

SYNOPSIS

John Hannon, wealthy ranch owner, his blind wife, Belle, and their beauti-ful daughter, Val. live happily together in Hannon's wonderful ranch home. Paradise. Redstar is the king of the Red Brood of horses owned by the master of the ranch.

Escorted by the cowboys of Pardise ranch, Val attends the Fourth of July selebration at Santa Leandra. Valentrie from the Border, while dancing with Lola Sanchez, is shot at by a jeal-

ous suitor. Val saves Velantrie's life by causing the bullet to go wild. During the celebration at Santa Le-andra the peerless Redstar disappears from Paradise. Val is heaarbroken and rides for consolation to the Mission to see her friend, Father Hillaire. She finds Velantrie at the Mission visiting

with Father Hillaire. The wistful look in the stranger's eyes deepened with a sort of swift sickness and he picked up his hat.

"I'll go," he said gently, but the father shook his head. "Stay until she leaves," he said des-perately, "we've had little speech to-

Not for all the poor treasures of his humble house would Father Hillaire have had Velantrie's whistle out the quiet air, have seen The Comet come trotting down beneath the hanging

So Velantrie stood and watched while Val came and sat in one of the ancient chairs and put the baby on her knee to play with its rose-leaf fingers and touch with understanding hands its "It's a beautiful baby, padre," she said, wisely regarding the infant, "a

darling bundle of sweetness. But 1 think with you that Maria is not so well. The cough persists." "I know," said the father anxiously, "and I have tried all my remedies in vain. She sickens for the sight of that

worthless one for whom she has never ceased to mourn." "If I had hold of him," said Val with sudden swift viciousness, "I'd kill

daughter!" said the priest sharply, and the girl blushed. But Velantrie smiled as he dropped into a chair across the little open space of the sanded walk.

"Suppose," he said in the low voice that was sweet with music, "that some one brought him back sealed, under pain of death, to be good to Maria and the cherub here? Would that please you?"

"More than anything in all this world!" cried Val impulsively, "ex-

But she broke the speech glanced at Father Hillaire.
"It would be a holy work," she finished gently, "and I should be very

"Then," said Velantrie, still smiling, "It shall be done. Who is the man, padre, and from where did he leave this part of the country?"

"It is only a peon from down by Arguenta across the line by the name of Mesos Pecuento, and he melted into the west somewhere. It is a heavy promise you make, my son."
"But one I shall be glad to re

answered Velantrie. Val looked at him with deep eyes that were sweet with a new depth and a sort of wonder. This stranger that she had begun to meet talked out on either side of the pass, a per-fect guard. No man's fool enough to deliberately give his life for a bunch of his acceptance of Lolo's challinge that night in Santa Leandra and how swiftly he had caught her meaning.

So she played with the baby and listened to the quiet talk of the two men and the summer day drowsed toward its close, and the stranger stayed as if he did not mean to leave.

Bonifacio brought Lightning, and

Velantrie looked at him with keen eyes. Always this man looked at horses. On the range, in the streets of the scattered towns, everywhere, it was horsefiesh for which he searched untiringly. An expression of admira-tion passed across his speaking face. That is a beautiful horse, Miss Hannon," he said, "a swift horse, too,

know."
Val smiled. "The swiftest in the country," she said proudly, "better than Clenden-ning's Dollar. Better than all others, except one.

At that slight reference to the lost Redstar her features 'clouded—and Father Hillaire felt the sweat start on his flesh.

But she said no more and held out "Goodby, father. I'll come again,

Then she turned and, with an appearance, of timidity that sat oddly on Val Hannon, held out the same hand to Velantrie. Again the man took it

to Velantrie. Again the man took it and again the father saw that unconscious eagerness in both young When the girl was gone, sailing like a kite in the winds across the reaches of the green plain, he wiped his face and the lines seemed to have been

graven a triffe deeper therein, as if he felt a pressage of disaster. CHAPTER X

John Hannon stood in the deep room where the Indian blankets glowed and held his wife in the bend of his arm. His face was a strange mixture of conflicting emotions. A veritable sickness of parting sat upon it and his dark eyes burned upon Belle's sightless face with such a passion of love as rarely lasts beyond the fires of youth. kissed her again and again and

studied the curve of her faded cheek, the curls of soft hair at her temples. And Belle's expert fingers passed over his features, "reading" his face before departure. When he was gone she would drop in a chair and weep like a school girl, but she sped him now like any Spartan.

