COMRADES OF PERIL

By RANDALL PARRISH

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CHAPTER XII.

The Attack on the Cabin.

There was no sound from without, except occasional the echo of a distant voice shout ng. Shelby, startled by these words and alarmed by her agitation, swiftly crossed the room. The body was gone, actually gone! As he bent over, incredulous, distrusting the evidence of his own eyes, he could perceive the stain of blood in which the man had fallen, but that was all. There was no semblance of a body there.

"Judas Priest!" he said soberly. "This beats anything ever I saw. He couldn't have been killed, but I never saw him twitch a muscle after he dropped. Gone! Darn it I know what to make of it. Why, where could he have gone to? There ain't but one way out from this shack an' he sure didn't go out there."

"No, he couldn't," her voice quavering. "We would have seen him if he had."

"Seen him! Of course, we would. He must have revived and crawled away. You bet there ain't no mystery about it. Dead men ain't movin' around an' there ain't no angels comin' down to carry that cuss off. What's happened is, he got back strength enough to crawl. Likely he got into that back room out o' sight. Anyhow I'm goin' to find out what's happened. You keep an eye at that hole in the wall yonder, while I scout around a minute. If you see anything movin' in shootin' distance, just blaze away. Don't hesitate a moment."

She went forward as he told her without a word and stared out, yet nervously turning her head about at the slightest sound. Shelby waited a moment, listening, and then stepped confidently forward across the threshold of the inner door. He had no doubt that he would discover Macklin—dead or alive, outstretched on the floor. The fellow must be there; he could have gone nowhere else. The place was as black as pitch; a step beyond the entrance and he had to grope his way blindly, unable to distinguish a single object. There was something grim and ghastly in feeling about with his feet for an unseen body. Then the fellow might still be alive, even dangerous. He stopped at the disquieting thought and spoke sharply into the gloom.

"Are you there, Macklin? Come, speak up; nobody is going to hurt you."

There was no response; no movement, no sound of a groan, no pulsing of breath. The stillness was intense, horrible. Shelby gripped himself and began to advance slowly, guiding his passage along the wall, expecting every instant to encounter some obstacle. His groping feet touched nothing. Inch by inch he explored the floor of the room; the perspiration beginning to stand in drops on his forehead. There was no body lying there, no form of a man, either living or dead; the place was absolutely unoccupied. He could hardly believe this true; his mind refused to grasp the fact; he came back to the door dazed and unnerved. All nature, all reasoning told him the man must be somewhere within the cabin; any other thought was simple impossible; yet where? He had already explored every inch of surface to no result. So bewildered and dumfounded was he before this mystery that he was even startled at the girl's voice asking an eager question.

"Is he there? Did you find him?"

"No; he's gone as though he had a pair of wings."

"But how could he get out?"

"That's what I say. Everything is solid; no human could vanish through these walls; there isn't a window not boarded up and only that one door. We wasn't outside ten minutes, nor ten feet away from the step. A rat couldn't have passed without bein' seen. Blamed if it don't make me shiver, for, by thunder, however it happened, he ain't here; he ain't nowhere in this cabin. An'," he added, peering at the floor, "there ain't no trail o' blood to show that he crawled away; just that little pool what he laid in."

"Could he have got through the roof, or the floor?"

Shelby laughed despondently.

"Lord, I don't easily see how he could; it's fifteen feet to them rafters an' no opening, while, judging from outside, the floor must rest plum on the ground. Who shot him, anyhow? Did you see?"

"Yes, I did," she explained excitedly. "I was looking that way, toward where the board was ripped off the window, I just had a glimpse of a face behind the muzzle of the gun. It was a woman; I am sure it was a woman, with black eyes. Then the smoke obscured everything and she was gone."

"She must have been Pancha," he admitted, struggling with the idea. "Why, of course, that's all plain enough. She overheard what he said and fired in mad passion."

"What do you mean? What are you talking about? This girl?"

"Sure; I told you about her; she helped me escape last night. She was crazily jealous over Macklin. She is Mexican and is here with her brother, a little outlaw, no doubt, knowing no law but her own passion. She must have been there when he boasted to Laud that he would leave her and marry you. It drove her crazy and she shot."

"I can understand that—yes," Olga burst forth, "and later she was sorry. I believe it was she who came back and took the body away."

"I hardly see how that theory helps much. How could she take him?"

"Perhaps she may know some secret passage. There might be one underneath. I do not know, yet in what other way could the body have been removed?"

Shelby shook his head gloomily, his eyes searching the floor for any evidence and finding none. To all appearances it appeared smooth and solid.

"I don't know," he said. "That idea may be as good as any. You might take this broken knife of mine an' see if you can start anything. What was goin' on out there?"

