

COMRADES OF PERIL

By RANDALL PARRISH

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CHAPTER XIV—Continued.

"That is why I am coming back," she insisted. "I told you I could shoot."

"All right," he grinned cheerfully. "Come along, then; only you keep down out of the way, and let me do the sniping. There's now you lost me a shot! Did you see that buck dodge between those two rocks? He'll try that trick again presently."

Oiga came back, creeping out cautiously and finding a place slightly behind where he lay. She held in one weapon, laying the other on the rocks together with a bag filled with cartridges.

Shelby barely averted his eyes toward her, his whole attention concentrated on what was occurring below. Suddenly she was taking place down but exactly what could not immediately be determined. He had perceived men moving beyond range, dodging along from rock to rock, more glancing dark figures, but plainly enough Indians. Once he was almost sure he distinguished a white man, through a rift in a gully, but the fleeting view gained was not convincing. Nevertheless he had no doubt that there were white men present. The method of attack was too bold, and determined, for savages alone; it was not the Sioux idea of war. Besides the one man who would have a real object in this assault would be Laud. Beyond all question it was he who was behind the effort, urged on by personal hatred, as well as a desire to gain possession of Oiga. Shelby wondered what the fellow might know about the escape of the Macklin's and that Pancha had ridden forth in search for help. If he did that might account for his desperate eagerness to overcome what resistance he could offer before she returned. Yet probably not, for if he did know the coward in him would cause him to seek fight before he could be cornered in this place. It was far more likely that he believed himself armed merely by Shelby and the girl, opposed with a revolver or two, and having a limited supply of ammunition. He saw little peril in the adventure, and figured that a quick, sharp rush, his warriors leaping from covert to covert, would win an easy victory. He would keep up a steady rifle fire from behind the rocks, forcing the defenders to keep under cover, and then suddenly send a charging party to end the affair.

Shelby snuffed grimly at the mental picture, never turning his head as he spoke to the silent girl beside him. "Don't Macklin!"

"Dead, I think, Tom. He didn't seem to breathe even faintly." "The poor devil; it will be mighty hard on Pancha though. You got your gun?"

"Yes."

"All loaded, I reckon; if not you better fill it up. There is going to be a fight here presently. When I say so, keep on drive. Keep down out of sight till then, but when you begin to pump smoke her act like a gnatling."

"But can't those rascals see you there?"

"Well, it doesn't look much like they can, the way they are peepin' in that rock. Nice little tune the bucks are playin'. That's what makes me think something's up; they ain't to keep us down out of sight, so we won't get what's comin'." Tain't Indian nature to waste land that way. Laud's back there somewhere playin' his game. I think I got sight of the meakin' cuss a minute ago, but he was out of range."

"You believe they intend to try and get up here?"

"That's my present notion; they don't look for much trouble either. It's up to us to give that outfit the surprise of their lives."

She reached out her hand and found his, as it rested on the belt of cartridges.

"Tom?"

"Yes."

"I—I don't know what is going to happen. I—I am not afraid, but—"

"But it seems to me I—I would like to have you kiss me once more first—"

"You only have once, you know."

Shelby turned his body about, looking his cocked revolver lying on the stone, and caught both her hands eagerly.

"Lord, I'm glad to hear you say that, little girl," he exclaimed, his eyes aglow. "I reckon I've been sort-

half afraid of you. But I ain't going to be any more; you sure mean it, don't you?"

Her eyes looked honestly, earnestly into his, answering him before her lips spoke.

"With all my heart, Tom."

He drew her softly toward him, forgetful of all else. The fifth spot of the parquetry, sending a splinter of stone flying past them.

It was a long, nerve-racking wait, during which they rested side by side, intent on every movement below, but doing little opportunity for action.

Occasionally they spoke, but generally remained silently watchful. The Indians kept up a desultory fire, and their aim was evidently making a change of position, yet so stealthily as to be hardly observed. They exposed themselves freely enough beyond pistol range, proof that they were fully aware of the call of the weapon.

Twice only did Shelby succeed in getting a fair shot—once clipping a scalp lock from an incautious fellow exposed head, and again wincing a man who recklessly attempted to leap across a narrow opening. This fellow dropped in the open trail, wounded in the thigh, and unable to drag himself to shelter, and soon a sliver of red arm reached out from behind a rock in an effort at rescue.

