The Last Shot

By
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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 of the Browns injured by a fall in his aeroplane. Ten years later. Westerling, nominal vice but real chief of staff, re-enforces South La Tir and meditates on war. Marta tells him of her teaching children the follies of war and martial patriotism, and begs him to prevent war while he is chief of staff. Lanstron calls on Marta at her home. She tells Lanstron that she believes Feller, the gardener, to be a spy. Lanstron confesses it is true and shows her 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 Grays prepare plans to use a trivial international affair to foment warlike patriotism and strike before declaring war. Partow, Brown chief of staff, reveals his plans to Lanstron, made vice chief. The Gray army crosses the border line and attacks. The Browns check them. Artillery, infantry, aeroplanes and dirigibles engage. Marta has her first glimpse of war in its modern, cold, scientific, murderous brutality. The Browns fall back to the Galland house. Marta sees a night attack. The Grays attack in force. Feller leaves his secret telephone and goes back to his guns. Hand to hand fighting. The Browns fall back again. Marta asks Lanstron over the phone to appeal to Partow to stop the fighting. Vandalism in the Galland house. Westerling and his staff occupy the Galland house and he begins to woo Marta, who apparently throws her fortunes with the Grays and offers valuable information. She calls up Lanstron on the secret telephone and plans to give Westerling information that will trap the Gray army. Westerling forms his plan of attack upon what he learns from her. The Grays take Bordy. Through Marta Westerling is led to concentrate his attack on the main line at Engadir. A leak of information is suspected. Bouchard is relieved as chief intelligence officer and in going accuses Marta. Westerling thinks him crazy. The Grays take the apron of Engadir. Partow dies suddenly and Lanstron succeeds him.

CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

Far up on a peak among the birds and aeroplanes, in a roofed, shell-proof chamber, with a telephone orderly at his side, a powerful pair of field-glasses and range-finders at his elbow, and a telescope before his eye, Gustave Feller, one time gardener and now acting colonel of artillery, watched the burst of shells over the enemy's lines. While other men had grown lean on war, he had taken on enough flesh to fill out

Watched the Bursting of Shells Over the Enemy's Lines.

the wrinkles around his eyes that shone with an artist's enjoyment of his work. Down under cover of the ridge were his guns, the keys of the instrument that he played by calls over the wire. Their barking was a symphony to his ears; errors of orchestration were errors in aim. He talked as he watched, his lively features reflective of his impressions.

"Oh, pretty! Right into their tummies! Right in the nose! La, la, la! But that's off—and so's that! Tell Battery C they're fifty yards over. Oh, beady-eyed gods and shiny little fishes—two smacks in the same spot! Humph! Tell Battery C that the trouble with that gun is worn rifling; that's why it's going short. Elevate it for another hundred yards—but it ought not to wear out so soon. I'd like to kick the maker or the inspector. The fellows in B 21 will accuse us of inattention. It's time to drop a shell on them to show we're perfectly impartial in our favors. La, la, la! Oh, what a pretty smack! Congratulations!"

B 21 was the position of Fracasse's company and the pretty smack the one that broke one man's arm and crushed another's head.

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The "God with us!" song was singularly suited to the great, bull voice of its composer, born to the red and become Captain Stransky in the red business of war. It was he who led the thunder of its verses.

"I certainly like that song," he said. Well he might. It had made him famous throughout the nation. "There's Jehovah and brimstone in it. Now we'll have our own."

"But we're always losing positions!" complained one of the men. "Little by little they are getting possession."

"They say the offensive always wins," said another.

"Five against three! They count on numbers," said Lieutenant Tom Fragini.

"There you go, Tom! Any other pessimists or anarchists want to be heard?" called out Stransky. "Just how long, at the present rate, will it take them to get the whole range? There's a limit to the number of even five millions."

Then the telephone in the redoubt brought some news. The staff begged to inform the army that the enemy's casualties in the last three days had been two hundred thousand! Immediately everybody was talking at once in Stransky's parliament, as he sometimes called that company of which he was, in the final analysis, unlimited monarch.

"How do they know?"

"Do you think it's fake?"