"Nothing much that I could see. There are men hiding behind the bank of the creek; I think they are Indians, and there may be others off to the right in the weeds."

"Just a guard left there to see that we don't get away. They'll wait until dark and then try to burn us out, I reckon; the bucks don't like my shooting. That was a rifle."

"Yes; the bullet struck the log."

He crossed over and looked out anxiously.

"I thought it might be a signal, but I guess not. Don't seem to be anything moving."

He straightened up again, his eyes surveying the room. "If we only had two more in this outfit we might give those devils a run for their money. The trouble is we can defend only two sides, an' they know it—anyhow, Laud does. I'm goin' to haul this bench over on that side; then you can stand up there, and shoot through that hole in the window while I pepper them from here in front. We'll make it hot while it lasts."

She watched him shift the bench, and then stood upon it to look out. The sun had gone down, and the valley swam in a purple haze. If she would utilize what little light still remained, she must search at once.

"Nothing out there?"

"I can see nothing moving. It is growing dark. Let me take the knife."

He gave it to her, and she got down upon her knees on the floor, anxiously testing the openings between the blocks with the broken blade. Shelby turned his head occasionally, barely able to distinguish her movements, yet felt little confidence in the success of the effort. Any attempt at escape through the door would be suicidal; in all probability, in spite of the silence, and seeming loneliness of the scene without, a dozen rifles were even then trained on the entrance, ready to shoot them down the instant either appeared. And there was no other way out, unless it might be through some secret passage existing underground. Macklin had certainly disappeared somewhere; the vanishing of his body was no miracle, and this theory of how it might have been accomplished alone appeared reasonable. In spite of his doubts, the man held to a measure of hope; nothing else than this remained which he could cling to; their only chance lay in some such discovery. Yet the woman, groping on her knees in the deepening darkness gave no sign of encouragement. Shelby could bear the strain no longer in silence.

"There is nothing to be found?" he asked anxiously, "no appearance of a trap?"

She lifted her head, with face turned toward him.

"Nothing that I seem able to move," she answered. "I have found a block which does not appear to fit as tightly as the others; I can get the knife blade between, and it doesn't seem to touch any earth below, yet the slab is immovable."

"Let me try my strength."

He started back to join her, but at that instant there came a sudden burst of rifle fire without, bullets thudding into the cabin walls, the sound punctuated by savage yells. Shelby whirled about instantly, and dropped to his knees, with eyes peering out through the opening between the logs. Olga also deserted her search, and climbed to her post of defense on the bench. The bullets did no damage, generally finding billet in the solid logs, although a few crashed through the planking of the door. To Shelby the meaning was sufficiently plain; the real danger lay, as he expected, in the rear; all this noise was being carried on merely to attract their attention. He called across, unable to see his companion, but well aware where she was.

"Don't waste any shot until you see something within range. Those fellows out there are just plugging away blindly. They'll never rush this side. Keep your eyes wide open, though. I'm going back, and try to knock off a board from that rear window. If I can get a few shots out there we'll [illegible] their little game. You hear?"

"Yes; I think one or two are crawling closer through those weeds."

"Likely enough, young bucks who can't hold back; keep your eye on them, an' let them have it, as soon as you are sure. Call out if you need me."

He groped his way as far as the inner door, helped by the almost continuous flash of the rifles outside; he had even crossed the threshold, his heart, choking him as he perceived a glare of red flame, already visible here and there through narrow chinks between the logs. Perhaps he was already too late—those devils had fired the cabin, the licking flames even then beginning to eat into the dry bark. He had no time in which to act or even think. Before he might venture another step forward. Olga fired twice rapidly, the flare of her revolver lighting up the entire interior. What followed he scarcely knew; there was a sharp cry,

"Was She Dead, or Alive?"

the crash of the overturned bench, and the sound of a body falling heavily on the floor. A revolver went spinning noisily across the room, and then all was still, and black once more.

Shelby could see nothing; only the blurred memory of that single instant had seared itself on his brain. She had been shot—his wife; this girl he had learned to love! Some stray shot from an Indian rifle, fired blindly in the dark, had found fatal passage through that broken shutter, and struck her down. His first helpless daze changed into a rage of revenge, mingled with a wild yearning that he might yet find her alive.

"Olga!" he cried out, "Olga!"

There was no answer, no movement. All was black, soundless; even the rifle fire without had ceased.

He dropped to his knees, and crept forward, feeling along the floor with outstretched hands, dreading each instant to touch her body. Suddenly his searching fingers encountered an opening in the puncheon floor.

