

# The Last Shot

BY 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 Westering of the Grays, see Captain Lanstron of the Browns injured by a fall from a tree. Ten years later, Westering, a young man who has been captured by the forces of the Grays, returns to the town. 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. Westering and the Gray premier plan 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 been 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 reveals 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. Vandalsism in the Galland house. Westering 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 Westering information that will trap the Gray army. Westering forms his plan of attack upon what he hears from her. The Grays take Bordir. Through Marta, Westering 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.

### CHAPTER—XVII—Continued.

All on the subject for the present! When it was taken up again his successor would be in charge. He, the indefatigable, the over-intense, with medieval partisan fervor, who loathed in secret machines like Turcas, was the first man of the staff to go for incompetency.

"And Engadir is the key-point," Westering was saying.

"Yes," agreed Turcas.

"So we concentrate to break through there," Westering continued, "while we engage the whole line fiercely enough to make the enemy uncertain where the crucial attack is to be made."

"But, general, if there is any place that is naturally strong, that—" Turcas began.

"The one place where they are confident that we won't attack!" Westering interrupted. He resented the staff's professional respect for Turcas. After a silence and a survey of the faces around, he added with sententious effect: "And I was right about Bordir!"

To this argument there could be no answer. The one stroke of generalship by the Grays, who, otherwise, had succeeded alone through repeated mass attacks, had been Westering's hypothesis that had gained Bordir in a single assault.

"Engadir it is then!" said Turcas with the loyalty of the subordinate



"In My Own Defense and for Your Aid."

who makes a superior conviction his own, the better to carry it out.

Hazily, Bouchard had heard the talk, while he was looking at Westering and seeing him, not at the head of the council table, but in the arbor in eager appeal to Marta.

"I shall find out! I shall find out!" was drumming in his temples when the council rose; and, without a word or a backward glance, he was the first to leave the room.

When Bouchard returned to his desk he guessed the contents of the note awaiting him, but he took a long time to read its stereotyped expressions transferring him to perfunctory duty well to the rear of the army. Then he pulled himself together and, leaden-hearted, settled down to arrange rou-

tine details for his departure, while the rest of the staff was immersed in the activity of the preparations for the attack on Engadir. He knew that he could not sleep if he lay down. So he spent the night at work. In the morning his successor, a young man whom he himself had chosen and trained, Colonel Bellini, appeared, and the fallen man received the rising man with forced official courtesy.

"In my own defense and for your aid," he said, "I show you a copy of what I have just written to General Westering."

A brief note it was, in farewell, beginning with conventional thanks for Westering's confidence in the past.

"I am punished for being right," it concluded. "It is my belief that Miss Galland sends news to the enemy and that she draws it from you without your consciousness of the fact. I tell you honestly. Do what you will with me."

It took more courage than any act of his life for the loyal Bouchard to dare such candor to a superior. Seeing the patchy, yellow, bloodless face drawn in stiff lines and the abysmal stare of the deep-set eyes in their bony recesses, Bellini was swept with a wave of sympathy.

"Thank you, Bouchard. You've been very fine!" said Bellini as he grasped Bouchard's hand, which was icy cold.

"My duty—my duty, in the hope that we shall kill two Browns for every Gray who has fallen—that we shall yet see them starved and besieged and crying for mercy in their capital," replied Bouchard. He saluted with a dismal, urgent formality and stalked out of the room with the tread of the ghost of Hamlet's father.

The strange impression that this farewell left with Bellini still lingered when, a few moments later, Westering summoned him. Not alone the diffidence of a new member of the staff going into the presence accounted for the stir in his temples, as he waited till some papers were signed before he had Westering's attention. Then Westering picked up Bouchard's note and shook his head sadly.

"Poor Bouchard! You can see for yourself," and he handed the note to Bellini. "I should have realized earlier that it was a case for the doctor and not for reprimand. Mad! Poor Bouchard! He hadn't the ability or the resiliency of mind for his task, as I hope you have, colonel."

"I hope so, sir," replied Bellini.

"I've no doubt you have," said Westering. "You are my choice!"

### CHAPTER XVIII.

#### A Change of Plan.

That day and the next Westering had no time for strolling in the garden. His only exercise was a few periods of pacing on the veranda. Turcas, as tirelessly industrious as ever, developed an increasingly quiet insistence to leave the responsibility of decisions about everything of importance to a chief who was becoming increasingly arbitrary. The attack on Engadir being the jewel of Westering's own planning, he was disinclined to risk success by delegating authority, which also meant sharing the glory of victory.

