

# COMRADES OF PERIL

By RANDALL PARRISE

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## CHAPTER XIV—Continued.

"That is why I am coming back."

"Instinct," I told you I could shoot."

"All right," he grinned cheerfully.

"Come along, then; only you keep down."

"There's now you lost me a shot."

"Did you see that black dog between those 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 to one weapon, laying the other on the rocks, together with a belt filled with cartridges.

She barely swept his eyes toward her, his whole attention concentrated on what was occurring below. Something was taking place down there, but exactly what could not immediately be determined. He had perceived beyond moving beyond range, dodging along from rock to rock, mere glimpses of dark figures, yet plainly enough Indians. Once he was almost sure he distinguished a white man, through a rift in a gully, but the flexing wing guided was not convincing. Nevertheless he had no doubt but what 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 Laul. Beyond all question it was Laul 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. Could he be aware of the escape of Mackinac and that Pancha had ridden forth in search for help? If he did that might account for his desperate eagerness to overcome what resistance they could offer before she returned. Yet probably not, for if he did know the coward in him would cause him to seek flight before he could be cornered in this place. It was far more likely that he believed himself opposed to more by Shelby and the girl, armed 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 way being cleared 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 smiled grimly at the mental picture, never turning his head as he spoke to the silent girl beside him.

"Hear's Mackinac."

"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 to the death."

"So, you'll drive 'em down out of sight till then, but when you begin to pounce make her act like a cat."

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

"Well, it doesn't look much like they can, the way they are peepin' that rock. Nice little time 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 glimpse what's comin'." "Tain't Indian nature to waste lead that way. Laul's back there somewhere playin' this game. I think I got sight of the meakin' cause 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 is 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.

"Yes."

"Yes," he answered without removing his gaze from the trail below.

"Don't worry about me," she said earnestly. "You know what I mean; don't think about me. I'll take care of myself, all right."

He cast a quick glance into her face.

"Sure, I know you will. You are a trump, a good partner. I thought that for a long while. You won't forget what I told you."

"I'll not forget."

There was a moment of silence and then she spoke again, a sharp little catch in her voice which she could not restrain.

"Tom."

"Yes."

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

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

"You only have one more first, love."

Shelby turned his body about, lay on his side, cocked his revolver and then he came forward and caught both her hands eagerly.

"Lord, I'm glad to hear you say that, little girl."

"Yes, I'm glad to hear you say that, little girl."

"I reckon I've been sorter eyes right."

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

He eyes looked honestly, earnestly into his, answering him, before he spoke.

"With all my heart, Tom."

Headed her softly toward him, forgetful of all else. Then a rifle spat viciously, and a ball struck the edge of the parapet, 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 finding little opportunity for action. Occasionally they spoke, but generally remained silently watchful. The Indians kept up a desultory fire, and behind his screen were evidently making a change of position, yet so stealthily as to be hardly perceptible. They exposed themselves freely enough beyond pistol range, proof that they were fully aware of the caliber of the weapons confronting them, but closer in the savages crept from rock to rock in this and that, until Shelby succeeded in getting a fair shot—once clipping a scalp loose from an incautiously exposed head, and again winging a brave who recklessly attempted to leap across a narrow opening. This leap resulted in the open trail, wounded to the thigh, and unable to drag himself to shelter, and soon a shrewd red arm reached out from behind a rock in an effort at rescue. This was withdrawn quickly as a speeding bullet struck within an inch of the outstretched hand. The Indian 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 retain self-control. Shelby never relaxing a gaze, or averting the steady gaze of his eyes. Suddenly he rose to his knees, a revolver gripped in either hand.

"There's Laul 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, as if he were about to throw it, and at the same time giving utterance to a hoarse shout. It must have been a signal, for instantly there were black with half-naked figures, 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.