This was withdrawn quickly as a speeding bullet struck within an arm's length of the hand. The injured warrior lay there twitching with pain.

The minutes dragged into half an hour, the strained nerves of the defenders on edge. Oiga was trembling from head to foot, struggling to restrain self-control, Shelby never relaxing a muscle, or averting the steady gaze of his eyes. Suddenly he rose to his knees, a revolver gripped in either hand.

"There's Laud now," he announced simply.

She saw the fellow also, lifting her head to peer over the low rim of rock, standing in the open trail, but just beyond range. He held a rifle in his hands, which he swung above his head, at the same time giving utterance to a hoarse shout. It must have been a signal, for instantly those figures were black with half-outfitted rifles flung in air, and giving utterance to fierce yells. It was a wild race, but the steep ascent to the cave halted them. The two above, reckless of exposure, fired as swiftly as they could press trigger, straight into the red faces. Some fell, shot down in their tracks, a few paused to reply, but the majority began to clamor back, and Laud ran forward to join them, shouting his orders. He was in full view against the snow-covered trail, and Shelby swung his smoking muzzle down upon him. To the crenelated fellow flung up both hands in a shapeless heap. Shelby, scarcely realizing the success of his quick shot, staggered back, reversed the gun in his hand, and struck with the butt at the first Indian appearing above the platform. It was hand to hand.

CHAPTER XV.

A Squadron of the Sixth.

Pancha vaulted into the fog, wading along the creek, and finally creeping out below the burned edge of the hill, where the guards lay there they were not encountered, and the mist hung so thick at that early hour she took few precautions to avoid them.

Her one thought was Macklin's love had conquered hate, and the desire for revenge. There was a chance of suc-

cess for her mission. The details had not been searched over; it could not have been, for the fire still smoldered, but the moment the Indians were able to overhaul the wreck they would discover that their victims had, in some way, escaped. There would be no chance of success. There would be no dead bodies consumed in the flames; they would not even find Macklin's remains. And Laud was no fool. The truth, in some form, would come to him at last; he would know they had got safely away; he would never stop until he again found them. And he would suspect her; perhaps had seen her face when she tried that fatal shot. Her only chance lay now, before this revelation came. She was cool, resourceful; had shrewdly thought out every step. If she was still unsuspected, no one would stop her. She had always been used to lead the way. Often she had taken early rides, and none of the ordinary guards would consider her going forth as at all strange. Of course, the hole was filled with strange fugitives—Indians hiding from the soldiers, suspicious of every white face. This might cause trouble, but she must take that chance. There was but one way to save Macklin's life; the doctor at Gerlach's, and unable to tell her so, and nothing else remained fixed in her mind. Mother of God, she would save him!

There were three horses in the little stable shack back of the cabin. She crept cautiously up through the fog, unable to see in the gloom, but feeling the animals by touch. One was still moist from riding, Laud's pony, no doubt. The next was a bay, and the third was the bay Jun had always been so proud of. She led the animal out, saddled and bridled him in the darkness, and with a mousing in the gray dawn, with a prayer for her heart, for help and guidance she rode slowly out into the trail. A fire burned in front of the little house behind the falls, a mere flicker of half-burned sticks, with two men hovering over it. One of the horse's hoofs and gripped a rifle. He was white, a flapping hat brim shadowed his face; the other, a blond, and heart gave a start, bound, but she reined up carelessly, as the fellow stepped into the fall. He peered curiously into her face.

"H—! young woman, you're out-d—d early, ain't you? What's up?"

There was nothing vicious in his greeting, and her heart quit its pounding.

"I'm after a doctor, Sam," she said swiftly, believing boldness the best card to play. "My brother has been shot."

"Sure, I heard that, only they told me he was dead; he ain't, hey? Had a rumper with Jun Joe, didn't he?"

"Yes; I just heard about it. He must have the doctor right away."

"Where the h—! you aim to find one?"

"Over at Gerlach's. There is an army surgeon there."

"Sure, but I'm bettin' the cuss won't come. 'Less he brings the whole army along with him. He'd have ter money in your blindfold if he did."

"Just the same he'll come, if I find him," she said grimly. "For I'll bring him, dead or alive. Who's out there on the trail?"