"That sums up to pretty near a million!"

"My God! Think of it—a million!"

"We're whittling them down!"

"It doesn't make any difference whether Partow or Lanstron is chief of staff!"

"They're paying!"

"Paying for our fellows that they've killed! Paying for being in the wrong!"

Stransky, his eyes drawing inward in their characteristic slant, was well pleased with his company, and the scattered exclamatory badinage kept on until it was interrupted by the arrival of the mail. Partow and Lanstron, understanding their machine as human in its elements, had chosen that the army should hear from home.

"How's this!" exclaimed one man, reading from a newspaper. "They're going to put up a statue of Partow in the capital! It's to show him as he died, dropped forward on the map, and in front of his desk a field of bayonets. On one face of the base will be his name. Two of the other faces will have 'God with us!' and 'Not for theirs, but for ours!' The legend on the fourth face the war is to decide."

"Victory! Victory!" cried those who had listened to the announcement.

Stransky was thinking that they had to do more than hold the Grays. Before he should see his girl they had to take back the lost territory. He carried two pictures of Minna in his mind: one when she had struck him in the face as he tried to kiss her and the other as he said good-by at the kitchen door. There was not much encouragement in either.

"But when she gets better acquainted with me there's no telling!" he kept thinking. "I was fighting out of cussedness at first. Now I'm fighting for her and to keep what is ours!"

CHAPTER XIX.

The Ram.

In the closet off the Galland library, where the long-distance telephone was installed, Westerling was talking with the premier in the Gray capital.

"Your total casualties are eight hundred thousand. That is terrific, Westerling!" the premier was saying.

"Only two hundred thousand of those are dead!" replied Westerling. "Many with only slight wounds are already returning to the front. Terrific, do you say? Two hundred thousand in five millions is one man out of twenty-five. That wouldn't have worried Frederick the Great or Napoleon much. Eight hundred thousand is one out of six. The trouble is that such vast armies have never been engaged before. You must consider the percentages, not the totals."

"Yet, eight hundred thousand! If the public knew!" exclaimed the premier.

"The public does not know!" said Westerling.

"They guess. They realize that we stopped the soldiers' letters because they told bad news. The situation is serious."

"Why not give the public something to think about?" Westerling demanded.

"I've tried. It doesn't work. The murmurs increase. I repeat, my fears of a rising of the women are well grounded. There is mutiny in the air. I feel it through the columns of the press, though they are censored. I—"

"Then, soon I'll give the public something to think about, myself!" Westerling broke in. "The dead will be forgotten. The wounded will be proud of their wounds and their fathers and mothers triumphant when our army descends the other side of the range and starts on its march to the Browns' capital."

"But you have not yet taken a single fortress!" persisted the premier. "And the Browns report that they have lost only three hundred thousand men."

"Lanstron is lying!" retorted Westerling hotly. "But no matter. We have taken positions with every attack and kept crowding in closer. I ask nothing better than that the Browns remain on the defensive, leaving initiative to us. We have developed their weak points. The resolute offensive always wins. I know where I am going to attack; they do not. I shall not give them time to reinforce the defense at our chosen point. I have still plenty of live soldiers left. I shall go in with men enough this time to win and to hold."

"The army is yours, Westerling," concluded the premier. "I admire your stolidity of purpose. You have my confidence. I shall wait and hold the situation at home the best I can. We go into the hall of fame or into the gutter together, you and I!"

For a while after he had hung up the receiver Westerling's head drooped, his muscles relaxed, giving mind and body a release from tension. But his spine was as stiff as ever as he left the closet, and he was even smiling to give the impression that the news from the capital was favorable.

When he called his chiefs of division it was hardly for a staff council. Stunned by the losses and repulses, loyally industrious, their opinions unasked, they listened to his whirlwind of orders without comment—all except Turcas.

"If they are apprised of our plan and are able to concentrate more artillery than our guns can silence, the losses will be demoralizing," he observed.

Westerling threw up his head, frowning down the objection.

"Suppose they amount to half the forces that we send in!" he exclaimed. "Isn't the position, which means the pass and the range, worth it?"

