

THE LAST SHOT

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by FREDERICK PALMER



SYNOPSIS.

At their home on the frontier between the Browns and Grays, Marta Galland and her mother, entertaining Colonel Westerling of the Grays, see Captain Lanstron, staff intelligence officer of the Browns, injured by a fall in his aeroplane. Ten years later, Westerling, nominal vice but real chief of staff, reinforces South La Tir, meditates on war.

CHAPTER II—Continued.

Rather idly, now, he drew a pad toward him and, taking up a pencil, made the figures seventeen and twenty-seven. Then he made the figures thirty-two and forty-two. He blackened them with repeated tracings as he mused. This done, he put seventeen under twenty-seven and thirty-two under forty-two. He made the subtraction and studied the two tens.

A swing door opened softly and his executive clerk reappeared with a soft tread.

"Some papers for your signature, sir," he said as he slipped them on the blotter in front of Westerling. "And the 132d—no order about that, sir?" he asked.

"None. It remains!" Westerling replied.

The clerk went out impressed. His chief taking to sums of subtraction and totally preoccupied! The 132d to remain! He, too, had a question-mark in his secret mind.

Westerling proceeded with his mathematics. Having heavily shaded the tens, he essayed a sum in division. He found that ten went into seventy just seven times.

"One-seventh the allotted span of life!" he mused. "Take off fifteen years for youth and fifteen after fifty-five—nobody counts after that, though I mean to—and you have ten into forty, which is one-fourth. That is a good deal. But it's more to a woman than to a man—yes, a lot more to a woman than to a man!"

The clerk was right in thinking Westerling preoccupied; but it was not with the international crisis. Over his coffee the name of Miss Marta Galland, in the list of arrivals at a hotel, had caught his eye in the morning paper. A note to her had brought an answer, saying that her time was limited, but she would be glad to have him call at five that afternoon.

Westerling realized that the question of marriage as a social requirement might arise when he should become officially chief of staff with the retirement of His Excellency the field-marshal. For the present he enjoyed his position as a bachelor who was the most favored man in the army too much to think of marriage.

It was a little surprising that the bell that the girl of seventeen had rung in his secret mind when he was on one of the first rounds of the ladder, now lost in the mists of a lower stratum of existence, should ever tinkle again. Yet he had heard its note in the tone of her prophecy with each step in his promotion; and while the other people whom he had known at La Tir were the vaguest shadows of personalities, her picture was as definite in detail as when she said: "You have the will! You have the ambition!" She had recognized in him the power that he felt; foreseen his ascent to the very apex of the pyramid. She was still unmarried, which was strange; for she had not been bad-looking and she was of a fine old family. What was she like now? Commonplace and provincial, most likely. Many of the people he had known in his early days appeared so when he met them again. But, at the worst, he looked for an interesting half-hour.

The throbbing activity of the streets of the capital, as his car proceeded on the way to her hotel, formed an energetic accompaniment to his gratifying backward survey of how all his plans had worked out from the very day of the prophecy. Had he heard the remark of a great manufacturer to the banker at his side in a passing limousine. "There goes the greatest captain of industry of us all!" Westerling would only have thought: "Certainly, I am chief of staff. I am at the head of all your workmen at one time or another!" Had he heard the banker's answer, "But pretty poor pay, pretty small dividends!" he would have thought, "Splendid dividends—the dividends of power!"

He had a caste contempt for the men of commerce, with their mercenary talk about credit and market prices; and also for the scientists, doctors, engineers, and men of other professions, who spoke of things in books which he did not understand. Reading books was one of the faults of Turcas, his assistant. No bookish soldier, he knew, had ever been a great general. He resented the growing power of these leaders of the civil world, taking distinction away from the military, even when, as a man of parts, he had to court their influence. His was the profession that was and ever should be the elect. A penniless subaltern was a gentleman, while he could never think of a man in business as one.

All the faces in the street belonged to a strange, busy world outside his interest and thoughts. They formed what was known as the public, often making a clatter about things which

they did not understand, when they should obey the orders of their superiors. Of late, their clatter had been about the extra taxes for the recent increase of the standing forces by another corps. The public was bovine with a parrot's head. Yet it did not admire the tolling ox, but the eagle and the lion.

As his car came to the park his eyes lit at sight of one of the dividends—one feature of urban life that ever gave him a thrill. A battalion of the 128th, which he had ordered that afternoon to the very garrison at South La Tir that he had once commanded, was marching through the main avenue.

Youths all, of twenty-one or two, they were in a muddy-grayish uniform which was the color of the plain as seen from the veranda of the Galland house. Where these came from were other boys growing up to take their places. The mothers of the nation were doing their duty. All the land was a breeding-ground for the dividends of Hedworth Westerling.