Bouchard's note, though officially dismissed as a matter of pathology, would not accept dismissal privately. In flashes of distinctness it recurred to him between reports of the progress of preparations and directions as to dispositions. At dusk of the second day, when all the guns and troops had their places for the final movement under cover of darkness and he rose from his desk, the thing that had edged its way into a crowded mind took possession of the premises that strategy and tactics had vacated. It passed under the same analysis as his work. His overweening pride, so sensitive to the suspicion of a conviction that he had been fooled, put his relations with Marta in logical review. He had fallen in love in the midst of war. A cool and intense impatience possessed him to study her in the light of his new skepticism, when, turning the path of the first terrace, he saw her watching the sunset over the crest of the range.

She was standing quite still, a slim, soft shadow between him and the light, which gilded her figure and quarter profile. Did she expect him? he wondered. Was she posing at that instant for his benefit? When she turned, her face in the shadow, the glow of the sunset seemed to remain in her eyes, otherwise without expression, yet able to detect something unusual under externals as they exchanged commonplace greetings.

"Well, there's a change in our official family. We have lost Bouchard—transferred to another post!" said Westering.

Marta noted that, though he gave the news a casual turn, his scrutiny sharpened.

"Is that so? I can't say that my mother and I shall be sorry," she remarked. "He was always glaring at us as if he wished us out of sight. Indeed, if he had his way, I think he would have made us prisoners of war.

Wasn't he a woman-hater?" she concluded, half in irritation, half in amusement.

"He had that reputation," said Westering. "What do you think led to his departure?" he continued.

"I confess I cannot guess!" said Marta, with a look at the sunset glow as if she resented the loss of a minute of it.

"There has been a leak of information to the Browns!" he announced.

"There has! And he was intelligent officer, wasn't he?" she asked, turning to Westering, her curiosity apparently aroused as a matter of courtesy to his own interest in the subject.

"Who do you think he accused? Why, you," he added, with a peculiar laugh.

She noted the peculiarity of the laugh discriminatingly.

"Oh!" Her eyes opened wide in wonder—only wonder, at first. Then, as comprehension took the place of wonder, they grew sympathetic. "That explains!" she exclaimed. "His hateful glances were those of delusion. He was going mad, you mean?"

"Yes," said Westering. "That—that would explain it!"

"I have been told that when people go mad they always ascribe every injury done to them to the person who happens to have excited their dislike," she mused.

"Which seems to have been the case here," Westering assented. He did not know what else to say. His pride was recovering its natural confidence in the infallibility of his judgment of human beings. He was seeing his suspicions as ridiculous enough to convict him of a brain as disordered as Bouchard's.

Marta was thinking that she had been skating on very thin ice and that she must go on skating till she broke through. There was an exhilaration about it that she could not resist: the exhilaration of risk and the control of her faculties, prompted by a purpose hypnotically compelling. Both were silent, she watching the sky, he in anticipation and suspense. The rose went violet and the shadows over the range deepened.

"The guns and the troops wait. With darkness the music begins!" he said slowly, with a start of stern fervor.

"The music—the music! He calls it music!" ran through Marta's mind mockingly, but she did not open her lips.

"They wait, ready, every detail arranged," he continued proudly.

The sky merged into the shadows of the landscape that spread and thickened into blackness. Out of the drawn curtains of night broke an ugly flash and further up the slope spread the explosive circle of light of a bursting shell.

"The signal!" he exclaimed.

Right and left the blasts spread along the Gray lines and right and left, on the instant, the Browns sent their blasts in reply. Countless tongues of flame seemed to burst from countless craters, and the range to rock in a torrent of crashes. In the intervening space between the ugly, savage gusts from the Gray gun mouths, which sent their shells from the midst of exploding Brown shells, swept the beams of the Brown search-lights, their rays lost like sunlight in the vortex of an open furnace door.

"Splendid! splendid!" exclaimed Westering, in a sweep of emotion at the sight that had been born of his command. "Five thousand guns on our side alone! The world has never seen the equal of this!"

Marta looked away from the range to his face, very distinct in the garish illumination. It was the face of a maestro of war seeing all his rehearsals and all his labors come true in symphonic gratification to the eye and ear; the face of a man of trained mind, the product of civilization, with the elation of a party leader on the floor of a parliament in a crisis.

"Soon, now!" said Westering, and looked at his watch.

