COMRADES OF PERIL

By RANDALL PARRISH

Copyright A. C. McClurg & Co.

A PINK RIBBON.

Synopsis.—Tom Shelby, a rancher rides into the frontier town of Ponca, looking for a good time after a long spell of hard work and loneliness on the ranch. Instead, he runs into a funeral—that of Dad Calkins, a retired, army man of whom little is known. A girl, still in her teens, survives Calkins, McCarthy, a saloon keeper and Ponca's leading citizen, decides that the girl now alone in the world, should marry. She agrees to pick out a husband from the score of men lined up in her home. To his consternation, she selects Shelby, who had, gone along merely as a spectator. He declines the honor. Indignant, the girl dismisses the assemblage. Shelby runs into two of the rejected suitors, and in a fight worsts them both. Angered at their remarks, he returns to the girl, determined to marry her, if she will have him. After his explanation she agrees to marry him. The wedding takes place and the couple set out for Shelby's ranch. With them is "Kid" Macklin, whom Shelby has hired as a helper. On the way the girl tells her husband her name is Olga Carlyn, and also tells him something of the peculiar circumstances of her life.

CHAPTER VI—Continued.

—5—

She made herself say these words calmly, looking him frankly in the face, yet as he went outside, closing the door behind him, seemingly quite satisfied with her readiness to abide the situation, she bowed her head on the dirty table, and her body shook with sobs which could no longer be restrained. So this was what she had come to—this! She had kept herself up all day with scarcely and this was the realization. She lifted her face and looked about, the tears still misting in her eyes; then she suddenly laughed, and stood up with cheeks glowing, and lips firmly set. It was a horrible mess, to be sure, yet the place itself was not so bad; she had lived in far worse; and once put in some degree of order and cleanliness it might prove fairly comfortable indeed. She surveyed the scene, as revealed by the yellow flame of the lamp, her heart beating faster. This was to be her home. She had come here as mistress. It mattered not, so much what it was not, but what she should make of it. Her slender form straightened with new determination. There was yet another door, and she looked out through it into a small lean-to, the lamp held high over her head. This was evidently the kitchen, containing, as it did, a small cook stove, a sort of roughly built closet, and sink, the latter stacked with unwashed dishes. An armful of split wood lay on the floor, and a half slab of bacon hung to a nail.

Olga gave vent to another laugh, but this time there was no hint of hysteria in it. She had found herself. Dressed still in the long duster, she set down the lamp on a small table, and dropping upon her knees, swiftly kindled a fire in the stove. As the wood began to crackle cheerfully, she searched the closet for materials, rejoicing to discover some dishes yet unused, together with remnants of food sufficient for her purpose. There was sugar, condensed milk, a few knarly potatoes, a small sack of flour, and a half can of coffee. She dumped these out on the table, and began humming a tune, as she added the slab of bacon to these treasures. She was too busy by now to give another thought to the dirt and disorder about her.

Shelby was kept outside considerably longer than he had anticipated. The buckskin, in spite of a sixty-mile journey, retained viciousness enough to kick the lantern out of the Kid's hand and smash it into smithereens, thus compelling the two to work in darkness. Macklin, unacquainted with the surroundings, was of little use, and most of the work had to be done by Shelby in person. When it was all over with both men were sweating profusely, tired and angry, the Kid cursing everything from the creation of the world. Shelby, suddenly remembering the girl left alone in the house all this time, lost the last grip on his temper.

"Shut up!" he barked savagely. "I've had just enough of that. What did you expect anyway—a reception committee an' a banquet? Come on in, now; we'll hustle up some grub. Here, you might as well tote a few of those things along with you."

Both men loaded up with packages from the buckboard, the Kid still swearing under his breath, but Shelby grimly silent. He was remembering what that interior looked like, and wondering how she was taking such a home-coming. He could not but contrast the dirt and disorder to which he had brought her with the immaculate cleanliness of the shack where she lived in Ponca. The memory made him half afraid to go in and face her eyes. He lifted the latch hesitatingly, the bundles on the other arm piled to his chin, and stepped across the threshold. Then he stopped suddenly, with his mouth wide open, the Kid pushing in behind him, even more heavily laden. She stood in the middle of the floor, with cheeks flushed, and eyes smiling.

