

COMRADES OF PERIL

CHAPTER XIII—Continued.

The broken gear perceptibly faster as they rolled upward, and several times they slid down, while they threw themselves on the rocks to catch breath for a fresh effort. The altitude began to affect Olga, her breathing 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 for not more than an hour in attaining the rock platform abutting on the cave. Getting Macklin's helpless boy over that last high stone rampart proved to be the most difficult task of all, and was only accomplished by sheer strength. Shelby, having done this, with limbs drawn against the rock, and slowly dragging the inert boy up by the muscles of his arms, assisted to some extent by the efforts of the girl beneath. Once safely behind the rock of the stone parapet, they lay panting with exhaustion.

However this was a badly worn, less than 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 the 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 chasma 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 surface. 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 Paucha with help. The wind kept the platform free from snow, but during 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. "Paucha? 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 at all. 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 Gerlach unnecessary. Since the fighting under, 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, yet 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 get them out 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 wild outlaw, cattle thieves and such 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."

They were both upon their feet, started by the strange sound. Shelby bent down and crept in through the entrance.

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 time full of sympathy. "Everything is all right. Life still and don't worry."

"Who else is here? Are you? Ain't you Tom Shelby?" he laughed wildly. "Lord, no; he's dead."

"That is just what 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 hell this is, Tom," broke in Olga, "good" remained from the 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 chasma 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 surface. 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 Paucha with help. The wind kept the platform free from snow, but during 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.

"I'm sure glad that I sooner thought that was what she plugged me for, that would be the best of it for they're all on that sort of thing. I like her, she's a good sport. 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 going?" "Gerlach; there's an army surgeon there."

"I'm so sure, Kid." "Well, I am. Lord, a man generally knows when he's got his dose. I see you ain't in it just 'bout Shelby here, and I don't know what I'm aintin' ter do with you. There ain't no use beatin' about the bush. Now, what you want to do for the buck, but I got a lot at her, an' it wasn't no trouble to pick up an acquaintance with Old Dad. He was tight-mouthed, though, drink or sober, an' that's how he held me back from goin'—that's straight, or ain't it?"

"You mean you threatened him?" "Yep! I never supposed it would shake the guts out of him the way it did. The old fool was just plain mad. He thought I was after him a devious, or something—an he just crumpled up, without makin' no fight at all. He was natur'ly set to go, but he was guilty of some crime. Now, the next thing I knowed, he got out back of the dance hall an' shot him self."

"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 was a little tight," 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 can't hear me sing, but I was a little tight, an' I could warble some, too. Say, did you ever hear me sing?" "Yes, Kid, I've heard you."

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"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, all I could do was to look at her, an' it wasn't no trouble to pick up an acquaintance with Old Dad. He was tight-mouthed, though, drink or sober, an' that's how he held me back from goin'—that's straight, or ain't it?"

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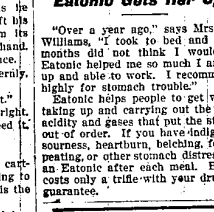
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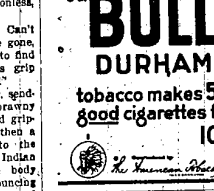
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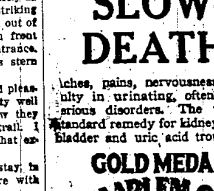
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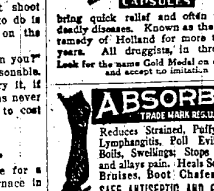
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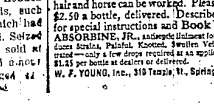
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