"Yes, if we both take and hold it; not if we fail," replied Turcas, quite unaffected by Westerling's manner.

"Failure is not in my lexicon!" Westerling shot back. "For great gains there must be great risks."

"We prepare for the movement, your excellency," answered Turcas.

It was a steel harness of his own will that Westerling wore, without admitting that it galled him, and he laid it off only in Marta's presence. With her, his growing sense of isolation had the relief of companionship. She became a kind of mirror of his egoism and ambitions. He liked to have her think of him as a great man unruffled among weaker men. In the quiet and seclusion of the garden, involuntarily as one who has no confidant speaks to himself, reserving fortitude for his part before the staff, while she, under the spell of her purpose, silently, with serene and wistfully listening eyes, played hers, he outlined how the final and telling blow was to be struck.

"We must and we shall win!" he kept repeating.

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Through a rubber disk held to his ear in the closet of his bedroom a voice, tremulous with nervous fatigue, was giving Lanstron news that all his aircraft and cavalry and spies could not have gained; news worth more than a score of regiments; news fresh from the lips of the chief of staff of the enemy. The attack was to be made at the right of Engadir, its center breaking from the redoubt manned by Fracasse's men.

"Marta, you genius!" Lanstron cried. "You are the real general! You—"

"Not that, please!" she broke in. "I'm as foul and depraved as a dealer in subtle poisons in the middle ages! Oh, the shame of it, while I look into his eyes and feign admiration, feign everything which will draw out his plans! I can never forget the sight of him as he told me how two or three or four hundred thousand men were to be crowded into a ram, as he called it—a ram of human flesh!—and guns enough in support, he said, to tear any redoubts to pieces; guns enough to make their shells as thick as the bullets from an automatic!"

"We'll meet ram with ram! We'll have some guns, too!" exclaimed Lanstron. "We'll send as heavy a shell fire at their infantry as they send into our redoubts."

"Don't. It's too like Westerling. It has become too trite!" she protested. "The end! If I really were helping toward that and to save lives and our country to its people, what would my private feelings matter? My honor, my soul—what would anything matter? For that, any sacrifice. I'm only one human being—a weak, lunatic sort of one, just now!"

"Marta, don't suffer so! You are overwrought. You—"

"I can say all that for you, Lanny," she interrupted with the faintest laugh. "I've said it so many times to myself. Perhaps when I call you up again I shall not be so hysterical."

Lanstron was not thinking of war or war's combination when he hung up the receiver. It was some moments before he returned to the staff room, and then he had mastered his emotion. He was the soldier again.

An hour or so before the attack the telegraph instruments in the Galland house had become pregnantly silent. There were no more orders to give; no more reports to come from the troops in position until the assault was made. Officers of supply ceased to transmit routine matters over the wire, while they strained their eyes toward the range. Officers of the staff moved about restlessly, glancing at their watches and going to the windows frequently to see if the mist still held.

No one entered the library where Westerling was seated alone with nothing to do. His suspense was that of the mothers who longed for news of their sons at the front; his helplessness that of a man in a hospital lobby waiting on the result of an operation whose success or failure will save or wreck his career. The physical desire of movement, the conflict with something in his own mind, drove him out of doors.

Westerling was rather pleased with the fact that he could still smile; pleased with the loyalty of younger officers when, day by day, the staff had grown colder and more mechanical in the attitude that completed his isolation. Walking vigorously along the path toward the tower, the exercise of his muscles, the feel of the cool, moist air on his face, brought back some of the buoyancy of spirit that he craved. A woman's figure, with a cape thrown over the shoulders and the head bare, loomed out of the mist.

"I couldn't stay in—not to-night," Marta said as Westerling drew near. "I had to see. It's only a quarter of an hour now, isn't it?"

She seemed so utterly frail and distraught that Westerling, in an impulse of protection, laid his hand on her relaxed shoulders.

"Our cause is at stake to-night," he declared, "yours and mine! We must win, you and I! It is our destiny!"

"You and I!" repeated Marta. "Why you and I?"

