

# COMRADES OF PERIL

By RANDALL PARRISH

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## THE FELLOW IN THE PINK SHIRT

She looked from him to the row of breathless men facing her, impatiently, her bosom rising and falling tumultuously.

"And I've got to choose which one I'd rather marry?"

"Well, yes, that is the idea crudely expressed. Not that you are compelled in any way; only we feel it highly desirable; that—well, perhaps I may say, it is the will of God that you make some such choice."

Her eyes wandered up and down the shrinking line, resting calmly on faces after faces. If she felt any humor in the situation, there was no expression of it visible. She retained an appearance of sullen indifference, which was almost insolent.

"There ain't no more of 'em?"

"No; this is all."

"And I got to pick from these?"

The preacher nodded his head, as she glanced inquiringly in his direction. The pent-up breath came in a sigh from between her lips.

"Well, if I've got to, I have, I suppose, and so far as I can see it don't make no great difference. I'll take the fellow sittin' over there on the window—the one with the pink shirt."

And so they were married. But they didn't live happily ever after, because this marriage occurs right at the beginning of the story. Moreover there was no love or even acquaintance between the young couple. Besides, the bride was kidnaped on her wedding day. So it was just naturally up to the bridegroom to rescue her. And in the adventures that followed the young people became "Comrades of Peril," with Cupid managing the game.

Unusual? Well, it's another of those decidedly out-of-the-ordinary Western stories by Randall Parrish. During the last three years the Western Newspaper Union has released six serials by this popular author—and each has been a great success. Enough said.

## CHAPTER I.

### Return of the Wanderer.

Shelby, alone in the buckboard, drove to the summit of the ridge, halting the broncos, as his eyes swept over the scene outlined below. The animals, their dusty sides streaked with sweat, stopped willingly after their sixty-mile trip from the Cottonwood. Below was a deep, narrow valley, in the midst of which Ponca spread out along the bank of the creek that gave the town its name. To Shelby, wearied with the dull plains, here was a scene of beauty.

Just beyond there was life, fresh, luxuriant, sweet; running water, luscious green grass, and above all, that which he craved most, human companionship. To be sure, he knew Ponca of old, and possessed no illusions. Ugly, dirty, unkempt, Ponca made no pretense to either cleanliness, or respectability; it possessed no pride, no hope of a future. It seemed to recognize its destiny, and be content, a mere mushroom town of the frontier, an adjunct of the cattle trade, permitted to flourish today, but as certainly doomed to perish tomorrow.

The man who sat there on the ridge gazing down, the reins held idly in his hand, his eyes following the winding of the valley, was a perfectly normal part of the picture—he belonged. Beneath the tan and dust was a smoothly shaven face, a face of twenty-five, or twenty-six, the features strong, nose somewhat prominent, lips firm and full, with dark-gray eyes shadowed by heavy lashes. In truth, he appeared all man, a certain reckless gaiety about him not to be mistaken, yet as evidently not to be lightly taken advantage of.

"It certainly beats h—l," he muttered, unconsciously aloud, "that a man should dream about visiting a dump like this. Shows what sort of place Cottonwood is to make a fellow homesick for Ponca. Town looks kinder dead; no cattle in the corral. H—l, what's the difference? There'll be some of the old bunch hangin' 'round, an' we'll make things hum for awhile. Come, broncs, jog along! Let's show Ponca we're a live outfit!"

It was a rough, curving descent, the trail in places barely wide enough for the wheels, but the driver never lost control, guiding the broncos with expert hand, until they finally swung about the edge of a great rock at the bottom, and went charging at full gallop into the main street. To better express the exuberance of his feelings at this return to civilization, and announce his arrival, Shelby whipped out his gun and began shattering the atmosphere, driving the animals frantic as the sharp reports rang out over their backs.

But if any sensation was expected, it signally failed to materialize. Ponca remained deserted, and unimpressed. Long experience had either rendered the inhabitants indifferent to such a display, or else the town had gone utterly dead. The silence and desolation caused Shelby to utter an oath, and suddenly swing his team up to a hitching rack in front of McCarthy's saloon, the door of which stood invitingly open. An instant the perplexed driver sat there, staring grimly about from end to end of the deserted street.

"What the h—l!" he ejaculated at last. "is up anyhow? Is this a graveyard I've got into? Lord, it can't be all the boys have got out; but something is sure dead wrong. Well, Mac's open anyhow. I'll go in and find out."