"And again, John dear," she asked anxiously, "will you be back this time? Will it be as long a trip as the last

The man raised his eagle's head and looked out through the window across the plains. What visions he saw none might know, but his eyes deepened and glowed and he smoothed her hair

Presently he came back to the mo-

"No," he answered brusquely, "not so long this time."

Then he kissed her again, motioned to Val to come and take her with an imperious nod of his head, put her gently in the girl's arms and was gone. Paradise settled into a sort of pleasant lethargy after the departure of the master. Belle Hannon was already Belle had gone indears looked."

friend."

The riders were coming in with rattle of spur and bit chain, the red veils were beginning to sift down from the blue infinitude above, and the long twilight would soon be falling over Paradise.

Val, standing alone in the patic after Belle had gone indears looked.

ant lethargy after the departure of the master. Belle Hannon was already speaking of the time when her hus-band should return, and Val spent many hours rocking lazily in the gay-fringed hammocks. She was her old self again in sweetness, in her eager care for all the creatures of the house-

hold and the ranch, but deep down in her heart she did not cease to mourn for the vanished Redstar. Sometimes at sundown she would cup her hands to her lips and, giving the two keen, long-drawn whistled notes listen wist ong-drawn whistled notes, listen wistfully as if from somewhere in the far fringes of the Blind Trail Hills she must each the fine faint echo of his

But always the vast silence of the illimitable land was unbroken, and Briston coming in from the dust and drouth of a long day's ride would look

at her pityingly.

The days passed and the master had been gone a fortnight when one cay Boyce Clendenning rode in on Dollar. Val, seeing him from afar, met him in the patio with smiles. all freshly clad in a starched print dress. In hon-est fairness she must accord him respect. She did not dislike him. either, when it came down to cases, for Buyce Clendenning was very much a man in a land where men must be all of that

to prosper. "Hello, Boyce," she greeted him, laying an admiring hand on Dollar's silver shoulder, "this is a treat—you coming so far to see us. Or were you going

"Hardly," said the man, sweeping down to take off his hat and extend his hand, "I came because I wanted

As Val led Clendenning into the depths of the cool old room Belle Han-non rose with the manner of a duchess and smiled toward the sound of their approach. The man had heard of John Hannon's blind wife—who in the range-land had not?—but he had never seen her. Now he looked at the delicate beauty of her face, its quick, receptive intelligence, its high mark of character, and knew why her daughter was as far above the other girls of the country as the clouds above the grass. He took Belle's hands, both of them, with a sudden pleasant liking which communicated itself instantly to the vibrant brain behind the hands, and the two were friends at once.

"This is Boyce Clendenning, Belle," said Val, and the man felt a strange surpirse at the girl's use of her mother's first name. He was to learn that that was one of their playful intima-cies which made the friendship of this mother and daughter so rare and so

"I know," said Mrs. Hannon, are the man John Hannon likes above all others among the ranchers, therefore you are good and worthy of regard. I shall like you, too."

Clepdenning laughed, tossed his hat way and sat down to a long and com-But finally the conversation drifted, as all speech must in the rangeland, to cattle and finally to rustlers.

"I suppose you've heard that the Flying Y's had trouble?" he asked

"No," said Val at once. "What?"
"Lost eighty head of fat steers ready or the driving."
"Good gracious! How?"

"Rustlers again. Drove them through the Needle's Eye into the Blind Trail. Trail was broad as daylight up to the face of the cliff, then of course it narrowed and was lost on the rock, for the pass into the hills is so narrow that only two steers can enter at the same time. The owners trailed their cattle there—to face two rifles sticking out on either side of the pass, a perthe ranch. But the country's buzzing, you bet, and I'm with it heart and

Val's dark eye flashed, for she Val's dark eye mashed, for she thought of her own loss, word of which had been noised about the country.