"You boys can pile that stuff on the table," she announced brightly. "I've scraped those papers up in one corner, so there's plenty of room. Never mind about bringing the rest in now; sup per's ready."

Shelby put his bundles down with out a word, his eyes quick to perceive the chairs cleared of their debris, the floor swept, the ashes back in the stove. He could hardly comprehend the miracle.

She led the way gayly, leaving her broom in a corner, and carrying the lamp. The lean-to kitchen had been transfigured, and actually presented a homelike appearance. The dirty dishes were shoved out of sight, the floor swept, the fire in the stove blazed cheerfully, and the table was covered with the essentials of a truly appetizing meal. She set the lamp down in the center, fully rewarded by the expression on the faces of the two.

"You boys wash up there in the sink," she commanded; "use that piece of sacking for a towel; it was all I could find. Then we'll get busy."

If Shelby was to live a thousand years he would never lose memory of that meal. The grateful warmth of the stove, the neatness of the table, the good fellowship with which she served, all coupled with the wonderful surprise, left upon him an impression never afterward to be blotted out. She talked about what she was going to do; about what he had purchased in town; about anything which came into her mind that she could manufacture conversation from. He told of their adventures outside, and made her laugh heartily over the struggle of getting the Kid's pony safely into the corral. The Kid himself said little, eating heartily but in silence, only occasionally lifting his eyes from the plate. This pretense at modesty did not seem like the Kid, and Shelby found himself observing the fellow with some wonderment. His looks were not at all prepossessing, now that he saw him more plainly revealed in the lamplight, and he was some years older than he had supposed. The fellow had a hard, dissipated face, and his lips were thin, with a distinctly cruel twist to them. Shelby had intended putting the man in that bunk in the front room, but now decided the stable was good enough for his use.

As soon as they were through he hunted up a second lantern.

"Take the rest of that stuff out the buckboard, Macklin," he said shortly, "and stow it away in the cellar-cave just to the right of the house. I'll be out presently, an' we'll fix things up for the night."

As the fellow disappeared, Shelby's eyes encountered those of his wife across the table.

"And what are you going to do?" she asked directly.

"Why, help you with these things, and then clean the shack up a bit; it is in worse shape than I realized."

She shook her head positively.

"Oh, no, mister man. This is my house, and I am going to take care of it—all alone. I have seen your style of housekeeping, and I prefer my own. You go on, and finish the work outside; when you come back it will look better in here."

Shelby went out. Macklin was seemingly busy at the task assigned him, the lantern hung to the broken branch of a convenient tree, lighting his path. Without even speaking, the ranchman passed by down the steep path leading toward the stream below. He was some time in completing his task, and, when he finally emerged once more from the stable, the only gleam of light he could perceive above came through the log chinks of the cabin. He wondered what had become of Macklin, yet gave the matter no special thought as he toiled slowly up the path, his mind more deeply interested in the reception awaiting him within.

He passed close enough to the buckboard to assure himself that his orders had been executed, and, believing the fellow had probably re-entered the house for some purpose, passed on directly to the front door. No one was in the main room, nor in the chamber behind. They remained exactly as he had left them. The silence startled him, and he advanced swiftly toward the kitchen, where the light still burned, visible through the open door. It also was deserted, the dirty dishes yet setting on the table untouched. Good God! what was the meaning of this? What had occurred? The outer door stood ajar, and he sprang anxiously forward, peering into the blackness. There was no sound, no movement; the blaze of light had blinded him, and he stepped outside so as to see better. He had taken but one step beyond the protection of the partially open door, when something struck him, and he went staggering down, as though his skull was crushed by the savage blow.

* * * * * * *

It was gray dawn when Shelby stirred once more, and, with eyes only partially open, stared in bewilderment at the pale arch of sky. Slowly memory came back, and he managed to lift one hand to his head, his numb fingers touching a ghastly scalp wound, the clotted blood matting his hair. He had been struck a desperate blow, and was doubtless left lying there in the belief that he was dead, yet apparently the skull was not crushed, and the night air had congealed the blood. Without supreme effort he drew himself into a sitting posture, and stared rather blankly about at the objects revealed in the gray dawn.