Shortly, in the direction of Engadir, to the rear of the steady flashes broke forth line after line of flashes as the long-range batteries, which so far had been silent, joined their mighty voices to the chorus, making a continuous leaping burst of explosions over the Brown positions, which were the real object of the attack.

"The moment I've lived for!" exclaimed Westering. "Our infantry is starting up the apron of Engadir! We had back the fire of the heavy guns concentrated for the purpose of supporting the men with an outburst. Three hundred heavy guns pouring in their shells on a space of two acres! We're tearing their redoubts to pieces! They can't see to fire! They can't live under it! They're in the crater of a volcano! When our infantry is on the edge of the wreckage the guns cease. Our infantry crowd in—crowd into the house that Partow built. He'll find that numbers count; that the power of modern gunfire will open the way for infantry in masses to take and hold vital tactical positions! And—no, no, their fire in reply is not as strong as I expected."

"Because they are letting you in! It will be strong enough in due season!" thought Marta in the uncontrollable triumph of antagonism. Five against three was in his tone and in every line of his features.

"It's hard for a soldier to leave a sight like this, but the real news will be awaiting me at my desk," he concluded, adding, as he turned away: "It's fireworks worth seeing, and if you remain here I will return to tell you the results."

Turning her back to the range for the moment, she saw the twinkle of the lights of the town and the threads of light of the wagon-trains and the

sweep of the lights of the railroad trains on the plain; while in the foreground every window of the house was ablaze, like some factory on a busy night shift. She could hear the click of the telegraph instruments already reporting the details of the action as cheerfully as Brobdignagian crickets in their peaceful surroundings. Then out of the shadows Westering reappeared.

"The apron of Engadir is ours!" he called. "Thanks to you!" he added with pointed emphasis. Back in the house he had received congratulations with a nod, as if success were a matter of course. Before her, exultation unbent stiffness, and he was hoarsely triumphant and eager. "It's plain sailing now," he went on. "A break in the main line! We have only to drive home the wedge, and then—and then!" he concluded.

She felt him close, his breath on her cheek.

"Peace!" she hastened to say, drawing back instinctively.

And then! The irony of the words in the light of her knowledge was pointed by a terrific renewal of the



"We're Tearing Their Redoubts to Pieces!"

thunders and the flashes far up on the range, and she could not resist rejoicing in her heart.

"That's the Browns!" exclaimed Westering in surprise.

The volume of fire increased. With the rest of the frontier in darkness, the Engadir section was an isolated blaze. In its light she saw his features, without alarm but hardening in dogged intensity.

"They've awakened to what they have lost! They have been rushing up reserves and are making a counter-attack. We must hold what we have gained, no matter what the cost!"

His last sentence was spoken over his shoulder as he started for the house.

Without changing her position, hardly turning her head, she watched until the firing began to lessen rapidly. Then she heard his step. She rose to face him, summoning back the spirit of the actress.

"This is better yet! I came to tell you that the counter-attack failed!" he said as he saw her appear from the shelter of the arbor.

She wondered if she were going to fall. But the post of the trellis was within reach. She caught hold of it to steady herself. Failed!

"The killing—it must have been terrible!" her mind at last made her exclaim to cover her tardiness of response to his mood.

"You thought of that—as you should—as I do!" he said.

He took her hands in his, pulsing warm with the flowing red of his strength. She let them remain lifelessly, as if she had not the will to take them away, the instinct of her part again dominant. To him this was another victory, and it was discovery—the discovery of melting weakness in her for the first time, which magnified his sense of masculine power. He tightened his grip slightly and she shuddered.

"You are tired!" he said, and it hurt her that he should be so considerate.

"The killing—to end that! It's all I want!" she breathed miserably.

"And the end is near!" he said. "Yes, now, thanks to you!"

"Thanks to her! And she must listen and submit to his touch!"

"Then engineers and material were ready to go in," he continued. "Before morning, as I had planned, we shall be so well fortified in the position that nothing can budge us. This success so strengthens my power with the staff and the premier that I need not wait on Fabian tactics. I am supreme. I shall make the most of the demoralization of this blow to the enemy. I shall not wait on slow approaches in the hope of saving life. Tomorrow I shall attack and keep on attacking till all the main line is ours."

"Now you are playing your real part, the conqueror!" she thought gladly. "Your kind of peace is the ruin of another people; the peace of a helpless enemy. That is better—better for her conscience. Unwittingly, she allowed her hands to remain in his. In the paralysis of despair she was unconscious that she had hands. She felt that she could endure anything to retrieve the error into which she had been the

means of leading the Browns. And the killing—it would not stop, she knew. No, the Browns would not yield until they were decimated.