"I'm with you, too," she said bitterly, "heart and soul. If the ranchers ride on the rustlers' trail I want to go along. I'd like to kill the man that took the Redstar."

beaten. I've been talking to the Attison boys and Quinlan and they all fa-vor organization and short shrift for the victims we may catch with the goods. It looks like the work of the Black Rustler, that clever lifter whom none meet and but few have ever the girl herself. Val Hannon for the glimpsed—the smooth, silent chap who works like a machine, with neatness and precision, and rides the fastest horse ever seen in these parts. There are some wonderful stories afloat about that horse—a great bay horse, tall and high-withered, seventeen hands they say, and so fast that those who have caught a far glimpse of him say it runs like a super-horse.

As he talked Val Hannon's eyes became wide, dark pools of retrospection.
"My land!" she said softly, "I believe I've seen that horse—from the top of Mesa Grande one day at sundown. I had ridden the Redstar up and was sitting on the rim, looking across the ranges, when a band of men came out of the north up Santa Lendra way, and one did ride a wonderful horse—a long red horse that lay down and ran for all the world like Redstar himself! And the rider rose in his stirrups and

waved his hat to me!"
"Did he wear a black mask?" asked Clendenning, quickly.
"Why, I couldn't say. He was far

and away too far off for me to see his face. I only got the genera loutline and color—and that mighty seeming of speed." "It might have been. There is a whisper about that he has been in

Santa Leandra several times, but nobody cares to question the Black Rust-An hour later he took his leave and

the two women sped him from the patio where the sweet spring talked in the stillness.

"Val," said Belle Hannon, quietly, "I'm with your dad, I favor Boyce Clendenning. He is honest, straight and of fixed purpose. If he sets out to catch the Black Rustler, he'll get him sooner or later. If he promises to love, cherish and protect a woman,

he'll do so till he dies." And she did not know with what utter prophecy she spoke.

Val laughed, a ringing peal, and shook her shoulder playfully.

"John Hannon had better be getting back," she said lightly, "or his wife'll be falling in love with his best

Belle had gone indoors, looked down across the empty fields, for the Red Brood grazed no more without a guard, and a sigh lifted her clim breast.

CHAPTER XI The Lure of the Padre's Garden There was a time after Clendenning's In fact there was an unostentatious reticence in their speech about the whole affair. She did not know that every man-jack of them had been filled they met face to face again, and the shadow of the poplars played over their young faces where the eager light leaped helplessly.

They drew up by common consent every man-jack of them had been filled with a vague dismay over the incident of the dance hall at Santa Leandra, nor that they had listened to faint whispers concerning the armed strangers.

"Holy smoke!" said Perly the local strangers of the strangers of the strangers.

"Holy smoke!" said Perly the lo-quacious, "if that there Velantrie was th' Black Rusler an' our Val saved his "And pleasure to myself," answered fotten hide, her name'll be all over this country an' I see where this bunch'il do a lot of fightin'."

John Hannon did not return as soon as they had expected him, and time dragged a little. Val rode to the Mission many times, but never again the she encounter a tall stranger in the find Mesos?"

"Not far from his native heath. He "Not far from his native heath. He or two, Father Hilliare was non-com-municative and she learned no more

about him.
She helped the boys with the breaking of the new string of horses, for John Hannon's daughter was better than a lot of men at that, and her dusky skin burned a tawnier shade in the sun, while her cheeks were like roses in the sunset.

The boss had been gone five weeks. August was blazing on the range-The heavens were high and hard with heat and the sun shone continually. But always at dusk there came out of the south the little cool wind that whispered along the levels, and the marvelous colors sifted down from infinitude.

And then one day, Val, riding aimlessly far down Arroyo Pecos way came up from the cool shade of the ford on Little Antelope, and face to with two men-Velantrie on a big white horse and a slim dark Mexican

with a sullen face. Instantly Velantrie's face lighted with the smile she had not forgotten, and his broad hat came off with s graceful sweep.

