' some harness, but I'm right glad to see you."

Alaire regarded him quizzically. "What made you hide?" she asked.

"Hide? Who, me?"

"I saw you dodge in here like a—gopher."

Blaze confessed: "I reckon I've got the willies. Every woman I see looks like that dressmaker."

"Paloma was telling me about you. Why do you hate her so?"

"I don't know 's I hate her, but her and her husband have put a jinx on me. They're the worst people I ever see, Miz Austin."

"You don't really believe in such things?"

Blaze dusted off a seat for his visitor, saying: "I never did till lately, but now I'm worse than a plantation nigger. I tell you there's things in this world we don't sabe. I wish you'd get Paloma to fire her. I've tried and failed. I wish you'd tell her those dresses are rotten."

"But they're very nice; they're lovely; and I've just been complimenting her. Now what has this woman done to you?"

It seemed impossible that a man of Blaze Jones' character could actually

The Door of a Harness Closet Opened, and Out of the Blackness Peered Paloma's Father.

harbor crude superstitions, and yet there was no mistaking his earnestness when he said:

"I ain't sure whether she's to blame, or her husband, but misfortune has folded me to herself."

"How?"

"Well, I'm sick."

"You don't look it."

"I don't exactly feel it, either, but I am. I don't sleep good, my heart's actin' up, I've got rheumatism, my stomach feels like I'd swallowed something alive—"

"You're smoking too much," Alaire affirmed, with conviction.

But skepticism aroused Blaze's indignation. With elaborate sarcasm, he retorted: "I reckon that's why my best team of mules ran away and dragged me through a ten-acre patch of grass burrs, eh? It's a wonder I wasn't killed. I reckon I smoked so much that I give a tobacco heart to the best three-year-old bull in my pasture! Well, I smoked him to death, all right. Probably it was nicotine poisonin' that killed twenty acres of my cotton, too; and maybe if I'd cut out tobacco I'd have floated that bond issue on the irrigation ditch. But I was wedded to cigarettes, so my banks are closin' down on me. Sure! That's what a man gets for smokin'."

"And do you attribute all these misfortunes to Paloma's dressmaker?"

The man nodded gloomily. "That ain't half! Everything goes wrong. I'm scared to pack a weapon for fear I'll injure myself. Why, I've carried a bowie knife in my bootleg ever since I was a babe in arms, you might say; but the other day I jabbed myself with it and nearly got blood-poisonin'. This fellow, Strange, with his fortune-tellin' and his charms and his conjures, has hocus-pocused the whole neighborhood. He's gettin' rich off of the Mexicans. He knows more secrets than a parrot."

"He is nothing more than a circus fakir, Mr. Jones."

"Yes'm! Just the same, these greasers 'd vote him into the legislature if he asked them. Why, he knows who fetched back Ricardo Guzman's body! He told me so."

"Really?" Alaire looked up quickly, then the smile left her face. After a moment she said, "Perhaps he could tell me something I want to know?"

"No, don't you get him started," Blaze cautioned hastily, "or he'll put a spell on you like he did on me."

"I want to know what Ed has to do with the Guzman affair."

Blaze shook his head slowly. "Well, he's mixed up somehow with Lewis. Dave thinks Tad was at the bottom of the killin', and he hoped to prove it on him; but our government won't do anything, and he's stumped for the time bein'. I don't know any more about Ed's dealin's than you do, Miz Austin; all I know is that I got a serpent in my household and I can't get shed of her. I've got a lapful of troubles of my own."

"This is too occult for me," she declared, rising. "But—I'm interested in what you say about Mr. Strange. If the Mexicans tell him so much, perhaps he can tell me something. I do hope you have no more misfortunes."

"You stay to supper," Blaze urged hospitably. "I'll be in as soon as that tarantula's gone."

But Alaire declined. After a brief chat with Paloma, she remounted Montrose and prepared for the homeward ride. At the gate, however, she met Dave Law on his new mare, and when Dave had learned the object of her visit to Jonesville he insisted upon accompanying her.

It was early dusk when they reached Las Palmas; it was nearly midnight when Dave threw his leg across his saddle and started home.

Alaire's parting words rang sweetly in his ears: "This has been the pleasantest day I can remember."

The words themselves meant little, but Dave had caught a wistful undertone in the speaker's voice, and fancied he had seen in her eyes a queer, half-frightened expression, as of one just awakened.

* * * * * * *

Jose Sanchez had beheld Dave Law at the Las Palmas table twice within a few days. He spent this evening laboriously composing a letter to his friend and patron, Gen. Luis Longorio.

CHAPTER XV.

An Awakening.

