

COMRADES OF PERIL

By RANDALL PARRISH

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"YOU CARE FOR ME."

Synopsis.—Tom Shelby, a rancher, rides into the frontier town of Ponca, looking for a good time after a long spell of hard work and loneliness on the ranch. Instead, he runs into a funeral—that of Dad Calkins, a retired army man of whom little is known. A girl, still in her teens, survives Calkins. McCarthy, a saloon keeper and Ponca's leading citizen, decides that the girl, now alone in the world, should marry. She agrees to pick out a husband from the score of men lined up in her home. To his consternation, she selects Shelby, who had gone along merely as a spectator. The wedding takes place and the couple set out for Shelby's ranch. With them is "Kid" Macklin, whom Shelby has hired as a helper. On the way the girl tells her husband her name is Olga Carlyn, and also tells him something of the peculiar circumstances of her life. Upon their arrival at the ranch Shelby is struck down from behind and left for dead. He recovers consciousness to find that Macklin and his wife have gone. He starts in pursuit. He learns his wife is an heiress, that her abduction has been carefully planned and that she has been taken to Wolves' Hole, a stronghold of the bandits and bar Indians. Reaching Wolves' Hole, he is discovered by "Indian Joe" and forced to accompany him into the hole. Here he claims to be one of the conspirators and is locked up pending developments. He considers it a Mexican girl, Pancha, in love with Macklin, who intends to marry Olga. Pancha, planning to get rid of her rival, releases Shelby and guides him to a hidden cave.

CHAPTER X.—Continued.

Descending was far easier than the toilsome climb through the darkness of the night before. There was nothing in sight so far as the mouth of the ravine where it opened into the main valley. Beyond that he could perceive moving figures, and occasionally hear the sound of a distant voice. It was clearly evident to his mind that something unusual must have occurred—some news of disaster or approaching danger—to arouse such excitement among the citizens of the Hole; and he also felt convinced that this more important thing had for the time being, at least, rendered his own escape a matter of small consideration. If any attempt had been made to trail him, this effort had certainly already been abandoned. As he leaned forth from his hiding place he saw, scarcely a hundred yards away, the log walls of that hut, concealed among the trees which he had dimly noted from the crag above. This was probably where Olga had been confined. His heart beat rapidly as he studied the outlines. Could she be there still? Was Macklin with her? or had she been left there under guard of some of his Indian allies?

If she was there, and not too securely guarded, it might be possible for him alone to effect her rescue. The inspiration to make the attempt appealed to him strongly. If he only could get her away unobserved as far as that cave, he believed it possible to follow the trail to the summit. The project appeared simple enough, as he turned it thus over in his mind; at least it surely could do no harm for him to determine definitely if the lady still remained imprisoned there. He would venture far enough to assure himself that this must be the fact. Shelby was sufficiently conscious of danger to use every precaution; the trailing of years came to his aid. The rocky banks of the stream were sufficiently high to conceal his advance, and the creek curved about so as to approach the hut within a few yards. Assured that the water would thus conceal his trail, he crept across the narrow open space, and lowered himself over the bank, crouching knee deep in the cold stream, safely under cover. Thus protected he waded slowly downward. He saw no evidence of any guard, and became convinced the cabin also was deserted; that if this was actually the place where Olga had been confined on arrival, she had since been removed elsewhere.

As he drew nearer the place appeared old, rather dilapidated and long deserted, a shack scarcely fit for human habitation any longer. The one window was boarded up, and the patched roof of the lean-to sagged dismally. This was certainly not the place; no one apparently had lived there for many a year. Still, now he had ventured so much, it might be well to take a look inside. Assuredly no harm could be done by his searching the rooms, and this would require only a moment or two.

He drew himself up into the weeds, and wiggled his way forward until he obtained a full view of the door. It was tightly closed, but unguarded without. Indeed his search revealed no sign that the hut had been visited for months, until he came within a yard or two of the long step before the entrance; then he suddenly encountered footprints in the softer ground, and was able to distinguish where some one—more than one, he thought—had pushed a passage through the surrounding tangle of weeds. He studied these signs intently, yet discerned nothing resembling

