

The Last Shot

FREDERICK PALMER

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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. He meditates on war, and speculates on the comparative ages of himself and Marta, who is visiting in the Gray capital. Westerling calls on Marta. She tells him of her teaching children the follies of war and martial patriotism, begs him to prevent war while he is chief of staff, and predicts that if he makes war against the Browns he will not win. On the march with the 53d of the Browns Private Stransky, anarchist, decries war and played-out patriotism and is placed under arrest. Colonel Lanstron overhearing, begs him off. Lanstron calls on Marta at her home. He talks with Feller, the gardener. Marta tells Lanstron that she believes Feller to be a spy. Lanstron confesses it is true. Lanstron shows Marta a telephone which Feller has concealed in a secret passage under the tower for use to benefit the Browns in war emergencies. Lanstron declares his love for Marta. Westerling and the Gray premier plan to use a trivial international affair to foment warlike patriotism in army and people and strike before declaring war. Partow, Brown chief of staff, and Lanstron, made vice, discuss the trouble, and the Brown defense. Partow reveals his plans to Lanstron. The Gray army crosses the border line and attacks. The Browns check them. Artillery, infantry, aeroplanes and dirigibles engage. Stransky, rising to make the anarchist speech of his life, draws the Gray artillery fire. Nicked by a shrapnel splinter, he goes berserk and fights "a man." Marta has her first glimpse of war in its modern, cold, scientific, murderous brutality.

CHAPTER X—Continued.

This was the very thing to whip her thoughts back from the knoll. He was thunderstruck at the transformation: hot color in her cheeks, eyes aflame, lips curving around a whirlwind of words.

"You name the very reason why I wish to stay. Why do you want to save the women? Why shouldn't they bear their share? Why don't you want them to see men mowed down? Is it because you are ashamed of your profession? Why, I ask?"

The problem of dealing with an angry woman breaking a shell fire of questions over his head had not been ready solved in the captain's curriculum like other professional problems, or was it mentioned in the official instructions about the defenses of the Galland house. He aimed to smile soothingly in the helplessness of man to presence of feminine fury.

"It is an old custom," he was saying, but she had turned away.

"Lenny's plan—mow them down! mow them down! mow them down!" she went on, more to herself than to him.

Was there nothing for her to do? Could she only look on in a fever of restlessness while action roared around her? The sight of several automobile ambulances in the road at the foot of the garden stilled the throbs of distraction in her temples with an answer. The wounded! They were already coming in from the field. She hurried down the terrace steps. The major surgeon in charge, surprised to find any woman in the vicinity, was about to tell her so automatically; then, in view of her intensity, he waited for her to speak.

"You will let us do something for them?" Marta asked. "We will make them some hot soup."

He was immediately businesslike. No less than Dellarme or Fracasse or Lanstron or Westerling, he had been preparing throughout his professional career for this hour. The detail of caring for the men who were down had been worked out no less systematically than that of wounding them.

"Thank you, no! We don't want to waste time," he replied. "We must get them away with all speed so that the ambulances may return promptly. It's only a fifteen-minute run to the hospital, where every comfort and appliance are ready and where they will be given the right things to eat."

"Then we will give them some wine!" Marta persisted.

"Not if we can prevent it! Not to start hemorrhages! The field doctors have brandy for use when advisable, and there is brandy in all the ambulances."

Clearly, volunteer service was not wanted. There was no room at the immediate front for Florence Nightingales in the modern machine of war.

"Then water?"

The major surgeon aimed to be patient to an earnest, attractive young woman.

"We have sterilized water—we have everything," he explained. "If we hadn't at this early stage I ought to be serving an apprenticeship in a village apothecary shop. Anything that means confusion, delay, unnecessary excitement is bad and unmerciful."

Marta was not yet at the end of her resources. The recollection of the dying private who had asked her mother for a rose in the last war flashed into mind.

