

# VAL OF PARADISE

by Virginia S. Roe

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### SYNOPSIS

John Hannon, wealthy ranch owner, his blind wife, Belle, and their beautiful 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.

Encouraged by the cowboys of Paradise ranch, Val attends the Fourth of July celebration at Santa Leandra. Val, dancing with Lola Sanchez, is shot at by a jealous suitor. Val saves Velantrie's life by causing the bullet to go wild.

During the celebration at Santa Leandra the peerless Redstar disappears from Paradise. Val is heartbroken and rides for consolation to the Mission to see her friend the Father Hillaire. She finds Velantrie at the Mission visiting with Father Hillaire.

**GO ON WITH THE STORY**  
The wistful look in the stranger's eyes deepened with the thought 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 desperately, "we've had little speech together."  
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 Comanche trotting down beneath the hanging trees.

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 the string of the grass. Val, seeing him from afar, met him in the patio with smiles, all freshly clad in a starched print dress. He was broad as the sun, his cheeks were like roses. She did not dislike him, either, when it came down to cases, for Boyce 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 by?"  
"Hardly," said the man, sweeping down to take off his hat and extended his hand, "I came because I wanted to."

As Val led Clendenning into the depths of the cool old room Belle Hannon 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 silhouetted 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.

"Has it?" said the man eagerly and simply, and Val blushed.  
"Lord—yes," said Velantrie, softly. For a moment they were silent, looking 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 the woman smiled and became the indifferent, smiling stranger.

Val saw the change and became 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 Pecuento," he said gently, "of down ARGUMENTS way, bound for the Mission to work for Father Hillaire and, incidentally, for work 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 and her father and mother 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 this country. Perhaps no more."  
The old man looked at him keenly.  
"Why?" he asked simply.  
"Because it is not well that I should," Father Hillaire sighed.

"No," said Val at once. "What?"  
"Lost eighty head of faststeers ready for 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 riders attacking out on either side of the pass, a perfect guard. No man's fool enough to deliberately give his life for a bunch of steers, so they went quietly back to the ranch. But the country is a burning, you bet, and I'm with it heart and soul."

Val's dark eye flashed, for she thought of her own loss, word of which had been noised about the country.  
"I'll take 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."  
"It's coming, sooner or later, that ride," answered Clendenning. "It must come, or we lay down our hands, beaten. I've been talking to the Atkinson boys and Quinlan and they all favor organization and short shrift for the rustlers. 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 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-winded, 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 Leandra 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 general outline 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 Rustler."  
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, 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 friend."  
The riders were coming in with rattles of spurs and bit chain, the red velvets 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 patio after 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 slim breast.

visit when nothing happened to stir the quiet life at the ranch. Val talked with the riders about the trouble at the Flying Y and Briston had little to say. 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 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 stranger.

"Holy smoke!" said Perly the loquacious, "if that there Velantrie was 't Black Rustler an' our Val saved his rotten hide, her name'll be all over this country an' I see where this bunch'll 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 did she encounter a tall stranger in the dry garden, and though she drew the talk artlessly to this stranger a time or two, Father Hillaire was non-communicative 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 tawny 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-land. 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 infinity.

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 face 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 a graceful sweep.  
"Hello, Hannon!" he cried, and it was well for Father Hillaire's peace of mind that he could not see the look of sudden 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, looking 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 the woman smiled and became the indifferent, smiling stranger.

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first time in her life deliberately waiting to cross trails with a man, and as unconscious of the fact as any child! At the fringe of the little stream 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 and sat still for a moment smiling at each other like two children—Val, the pride of Paradise, and Velantrie, "some-time of the Border."  
"I want to thank you," said the girl simply at last, "you have brought life to Maria, I know."  
"And pleasure to myself," answered the man, "for it has given me great pleasure to do your will. It is a gentle will and kind."  
"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's deal. Where did you find Mesos?"  
"Not far from his native heath. He was hiding among the jacals. It was no great thing to find him."  
"But how did you make him come?" asked the girl wonderingly.

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

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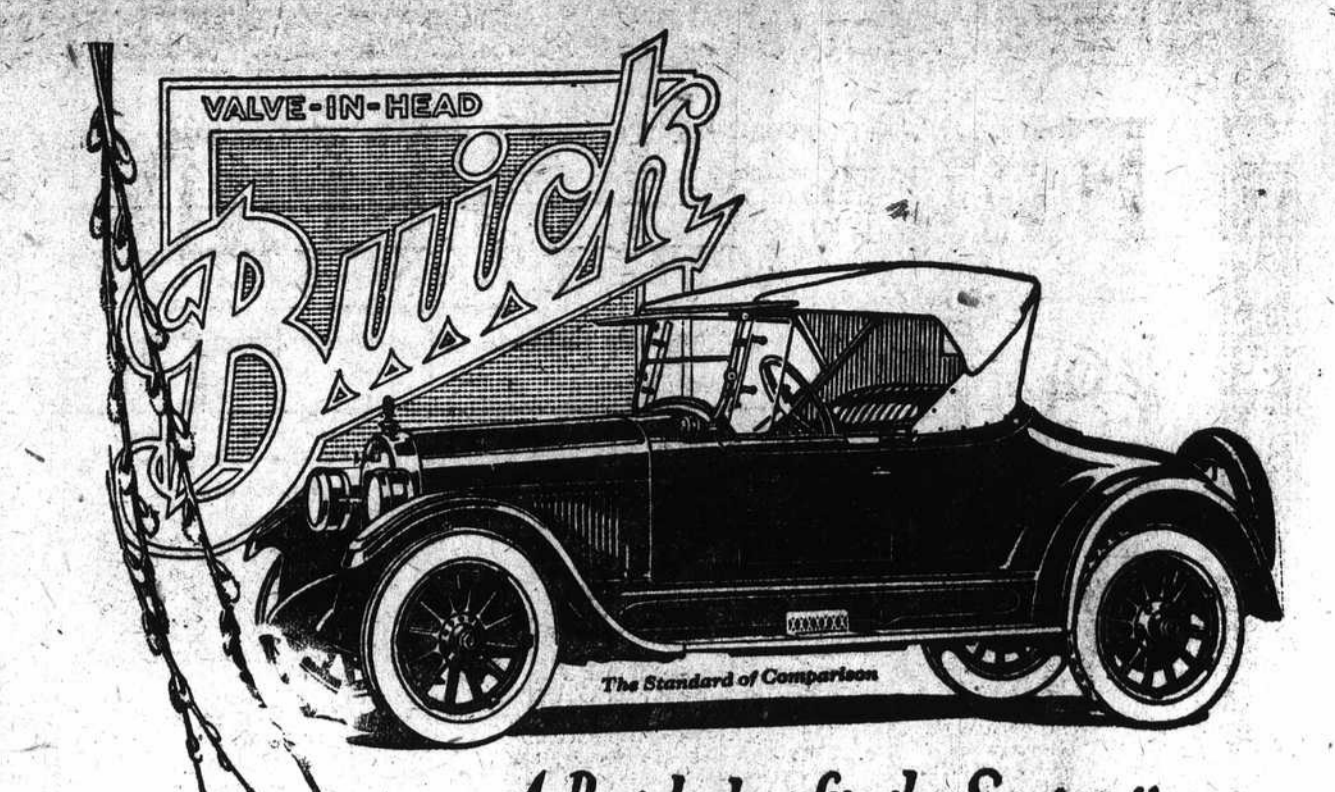
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