Time was when Phil Strange boasted that he and his wife had played every fairground and seaside amusement park from Coney Island to Galveston. In his battered wardrobe trunks were parts of old costumes, scrapbooks of clippings, and a goodly collection of lithographs, some advertising the supernatural powers of "Professor Magi, Sovereign of the Unseen World," and others the accomplishments of "Mlle. Le Garde, Renowned Serpent Enchantress." In these gaudy portraits of "Magi the Mystic" no one would have recognized Phil Strange. And even more difficult would it have been to trace a resemblance between Mrs. Strange and the blond, bushy-headed "Mlle. Le Garde" of the posters. Nevertheless, the likenesses at one time had been considered not too flattering, and Phil treasured them as evidences of imperishable distinction.

But the Stranges had tired of public life. For a long time the wife had confessed to a lack of interest in her vocation which amounted almost to a repugnance. Snake-charming, she had discovered, was far from an ideal profession for a woman of refinement. It possessed unpleasant features, and even such euphemistic titles as "Serpent Enchantress" and "Reptilian Mesmerist" failed to rob the calling of a certain odium, a suggestion of vulgarity in the minds of the more discriminating. This had become so illustrating to Mrs. Strange's finer sensibilities that she had voiced a yearning to forsake the platform and pit for something more congenial, and finally she had prevailed upon Phil to make a change.

The step had not been taken without misgivings, but a benign Providence had watched over the pair. Mrs Strange was a natural seamstress, and luck had directed her and Phil to a community which was not only in need of a good dressmaker but peculiarly ripe for the talents of a soothsayer. Phil, too, had intended to embrace a new profession; but he had soon discovered that Jonesville offered better financial returns to a man of his accepted gifts than did the choicest of seaside concessions, and therefore he had resumed his old calling under a slightly different guise. Before long he acknowledged himself well pleased with the new environment, for his wife was far happier in draping dress goods upon the figures of her customers than hanging them folds about her own, and he found his own fame growing with every day. His mediumistic gifts came into general demand. The country people journeyed miles to consult him, and Blaze Jones' statement that they confided in the fortune-teller as they would have confided in a priest was scarcely an exaggeration. Phil did indeed become the repository for confessions of many sorts.

Contrary to Blaze's belief, however, Strange was no prince of Darkness, and took little joy in some of the secrets forced upon him. Phil was a good man in his way—so conscientious that certain information he acquired weighed him down with a sense of un-

"Over Her Head Floats a Skeleton—"

pleasant responsibility. Chancing to meet Dave Law one day, he determined to relieve himself of at least one troublesome burden.

But Dave was not easily approachable. He met the medium's allusions to the occult with contemptuous amusement, nor would he consent to a private "reading." Strange grew almost desperate enough to speak the ungarnished truth.

"You'd better pay a little attention to me," he grieved; "I've got a message to you from the 'Unseen World.'"

"Charges 'collect,' I reckon," the Ranger grinned.

Strange waved aside the suggestion. "It came unbidden, and I pass it on for what it's worth." As Dave turned away, he added, hastily, "It's about a skeleton in the chaparral, and a red-haired woman."

Dave stopped; he eyed the speaker curiously. "Go on," said he.

But a public street, Strange explained, was no place for psychic discussions. Dave agreed. When they were alone in the fortune-telling "parlor," he sat back while the medium closed his eyes and prepared to explore the invisible. After a brief delay Phil began:

"I see a great many things—that woman I told you about, and three men. One of 'em is you, the other two is Mexicans. You're at a water hole in the mesquite. Now there's a shooting scrape; I see the body of a dead man. And now the scene changes. Everything dissolves. I'm in a mansion; and the red-haired woman comes toward me. Over her head floats a skeleton—"

Dave broke in crisply. "All right! Let's get down to cases. What's on your mind, Strange?"

The psychic simulated a shudder—a painful contortion, such as anyone might suffer if rudely jerked out of the spirit world.

"Eh? What was I—? There! You've broke the connection," he declared. "Did I tell you anything?"

"No. But evidently you can."

"I'm sorry. They never come back."

"Rot!"

Phil was hurt, indignant. With some stiffness he explained the danger of interrupting a seance of this sort, but Law remained obdurate.

"You can put over that second-sight stuff with the greasers," he declared, sharply, "but not with me. So, Jose Sanchez has been to see you and you want to warn me. Is that it?"

"I don't know any such party," Strange protested. He eyed his caller for a moment; then with an abrupt change of manner he complained: "Say, Bo! What's the matter with you? I've got a reputation to protect, and I do things my own way. I'm getting set to slip you something, and you try to make me look like a sucker. Is that any way to act?"

"I prefer to talk to you when your eyes are open. I know all about—"

"You don't know nothing about anything," snapped the other. "Jose's got it in for Mrs. Austin."

"You said you didn't know him."

"Well, I don't. He's never been to see me in his life, but—his sweetheart has. Rosa Morales comes regular."

"Rosa! Jose's sweetheart!"

"Yes. Her and Jose have joined out together since you shot Panfilo, and they're framing something."

"What, for instance?"

The fortune-teller hesitated. "I only wish I knew," he said slowly. "It looks to be like a killing."

Dave nodded. "Probably is. Jose would like to get me, and of course the girl—"

"Oh, they don't aim to get you. You ain't the one they're after."