He sprang out over the wheel, stiffened from the long ride, yet standing erect nevertheless, and strode up the saloon steps and in through the open

door. He had expected a welcome and this strange lack of interest on the part of the citizens of Ponca had already considerably chilled his enthusiasm. Once inside, he stopped, staring about in even deeper perplexity. The big saloon was absolutely empty of patrons—the tables were unoccupied; no one was lined up in front of the long bar, and no sound of voices or of poker chips came down from the room above. The place seemed like a huge grave, and, for a brief moment, he even failed to perceive its only occupant—a red-mustached bartender in front of the mirror, industriously rubbing the immaculate glass. Thoroughly angered by this time, Shelby advanced, his footsteps muffled by the sawdust on the floor.

"What the h—l is the matter with this dump?" he demanded savagely, his fist thumping the bar. "Oh, so it's you, is it, Moran? Well, are you all that's left in Ponca?"

The red-mustached one turned differently, yet managed to extend a rather limp hand in fraternal greeting.

"That's 'bout the size of it, Tom," he admitted gravely. "Where yer been the last six months?"

"Over on the Cottonwood, ranching. Say, I ain't seen nothin' but dogs since I struck this valley. What's up? Ponca gone on the bum?"

"No; she's all right mostly. Be all right tomorrow, I reckon, fer Hitchcock's outfit's comin' in with a bunch o' steers. What'll yer drink?"

"Best yer've got, o' course. That looks a bit like old times, an' tastes like it. Take a snort with me, Moran. Where's Mac, an' all the boys, anyhow?"

"Out ter the funeral; that's what's the matter with this town. The whole kit an' caboodle gone across the creek to help plant old Dad Calkins. You remember Old Dad?"

"No, can't say I do; what was he, a gambler?"

"Kind of a tin-horn; soused most of the time but still everybody liked him; pretended ter be a blacksmith when he first come, an' put up a shack down there next the hotel. Never worked mor'n three days by my knowledge since—just naturally hummed 'round, but he was a h—l of a good story-teller, an' the boys cottoned to him. Sure, yer must have knowed him."

Shelby shook his head. "What did he die from?"

"Shot himself, I reckon. He was picked up over back o' the dance hall, with a bullet in his nut an' a gun in his hand. The girl was huntin' for him, 'cause he didn't come home, an' so Dan he went along with her. The two of 'em found him out there."

"What girl?"

"Daughter, I s'pose. She's been yer kinder keepin' house ever since I first knew the cuss."

"How old is she?"

"I ain't no judge o' females' ages, if yer ask me, but maybe sixteen or seventeen. Quite a wisp of a gurl first I saw her, but she don't make up with nobody; sorter sullen-like, an' just stays ter home all the time."

"Where'd you say all this rumpled was goin' on?"

"Over cross the creek, beyond that bunch o' willows. You know where the graveyard is. Goin' ter be some obsequies, you bet. Dan he went clear to Buffalo Gap for ter git a preacher ter do the thing up well. What's the matter with yer goin' over there, Tom, an' takin' the show in? Dan'll be mighty pleased ter see yer horn in."

Shelby helped himself to another drink and gazed disconsolately about the big, deserted room. "I reckon I'll turn the broncs into Davis' corral, an' then ambig along," he said slowly. "Even a funeral's better than this dump today."

He had waded the shallow waters and reached the edge of the willows before his eyes distinguished the crowd gathered in the open space beyond. It was surely some funeral; there was no doubt about that. A mass of men stood there, bare-headed in the sunshine, and beyond them, on a little knoll, a small bunch of women were crowded together, girls from the dance hall mostly, judging from their clothes and faces, although one or two older women were at the farther end. Shelby caught a glimpse of the preacher, elevated on a box, and his ears caught the sonorous words of exhortation with which he ended his sermon. There followed a faint applause, checked instantly by McCarthy, who politely requested the bunch to stop making d—d fools of themselves, and immediately announced that the Ponca male quartette would sing "Onward, Christian Soldiers," after which those who desired would be given the opportunity to view for the last time the features of the departed. As the last dulcet strains of the hymn rolled away, McCarthy, as though anxious to preserve the lives of the singers by quick action, pushed his way once again to the front.

"Now, you bucks," he roared out tersely, "line up along them willows. I'll go first with the daughter as chief mourners, an' then the females will fall in behind. After that the rest of yer can mosey along. We're goin' ter do this up in some style, an' it ain't just goin' to be showin' proper respect fer the dead, but we're agoin' ter remember the orphaned and the fatherless. That's the way Ponca does business. Now, chip in, gents; there's a box there at the head of the corpse, an' after yer've had a squint at Ol' Dad cough up something fer the gurl."