At the far side of the park he saw another kind of dividend—another group of marching men. These were not in uniform. They were the unemployed. Many were middle-aged, with worn, tired faces. Beside the flag of the country at the head of the procession was that of universal radicalism. And his car had to stop to let them pass.

For an instant the indignation of military autocracy rose strong within him at sight of the national colors in such company. But he noted how naturally the men kept step; the solidarity of their movement. The stamp of their army service in youth could not be easily removed. He realized the advantage of heading an army in which defense was not dependent on a mixture of regulars and volunteers, but on universal conscription that brought every able-bodied man under discipline.

These reservists, in the event of war, would hear the call of race and they would fight for the one flag that



"One-Seventh the Allotted Span of Life!" He Mused.

then had any significance. Yes, the old human impulses would predominate and the only enemy would be on the other side of the frontier. They would be pawns of his will—the will that Marta Galland had said would make him chief of staff.

Wasn't war the real cure for the general unrest? Wasn't the nation growing stale from the long peace? He was ready for war now that he had become vice-chief, when the retirement of His Excellency, unable to bear the weight of his years and decorations in the field, would make him the supreme commander. One ambition gained, he heard the appeal of another; to live to see the guns and rifles that had fired only blank cartridges in practice pouring out shells and bullets, and all the battalions that had played at sham war in maneuvers engaged in real war, under his direction. He saw his columns sweeping up the slopes of the Brown range. Victory was certain. He would be the first to lead a great modern army against a great modern army; his place as the master of modern tactics secure in the minds of all the soldiers of the world. The public would forget its unrest in the thrill of battles won and provinces conquered, and its clatter would be that of acclaim for a new idol of its old faith.

CHAPTER III.

The Second Prophecy.

Marta, when she had received the note from Westerling, had been in doubt as to her answer. Her curiosity to see him again was not of itself compelling. The actual making of the prophecy was rather dim to her mind

until he recalled it. She had heard of his rise and she had heard, too, things about him which a girl of twenty-seven could better understand than a girl of seventeen. His reason for wanting to see her he had said was to "renew an old acquaintance." He could have little interest in her, and her interest in him was that he was head of the Gray army. His work had intimate relation to that which the Marta of twenty-seven, a Marta with a mission, had set for herself.

A page came to tell Westerling that Miss Galland would be down directly. When she appeared she crossed the room with a flowing, spontaneous vitality that appealed to him as something familiar.

"Ten years, isn't it?" she exclaimed as she seated herself on the other side of the tea-table. "And, let me see, you took two lumps, if I remember?"

"None now," he said. "Do you find it fattening?" she asked.

He recognized the mischievous sparkle of the eyes, the quizzical turn of the lips, which was her asset in keeping any question from being personal. Nevertheless, he flushed slightly.

"A change of taste," he averred. "Since you've become such a great man!" she hazarded. "Is that too strong?" This referred to the tea.

"No, just right!" he nodded. He was studying her with the polite, veiled scrutiny of a man of the world. A materialist, he would look a woman over as he would a soldier when he had been a major-general making an inspection. She was slim, supple; he liked slim, supple women. Yes, she was twenty-seven, with the vivacity of seventeen retained, though she were on the edge of being an old maid according to the conventional notions. Necks and shoulders that happened to be at his side at dinner, he had found, when they were really beautiful, were not averse to his glance of appreciative and discriminating admiration of physical charm. But he saw her shrug slightly and caught a spark from her eyes that made him vaguely conscious of an offense to her sensibilities, and he was wholly conscious that the suggestion, bringing his faculties up sharply, had the pleasure of a novel sensation.

"How fast you have gone ahead!" she said. "That little prophecy of mine did come true. You are chief of staff!"

After a smile of satisfaction he corrected her.

"Not quite; vice-chief—the right-hand man of His Excellency. I am a buffer between him and the heads of divisions. This has led to the erroneous assumption which I cannot too forcibly deny—"

He was proceeding with the phraseology habitual whenever men or women, to flatter him, had intimated that they realized that he was the actual head of the army. His Excellency, with the prestige of a career, must be kept soppotically enjoying the forms of authority. To arouse his jealousy might curtail Westerling's actual power.

"Yes, yes!" breathed Marta softly, arching her eyebrows a trifle as she would when looking all around and through a thing or when she found any one beating about the bush. The little frown disappeared and she smiled understandingly. "You know I'm not a perfect goose!" she added. "Had you been made chief of staff in name, too, all the old generals would have been in the sulks and the young generals jealous," she continued. "The one way that you might have the power to exercise was by proxy."

This downright frankness was another reflection of the old days before he was at the apex of the pyramid. Now it was so unusual in his experience as to be almost a shock. On the point of arguing, he caught a mischievous, delightful "Isn't that so?" in her eyes, and replied:

"Yes, I shouldn't wonder if it were!" Why shouldn't he admit the truth to the one who had rung the bell of his secret ambition long ago by recognizing in him the ability to reach his goal? He marvelled at her grasp of the situation.