"We have the numbers to spare. Numbers shall press home—home to terms in their capital!" Westering's voice grew husky as he proceeded, harsh as orders to soldiers who hesitated in face of fire. "After that—after that—the tone changed from harshness to desire, which was still the desire of possession—the fruits of peace, a triumph that I want you to share!" He was drawing her toward him with an impulse of the force of this desire, when she broke free with an abrupt, struggling pull.

"Not that! Not that! Your work is not yet done!" she cried.

He made a move as if to persist, then he fell back with a gesture of understanding.

"Right! Hold me to it!" he exclaimed resolutely. "Hold me to the bargain! So a woman worth while should hold a man worth while."

"Yes!" she managed to say, and turned to go in a sudden impetus of energy. Half running, half stumbling, the light of the lantern bobbing and trembling weirdly, she hastened through the tunnel. Usually the time for taking the receiver down till Lanny replied was only a half minute. Now she waited what seemed many minutes without response. Had the connections been broken? To make sure that her impatience was not tricking her she began to count off the seconds. Then she heard Lanstron's voice, broken and hoarse:

"Marta, Marta, he is dead! Partow is dead!"

Recovering himself, Lanstron told the story of Partow's going, which was in keeping with his life and his prayers. As the doctor put it, the light of his mind, turned on full voltage to the last, went out without a flicker. Through the day he had attended to the dispositions for receiving the Grays' attack, enlivening routine as usual with flashes of humor and reflection ranging beyond the details in hand. An hour or so before dark he had reached across the table and laid his big, soft palm on the back of Lanstron's hand. He was thinking aloud, a habit of his in Lanstron's company, when an idea requiring gestation came to him.

"My boy, it is not fatal if we lose the apron of Engadir. The defenses behind it are very strong."

"No, not fatal," Lanstron agreed. "But it's very important."

"And Westering will think it fatal. Yes, I understand his character. Yes—yes; and if our counter-attack should fail, then Miss Galland's position would be secure. H-m-m—those whom the gods would destroy—hm-m-m. Westering will be convinced that repeated, overwhelming attacks will gain our main line. Instead of using engineering approaches, he will throw his battalions, masses upon masses, against our works until his strength is spent. It would be baiting the bull. A risk—a risk—but, my boy, I am going to—"

Partow's head, which was bent in thought, dropped with a jerk. A convulsion shook him and he fell forward into the map, his brave old heart in its last flutter, and Lanstron was alone in the silent room with the dead and his responsibility.

"The order that I knew he was about to speak, Marta, I gave for him," Lanstron concluded. "It seemed to me an inspiration—his last inspiration—to make the counter-attack a feint."

"And you're acting chief of staff Lanny? You against Westering?"

"Yes."

The colonel of the 128th and Captain Fracasse were eating their biscuits together and making occasional remarks rather than holding a conversation.

"Well, Westering is a field-marshal," said the colonel.

"Yes, he's got something out of it!"

"The men seem to be losing spirit—there's no doubt of it!" exclaimed the colonel, more aloud to himself than to Fracasse, after a while.

"No wonder!" replied Fracasse. Martinet though he was, he spoke in grumbling loyalty to his soldiers. "What kind of spirit is there in doing the work of navvies? Spirit! No soldiers ever fought better—in invasion, at least. Look at our losses! Spirit! Westering drives us in. He thinks we can climb Niagara Falls! He—"

"Stop! You are talking like an anarchist!" snapped the colonel. "How can the men have spirit when you feel that way?"

"I shall continue to obey orders and do my duty, sir!" replied Fracasse. "And they will, too, or I'll know the reason why."

There was a silence, but at length the colonel exploded:

"I suppose Westering knows what he is doing!"

"Still we must go on! We must win!"

"Yes, the offensive always wins in the end. We must go on!"

"And once we have the range—yes, once we've won one vital position—the men will recover their enthusiasm and be crying: 'On to the capital!'"

"Right! We were forgetting history. We were forgetting the volatility of human nature."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

### Cholera's Natural Home.

The marshy ground of the Ganges delta, with its vast masses of vegetation, decaying under a tropical sun, is the native home of the cholera. In that pestilential region the cholera and plague are found every year and all the year round. Every cholera epidemic which has desolated Europe, every visitation of the plague, is believed to have started from the mouth of the Ganges.

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