Shelby dropped into place behind the stage agent, who recognized the newcomer with a hard handgrip and grin of welcome.

"Just blow in? We're givin' Old Calkins the time o' his career; owed me a hundred, but what the h—l do I care! Know the ol' cuss?"

"No; I just dropped around fer to pass away the time. Some spouter that fat preacher."

"Ain't he, though?" admiringly. "He sure shot off some language I never did hear afore. Yer heard our quartette, I reckon?"

"Heard it! Not being altogether deaf, I did. Hullo, the procession is about to start—so that's Old Calkins' girl, is it?"

The stage agent nodded.

"Yep; not so darned much to look at, either. I don't reckon I've seen her afore fer a year."

Shelby could not have described what there was about the girl to interest him even slightly. As Mike said, there was not much to look at, and what there was had been rendered particularly hideous by the ill-fitting black dress in which she was dressed. She walked well, and she held her head straight up, a bit defiantly, looking neither to right nor left as McCarthy led her forward by a grasp on one arm. The corners of her mouth drooped a trifle and her hair was drawn straight back and bound in a wisp. Altogether she made a rather pathetic picture, and this somehow impressed Shelby. He watched her step at the head of the opened casket and look down at the face of the dead man. There was no sign of a tear, no semblance of a sob, and



There Was No Sign of a Tear.

then she moved on with no change perceptible in her face, outwardly unmoved. To all appearances her only desire was to have the affair ended and be left alone.

Shelby passed and stared down at the face in the casket, that of a man of sixty, possibly, yet exhibiting even in death the marks of a hard life which had unduly aged him. It was rather an intelligent face, framed in

a white beard, with the fragment of a scar showing on one cheek. There was something about the face strangely familiar, yet he could not recall the man to memory—some way the sight of him had turned his mind back to army days, yet the two would not connect themselves definitely. As he thrust his contribution into the box, McCarthy gripped him cordially.

"Well, bless me, if here ain't Tom Shelby, lookin' like a white man, and blowin' his money like a good sport. How's things on the Cottonwood? Fine as silk, hey? See yer later, Tom. No, yer don't, Ramsay! You tried that game on me once before. I'm keepin' cases here."

There was a moment's delay, while Ramsay reluctantly dug down into his jeans for an amount satisfactory to the party in charge, and Shelby, still struggling with his elusive memory, bent over and asked hoarsely:

"Say, Mac, who was this guy, anyhow?"

"Old Dad, you mean? Furst I knew of the fellow was about three years ago, blacksmithin' down at Kelly's camp. When that moved on he come up here, an' has been hangin' 'round ever since. Wa'n't such a bad sort, 'cept when in liquor; a smart ol' devil, too; read everything he could get hold of."

"Do you happen to know if he was ever in the army?"

"Come to think of it, Tom, I do. Once when he was drunk, he showed me his discharge papers. Lemme see; h—l, yes—the ol' cuss was a sergeant in the Sixth cavalry. That's all right, Ramsay—pass along. Now, whose next; step up lively, boys."

Shelby drifted along with the line, which broke into groups, waiting silently for the ceremonies to be concluded and the body lowered into the grave before wending their way back to the delights of Ponca. The ranchman lingered with the others while the preacher solemnly consigned the body to dust, but when he saw the quartette climbing back into the wagon for a final song, he promptly joined a number who were attempting to escape. Shelby paused and glanced back; the distance was too great to distinguish faces, yet there was no mistaking the pathetic figure of the girl standing in loneliness beside the still open grave. She had not particularly appealed to him before, but now his heart made vague response to her loneliness.

It was doubtless this lingering memory which kept him away from McCarthy's saloon during the next hour. He had lost his earlier inclination for a wild carouse in town, or any desire to renew old acquaintances at the bar. He was almost persuaded to load up in the morning, if he could find the hand he needed and drive back to Cottonwood. There was nothing in it, this getting drunk on vile whisky and blowing in all he had saved at faro. H—l, no! He needed every dollar to make the ranch pay and could not afford to be a d—n fool forever. Here is where he would quit. No doubt, he was honest enough in these intentions, yet the mood passed away so completely that before night he was again with the gang and had stowed away sufficient liquid refreshments to completely overcome any lingering recollection of any higher purpose. In this happy condition he finally wended his way across the street to the shelter of the hotel.