"Red Indians, an' Stumpy, 'long with a couple of Sioux. The boys are a bit 'umpy just now with all them soldiers scoutin', the Bad Lands. Maybe they'll try ter stop yer, but yer got to go on last night—shoot, ter beat h—! up the canyon, an' there was quite a fire, too?"

"Now over the girl Macklin brought in," she explained calmly, "the old cabin got burned."

"Some more of 'Injun Joe's' cussedness, I reckon?"

"Yes, he was in it; well, Atlas Sam."

She rode forward, never even veering to glance back. Thus far everything had gone easier than she could have hoped. There were no orders out against her, and these night guards were not even aware of her. She had taken place at the old cabin under the veil of falling water, and up the steep bank beyond, out into the valley of the Cottonwood.

There was little danger of meeting anyone now, she needed to avoid, and these night watchers at the bend of the trail, the way would be open. She came upon these just below the crest, grouped for shelter under the ledge of an outcropping rock. Haines had been drinking and was in a good humor, listening to her story with a broad grin, and dismissing her willingly enough.

"To h—! of course yer kin go," he said lazily. "Yer brother pulled me out of the Sowskin net. He's a d—d good scout of a Mex. Go to it, girl; you know the trail!"

"Yes, along the edge of the Bad Lands."

"Sarge; better keep in the first gully, yer might run into a sojer outfit. They're thicker than fleas out-

there now, they tell me. So long, sister."

It had begun to snow, big, heavy flakes, drifting with the wind, quickly whitening the landscape. The slight murk of the trail were almost instantly obliterated, but the low range of hills ahead were a sufficient landmark, and she forced her horse into a swift pace, riding with her head lowered, and with watchful eyes peering through the snow curtain.

She was alone now; free, with nothing intervening between her and Gerlach's. Her heart bounded with the thought of success—she would bring back the doctor to Macklin. She felt no doubt any more.

The direct trail skirted just within the outer range of the sand hills, making it impossible for her to mistake the way even in that maze of snow. She rode more carelessly now that she was safely out of sight, and free from any possibility of pursuit.

The horse, with lowered head, seemed to feel the urgency, and plunged forward eagerly. Suddenly as they swept around a sharp corner, seeing and hearing nothing to warn of any other presence in that solitude, they came at full tilt against a hated column

of cavalry. Before Pancha could even jerk up her reins, a startled trooper had gripped the bit, and held her mount helplessly paving the air.

"Well, what's this?" he growled, rucking at the frightened animal, and dragged half of his foot in the fierce struggle. "A Mex! Say, fellows, this looks like Arizona. Lay hold here, Mapes! Call the sergeant, somebody; I've got this bird; when there now, what's this about young lady?"

"What is it Summers?" the sergeant, pushing through the ring of men, peered curiously up at her from under the brim of a battered campaign hat.

"She just came a-tairin' in, sergeant, like she was goin' somewhere. She was sure ridin' like h—!, an' she is Mex, all right."

"So I see. Well, senorita, want you to come out here?"

His face was kindly, if stern.

"Senor, I ride for a doctor," she said earnestly. "Please do not stop me—a man is dying."

"A man? Where? Is he a Mexican?"

"No, senor, an Americano; he was shot; he verba bad! If I find no doctor, he die maybe."

"But where were you going?"

"To Gerlach's, senor; there is army doctor there."

"Not now there ain't; he's back here with us somewhere. Where is this fellow who's hurt?"

She hesitated just an instant, yet there was no averting the truth. If the doctor was here among these soldiers, she would have to tell the truth or else desert Macklin to his fate. He would not do this, she was sure. Laud suddenly stared into new life. Here was the opportunity for revenge, as well as service.

"In Wolves' hole, senor."

"Wolves' hole? Good! Had you come from there? Pass the word for the major, some one. What's that? Oh, excuse me, sir," and he came stiffly to attention, facing the heavy-set, middle-aged officer, with iron-gray mustache and goatee.

"What have you here, sergeant?" the latter asked briefly, "Mexican woman?"

"Yes, sir; she just ran into us at full tilt. She claims to be after a doctor, she's claims to be a wounded Americano in Wolves' hole."

"Is that so? Perhaps this is good luck. Who is this Indian, senorita?"