"You haven't any flowers! They won't do any harm, even if they aren't sterilized. The wounded like flowers, don't they? Don't you like flowers? Look! We've millions!"

"Yes, I do. They do. A good idea. Bring all the flowers you want to."

The major surgeon's smile to Marta was not altogether on account of her

suggestion. "It ought to help anybody who was ever wounded anywhere in the world to have you give him a flower!" he was thinking.

She ran for an armful of blossoms and was back before the arrival of the first wounded man who preceded the stretchers on foot. He was holding up a hand bound in a white first-aid bandage which had a red spot in the center. Those hit in hand or arm, if the surgeon's glance justified it, were sent on up the road to a point a mile distant, where transportation in requisitioned vehicles was provided. These men were triumphant in their cheerfulness. They were alive; they had done their duty, and they had the proof of it in the coming souvenirs of scars.

Some of the forms on stretchers had peaceful faces in unconsciousness of their condition. Others had a look of wonder, of pain, of apprehension in their consciousness that death might be near. The single word "Shrapnel!" by a hospital-corpse corporal told the story of crushed or lacerated features, in explanation of a white cloth covering a head with body uninjured.

Many of the wounded looked at Marta even more than at the flowers. It was good to see the face of a woman, her eyes limpid with sympathy, and it was not what she said but the way she spoke that brought smiles in response to hers. For she was no solemn ministering angel, but high-spirited, cheery, of the sort that the major surgeon would have chosen to distribute flowers to the men. Every remark of the victims of war made its distinct and indelible impression on the gelatin of her mind.

"I like my blue aster better than that yellow weed of yours, Tom!"

"You didn't know Ed Schmidt got it? Yes, he was right next to me in the line."

"Say, did you notice Dellarme's smile? It was wonderful."

"And old Bert Stransky! I heard him whistling the wedding march as he fired."

"Miss, I'll keep this flower forever!"

"They say Billy Lister will live—his cheek was shot away!"

"Once we got going I didn't mind. It seemed like as if I'd been fighting for years!"

"Hole no bigger than a lead-pencil. I'll be back in a week!"

"Yes; don't these little bullets make neat little holes?"

"We certainly gave them a surprise when they came up the hill! I wonder if we missed the fellow that jumped into the shell crater!"

"Our company got it worst!"

"Not any worse than ours, I'll wager!"

"Oh—oh—can't you go easier? Oh-h-h—the groan ending in a clenching of the teeth."

"Hello, Jake! You here, too, and going in my automobile? And we've both got lower berths!"

"Sh-h! That poor chap's dying!"

Worst of all to Marta was the case of a shrapnel fracture of the cranium.



"Why Do You Want to Save the Women?"

with the resulting delirium, in which the sufferer's incoherence included memories of childhood scenes, moments on the firing-line, calls for his mother, and prayers to be put out of misery. A prod of the hypodermic from the major surgeon, and "On the operating table in fifteen minutes" was the answer to Marta's question if the poor fellow would live.

Until dark, in groups, at intervals, and again singly, the wounded were coming in from a brigade front in the region where the rifles were crackling and the shrapnel clouds were hanging prettily over the hills; and stretchers were being slipped into place in the

ambulances, while Marta kept at her post.

"We shan't have much more to do at this station," said the major surgeon when a plodding section of infantry in retreat arrived.

CHAPTER XI.

At the Galland House.

Every unit engrossed in his own work! Every man taught how a weak link may break a chain and realizing himself as a link and only a link! The captain of engineers forgot Marta's existence as an error of his subordinates caught his eye, and he went to caution the axmen to cut closer to the ground, as stumps gave cover for riflemen. For the time being he had no more interest in the knoll than in the wreckage of the dirigibles which were down and out of the fight.

After all, the knoll was only a single point on the vast staff map—only one of many points of a struggle whose progress was bulletined through the sittings of regimental, brigade, division and corps headquarters in not results to the staff. Partow and Lanstron overlooked all. Their knowledge made the vast map live under their eyes. But our concern is with the story of two regiments, and particularly of two companies, and that is story enough. If you would grasp the whole, multiply the conflict on the knoll by ten thousand.