The sight as instantly restored his memory; the cabin door stood wide open, just as he left it, and within the lamp still burned on the table, in the midst of the dirtied dishes. She had not returned, then; he had been lying there alone all night. The realization maddened him to effort, and, by grasping at the door for support he attained his feet, and stood there for a moment, swaying dizzily. Exactly what had occurred he could not determine; the whole affair seemed more like a dream than a reality. He had left her there apparently cheerful and happy, the laughter in her eyes a memory to linger with him; he had not been absent to exceed thirty minutes, and not so far away but what any cry would surely have reached his ears. Yet when he returned she had vanished utterly, leaving everything untouched. Whatever occurred must have been brought to pass almost immediately upon his departure, before she even began the work of cleaning up. But how could such a thing happen without any alarm? Why, the Kid was working within ten feet of the house, and must have heard the slightest sound of a struggle. The Kid! where was he anyway? What had become of the fellow all this time? He was nowhere in sight when Shelby retraced his steps up the path. Could it be that the Kid was the one guilty of this deed? If so, what was his object? Not robbery, surely, for the place had not been ransacked, or anything removed from his pockets. Yet surely this was not Indian work; it bore no resemblance to a savage raid. The questions were unanswerable; no mental effort gave him any clue, yet his strength was rapidly coming back, and with it a grim, determined anger, which urged him into action.

First he went through the deserted house, room by room, seeking for the slightest sign of guidance, but finding none. Everything remained precisely as he remembered seeing it the night before. He blew out the light, took down one of the rifles from the wall, loaded it, and then, feeling his old strength returning, cautiously stepped out through the front door. The buckboard stood there, paunt and stripped, except for the box between the rear wheels. He peered into this, and found it still half filled with bundles.

He Went Staggering Down.

Macklin had not completed his job, other evidence being furnished by the extinguished and overturned lantern on the ground just beyond. But there was no sign visible of any struggle.

Surely she had not left of her own choice. That was unthinkable. She had appeared cheerful and contented, even actually interested in the new life; besides, if she possessed the slightest desire to escape, he had offered her every opportunity on the way out, and she had refused. Surely she would never have come way out there to make her disagreeable journey over again at night. Even if crazy enough for such an attempt, the effort would never be made upon foot, and all three ponies were in the corral; he had seen them while coming down. No, that theory might be dismissed at once, and secretly he was glad it was so easily disposed of—it had vaguely haunted him at first, causing him to dread the discovery that it might be true.

Then what was true? Who could be guilty of such an outrage? Indians? White outlaws? Joe Macklin? These three possibilities alone remained, but the first two seemed quite impossible. He was used to Indian foray, but this act bore no resemblance to the work of savages on the warpath. There had been no attempt to plunder, or destroy. The very fact that the ponies remained undisturbed convinced him that this was no deed of Indian raiders. That it might have been white outlaws was not quite so easily dismissed. There were desperate men hiding out yonder in the Bad Lands, but he never had known of their entering to attack any settler, except occasionally to run off cattle on the range. In this case there was no apparent object—they had taken nothing, neither food nor stock. Then it must have been Macklin.

His sudden disappearance was, at least, proof he must have had a hand in it. But why? To what end? Shelby straightened up, a new flash of intelligence in his eyes. Perhaps this all harked back to that early mystery in her life. She had told him that Calkins had taken her from place to place, apparently always afraid that he was being followed. Was it possible that he had been hunted down at last; that he recognized the approach of the end, and had committed suicide on that account? And was this strange seizure of Olga part of the plot, either for revenge, or restitution? This explanation seemed more probable than any other; in a way it appeared to fit the case, although he possessed no more knowledge of what it all meant than he did before. Only, evidently all that had been desired was possession of the girl; and that was deemed of sufficient importance to even justify murder. He had been left for dead, in order that she might be borne away alive.

No longer doubting but what this theory at least approximated the truth, Shelby faced the facts frankly, and with no further hesitation. It was up to him to act promptly; there was no one to whom he could turn for help. His eyes darkened, and his jaws set. All right then, he would certainly give the Kid a run for his money. There must be some trail left; such a deed as this could never be accomplished without leaving some mark behind. Whether they traveled on foot, or horseback, the party must surely leave some trace of passage, and Shelby, who had been the best trailer in his regiment, felt confident of being able to run the outfit down.

