

COMRADES OF PERIL



RANDALL PARRISH

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CHAPTER XIII—Continued.

The burden grew perceptibly heavier as they toiled upward, and several times they put Macklin down, while they flung themselves on the rocks to regain breath for a fresh effort. The altitude began to affect Olga, her heart beating rapidly from exertion, but she struggled on, determined not to yield. Shelby, noting the whiteness of her face, insisted on frequent periods of rest, so that they must have been more than an hour in attaining the rock platform abutting on the cave. Getting Macklin's helpless body over that last high stone rampart proved to be the most difficult task of all, and was only accomplished by sheer strength. Shelby, hanging downward, with limbs braced against the rock, and slowly drawing the inert body up by the muscles of his arms, assisted to some extent by the efforts of the girl beneath. Once safely behind the cover of the stone parapet, they lay panting with exhaustion.

However this was a bodily weariness soon ministered unto. Shelby, refusing to let Olga attempt any more, drew the wounded man back into the greater security of the cave, and made him as comfortable as possible. Then, although still breathing heavily himself, he hastily gathered together what food remained from his store of the day before, and took this out to share with her. They sat in the open just outside the narrow entrance to the cave, where, by lifting their heads, they could look over the parapet into the deep chasm of the valley. It had begun to snow, in large, swirling flakes, thickly enough to blot out completely the scene beneath, leaving them perched high above its vortex, as though they lived in another world. The white curtain gave them a sense of isolation, of security, which helped immeasurably to restore their courage. They were beyond all probability of pursuit, free from immediate peril; shut off from discovery. All that remained was to wait patiently the return of Pancha with help. The wind kept the platform free from snow, hurling it down into the deep gorge, powdering the trail they had just traveled, and thus completely obliterating any signs of their passage. Yet the gray gloom weighed heavily on the girl.

"How long will it take her?" she asked. "Pancha? Oh, she can hardly get back before late tonight. It is a hard ride, even if she meets with no accident." "You do not think she will attempt to return alone?" "Not if she brings the doctor. I said nothing, for I did not believe it necessary. He will never venture into this Hole without an escort, and a reasonably strong one. I am hoping she encounters some party out scouting which will make a trip to Gerlasche unnecessary. Since the fight out yonder, troops must be searching the Bad Lands for renegade Indians. They would only be too glad to discover some guide who would lead them here."

"But surely they know of this place?" "They know of it; yes, in a way. They possess full information as to its existence. But to get in here is quite another matter. Without a competent guide they might hunt for weeks and, if they did discover the trail through some accident, the game would be gone. Only a sudden dash will ever round that outfit up; they will have to be hit front and rear, and with no small force."

He looked out into the cloud of snow, seeking vainly to penetrate the curtain. "The Lord only knows how many savage devils there are down there now," he said soberly. "I don't think there was much of a bunch when I first came in—mostly white outlaws, cattle thieves and scum of that kind; but since the fight Indians have been coming, a slew of 'em, young bucks who got away. They'll be desperate and crazed. What was that? That noise?" "It came from the cave. Perhaps it was Macklin."

CHAPTER XIV.

The Story of a Plot. It was Macklin, burning with fever, delirious, yet partially conscious once more, uttering sounds which could hardly be distinguished as words, and struggling vainly to lift his body into an upright position. Through the dusk of the place he stared dully into Shelby's face, at first without recognition; then his eyes exhibited terror and he endeavored to wrench away, covering back against the rock wall, as though

he beheld a ghost. The horror he felt gave volume to his voice. "Good God!" he shrieked. "Am I dead? Is this hell?" "No, Kid," and Shelby held him firmly, his tone full of sympathy, "everything is all right. Lie still and don't worry."

"But who the h—l are you? Ain't you Tom Shelby?" he laughed wildly. "Lord, no; he's dead!" "That is where you are wrong, my boy. I'm Shelby all right, but a long ways from being dead."

"You, Shelby? Didn't he get you?" "Well, yes, he got me, but not quite strong enough. I failed to stay got. You lie down, and be still. Here, take a drink of this."

The fellow did as he was ordered, his hands shaking so that Shelby had to hold the bottle to his lips. Even as he drank greedily, his eyes never deserted the other's face; until the girl, creeping silently up behind, came also into his range of vision. Her presence seemed to give him a sense of reality.

"Say, this is too much for me," he said huskily, but lying back quiet. "The two of yer here. Just what's happened anyhow? It was Pancha, wasn't it, who hauled me out of that cabin. Well, where's Pancha? an' what the h—l is this place I'm in?" "Let me tell him, Tom," broke in Olga, pressing forward, and lifting his head into her lap. "He will believe me, and he is afraid of you yet. You can hear what I say, Mr. Macklin!"