"No? Who, then?"

"I don't know nothing definite. In this business, you understand, a fellow has to put two and two together. All the same, I'm sure Jose ain't carving no epitaph for you. From what I've dug out of Rosa, he's acting for a third party—somebody with pull and a lot of coin—but who it is I don't know. Anyhow, he's cooking trouble for the Austins, and I want to stand from under."

Now that the speaker had dropped all pretense, he answered Dave's questions without evasion, and told what he knew. It was not much, to Dave's way of thinking, but it was enough to give cause for thought, and when the men finally parted it was with the understanding that Strange would promptly communicate any further intelligence on this subject that came his way.

On the following day Dave's duties called him to Brownsville, where court was in session. He had planned to leave by the morning train; but as he continued to meditate over Strange's words, he decided that, before going, he ought to advise Alaire of the fellow's suspicions in order that she might discharge Jose Sanchez and in other ways protect herself against his possible spite. Since the matter was one that could not well be talked over by telephone, Dave determined to go in person to Las Palmas that evening. Truth to say, he was hungry to see Alaire. By this time he had almost ceased to combat the feeling she aroused in him, and it was in obedience to an impulse far stronger than friendly anxiety that he hired a machine and, shortly after dark, took the river road.

The Fates are malicious jades. They delight in playing ill-natured pranks upon us. Not content with spinning and measuring and cutting the threads of our lives to suit themselves, they must also tangle the skein, causing us to cut capers to satisfy their whims.

At no time since meeting Alaire had Dave Law been more certain of his moral strength than on this evening; at no time had his grip upon himself seemed firmer. Nor had Alaire the least reason to doubt her self-control. Dave, to be sure, had appealed to her fancy and her interest; in fact, he so dominated her thoughts that the imaginary creature whom she called her dream-husband had gradually taken on his physical likeness. But the idea that she was in any way enamored of him had never entered his mind. In such wise do the Fates amuse themselves.

Alaire had gone to her favorite after-dinner refuge, a nook on one of the side galleries, where there was a wide, swinging wicker couch; and there, in a restful obscurity fragrant with flowers, she had prepared to spend the evening with her dreams.

She did not hear Dave's automobile arrive. Her first intimation of his presence came with the sound of his heel upon the porch. When he appeared, it was almost like the materialization of her uppermost thought—quite as if a figure from her fancy had stepped forth full-clad.

She rose and met him, smiling. "How did you know I wanted to see you?" she inquired.

Dave took her hand and looked down at her, framing a commonplace reply. But for some reason the words lay unspoken upon his tongue. Alaire's informal greeting, her parted lips, the welcoming light in her eyes, had sent them flying. It seemed to him that the dim half-light which illumined this nook emanated from her face and her person, that the fragrance which came to his nostrils was the perfume of her breath, and at the prompting of these thoughts all his smothered longings rose as if at a signal. As mutinous prisoners in a jail delivery overpower their guards, so did Dave's long-repressed emotions gain the upper hand of him now, and so swift was their uprising that he could not summon more than a feeble, panicky resistance.

The awkwardness of the pause which followed Alaire's inquiry strengthened the rebellious impulses within him, and quite unconsciously his friendly grasp upon her fingers tightened. For her part, as she saw this sudden change sweep over him, her own face altered and she felt something within her breast leap into life. No woman could have failed to read the meaning of his sudden agitation, and, strange to say, it worked a similar state of feeling in Alaire. She strove to control herself and to draw away, but instead found that her hand had answered his, and that her eyes were flashing recognition of his look. All in an instant she realized how deathly tired of her own struggle she had become, and experienced a reckless impulse to cast away all restraint and blindly meet his first advance. She had no time to question her yearnings; she seemed to understand only that this man offered her rest and security; that in his arms lay sanctuary.

To both it seemed that they stood there silently, hand in hand, for a very long time, though in reality there was scarcely a moment of hesitation on the part of either. A drunken, breathless instant of uncertainty, then Alaire was on Dave's breast, and his strength, his ardor, his desire, was throbbing through her. Her bare arms were about his neck; a sigh, the token of utter surrender, fluttered from her throat. She raised her face to his and their lips melted together.

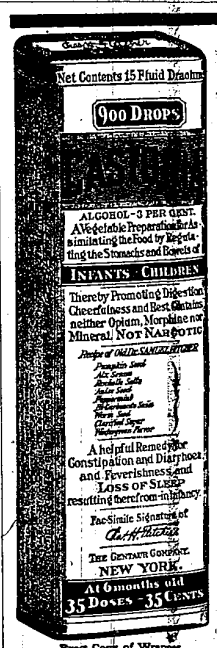
(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Cossack Superstition.

Among the numerous superstitions of the Cossacks there is a belief that they will enter heaven in a better state of moral purity if they are personally clean when killed in battle.

Style in Emotion.

"Now some scientific sharp says there are styles in emotions." "I believe it. I know some women who always wear their dignity ruffled."



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