There had been the engrossment of transcendent emotion in repelling the charge. What followed was like some grim and passionless trance with triggers ticking off the slow-passing minutes. Dellarme aimed to keep down the fusillade from Fracasse's trench and yet not to neglect the fair targets of the reserves advancing by rushes to the support of the 128th. Reinforced, the gray streak at the bottom of the slope poured in a heavier fire. Above the steady crackle of bullets sent and the whistle of bullets received rose the cry of "Doctor! Doctor!" which meant each time that another Brown rifle had been silenced. The litter bearers, hard pressed to remove the wounded, left the dead. Already death was a familiar sight—an article of exchange in which Dellarme's men dealt freely. The man at Stransky's side had been killed outright. He lay face down on his rifle stock. His cap had fallen off. Stransky put it back on the man's head, and the example was followed in other cases. It was a good idea to keep up a show of a full line of caps to face enemy.

Suddenly, as by command, the fire from the base of the knoll ceased altogether. Dellarme understood at once what this meant—the next step in the course of a systematic, irresistible approach by superior numbers. It was to allow the ground scouts to advance. Individual gray spots detaching themselves from the gray streak began to crawl upward in search of dead spaces where the contour of the ground would furnish some protection from the blaze of bullets from the crest.

"Over their heads! Don't try to hit them!" Dellarme passed the word.

"That's it! Spare one to get a dozen!" said Stransky, grinning in ready comprehension. He seemed to be grinning every time that Dellarme looked in that direction. He was plainly enjoying himself. His restless nature had found sport to its taste.

The creeping scouts must have signaled back good news, for groups began crawling slowly after them.

"Over their heads! Encourage them!" Dellarme commanded.

After they had advanced two or three hundred yards they stopped, shoulders and hands exposed in silhouette, and began to work feverishly with their spades.

"Oh, beautiful!" cried Stransky. "That baby captain of ours has some brains, after all! We'll get them now and we'll get them when they run!"

But they did not run. Unflinchingly they took their punishment while they turned over the protecting sod in the midst of their own dead and wounded. In a few minutes they had dropped spades for rifles, and other sections either crawled or ran forward precipitately and fell to the task of joining the isolated beginnings into a single trench.

Again Dellarme looked toward regimental headquarters, his fixed, cheery smile not wholly masking the appeal in his eyes. The Grays had only two or three hundred yards to go when they should make their next charge in order to reach the crest. But his men had fifteen hundred to go in the valley before they were out of range. After their brave resistance facing the enemy they would receive a hail of bullets in their backs. This was the time to withdraw if there were to be assurance of a safe retreat. But there was no signal. Until there was, he must remain.

The trench grew; the day wore on. Two rifles to one were now playing against his devoted company, which had had neither food nor drink since early morning. As he scanned his thinning line he saw a look of bloodlessness and hopelessness gathering on the set faces of which he had grown so fond during this ordeal. Some of the men were crouching too much for effective aim.

"See that you fire low! Keep your heads up!" he called. "For your homes, your country and your God! Pass the word along!"

Parched throat after parched throat repeated the message hoarsely and leaden shoulders raised a trifle and dust-matted eyelashes narrowed sharply on the sights.

"For the man in us!" growled Stransky. "For the favor of nature at birth that gave us the right to wear trou-

sers instead of skirts! For the joy of hell, give them hell!"

"For our homes! For the man in us!" they repeated, swallowing the words as if they had the taste of a stimulant.

But Dellarme knew that it would not take much to precipitate a break. He himself felt that he had been on that knoll half a lifetime. He looked at his watch and it was five o'clock. For seven hours they had held on. The Grays' trench was complete the breadth of the slope; more reserves were coming up. The brigade commander of the Grays was going to make sure that the next charge succeeded.