He nodded, gasping, his eyes on her face. "Then listen closely. It will only take a moment to explain. You were shot—"

"Yes, yer," he stuttered. "I know; she did it." "Oh, you saw, then, who fired. It was all a mistake, and she was so sorry. The bullet was meant for Indian Joe Laud, but you stepped in the way."

"Pancha tried to kill Laud?" "Yes; it was all on account of me. You—you carried me off because you believed I had the right to some money, didn't you?"

His eyes brightened, but still with the dull glow of fever in them. "Sure; you got it comin', too. But what's that got to do with Joe Laud? He wasn't noway hooked up on this game."

"Oh, yes, he was. I'll explain all that. You told something to a man named Matt Hanley once."

"Me! maybe I did, when we was drunk together over at Gerlasche. I'd just found out 'bout it then. But he never remembered—Hanley didn't."

"Yes, he did, and he kept watch on you ever since; he and a fellow, Slagin. They were somewhere up the valley the night you brought me in here, and they knew what was up. They followed, meaning to get you put out of the way somehow, so they could get hold of me themselves. I guess they didn't have brains enough to make it. I don't know exactly what happened, but after Slagin got killed—"

"H—I was that what that guy came to the cabin for?" "We suppose so; at least that was what caused Hanley to tell the story to Indian Joe Laud, and get him to take a hand. They tried to get the Mexican, Pancha's brother, to help them, but something brought on a quarrel, and Laud killed him. An Indian boy told Pancha, and she went crazy over you both. That was what brought her to the cabin."

"An' that ol' devil come there to get me, did he?" "Yes, but first he tried to learn all he could; things Hanley didn't know, so he could make the job worth while. Then Pancha tried to shoot him, and got you."

He struggled to speak. "Say, lift me up a little more. That's it; something seems to fill up in my throat. You sure she didn't hear nothin' I said there—'bout leavin' her, an' marryin' you?"

"I know she didn't." "Lord, I'm sure glad o' that. I sorter thought that was what she plugged me for; that would be the Mex of it; they're h—I on that sort of thing. I like her, she's a good scout. Why ain't she here? Where is she now?"

"She has gone for a doctor; went down into the Hole to get a horse to ride."

"Where is she goin'?" "Gerlasche; there's an army surgeon there."

"Yes, I know," wearily, "an' where you got me?" "In a small cave part way up the bluff."

"Sure, Eagle's cave. Pancha took me up yere once, an' showed it to me. An' you two lugged me all that ways?" "Yes."

ain't done nuthin' to make either one of yer decent ter me. I thought Shelby here was deader'n a doornail, an' I reckon you know what I was aimin' ter do with you. There ain't no use beatin' about the bush. So now, what'd yer do it for?" Shelby's hand reached out and touched that of his wife. "Well, Kid, I'll tell you," he said frankly, "we did it for Pancha."

Macklin grinned grimly, exposing his teeth. "I reckoned that was 'bout the truth," he said recklessly. "But I'll tell yer one thing—Pancha's never goin' ter get back before I slide out. I got what's comin' to me, an' there ain't no doc ever goin' ter hold me back from goin'—that's straight, ol' man."

"I'm not so sure, Kid."

"Well, I am. Lord, a man generally knows when he's got his dose. I reckon; an' it ain't goin' ter do nobody no good fer me ter keep my lips shut. Say, lady, you let your man put his shoulder back o' me, an' hoist me up higher. There, now maybe I can get this thing off my chest."

"You want to explain something?" "Sure; didn't I tell you. I ain't goin' ter leave this game wide open for Indian Joe to cash in on. You been decent to me, an' I'll play white as I can."

He spoke slow, hesitatingly, as though his mind wandered, stopping every moment or two for breath. Once he coughed sharply, an expression of pain on his face, but he went grimly on.

"I'd been on considerable of a bat down there, an' was soberin' up. You know the Custer house?"

"Yes; the old hotel."

"Well, it ain't no palace; you could throw a cat through them partitions in places; an' I woke up to hear a couple of guys talkin' in the next room. First I didn't care what they was sayin', an' then I began to take an interest. Seems one of 'em was a lawyer from Kansas City, or Omaha; an' the other gazoob was a rich guy from down East, who was huntin' a niece who had disappeared out in this country—the name was Churchill—"

"Is your name Churchill?" "Mine! Not in a thousand years. That was all a lie. Well, as near as I could get hold of the story, this yer girl's mother was nursin' in Richmond durin' the war, an' fell in love with a Yank an' married him. She never know'd she was no helress, an' didn't dare go home 'cause she'd married a Yank. Her people didn't get on to it for a long while, an' then, I reckon, they didn't get the story straight. Maybe they didn't try very hard—anyhow she'd dropped plum outer sight. Later they found out somehow that she'd married a regular army officer, named Carlyn, an' gone West with him. I dunno just what delayed 'em after that, but afore they got these folks located the woman died, leavin' a little girl, an' her husband—her was a colonel by that time—put her into a Catholic school. Meanwhile, the colonel got on to some extent, an' began to make inquiries down East; but, before he accomplished much, he got mixed up one night in a street fight down in Sheridan, an' would have been killed if it hadn't been for a sergeant he had with him named Calkins. He got him home alive, but he croaked later. That left the kid alone at school, but these folks didn't know where."