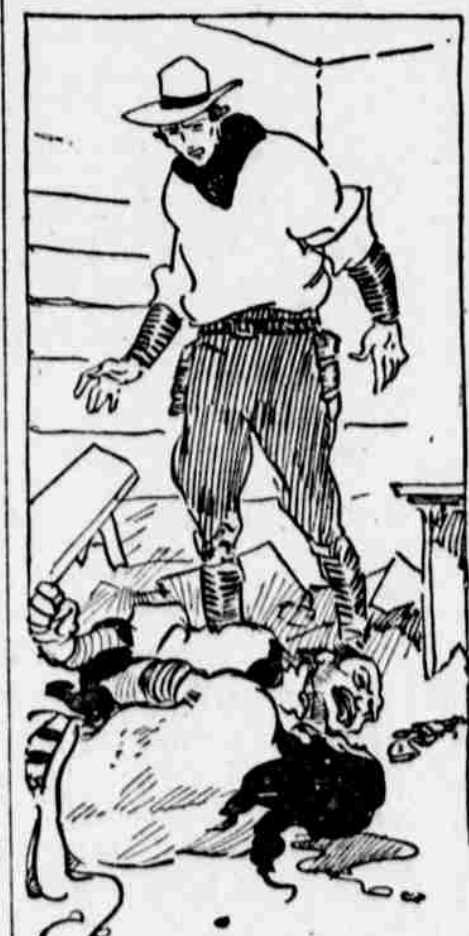
a woman's shoe. The moccasin-shod feet, however, had passed over the ground again and again, and he even believed, one, and perhaps more, of the wearers had sat on the doorstep impatiently stamping their feet. To his judgment the place had indeed been under guard, and that recently—the marks were comparatively fresh and clean-cut, as though made within a few hours.

Then, in all probability, this had been the prison where his wife was held. He had stumbled upon it. Here, undoubtedly, was the very spot where she had been confined under guard during the past night, yet she certainly was not there now. The deserted appearance of the place was proof positive that she had been taken elsewhere. Voices sounded off toward the broader expanse of valley, but too far away to present danger; even as he stood cautiously up, and looked out over the tops of the weeds he could see nothing to create alarm. He was alone, unseen, unsuspected, and yielded to the desire to learn what was within the hut. She might have left some message, some sign of her presence, which would prove a clue.

The outer door was secured merely by a wooden latch, and opened easily by his touch. Afraid lest some unknown eye might mark his movements, Shelby glided quickly in through the narrow opening, and instantly pressed the door shut behind him. He was in almost total darkness, the only light finding entrance between the ill-fitting boards at the single window. He felt his way blindly across the room, guided by this dim ray, and discovering one of the boards somewhat loosened, managed to wrench it free, thus permitting the gray daylight to gain entrance. This gave him a dim view of the interior, a nearly square room, inexpressibly dirty, and without furniture, except a rough bench thrust back against one wall.

Straight across from where he stood some black object lay upon the floor, so indistinct in its outlines he could not, in that faint light, determine what it might be—a pile of rags, perhaps, or a shapeless heap of rubbish. He stepped forward, curious to learn its nature, yet stopped suddenly, staring down in speechless horror. He was beside the bodies of two men, both dead, gripped together, stiffened in the very attitude with which death had overtaken them. They had died fighting like wild dogs, and their strange posture told the whole story. Shelby, crushing back the dread he felt, tried to part them, but the stiffened limbs would not yield. One was a white man, the other an Indian, the latter shot through the chest, the former apparently choked to death, the rigid red fingers of his antagonist still clutching his throat. Beyond on the floor lay a revolver and a knife.

Shelby stared at the gruesome scene, unable to remove his gaze. In the dim light the features of the two men were almost unrecognizable. What had caused this tragedy? this fierce



Both Dead, Gripped Together.

death grapple? He could only conjecture from what little he knew of the circumstances. Beyond doubt one of these antagonists would be the guard whom Macklin had left to watch over his captive while he departed. But the other? Some one who sought entrance probably; some one endeavoring to reach the woman, either inspired by good or evil intent. Yet which was the guard? which the invader? Those who had accompanied the Kid at the ranch were all Indians, and it was therefore most likely that a savage had been left to watch over the girl. Then it was the white man who thus sought to reach her. For what purpose?

Shelby bent down and peered inquiringly into the agonized face of the

dead white man. The features were discolored, distorted from the agony in which he had died, the lips drawn back, disclosing a grinning row of teeth. The face scarcely appeared human, and yet was vaguely familiar. He had seen it once before, revealed in the glare of a match, and the recollection came back haunting him—the fellow was Slagin, Hanley's partner. Then he had come there for no good! Had come there in the night like a slinking cat, knowing of Macklin's absence, to carry out some foul object of his own.