At last Dellarme's glance toward regimental headquarters showed the flag that was the signal for withdrawal. Could he accomplish it? The first lieutenant, with a shattered arm, had gone on a litter. The old sergeant was dead, a victim of the colonial wars. Used to fighting savage enemies, he had been too eager in exposing himself to a civilized foe. He had been shot through the throat.

"Men of the first section," Dellarme called, "you will slip out of line with the greatest care not to let the enemy know that you are going!"

"Going—going! Careful! Men of the first section going!" the parched throats repeated in a thrilling whisper.

"Those who remain keep increasing their fire!" called Dellarme again. "Cover the whole breadth of the trench!"

Every fourth man wormed himself backward on his stomach until he was below the sky-line, when his stiffened limbs brought him to his feet and he started on a dead run down into the valley and toward a cut behind another knoll across the road from the Galland house. The others followed at intervals.

Once across a road and up three series of steps of the other garden terrace, behind a breastwork of sandbags, the company rested. Most of them had fallen asleep on the ground after finishing their rations, logs of men in animal exhaustion. Some of those awake were too weary to give to each other more than a nod and smile. They had witnessed too much horror that day to talk about it. But Stransky foraged.

Marta, coming out on the veranda, saw him.

"You are tired! You are hungry!" she said with urgent gentleness. "Come in!"

He followed her into the house and dropped on a leather chair before a shining table in a room paneled with oak, wondering at her and at himself. No woman of Marta's world had ever spoken in that way to him. But it was good to sit down. Then a maid with a sad, winsome face and tender eyes brought him wine and bread and cold meat and jam. He gulped down a glassful of wine; he ate with great mouthfuls in the ravenous call of healthy, exhausted tissues, while the maid stood by to cut more bread.

"When it comes to eating after fighting—"

He looked up when the first pangs of hunger were assuaged. Enormous, broad-shouldered, physical, his cheeks flushed with wine, his eyes opened wide and brilliant with the fire that was in his nature—eyes that spoke the red business of anarchy and war.

"Say, but you're pretty!"

Springing up, he caught her hand and made to kiss her in the brushness of impulse. Minna struck him a stinging blow in the face. He received it as a mastiff would receive a bite from a pup, and she stood her ground, her eyes challenging his fearlessly.

"So you are like that!" he said thoughtfully. "It was a good one, and you meant it, too."

"Decidedly!" she answered. "There's more where that came from!"

Then little Clarissa Eileen entered and pressed against her mother's skirts, subjecting Stransky to childhood's scrutiny. He waved a finger at her and grinned and drew his eyes together in a squint at the bridge of his nose, making a funny face that brought a laugh.

"Your child?" Stransky asked Minna.

"Yes."

"Where's her father? Away fighting?"

"I don't know where he is!"

"Oh!" he mused. "Was that blow for him at the same time as for me?" he pursued thoughtfully.

"Yes, for all of your kind."

"M-m-m!" came from between his lips as he rose. "Would you mind holding out your hand?" he asked with a gentleness singularly out of keeping with his rough aspect.

"Why?" she demanded.

"I've never studied any books of etiquette of polite society, and I am a poor sort at making speeches, anyhow. But I want to kiss a good woman's hand by way of apology. I never kissed one in my life, but I'm getting a lot of new experiences today. Will you?"

She held out her hand at arm's length and flushed slightly as he pressed his lips to it.

"You certainly do cut thick slices," he said smiling. "And you certainly are pretty," he added, passing out of the door as jauntily as if he were ready for another fight and just in time to see the colonel's of the regiment come around the house. He stood at the salute, half proudly, half defiantly, but in nowise humbly.

"Well, Major Dellarme!" was the colonel's greeting of the company commander.

"Major?" exclaimed Dellarme.