"It was in St. Louis."

"Sure, they found out later, but by that time she'd gone. This yer old sergeant, Calkins, had come with a

power of attorney, or something, an' got her out. That's where I first began to get real interested—after this fellow Calkins got into the game. I'll tell yer why I got it into my nut that maybe I'd hit a hot trail, where, if it panned out all right, there might be some boodle in it for me. I run steers for the XL about four months once, and we used to drive into Ponca to blow ourselves. I knowed there was an ol' fellow hangin' 'round there, in McCarthy's place mostly, a sorter tinner sport, they called Ol' Dad Calkins; an' I'd heard somewhere he had a girl livin' with him 'bout seventeen, or so. Somehow I got to mullin' over this, an' finally decided to see what kind of a lead I'd struck. It looked like easy money, if she was the girl, an' didn't know yet what was up."

"You went to Ponca for that purpose?" "Just prospectin' like. Them other two guys went off somewhere else, an' so I had easy sailin'. I couldn't get next the girl at all. I reckon she never left the shack; but I got a look at her, an' it wasn't no trouble to pick up an acquaintance with Ol' Dad. He was tight-mouthed, though, drunk or sober, an' finally I had to throw the fear of God into him to make him spill."

"You mean you threatened him?" "Yep! I never supposed it would shake the guts out of him the way it did, though. The old fool went plum batty when I told him what I knowed. He thought I was after him—a detective, or something—an' he just crumbled up, without makin' no fight at all. I reckon he'd been hidin' her so long, he just naturally got it into his nut he was guilty of some crime. Enyhow, the next thing I knowed, he'd gone out back of the dance hall an' shot himself."

He stopped, shaken by a paroxysm of coughing. Shelby held him tightly, and finally this passed away, the man resting weakly on his arms, but with mind evidently wandering.

"I used to talk all right," he whispered hoarsely, gasping for breath, "an' I could warble some, too. Say, did you ever hear me sing?"

"Yes, Kid, I've heard you."

"Sure, you did. Everybody said I had a wonderful voice. Trouble with me is I never ain't had no show. If I could'er got started in opera, I'd never been out yere getting plugged by no Mex woman. It's hell, ain't it? But, say; where was I, enyhow?"

"You just explained why Calkins killed himself."

"Oh, yes, that's it. Well, o' course I felt bad about the ol' man, but it wasn't no fault o' mine. Then it seemed like his shufflin' off put the cards right in my hands. It sure proved she was the girl an' now she was left plum alone, it didn't look no awful hard job for me to shine up an' marry her, before anybody else got wise. Say, I had it all figured out when you an' Dan McCarthy horned in on that fool stunt of yours, an' knocked my game jolley-west. Then I cottoned onto that job with you. I didn't aim to stay out there punchin' steers, but just thought I'd see how things turned out. I sorter figured it this way—the girl she didn't care nothin' for you; she just married yer ter get out er there, an' hav' some place ter live; an' maybe, out there on the Cottonwood, I could make love to her, an' some day we'd skip out together. That's as far as I went at first, an' goin' out over them prairies, I got it into my head that she didn't have no objection to a little flirtation. I was feelin' quite foxy about it when we got to the ranch."

The lashes drooped low over Olga's eyes, and her cheeks burned.

"Then I reckon the devil must er took charge o' the game, fer the minute I was left alone out there I run into a bunch o' Indian cattle thieves. I knew two of 'em for they were out of the Hole here, an' all at once, it struck me I might just as well have the job over with. I took it she didn't care about you, an' that a little strong arm stuff would pan out all right. It works with most women. I didn't have no notion then of bumping you off, Shelby, but the buck who took that job cracked you good an' hard. Well, that makes the whole story, don't it?"

He shut his eyes, his head falling back in complete exhaustion. Only his labored breathing proved that Macklin still lived. Olga held him motionless in her lap, bending over and softly smoothing back his hair with one hand. Shelby left them there, creeping out through the entrance onto the rock platform without.