With this once settled in his mind, and his plan of pursuit outlined, Shelby threw off his depression, and became cool and resolute. First he searched over every foot of ground within a quarter of a mile of the house, seeking to discover just how Macklin had operated, and, whether or not, he was alone. The result was only partially successful. The hard-packed earth revealed little of value. Down below the cabin on the sloping side of the hill, he found the mark of a high-heeled boot such as the Kid wore, and, a foot or so beyond, the plain impression of a moccasin. A hundred yards to the north the imprints were again visible, making it clear to his mind that the fugitives were then making for the lower ford. The girl was evidently being carried, and two men must have been engaged on the job, one of them possibly an Indian. He passed straight on to the ford to verify this theory, and here the mud exhibited clearly the movements of both the fellows, while close at the water's edge he came upon a narrow pink ribbon, which the girl had evidently hurriedly dropped in guidance.

It was clearly manifest now the direction in which they had disappeared, but Shelby remained unsatisfied. He could not believe that they would attempt to escape thus on foot with their burden. If Macklin had one assistant, it was highly probable there would be others also engaged in the affair. The opposite shore was deserted, and he crossed over, wading to his thighs in the swift water, with rifle flung forward, and eyes intently searching the farther bank. The trail was plain at this point; he could easily trace the steps of both men passing up a narrow gully into the first line of bluffs, and there, in a little open glade, he found where horses had been tethered and trampled the turf. They had evidently been held for some time; had entered from the north down a slight coulee, and departed westward along a shelving bank. There were five animals, all mounted, to judge from the deep impress of hoofs, and he followed their passage as far as the crest of the bluff. They were well beyond view, of course by this time, across that rough, broken country, but he satisfied himself that they were heading straight for the Bad Lands.

Shelby knew now something of what he must contend with. The act of abduction, and attempted murder, was no sudden temptation assailing Macklin, but undoubtedly part of a well-organized plot. Whatever their object, five men were concerned in the outrage, their intention probably the making of the girl a prisoner. In Shelby's judgment she was probably in no immediate danger. If the fellows had intended taking her life, she would never have thus been spared and carried away, apparently uninjured. Their purpose evidently required that she be kept alive, but helpless in their hands.

He was cool now; grimly determined, but intent on preparing himself for a long and dangerous quest. He was to be one man pitted against five, and every instinct of long experience on the plains, warned him against being rash. He recrossed the stream, built a fire in the stove, and, after washing the blood from his head, ate heartily; then packed a leather haversack with food, and was ready. He took this time in which to plan out his course, and then went forward unhesitatingly, filling his pockets with rifle cartridges, and flinging the haversack over his shoulder, before starting for the corral. He decided upon the buckskin as being the better animal for his purpose—a vicious brute, harder to handle, but tireless, and able to exist where either of the others would starve. It required a good half-hour to rope and saddle the beast, but he had plenty of time. Once on the trail he could easily outride the party he was following, and he had no desire to approach them closely until well after dark.

Once firm in the saddle, however, ride under the slip, with haversack strapped on the opposite side, and blanket-roll behind, he gave the plunging, bucking demon between his legs

He Followed Their Passage.

little mercy. The man was in no mood for play of any sort, and set himself to conquering the brute in the quickest possible way. It was a rough, hard struggle, but the human won, and, under the merciless sting of the quirt, the maddened but subdued animal, nostrils distended, and eyes vicious as ever, yielded final obedience to the rein.

CHAPTER VII.

—1—

An Hour Behind.

There was no marked trail, but the instincts of a plainsman kept Shelby's course directly to the northwest. The bronco, now thoroughly tamed, and obedient to the slightest pressure of the rider's leg, kept a tireless gait, picking out unaided the easiest paths. From the general direction of the trail left by the raiders he had decided they were heading for a certain portion of the Bad Lands, and, if this theory was correct, he ought easily to cut across their tracks again late in the afternoon. Sitting upright in the deep saddle, with the straight back of the cavalryman, his eyes watchful, his lips grimly set, he rode steadily on hour after hour, thinking, planning, beginning now to realize the depth of his own interest in this effort at rescue. He had hardly comprehended before that this girl was really his wife—that her life had become his to guard. The affair between them had occurred so swiftly, so unexpectedly, he had not before awakened to its true meaning. But now it became very real, and he was positively surprised to learn the strength of hold she already had upon him.