It seemed very strange to be thinking of any two persons when hundreds of thousands were awaiting the signal for the death prepared by him. He mistook the character of her thought in the obsession of his egoism.

"What do lives mean?" he cried with a sudden desperation, his grip of her shoulders tightening. "It is the law of nature for man to fight. Unless he fights he goes to seed. One trouble with our army is that it was soft from the want of war. It is the law of nature for the fittest to survive! Other sons will be born to take the place of those who die to-night. There will be all the more room for those who live. Victory will create new opportunities. What is a million out of the billions on the face of the earth? Those who lead alone count—those who dwell in the atmosphere of the peaks, as we do!" The pressure of his strong hands in the unconscious emphasis of his passion became painful; but she did not protest or try to draw away, thinking of his hold in no personal sense but as a part of his self-revelation. "All—all is at stake there!" he continued, staring toward the range. "It's the Rubicon! I have put my career on to-night's cast! Victory means that the world will be at our feet—honor, position, power greater than that of any other two human beings! Do you realize what that means—the honor and the power that will be ours? I shall have directed the greatest army the world has ever known to victory!"

"And defeat means—what does defeat mean?" she asked narrowly, calmly; and the pointed question released her shoulders from the vise.

What had been a shadow in his thoughts became a live monster, striking him with the force of a blow. He forgot Marta. Yes, what would defeat mean to him? Sheer human nature broke through the bonds of mental discipline weakened by sleepless nights. Convulsively his head dropped as he covered his face.

"Defeat! Fail! That I should fail!" he moaned.

Then it was that she saw him in the reality of his littleness, which she had divined; this would-be conqueror. She saw him as his intimates often see the great man without his front of Jove. Don't we know that Napoleon had moments of privacy when he whined and threatened suicide? She wondered if Lanny, too, were like that—if it were not the nature of all conquerors who could not have their way. It seemed to her that Westerling was beneath the humblest private in his army—beneath even that fellow with the liver patch on his cheek who had broken the chandelier in the sport of brutal passion. All sense of her own part was submerged in the sight of a chief of staff exhibiting no more stoicism than a petulant, spoiled schoolboy.

While his head was still bent the artillery began its crashing thunders and the sky became light with flashes. His hands stretched out toward the range, clenched and pulsing with defiance and command.

"Go in! Go in, as I told you!" he cried. "Stay in, alive or dead! Stay till I tell you to come out! Stay! I can't do any more! You must do it now!"

"Then this may be truly the end," thought Marta, "if the assault fails."

And silently she prayed that it would fail; while the flashes lighted Westerling's set features, imploring success.

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In the Browns' headquarters, as in the Grays', telegraph instruments were silent after the preparations were over. Here, also, officers walked restlessly, glancing at their watches. They, too, were glad that the mist continued. It meant no wind. When the telegraph did speak it was with another message from some aerostatic officer saying, "Still favorable," which was taken at once to Lanstron, who was with the staff chiefs around the big table. They nodded at the news and smiled to one another; and some who had been pacing sat down and others rose to begin pacing afresh.

"We could have emplaced two lines of automatics, one above the other!" exclaimed the chief of artillery.

"But that would have given too much of a climb for the infantry in going in—delayed the rush," said Lanstron.

"If they should stick—if we couldn't drive them back!" exclaimed the vice-chief of staff.

"I don't think they will!" said Lanstron.

To the others he seemed as cool as ever, even when his maimed hand was twitching in his pocket. But now, suddenly, his eyes starting as at a horror, he trembled passionately, his head dropping forward, as if he would collapse.

"Oh, the murder of it—the murder!" he breathed.

"But they brought it on! Not for theirs, but for ours!" said the vice-chief of staff, laying his hand on Lanstron's shoulder.

"And we sit here while they go in!" Lanstron added. "There's a kind of injustice about that which I can't get over. Not one of us here has been under fire!"

Even the minute of the attack they knew; and just before midnight they were standing at the window looking out into the night, while the vice-chief held his watch in hand. In the hush the faint sound of a dirigible's propeller high up in the heavens, muffled by the fog, was drowned by the Gray guns opening fire.