"It wasn't so very hard to say, was it?" she asked happily, in response to his smile. Then, her gift of putting herself in another's place, while she strove to look at things with his purpose and vision, in full play, she went on in a different tone, as much to herself as to him: "You have labored to make yourself master of a mighty organization. You did not care for the non-essentials. You wanted the reality of shaping results."

"Yes, the results, the power!" he exclaimed.

"Fifteen hundred regiments!" she continued thoughtfully, looking at a given point rather than at him. "Every regiment a blade which you would bring to an even sharpness! Every regiment a unit of a harmonious whole, knowing how to screen itself from fire and give fire as long as bidden, in answer to your will if war comes! That is what you live and plan for, isn't it?"

thrilled at seeing a picture of himself, as he wanted to see himself, done in bold strokes. It assured him that not only had his own mind grown beyond what were to him the narrow associations of his old La Tir days, but that hers had grown, too. "And you—what have you been doing all these years?" he asked.

"Living the life of a woman on a country estate," she replied. "Since you made a rule that no Gray officers should cross the frontier we have been a little lonelier, having only the Brown officers to tea. Did you really find it so bad for discipline in your own case?" she concluded with playful solemnity.

"One cannot consider individual cases in a general order," he explained. "And, remember, the Browns made the ruling first. You see, every year means a tightening—yes, a tightening, as arms and armies grow more complicated and the maintaining of staff secrets more important. And you have been all the time at La Tir, truly?" he asked, changing the subject. He was convinced that she had acquired something that could not be gained on the outskirts of a provincial town.

"No. I have traveled. I have been quite around the world."

"You have!" This explained much. "How I envy you! That is a privilege I shall not know until I am superannuated." While he should remain chief of staff he must be literally a prisoner in his own country.

"Yes, I should say it was splendid! Splendid—yes, indeed!" Snappy little nods of the head being unequal to expressing the joy of the memories that her exclamation evoked, she clasped her hands over her knees and swung back and forth in the ecstasy of seventeen. "Splendid! I should say so!" She nestled the curling tip of her tongue against her teeth, as if the recollection must also be tasted.

"Splendid, enchanting, enlightening, stupendous and wickedly expensive! Another girl and I did it all on our own."

"O-oh!" he exclaimed. "Oh, oh, oh!" she repeated after him. "Oh, what, please?"

"Oh, nothing!" he said. It was quite comprehensible to him how well equipped she was to take care of herself on such an adventure.

"Precisely, when you come to think it over!" she concluded. "What interested you most? What was the big lesson of all your journeying?" he asked, ready to play the listener.

"Being born and bred on a frontier, of an ancestry that was born and bred on a frontier, why, frontiers interested me most," she said. "I collected impressions of frontiers as some people collect pictures. I found them all alike—stupid, just stupid! Oh, so stupid!" Her frown grew with the repetition of the word; her fingers closed in on her palm in vexation. He recollected that he had seen her like this two or three times at La Tir, when he had found the outbursts most entertaining. He imagined that the small fist pressed against the table edge could deliver a stinging blow. "As stupid as it is for neighbors to quarrel! It put me at war with all frontiers!"

"Apparently," he said. She withdrew her fist from the table, dropped the opened hand over the other on her knee, her body relaxing, her wrath passing into a kind of shamefacedness and then into a soft, prolonged laugh.

"I laugh at myself, at my own inconsistency," she said. "I was warlike against war. At all events, if there is anything to make a teacher of peace lose her temper it is the folly of frontiers."

"Yes?" he exclaimed. "Yes? Go on!" And he thought: "I'm really having a very good time." "You see, I came home from my tour with an idea—an idea for a life occupation just as engrossing as yours," she went on, "and opposed to yours. I saw there was no use of working with the grown-up folks. They must be left to The Hague conferences and the peace societies. But children are quite alike the world over. You can plant thoughts in the young that will take root and grow as they grow."

"Patriotism, for instance," he observed narrowly.

"No, the follies of martial patriotism! The wickedness of war, which is the product of martial patriotism!" The follies of patriotism! This was the red flag of anarchy to him. He started to speak, flushing angrily, but held his tongue and only emitted a "whew!" in good-humored wonder.

"I see you are not very frightened by my opposition," she rejoined in a flash of amusement not wholly untempered by exasperation.

"We got the appropriation for an additional army corps this year," he explained contentedly, his repose completely regained.

"Thus increasing the odds against us. But perhaps not; for we are dealing with the children not with recruits, as I said. We call ourselves the teachers of peace. I organized the first class in La Tir. I have the children come together every Sunday morning and I tell them about the children that live in other countries. I tell them that a child a thousand miles away is just as much a neighbor as the one across the street. At first I feared that they would find it uninteresting. But if you know how to talk to them they don't."

