

# COMRADES OF PERIL

By RANDALL PARRISH

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## CHAPTER XII.

### The Attack on the Cabin.

There was no sound from without, except occasionally the echo of a distant voice shouting. 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 scurrying. "This beats anything ever I saw. He couldn't have been killed, but I never saw him twitch a muscle after he dropped. Gosh! Darn if I know what to make of it. Why, where could he have gone to? There ain't but one way out from this shack and he sure didn't go out there."

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

"Seen him? Of course, we would. He must have revved and crawled away. You bet, there ain't no mystery about it. Dead men ain't movin' around and 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 blime 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 forth across the threshold of the lower 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 night; he stepped 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; nobb'y is going to hurt you."

There was no response, no movement, no sound. A groan, a pulsing of breath. The stillness was intense, horrible. Shelby gripped himself and began to advance slowly, guiding his passage along the wall, expecting at any 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 accept the fact. He came back to the door, dazed and unimpaired. All nature, all reasoning within him the man must be somewhere within the cabin; any other thought was simply 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 holes could vanish through these walls; there isn't a window nor boarded up and only that one door. We wasn't out here ten minutes, nor ten feet away from the step. A rat couldn't have passed without being 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. Ah," 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 and no opening, while judging from outside, the floor must rest 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 really 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 was shot. I believe it was she who came back and took the body away."

"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 and see if you can find anything. What was going on out there?"

"Nothing much, but 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 woods."

Just a guard laid 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, and they know it—anyhow, Land does. Try going to the window 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 knife. Shelby turned his head occasionally, barely able to distinguish her movements, yet felt little confidence in the success of the effort. Any attempt to escape from the cabin, through the instant opening, was a miracle, and this 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 as they came.

There was no other way out, unless it might be through some secret passage existing underground. Macklin had certainly discovered something of the kind, 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, not being willing to let this remained, yet he could cling to their only chance lay in some such discovery. Yet the woman, groping on her knees in the deepening darkness gave up this hope, and 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.

"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 behind it, 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 through the opening between the logs. Olga also deserted her search, and clambered to her post of defense on the bench. The bullets did no damage, merely rattling about the walls, although a few crashed through the planking of the floor.

To Shelby the meaning was sufficiently plain; the real danger lay, as he expected, at the rear; all this noise was directed at the rear, 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. These 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 we can get a few sticks out there we'll get their little name. You hear?"

"Yes; I think one or two are crawling closer these hours."

"Likely enough; keep your eyes on them, and let them have it, as soon as you are sure. Call out if you need me."

He dropped his way 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.

He reached the door, and 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.

"What's that?"

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

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

"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, 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 punctures of the cabin floor resting solidly upon the ground. Shelby, leading the way, feeling his passage along inch by inch, was suddenly seized by an earth-shaking which seemed to break up the ground.

He could feel it, it did not wholly reach the top, leaving a space there through which it might be possible to crawl. Yet what was this? He was startled. Why should they venture further at present? Land was outside with his Indian; the whole scene lit up with the glare of flames. They dared not venture to escape—themselves. Here they were beyond reach, protected from both flames and savages. Unless some among these assailants knew the existence of this 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 to 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—your 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 for some time; those logs will be glowing embers for hours. Let the glowing embers be left falling to them."

"Was—see! It has crushed its way down through the floor. There is a cauldron of fire in that hole we just left, but it can't reach us here—only the smoke."

"Will it not show where we are?" 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."

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still dangling, just as it had fallen. Obeying the first impulse, aware of a sudden outburst of red flames some where above him, he forced the block upward, back into its place, fanning it there with his strength, until a sharp click convinced him the puncture again was securely held. They were alone, isolated, in the black depths, underneath the burning cabin. 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 herded. In the sudden reaction he herded. In the sudden reaction he herded.

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"Don't lose your nerve," he whispered, startled by her action, "nothing can hurt us here."

"Oh, I know; it is not that," she went almost a sob. "I do not think I am really frightened; only I—I want to feel you near me."

"Me?" he questioned surprised; "why, I haven't been much good so far."

"Oh, but you have; you have been splendid. No woman could ever ask more. I want you to know how grateful I am."

"Well, I don't just like that," he protested. "There ain't no cause for you to be grateful, so far as I can see. A man who wouldn't stick with his wife wouldn't be much."

"Are you here just because of that?"

"Well, maybe not altogether. Of course, I'd be here anyhow. I wouldn't go back on no woman who belonged to me. But you ain't just that exactly. I've somehow got to thinkin' a lot about you lately."

"Truly?"

"Sure; there's a heap of things happened since we was lined up against the wall of that shack down at Ponca. I've found out more what you are than I knew then. I reckon, you get a better time on me."

"I chose you even then."

He laughed awkwardly.

"Out of that bunch! I don't take that as no great compliment. Gosh, that was the meanest lot o' cattle ever rode herd over."

"Oh, I don't know," her mood changing into less interest. "There were some among them not so bad. Anyhow, I chose you."

"Maybe you're sorry since?"

"I am not," firmly. "I never have been. See here, Tom Shelby, I pretty near knew what sort of man you was when I selected you; your face told me that. You thought I just took you as a get away. Well, maybe I did in a sense, for I would have done almost anything to escape from that life. But I never would have gone with you. If I had, honestly liked you just the same. You said in the cabin there that you didn't marry me because you knew I had money—that you had no such knowledge. Was that true?"

"Then why did you marry me?"

His face, burning from the heat of the nearby flames, grew redder, if possible, with embarrassment. Her eyes were gazing straight at him, insistent of an answer.

"Well, I ain't exactly sure that I know," he admitted reluctantly. "Maybe I sorter sympathized with you a bit, at first, then I sorter liked you, and then I sorter loved you. I—I kinder got to wantin' you myself."

"I knew you did."

"You knew? But how? I never said anything like that."

"So just I felt the change. I would never have said 'yes' otherwise. I am willing to tell you where. Perhaps we shall never get out of this place."

"Certainly."

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## ONE NEIGHBOR TELLS ANOTHER

Points the Way to Comfort and Health. Other Women Please Read

Moundville, W. Va.—"I had taken doctor's medicine for nearly two years

because my periods were irregular, came every two weeks, and I would suffer with bearing-down pains. A lady told me of Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound and how much good it had done her daughter, so I took it and now I am regular every month and have no pain at all. I recommend your medicine to everyone and you may publish my story, hoping that the Vegetable Compound does some other girl the good it has done me."—Mrs. GROSZ, TAZEWELL, 916 Third Street, Moundville, W. Va.

How many young girls suffer as Mrs. Tazewell did and do not know where to turn for advice or help. They often are obliged to earn their living by toiling day in and day out no matter how hard the pain they have to bear. Every girl who suffers in this way should try Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound and if she does get better, write and tell us. We will send her a box of the Compound, and if she is in need of it, we will send her a box of the Compound, and if she is in need of it, we will send her a box of the Compound.

Such letters are held in strict confidence.

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