"Yes. Partow has the power. Four of the aviators have iron crosses already and promotion, too; and you are a major. Company G got into a mess and the whole regiment would

have been in one unless you held on. So I let you stay. It all came out right, as Lanstron planned—right as far. But your losses have been heavy and here you are in the thick of it again. Your company may change places with Company E, which has had a relatively easy time."

"No, sir; we would prefer to stay," Dellarme answered quietly.

"Good! Then you will take this battalion and I'll transfer Grollier to Alvery's. Bad loss, Alvery—shrapnel. The artillery has been doing ugly work, but that is all in favor of the defensive. If we can hold them on this line till tomorrow noon, it's all we want for the present," he concluded.

"We'll hold them! Don't worry!" put in Stransky.

If a private had spoken to a colonel in this fashion at drill, without being spoken to, it would have been a glaring breach of military etiquette. Now that they were at war it was different. Real comradeship between officer and man begins with war.

"We shall, eh?" chuckled the colonel. "You look big enough to hold anything, young man! Here! Isn't this the fellow that Lanstron got off?"

"Yes, sir," answered Dellarme.

"Well, was Lanstron right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wonderful man, Lanstron!"

"He knows just a little too much!" Stransky growled.

As Fracasse's men rose from their trench for the final charge and found that the enemy had gone, an officer



"Want to Kiss a Good Woman's Hand by Way of Apology."

of the brigade staff brought instructions to the colonel.

"The batteries are going to emplace here for your support in the morning. You will move as soon as your men have eaten and occupy positions B-31 to B-35. That gives you a narrow front for one battalion, with two battalions in reserve to drive home your attack. The chief of staff himself desires that we take the Galland house before noon. The enemy must not have the encouragement of any successes."

"So easy for Westerling to say," thought the colonel; while aloud he acknowledged the message with proper spirit.

Before the order to move was given the news of it passed from lip to lip among the men in tired whispers. Since dawn they had lived through the impressions of a whole war, and they had won. With victory they had not thought of the future, only of their hunger. After the nightmare of the charge, after hearing death whispering for hours intimately in their ears, they were too weary and too far thrown out of the adjustments of any natural habits of thought and feeling to realize the horror of eating their dinners in the company of the dead. Now they were to go through another hell, but many of them in their exhaustion were chiefly concerned as to whether or not they should get any sleep that night.

The satire of war makes the valet's son a hero; the chance of war kills the day-laborer's son live; the sport of war gives the latent forces of a Stransky full play; the glory of war brings Dellarme quick promotion; the glamour and the spectacular folly of war turn the bolts of the lightnings which man has mastered against man. Perhaps the savage who learned that he could start a flame by rubbing two dry sticks together may have set fire to the virgin forest and wild grass in order to destroy an enemy—and naturally with disastrous results to himself if he mistook the direction of the wind.

Marta Galland's thoughts at dusk when she returned up the steps to the house were of the wreckage the hot whirlwind of war left. She was seeing fathers staring and mothers weeping. Her experience with the wounded drawing deep on the wells of sympathy, heightened her loathing of war and of all who planned and ordered it and led its legions. She had been engaged since dark in completing the work of moving valuable articles from the front to the rear rooms of the house, which had been begun early in the day by Minna and the coachman.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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Their Places.

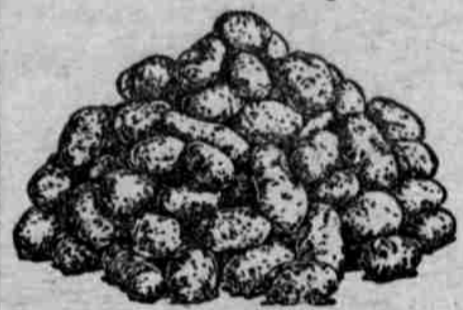
"Where did you go in the theater, Mrs. Comeup?"

"We sat in the mezzotint boxes, but the girls preferred seats in the parakeet."

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The Bore.

"I hate to ask Jinks about his health."

"Why?"

"He promptly tells me all about it."

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