The ranchman drew in a long breath, and stood up. The silence and gloom oppressed him, as his eyes once more swept about the dismal apartment. It was surely a fit abode for murder, but the sight of those two dead bodies interlocked on the floor was more than he could bear. Obeying the first impulse he dragged them, still gripping each other, across the floor, and thrust them under the bench, flinging over them the folds of a tattered blanket.

But what of her—Olga? Surely no one could have been here since these two men fought? Otherwise their bodies would have been found, and cared for. It must be that Macklin had not yet returned, and that Hanley knew nothing of Slagin's desperate venture. Then the girl must still be confined in the house, helpless to escape and guarded by these dead men. The thought sent the blood surging into Shelby's throat, and his eager eyes sought the only door opening through the side wall. It was tightly closed and secured by a strong bar of wood. He picked up the revolver from the floor, and went swiftly forward, prepared to face whatever might be revealed beyond. The bar fitted snugly yet he forced it free of the clasp, and pushed the door open with his knee, watchfully peering into the darkness behind. He saw nothing, no flutter of movement, no evidence that the place was occupied. In spite of daylight without, the room, with its shuttered windows, remained black. His heart almost ceased to beat, yet he advanced into the room, flinging the door wide open behind him. This admitted sufficient light to enable him to dimly make out his surroundings—a couch, covered with a bearskin, a rudely made chair, a bucket of water in one corner, and a faintly revealed figure against the further wall.

"Olga!" he exclaimed, "Olga!" She moved, leaning forward eagerly. "Who are you? Who calls me?" "It is you, then?" he sprang forward. "Don't be afraid; I am Shelby!" "Shelby—you! Tom Shelby! O God! this is not a dream!"

"No, no! I am just as real as you are. See! touch me. You thought I was dead?" Her hands were in his own; her eyes, still incredulous, searching his face in the dim light.

"Dead—yes! They told me so; an Indian said he had crushed in your skull. He boasted of it; and when I asked that Macklin, he only laughed, when he said it was so."

"Laughed, how?" Her eyes fell.

"He—he didn't seem to think it could make much difference to me; that I would care."

"But do you know who he is? Did he tell you? Did the fellow explain his purpose in this outrage?"

"I do not know; he had no time, no opportunity; we were never alone. What do you mean? Was this all done for some deliberate purpose?"

"Yes, it was, Olga. His name is not Macklin at all; it is probably Churchill—have you ever heard that name before?"

"No; I am sure not."

"It was your mother's name. She came from Virginia, and was heiress to considerable property. It was left to her in trust, and her uncle was the trustee."

"My mother?"

"Yes; she never knew this while she lived, but your father learned some of the facts after her death, and endeavored to verify them. His search was what started trouble; for your uncle, the trustee—his name is Cornelius Churchill—had made no effort to locate the heir to the property left in his care. Instead he had used the money, believing himself perfectly safe. When he learned of your father's suspicions, he became frightened."

"Can this be true?"

"It evidently is true, strange as it seems. Then your father was killed, perhaps through some row engineered by Churchill to put him out of the way, and they made every effort to find you. You alone stood between them and this ill-gotten wealth. Fortunately you could not immediately be located; you had been hidden away in a Catholic school, and, before Churchill succeeded in discovering what school you were at, Calkins took you away, and destroyed every trail."

"Calkins! Who and what was he?"

"A sergeant in your father's troop; a faithful fellow to whom your father had confided his story before he died. His one object was to keep you safely out of Churchill's hands until you should become of age. That was why

he dragged you from town to town and kept you in poverty."

"But why did he never tell me all this?"

"I cannot answer that; no doubt he thought it best; believed the time had not come. I understand he acted under legal advice. Then, you know, his death was very sudden."

"Did he kill himself?"

"I do not think so now. That was the story in Ponca, but it is my belief he was murdered. You had finally been traced; the man who had succeeded in finding your trail was in Ponca. Calkins had to be put out of the way."

"You—mean Macklin?"

"Yes; only, as I say, that is probably not the fellow's name—he is Cornelius Churchill's son."

"Where—where did you learn all this?"

"Macklin told the story, when he was drunk, to another rascal. I crept up to a camp-fire one night and heard the latter relate the tale."

"Where was this?"