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Before the mine exploded, by the light of the shell bursts breaking their vast prisms from central spheres of flame for miles, with the quick sequence of a moving-picture flicker, Fracasse's men could see one another's faces, spectral and stiff and pasty white, with teeth gleaming where jaws had dropped, some eyes half closed by the blinding flashes and some opened wide as if the lids were paralyzed. Faces and faces! A sea of faces stretching away down the slope—faces in a trance.

Up over the breastworks, over rocks and splintered timbers, Peterkin and the judge's son and their comrades clambered. When they moved they were as a myriad-legged creature, brain numbed, without any sensation except that of rapids going over a fall. Those in front could not falter, being pushed on by the pressure of those in the rear. For a few steps they were under no fire. The scream of their own shells breaking in infernal pandemonium in front seemed to be a power as irresistible as the rear of the wedge in driving them on.

Then sounds more hideous than the flight of projectiles broke about them with the abruptness of lightnings held in the hollow of the Almighty's hand and suddenly released. The Browns' guns had opened fire. Explosions were even swifter in sequence than the flashes that revealed the stark faces. Dust and stones and flying fragments of flesh filled the air. Men went down in positive paralysis of faculties by the terrific crashes. Sections of the ram were blown to pieces by the burst of a shrapnel shoulder high; other sections were lifted heavenward by a shell burst in the earth.

Peterkin fell with a piece of jagged steel embedded in his brain. He had gone from the quick to the dead so swiftly that he never knew that his charm had failed. The same explosion got Fracasse, sword in hand, and another buried him where he lay. The banker's son went a little farther; the barber's son still farther. Men who were alive hardly realized life, so mixed were life and death. Infernal imagination goes faint; its wildest similes grow feeble and banal before such a consummation of hell.

But the tide keeps on; the torn gaps of the ram are filled by the rushing legs from the rear. Officers urge and lead. Such are the orders; such is the duty prescribed; such is human bravery even in these days when life is sweeter to more men in the joys of mind and body than ever before. Precision, organization, solidarity in this charge such as the days of the "death-or-glory" boys never knew! Over the bodies of Peterkin and the barber's and the banker's sons, plunging through shell craters, stumbling, staggering, cut by swaths and torn by eddies of red destruction in their ranks, the tide proceeded, until its hosts were oftener treading on flesh than on soil. And all they knew was to keep on—keep on, bayonet in hand, till they reached the redoubt, and there they were to stay, alive or dead.

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"After hell, more hell, and then still more hell!" was the way that Stransky expressed his thought when the engineers had taken the place of the 53d of the Browns in the redoubt. They put their mines and connections deep enough not to be disturbed by shell fire. After the survivors in the van of the Grays' charge, spent of breath, reached their goal and threw themselves down, the earth under them, as the mine exploded, split and heaved heavenward. But those in the rear, slapped in the face by the concussion, kept on, driven by the pressure of the mass at their backs, and, in turn, plunged forward on their stomachs in the seams and furrows of the mine's havoc. The mass thickened as the flood of bodies and legs banked up, in keeping with Westerling's plan to have "enough to hold."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Poor Mrs. Smith.

A minister was recounting some of his amusing experiences in marrying people. "There's an old custom," said he, "that the bridegroom shall kiss the bride immediately after the marriage ceremony is over. It's a good, practical custom, for it serves more handily than anything else that I know of to dissipate the awkward pause that almost always follows a simple, informal ceremony. For this reason I keep the custom alive.

"One day a man whom I shall call Smith came to the parsonage to be married. Mr. Smith was a pompous, consequential little man. The prospective Mrs. Smith was a fine, winsome girl. After the ceremony, Mr. Smith, in spite of his pomposity, did not seem to know just what was the next thing to do, so, as is my practice in such emergencies, I said: 'My dear sir, it is your privilege to salute the bride.' He turned around and extending his hand formally, said: 'Mrs. Smith, I congratulate you.'"

Barber's Story Record.

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"Is not it customary to refer to intoxicating beverages as lush?" asked the learned but unsophisticated citizen.

"Yes."

"Then 'luscious bivalve,' no doubt, refers to the oyster cocktail."

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