## CHAPTER II.

### Outlining a Plot.

The Occidental hotel, Hicks proprietor, was merely a place in which one could sleep and eat, if one was thoroughly accustomed to border ideas of comfort. McCarthy, having no home of his own, roomed over his saloon, but was compelled to eat the Hicks brand of cooking, and, with many apologies therefor, had, on this particular occasion, the ex-reverend from Buffalo Gap as his honored guest. Shelby saw the two when he first entered, over in the farther corner and, as there chanced to be a vacant seat beside McCarthy, he made his slightly uncertain way in that direction and succeeded in safely establishing himself on the empty bench. The room was well filled with men, most of them still discussing the important event of the afternoon, and he soon became aware that the conversation of the two next to him bore upon the same subject.

Shelby stared at the smoking, greasy mess outspread before him, prying open a soggy biscuit, and asked a question of McCarthy.

"How'd the collection come out, Mac?"

"What collection? Oh, for the gurl; 'bout five hundred, wa'n't it, reverend?"

"Four, ninety-seven," said the preacher in his deep voice. "Quite an assistance for the young woman in this time of bereavement, as I am informed her father left little or no property."

"Property! Old Calkins! Well, I should say not. And what's more," the saloon-keeper becoming interested, "I don't see how that money's goin' ter do her much good. I was just

talkin' ter the dominie yere about her. Tom, what is she agoin' ter do? An' what hed this town ought ter do fer her?"

"What do you mean? They done enough, ain't they, with that swell funeral an' five hundred bucks on top of it? What more would she expect?"

"She don't expect nuthin'. That ain't her style. I got an idee she won't even accept this bunch o' coin. She's the ornariest heifer I ever saw. But that's got no bearin' on us. She's an orphan, left yere in Ponca with no visible means of support. She's a decent girl; nobody ever said nuthin' against her, and the way it looks ter me we got a moral duty ter perform. Ain't that it, Reverend?"

"That is the thought I endeavored to convey," returned the visitor from Buffalo Gap seriously. "You heard me, I presume, young man?"

"Only the last few sentences," admitted Shelby. "I don't belong here, but just happened to drift in today."

"Tom's ranchin' over on the Cottonwood," interrupted McCarthy, "but he's a mighty straight guy, an' I'd like ter have him express his feelin's on this yere idee o' yours, Reverend. It's rather a new one on me."

The preacher straightened up and cleared his throat.

"Well, here's the case of a young girl, seventeen or eighteen years old, who has had no experience whatever in life, suddenly left an orphan in this town, without any money or friends, so to speak. Where can she go? What can she do? There isn't a place she could earn a living here, excepting the dance hall; there isn't a place in this town she could call home. That is what I tried to make clear to Mr. McCarthy—that the men o' this town ought to give her a chance. Mac here's a married man; got a wife and two daughters of his own back East and he cottoned to my idea right away."

"But what is your idea?"

"Marriage, sir—marriage; honorable matrimony. I even offer my services freely. The girl should be given a husband and a home; this would assure her future and relieve Ponca of every obligation. Do you see the point?"

"Yes," admitted Shelby, yet rather dazed at the project, "but there would seem to be certain obstacles in the way of such a scheme. No doubt you have considered these. Who, for instance, would marry her?"

"There isn't likely to be any trouble about that," confidently. "If she'd fix up she'd be a right good-looking girl, besides, she's got five hundred dollars to start with and that's more money than a lot of these gazabos ever saw in all their lives. I'll bet there's fifty men in Ponca that would jump at the chance."

"Rounders and tin-horns."

"Some of them—sure. But there would be some decent fellows among them. That's about how we figured it, McCarthy."

The saloonkeeper nodded.

"There's quite a few of the right kind 'round Ponca, Tom, who'd be mighty glad to get a decent woman and settle down. I could name a half dozen right now. What I ain't so sure 'bout is the gurl."

"She might object? Of course she will, and why shouldn't she. You want to know what I think of the scheme, Mac? Well, it's a fool idea and it won't work—that's what I think of it; it's idiotic."

The Buffalo Gap man leaned forward, drawing in his paunch so as to view the speaker around McCarthy. The words of condemnation evidently cut for his face was flushed, although he held his temper.

"That's what Mac here said at first, but now he believes it will work, and so do I," he explained gravely. "It isn't at all likely the girl will object to getting married, provided she hooks up with a man she sort of likes. The only problem is to discover the right fellow."

"And you think you can go out in this town, rope an' hog-tie any stray maverick you find on the range an' give him the brandin' iron, do yer?"

"You got right out o' here, the whole kit an' caboodle of you."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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