"Miss Hannon!" he cried, and it was well for Father Millaire's peace of mind that he could not see the look of sud-den joy that flashed between them. "Mr. Velantrie!" mimicked the girl with a laugh, "it's been long since we

met in the padre's garden."
"Has it?" said the man eagerly and simply, and Val blushed.
"Hasn't it?" she asked honestly.
"Lord—yes," said Velantrie, softly.

For a moment they were silent, look-ing at each other with the age-old wonder that comes once in every life. Then the man thought quickly and sharply of the Church door-and woman-and became on the instant the indifferent, smiling stranger. Val saw the change and

grave herself. Velantrie turned to the rider beside him, a slim, good-looking youth, scarce more than a boy, and waved an eloquent hand.

"Let me present Senor Mesos Peceuento," he said gently, "of down Argu-enta way, bound for the Mission to for Father Milliare and, incidentally, for wedlock in the chapel."

Val Hannon blushed again, but the look she flashed Velantrie was eloquent of gratitude and gladness and

admiration for so successful a quest.

They spoke for a few moments more, but the spontaneity was gone from their meeting, and presently the strangers rode into the Antelope to emerge to the sight of the distant Mission gleaming palely in the light, while Val Hannon touched Redcloud and went on toward the south.

Velantrie, strong on the bit of his own desires, went straight to his destination.
"I think, padre," he said, "that I

shall come but little more to country. Perhaps no more.' The old man looked at him keenly.
"Why?" he asked simply.

"Because it is not well that I should." Father Millaire sighed. "This white's a good horse," Velan-ie said, "but I miss The Comet trie said,

laid up with a sprained tendon." He rode straight back the way he had come and he was deep in thought as he neared the fringes of the Little Antelope. Thought that concerned Val Hannon. Valentrie had known many women, but none of them had come into his life for more than a fleeting ouch. He was, as he had told Father "It's coming, sooner or later, that ride," answered Clendenning. "It must come, or we lay down our hands," weaker man would have stayed for. Therefore he struck the big white horse with a heel and rode through she shallow water-and there,

visit when nothing happened to stir first time in her life deliberately waitthe quiet life at the ranch. Val talked ing to cross trails with a man, and as unconscious of the fact as any child; with the riders about the trouble at the Fying Y and Briston had little to say. In fact there was an unostentatious

"And pleasure to myself," answered the man, "for it has given me great pleasure to do your will. It is a gen-tle will and kindly."

"Father Hillaire, too, will be full of joy over the erring sheep brought back to his fold, for he had grieved with and over Maria a deal. Where did you

was hiding among the jacals. It was no great thing to find him."
"But how did you make him come?" asked the girl wonderingly.

Velantrie smiled. He did not tell her that among the poor Mexicans across the line the name of Velantrie was magic, that in mr, an humble hut it bore a sound of "cle liverer," that it carried hope as well as fear, and that its owner had merely speak and his words, running afar among the peons, were like creeping on the ground to bring back the thing they sought. Continued Next Sunday.)

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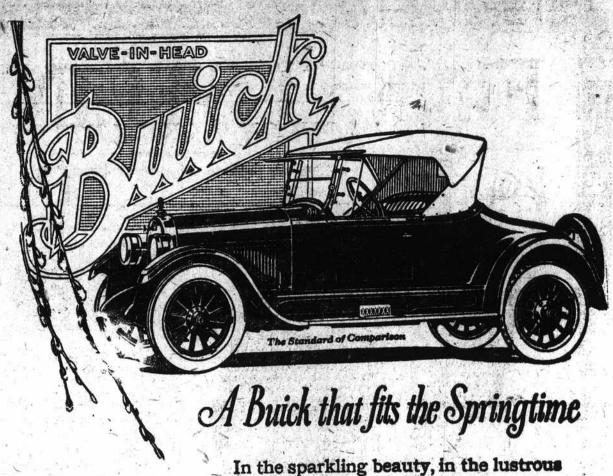
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