"He is a love, senor."

"Oh, that's it. Then perhaps we can do business. We've got a surgeon here with us. If you will show us—"

From a story—"I am half inclined to kiss you," he said, as he bent over her. —Boston Transcript.

The "war of the union" begins shortly after the marriage ceremony ends.

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a way to get into Wolves' hole. I'll promise he'll take care of your man, all right."

"You ask me to guide you?"

"That's the bargain. We have been trying to locate the place for two days. Who is the leader of those outlaws?"

"Indian Joe Laud, senor."

"I've heard of the brute. Judging from the way you looked then, he is no friend of yours."

"No, senor; I hate him; he kept my brother; now he try to kill this man I tell you 'bout—he an' two more Americones."

"Two more? This is becoming interesting, Sergeant. Let's have the straight story, senorita. You want us to help these people—is that it?"

"Si, senor; it is nothing to me what you do. I care for them not at all; they are my people any more. There are many—Indians a lot; they hide there."

"But, who are these Americones? They belong to the gang?"

"No, senor. One was a woman, senor; young, pretty woman; she captured and brought there. Pet was her husband that try to save her. He follow an' git in some way, like the mother of God help. Hees name was Shelby."

"Shelby?" broke in the sergeant, forgetting of the officer's presence in his surprise. "What Shelby? Was his other name Tom?"

"Si, senor," and she turned her eyes on him. "You know this Tom Shelby?"

"Do I? Of course I do. You remember him, Major Hays. He was sent down to the C Troop; then later he was with the scouts. He's up in this country, I know. I ran into him down at Ponca when I came through there. Why, that was his wedding day, and I saw the bride."

"I say, those venerable devils have got their both there in the hole!" broke to the major, "prisoners?"

"They got away now; they hide in a cave," she explained.

"And you was about the way in?"

"Senor, the doctor he will care for this man if I do."

"I pledge you my word he will."

"And you, keep Indian Joe Laud, senor?"

"We'll surely do our best."

"I know you—yes; who that man there?"

Shanpussy wheeled about to face the fellow she pointed at, gripping him with one hand, and dragging him forth from among the wilder.

"This is the bird they gave us for a guide," he said shortly. "You know him?"

"He," she gave vent to a bitter laugh. "That fellow Duff Knifer; bad Indian, herce thief. Why they give you him?"

"I—I knows. What'll I do with the cuss, major?"

"Have a couple of men hold him under guard. We seem to be on the right track now; senorita, where is this Wolves' hole?"

"Over there, not far; across the mesa. You come! I show you. That be better first—senor—just you an' me, so you can tell each other, so we be not seen."

"On foot? You don't mean we are so near the place?"

"Si, senor; I show you."

A little band followed her lead between the sand ridges out upon the open plain—the major, a lieutenant, the sergeant, and three men. She led them along a slight depression, sufficiently to partially screen them from observation. The steady fall of snow had ceased, although there were occasional flurries, driving sharply low and gray. Hays swore under his breath, but convinced he was being misled, he started to speak, but held his tongue. The girl never turned her head, but moved straight forward.

She came to a slight ridge, and stopped suddenly, pointing.

"There, senor," she said simply, "Wolves' hole."

The astounded officer stood motionless, his mouth open, his eyes staring at the sight so unexpectedly revealed. For an instant he could not believe what he saw. Almost under his feet the precipice fell away into that tremendous gorge, the mantle of snow emphasizing its depth, but bringing out the black rocks in stern contrast.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, "what a rift! And not a sign to make you dream of its existence. I'd have sworn I got back this plain was a dead level for thirty miles. But how in heaven's name do we ever get down there?"

"There is something going on, sir, on Indian side, and you speak up to the lieutenant eagerly. 'Listen, those are rifles popping, and I can see white puffs of smoke through the glass. There's a fight going on down there.'"

"Dear you, you ain't right, Boyd! You're certainly jumping away rather lively. Currier Shelby likely, and as I remember the lad, he'll stay with them as long as he has a cartridge left. By Jingo! we've got to get down, and clear this nest out. Where's the trail, senorita?"

"Over down to the left, senor. You take your glass, so. Now straight along the bank, where that cedar tree tops the edge. Mind you, you see me! I mean—"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

In Position.

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