"On Dragoon creek."

"Yes—but when?"

"Night before last; while I was seeking to trail you."

She had never released her grasp of his hand; now it tightened.

"Night before last; you—you never knew it before?"

"Certainly not."

"You didn't marry me because I had all this money?"

Shelby laughed lightly.

"Lord, no; I never suspected you had five cents."

"And—and," she went on earnestly, "you—you followed after me, hurt as you was, never knowing about all this—just—because it was me?"

"That's sure right; leastwise until I struck this outfit over on Dragoon creek, and I can't say that I cared a d—n about the money at all; only it gave me a notion of what was up. I'd come just the same; you can bet your life on that."

"Oh, I am glad you said so! And you—you actually don't care for the money?"

"Care for it! Little girl, I ain't given it a thought. I'm here for—you!"

"Me? You care for me?"

"Well, I reckon I must. Long as you're my wife, I'm your husband, ain't I?"

"Yes," she said, rather wearily, "I understand."

Her glance was toward the open door into the other room, and she seemed anxious to change the topic.

"What—what happened out there last night? Do you know? There was fighting, and a shot fired. I am sure I heard a cry, as though some one was hurt, and then after that everything was silent."

"There was a fight," he answered, "and it cost the lives of two men—one white, the other Indian. I found them gripped in each other's arms there on the floor, both dead!"

"Both dead! Two of them out there. How horrible! Who are they?"

"One must have been your guard."

"Yes, the Indian; and the other?"

"A ruffian named Slagin; he was one of the fellows I overheard talking about your case. He must have known that Macklin left you here alone last night, and came to see you for some purpose. He must have encountered the Indian unexpectedly, and the two went into the death grapple."

"And—both were killed?"

"Yes; the red was shot, and the white choked to death. It was a game fight all right. I couldn't pry the fellows apart."

"And they are there now?"

"Not in sight—no; I rolled the bodies back under a bench out of sight, and threw an old blanket over them. Now see here, Olga," he went on earnestly, "we've got to get out of here before anyone comes. I know a place where we can hide, and a trail that leads up from this Hole; but the first thing to do is to get safely away before Macklin gets back. You will go with me?"

"Of course; but do you dare make the attempt by daylight?"

"I don't dare anything else. Every minute we waste here adds to our danger. You have nothing to take with you?"

She shook her head; then suddenly she lifted her eyes again, and looked him directly in the face.

"Tom Shelby," she asked impetuously, "is what you said actually true—that you are just doing this because you have got to, being my husband?"

He stared at her, surprised, and confused by so direct a question.

"Sure; that's what I ought to do, ain't it? But maybe you don't exactly savor what I mean. I—I reckon I've got to thinkin' a lot about you lately; since that galoot took you away I mean; and—and well, I'm d—d glad you are my wife," he broke forth desperately. "That's honest how I feel about it."

The clear eyes watching him smiled, and she stretched out her hand.

"You are sure then it is not just a duty. You really want me to go with you?"

"I ain't much good telling these things, but that's what I want. I reckon there ain't no world big enough to keep me from huntin' you up—God! did you hear that?"

It was the harsh voice of a man singing, the voice of Joe Macklin.

CHAPTER XI.

A Shot in the Dark.

She stood clutching him tightly, both staring in startled fear out through the open door into the dim light of the front room. The whole situation flashed through Shelby's mind—if Macklin was alone he could handle him; yet there was danger that the

man might shoot, and the report or overheard by others. Then, again, he might not be alone. It was better to make sure first, and then act. But how? A possibility occurred to him—it was dark within that second room; he could slip back into the corner, and remain concealed; perhaps the fellow would talk, would reveal his plans; at least, once at his ease, he could be made the victim of surprise. But would Olga play the part necessary?

"Can you act?" he whispered hastily.

"We must fool that fellow."

"How do you mean? What am I to do?"

"Make him talk. Let him think you are all right; above all keep him from suspecting that I am either here, or even alive."

"But how can I?" breathlessly, "with the door unbarred, and those dead men? He will know something has gone wrong."

"Tell him they fought and killed each other, but that first they unbarred the door. You found them there, and dragged the bodies under the bench. You dared not go away; you were afraid—make up some story. Here he is now!"

He left her frightened and dismayed by this sudden emergency, and sprang back into the darkest corner, crouching against the log wall. If she would only induce Macklin to reveal his plans, gain his confidence. He could

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