His mind would linger over a thousand little womanly peculiarities which somehow had unconsciously impressed him—the soft glow in her eyes, the wistfulness of her smile; the slight dimple in her chin; the pulsing of blood in her cheeks; the round firmness of the white neck; the peculiar gracefulness of her walk; the nameless attractiveness of poise, all came back now in odd fascination. He was not aware before that he had even noticed these things, but now their memory dominated him, caused his pulses to quicken. He had known little of women since boyhood, and never before had he encountered in terms of intimacy this type of a woman. She had been a revelation to him even in his blindness, but now, under the spell of memory, she had suddenly changed to an inspiration. His wife, Olga Carlyn, his wife! He said the words over, as though he recalled a dream, the sound of the words causing the startled buckskin to cast back an evil eye at his unconscious rider.

"What's the idea of stealin' the girl?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Before asking a favor of a man a wise woman gives him a good dinner with a little flattery on the side.

AN OPEN LETTER TO WOMEN

Mrs. Little Tells How She Suffered and How Finally Cured

Philadelphia, Pa.—"I was not able to do my housework and had to lie down most of the time and felt bad in my left side. My monthly periods were irregular, sometimes five or seven months apart and when they did appear would last for two weeks and were very painful. I was sick for about a year and a half and doctored but without any improvement.

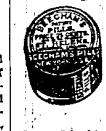
A neighbor recommended Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound to me, and the second day after I started taking it I began to feel better and I kept on taking it for seven months. Now I keep house and perform all my household duties. You can use these facts as you please and I will recommend Vegetable Compound to everyone who suffers as I did."—Mrs. J. S. LITTLE, 3455 Livingston St., Philadelphia, Pa.

How much harder the daily tasks of a woman become when she suffers from such distressing symptoms and weakness as did Mrs. Little. No woman should allow herself to get into such a condition because such troubles may be speedily overcome by Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, which for more than forty years has been restoring American women to health.

Painful Sensations

in the muscles, "neuralgia", soreness, aching back, pimples, boils, rashes and other eruptions, usually result from self-poisoning by products of imperfectly digested or non-eliminated food.

BEECHAM'S PILLS



help to restore activity of liver, bowels, kidneys, and skin, and so counteract cause and relieve symptoms.

Largest Sale of Any Medicine in the World. Sold everywhere. In boxes. 25c., 25c.

Small Sign of Fear.

It was Robert's first day in school and he was having a good time talking to the little girl that sat next to him when his teacher called him up to her and sat him on her knee till she had finished the lesson when she said to him:

"Now, Robert, are you not sorry you made so much noise that Miss Clarke had to call you up and sit you on her lap?"

Robert snuggled up to her and looked up into her face, and, smiling said: "No, I like it."

Hall's Catarrh Medicine

Those who are in a "run down" condition will notice that Catarrh bothers them much more than when they are in good health. This fact proves that while Catarrh is a local disease, it is greatly influenced by constitutional conditions. HALL'S CATARRH MEDICINE is a Tonic and Blood Purifier, and acts through the blood upon the mucous surfaces of the body, thus reducing the inflammation and restoring normal conditions.

All druggists. Circulars free.
F. J. Cheney & Co., Toledo, Ohio.

Safety in Delay.

Mrs. Bacon—What is your husband ranting about in the kitchen?

Mrs. Egbert—He's expressing his opinion of the cook.

Mrs. Bacon—Dear me! I should think he'd be afraid to speak to her in that way.

Mrs. Egbert—Why should he be afraid? You know she left yesterday."—Yonkers Statesman.

DON'T DESPAIR

If you are troubled with pains or aches; feel tired; have headache, indigestion, insomnia; painful passage of urine, you will find relief in

GOLD MEDAL HAARLEM OIL CAPSULES

The world's standard remedy for kidney, liver, bladder and uric acid troubles and National Remedy of Holland since 1696. Three sizes, all druggists. Guaranteed. Look for the name Gold Medal on every box and accept no imitation.

WANTED: Agent to handle our non-fadeable and fast dye—WONDER-FIX—for homes, in 10c packages, and for the trade in pound cans, $1 per pound; 15 shades. 40% profit assured. $10 will start you. CRESCENT CITY DYE SALES CO., Inc., 2501 Port St., NEW ORLEANS, LA.

SPRING IS COMING. Make your wall paper clean and sweet again. Simple formula 15c. O. Bauer, 114 E. Pearl, Cincinnati, O.

W. N. U., DETROIT, NO. 2—1923.