Shelby dared not move, except to feel downward into this mysterious opening. Yet he realized instantly what must have occurred—the miracle which had so swiftly disclosed this secret passage. The girl, in falling, had dislodged the very block in the floor she had been endeavoring so vainly to discover. It had suddenly swung downward to the heavy blow of her body, and she had fallen with it [illegible] the unknown darkness below. [illegible] was she dead or alive? Had the [illegible] stunned her? He drew himself to [illegible] very edge listening. What was [illegible] there? Macklin perhaps; the [illegible] bodies might be lying there together in a common grave. But wait, something moved surely!

"Olga! speak to me!"

He couldn't restrain the agony which he uttered the words. Fr[illegible] ened as she was, dazed by the [illegible] scarcely conscious even yet, or she [illegible] actually comprehend what had [illegible] curred, his cry penetrated her [illegible] brought her back to life.

"Yes, I—I am here, Tom," she [illegible] aged to say weakly.

"And you are not hurt?" his [illegible] thrilling now with a sudden return [illegible] hope.

"Oh, I—I don't know. I c[illegible] even tell what has happene[illegible] stepped back quickly, the bench [illegible] turned and I fell. It is all [illegible] around me—where am I?"

"In the passage beneath the ca[illegible] he explained quickly. "It has be[illegible] miracle; your fall opened the [illegible] Perhaps we may escape from [illegible] devils yet. Take room for me to d[illegible] down; the cabin is already on fi[illegible] the hole dee[illegible]."

"Not very! I think, and there [illegible] room."

He lowered himself, but it was [illegible] necessary to drop; his feet struck [illegible] earth floor, and, as he turned [illegible] hands came in contact with the [illegible] still dangling, just as it had fallen. Obeying the first impulse, aware of a sudden outburst of red flames somewhere above him, he forced the block upward, back into its place, jamming it there with all his strength, until a sharp click convinced him the puncheon again was securely held. They were alone, isolated, in the black depths, underneath the burning cabin, buried deep in the protecting earth. He reached blindly out through the darkness until he touched her, his fingers closing convulsively on a fold of her dress. In the sudden reaction he felt as weak as a child, unable even to control his speech.

"It was God who helped us," he said humbly, "no one else could. You are sure, Olga, you are unhurt?"

"I must be bruised, I suppose; it was an ugly fall, and—and I really think I lost consciousness at first. Then I seemed to hear you call me a long ways off. Is the cabin afire?"

"Yes; those devils started it at the rear. You can hear the wood crackle even down here, and we must get farther back out of the way. When the roof falls this part of the floor may cave in also."

In spite of the increasing volume of flames above, scarcely a glimmer of red light succeeded in penetrating to where they were hidden. A very slight glow found entrance through a narrow crack above them, yet Shelby was compelled to learn their immediate surroundings more by sense of touch than sight.

They were in a mere hole scooped out from the soft earth, hardly wider than the trap door which led to it, the other puncheons of the cabin floor resting solidly upon the ground. Shelby leading the way, feeling his passage along inch by inch, was suddenly halted by an earth barrier which seemingly blocked all further progress. He could feel that it did not wholly reach the top, leaving a space there through which it might be possible to crawl. Yet what would there be beyond? Why should they venture further at present? Laud was outside with his Indians, the whole scene lit up with the glare of flames. They dare not venture to expose themselves. Here they were beyond reach, protected from both flames and savages. Unless some among those assailants knew the existence of this tunnel, or accidentally stumbled upon its outer entrance, they could scarcely be exposed. Even if one or two found their way in, this barrier of earth would block them, and, if necessary, form the best possible defense. Confident that they had perished, and that their charred bodies were lying in the midst of the still smoking embers of the cabin, there would be no guard watching for an attempt at escape. He reached out and grasped her hand, drawing her down beside him.

"What is it?" she asked in a whisper.

"A fall of earth nearly blocking the passage," he explained. "I have no idea where the tunnel leads to, and, if I did, we would never dare creep out into the open at present."

"You—you think we had better remain here?" doubtfully.

"Until the fire dies down; perhaps even longer. Let them believe we died in the cabin; then there may be some chance for us to get away."

"But they will search the ruins?"

"Not for some time; those logs will be glowing embers for hours. That sounded like the roof falling in then. It was—see! It has crushed its way down through the floor. There is a caldron of fire in that hole we just left, but it can't reach us here—only the smoke."

"Will it not show them where we

"I Love You!" He Whispered Passionately.

alive, and I want to be honest with you for once. Whatever happens, I would rather you knew."

"But you cannot mean—"

"It is exactly what I mean, Tom. I love you! Do you care?"

"Care! Why, Olga, girl, I have done nothing but care. I hardly knew what it all meant at first, the way I thought of you. Love came to me like a strange thing. I have led a man's life, and I have known few good women. Even now I cannot wholly realize what has come to me."

He gathered her suddenly into his arms, the neckerchief slipping down about her throat.

"I love you!" he whispered passionately, "love you, wife of mine."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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