It had ceased snowing, but enough had fallen to cover the bluff with a white mantle, obliterating the trail, and leaving the valley below covered. The sky arched over all dull and gray. Shelby hung out over the ledge, watchfully studying the view outspread beneath. It was a peaceful scene enough, with scarcely a moving figure visible. He could hardly realize that this was the haunt of outlaws, where, only a few hours before he had been desperately struggling for life. The daylight revealed no sign of disorder or pursuit, the only reminder of what had occurred being the blackened ruins of the burned cabin almost directly below. Yet this was deserted and the snow about appeared untrampled. The sight gave him hope, yet he felt strangely depressed and unnerved. The remembrance of the scene just witnessed could not be cast off. He had no reason to question the truth of that occasion and it had impressed him strongly. Macklin was evidently dying; was already beyond help. Any breath might prove to be his last, and it was even then too late for any doctor to save him. But would Pancha return in time to assist them? Would she bring sufficient help with her? In spite of the ominous quiet below he felt no faith that Indian Joe would so easily abandon their trail. He was not that kind. Something would assuredly arouse his suspicion that they had not perished in the flames. Indeed, that could be easily ascertained by a search of the debris, and the perturbed ranchman was far from being satisfied that Pancha alone knew of this secret trail. Why, Macklin stated he had himself been up as far as the cave; and it was scarcely likely it had been entirely overlooked so long by these others—the Indians certainly must have scoured every inch of these bluffs at one time or another. Something, for the moment, may have drawn aside suspicions of his escape, yet those devils would

track him down. The conviction haunted him.

He drew back just in time. There was the sharp crack of a rifle; a bullet chipped the outer edge of the parapet, and a little puff of smoke curled up away to the left and vanished against the leaden sky. Shelby fell flat on his face and crept backward, seeking instinctively the protection of an overhanging rock, his eyes instantly marking that vague spiral of smoke. He had guessed right. Indian cunning had already learned the truth and had found means of approach unknown even to the Mexican girl. Somewhere in the security of those rocks, keen eyes were watching every movement, savagely eager to end all by some well-directed shot. Yet, with the chug of the bullet, all depression left him. He knew now what he had to face; that narrow platform must be defended, for hours probably, revolvers pitted against rifles; himself alone against an unknown number of assailants. It

meant caution as well as bravery, the quick wit of a white man outgeneraling savage treachery. Even as he rolled over, so as to cautiously lift his head, the "45" was jerked from its holster and rested ready in his hand. He heard Olga at the cave entrance. "Stay back!" he ordered sternly. "Don't venture out here yet."

"But what is it? I heard a shot."

"Yes; they have found us all right. Hand me another gun; I may need it. Did Macklin have one?"

"Yes; it is still at his belt."

"Get it, and with whatever cartridges he may have. This is going to be a fight at short range. How is the fellow?"

"I—I am sure he must be dying. Tom," she said breathlessly. "He scarcely breathes any more. Isn't there any way I can help?"

"Only by doing what I asked; get his gun. This is bound to be some fight. I don't know how many are out there; the bird who shot at me is behind that rock yonder; he's Indian all right; you can glimpse his scalplock just over the edge. If he would only shove his nut up about half an inch more I'd show him that a '45' ain't such a bad weapon, when you know how to use it."

He advanced, his revolver barrel across the top, and lay motionless, sighting along the smooth steel.

"Now, boy, you do that again. Can't make out exactly where I have gone, can you? Well, you are going to find out in about a minute." His grip tightened. "Ah! there you are!"

His finger pressed the trigger, sending forth a spurt of flame. A brawny red arm was flung up, the hand gripping at the rock for support; then a rifle went crashing down into the chasm and the next instant an Indian whirled head downward, the body striking a narrow ledge and bouncing off into space. Three shots answered the crack of the revolver, so swiftly as to seem echoes, the bullets striking the solid rock wall, one, crushed out of all shape, dropping directly in front of Olga, crouching in the entrance. Shelby laughed, but with eyes stern and watchful.

"Three more located," he said pleasantly. "Seem to have us pretty well trapped. I'd like to know how they got up here without using the trail. I thought you were goin' after that extra gun?"

"I am, Tom, but I can't stay in there. I want to be out here with you."

"Why I ain't in a mite o' danger, little girl. Those reds can't shoot through this rock. All I got to do is lie here quiet an' take 'em on the jump."

"But suppose they rush in on you?" "It don't hardly look reasonable. Still, o' course, they might try 'it, if they got a white leader. Indians never would themselves; it's liable to cost too heavy."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

"King's Tobacco Pipe."

This is a popular nickname for a peculiarly shaped kiln or furnace in the northeast corner of the tobacco warehouse belonging to the London docks. Here contraband goods, such as tobacco, cigars and tea, which had been smuggled in, were burned. Seized and unclaimed goods are now sold at periodical sales, or distributed among public institutions, but damaged and worthless goods are still burned.

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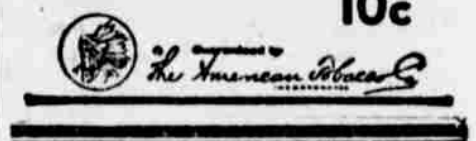
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