"Naturally they don't, when you talk to them," he interrupted. She was so intent that she passed over the compliment with a gesture like that of brushing away a cobweb. Her eyes were like deep, clear wells of faith and purpose.

dren will like them too well ever to want to kill them when they grow up. We have a little peace prayer—they have even come to like to recite it—a prayer and an oath. But I'll not bother you with it. Other women have taken up the idea. I have found a girl who is going to start a class on your side in South La Tir, and I came here to meet some women who want to inaugurate the movement in your capital."

"I'll have to see about that!" he rejoined, half-banteringly, half-threateningly.

"There is something else to come, even more irritating," she said, less intently and smiling. "So please be prepared to hold your temper."

"I shall not beat my fist on the table defending war as you did defending peace!" he retorted with significant enjoyment.

But she used his retort for an opening.

"Oh, I'd rather you would do that than jest! It's human. It's going to war because one is angry. You would go to war as a matter of cold reason." "If otherwise, I should lose," he replied.

"Exactly. You make it easy for me to approach my point. I want to prevent you from losing!" she announced cheerfully yet very seriously.

"Yes? Proceed. I brace myself against an explosion of indignation!" "It is the duty of a teacher of peace

to use all her influence with the people she knows," she went on. "So I am going to ask you not to let your country ever go to war against mine while you are chief of staff."

"Mine against yours?" he equivocated. "Why, you live almost within gunshot of the line! Your people have as much Gray as Brown blood in their veins. Your country! My country! Isn't that patriotism?"

"Patriotism, but not martial patriotism," she corrected him. "My thought is to stop war for both countries as war, regardless of sides. Promise me that you will not permit it!"

"I will not permit it!" He smiled with the kindly patronage of a great man who sees a charming woman floundering in an attempt at logic. "It is for the premier to say. I merely make the machine ready. The government says the word that makes it move. I able to stop war? Come, come!"

"But you can—yes, you can with a word!" she declared positively. "How?" he asked, amazed. "How?" he repeated blandly.

Was she teasing him? he wondered. What new resources of confusion had ten years and a tour around the world developed in her? Was it possible that the whole idea of the teachers of peace was an invention to make conversation at his expense? If so, she carried it off with a sincerity that suggested other depths yet unsounded.

"Very easily," she answered. "You can tell the premier that you cannot win. Tell him that you will break your army to pieces against the Browns' fortifications!"

He gasped. Then an inner voice prompted him that the cue was comedy.

"Excellent fooling—excellent!" he said with a laugh. "Tell the premier that I should lose when I have five million men to their three million! What a harlequin chief of staff I should be! Excellent fooling! You almost had me!"

Again he laughed, though in the fashion of one who had hardly unbent his spine, while he was wishing for the old days when he might take tea with her one or two afternoons a week. It would be a fine tonic after his isolation at the apex of the pyramid surveying the deference of the lower levels. Then he saw that her eyes, shimmering with wonder, grew dull and her lips parted in a rigid, pale line as if she were hurt.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Laconic Advice. When Atticus once discovered a treasure of gold while digging under a house he sent news of his discovery to the emperor, Nerva, from whom he received the laconic reply: "Use it." And when in his diffidence he protested that it was too large a sum for his own personal use, the emperor responded: "Then abuse it."

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Another plan is to purchase from some of the railway companies who hold large tracts, or from some responsible land company. The prices asked are exceedingly low and the terms easy. Whether one may decide to locate in the open prairie area or in the park country the land will be found to be of the same general texture, a rich black or chocolate colored loam on a clay subsoil.

Again attention is drawn to the fact of the great opportunities for farming that are offered in Western Canada. Already a number of holders of tracts of land there, who are residents of the United States—business men, merchants, lawyers, bankers—men of foresight and keen knowledge of business, have decided to cultivate the lands they have been holding for speculation and wait no longer for a buyer to turn up. They are acting wisely.

Canadian laws are as fair and just as can be found in the civilized world. Military service is not compulsory, nor is there one ounce of coercion used. Anything that is given to Great Britain whether in money or men is entirely voluntary. There is no drafting nor conscription of any kind. Already over sixty thousand of the young men of Canada have volunteered for service, and thirty-five thousand have gone forward, many of these having left their farms in their love for Great Britain and a desire to fight for their country. As a consequence, many farms may be left untilled. Therefore Canada invites others to come in and take their places. This then is the opportunity for the American who wishes to better his own condition.—Advertisement.

Too Indulgent. "Yep! I'm goin' to keep workin' awhile, an' then I'll be my own boss." "I wouldn't if I was you, Josh," replied Farmer Cortnessel. "A man that's his own boss is always liable to think he has done his whole duty when he has told the help to take another holiday."

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