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ness for his mission. The debris 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 charred bones, no singed flesh, no tattered bodies consumed in the flames; they would not even find Mackinac's remains. And Laul was no fool. The truth, in some form, would come to him at once; he would know they had got safely away; nor would he ever stop until he again found them. And he would suspect her; perhaps had seen her face when she fired that fatal shot. Her only chance lay now, before this revelation came.

She was cool, resolute; and she was still out every step. If she were still unsuspected, no one would stop her. She had always been free to leave the valley. Often she had taken early rides, and consider her ordinary guards, would consider her going forth as at all strange. Of course, the Hole was filled now with strange fugitives—Indians hiding from the soldiers, suspicious of every white man, and a general trouble, but face. These might cause trouble, but that was one way to save Mackinac's life—the doctor at Gerlach's. Shelby had told her so, and nothing else seemed fixed in her mind. "Of God, she would save him!"

There were three her, in the little stable back of the cabin. She crept cautiously up through the trees, the moon, but lo, unable to see in the moon, but lo, unable to see the animals by touch. One was still moist from riding, Laul's pony, no doubt. The next was her own, having scarcely stamina for such a trip, but the third was the bay. She had always been so proud of her. She led the animal out, saddled and bridled him in the darkness, and then, a mauling in the gray dawn, with a prayer in her heart for help and guidance, she rode slowly out of the trail. A fire burned in front of the little house; beside the falls, a mere flicker of half-burned logs, with two men hovering about it. One of the horse's hoofs and grazed a rifle. He was white, a Dapping; it bit him showing his face; the other, an Indian, wrapped in a blanket moodily. Her head gave a sharp bound, but she stepped up carelessly, as the fellow reined into the trail. He peered curiously into her face.

"I—I, 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.

"In after a doctor, Sam," she said, softly, belittling boldness the best card to play. "My brother has been shot."

"Sure, I heard that; they told me he was dead, he ain't, hey? Had a run-up with Injun Joe, didn't he?"

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

"Where the h—l you aim to find one?"

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

"Sure, but I bettin' the cuss won't come, less he brings the whole army 'long with him. He'd have 'er for money in a heartbeat 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 on the trail?"

"Red Haines, an' Stumpy, 'long with a couple of Sioux. The boys are a bit jump; just now with all them soldiers scoutin' the Bad Lands. Maybe they'll try to stop you, but yer tell 'em I said it was all right. Say, what you got on last night—shootin', or what?"

"I was out on the canyon, an' there was quite a fire, too."

"Row over the girl Mackinac brought in," she explained calmly. "An' the cabin got burned."

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

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

She rode forward, never even turning to glance back. Thus far everything had gone easier than she had hoped. There were no orders against her, and those which she had not even aware of what had taken place. She guided her horse under the veil of falling water, and up the steep bank beyond, out into the valley of the Gros Ventre.

There was little chance of meeting anyone there, she needed to avoid, and once beyond those watchers at the head of the trail, the way would be open. She came upon them just below the crest, guided by shelter under the ledge of an outcropping rock. Haines had been drinking and was in a good humor, or listening to her story with a broad grin, and dismissing her willingly enough.

"To h—l o' or se yer kin go," he said thickly. "Ye brother pulled me out o' the Sowski; ont. He's a d—d good sort o' a l—x. Go to it, girl; you know the way."

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

"Spre; better k—p in the first gully, or yer might run inter a soldier out. They're thicker than flies out there now, they tell me. So, long, sister."

It had begun to snow, big, heavy flakes, drifting with the wind, thickly whitening the landscape. The slight marks of the trail were almost instantly obliterated, but the low range of hills ahead was sufficient to hamper her. 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 elixir of success—she would bring back the doctor to Mackinac. She felt no doubt any more.

The direct trail circled 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 carefully 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 on a sharp corner, seeing and bearing nothing to warn of any other presence in that solitude, they came at full tilt against a hated column

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"Well, what's this?" he growled, tugging at the frightened animal, and dragged half his feet in the dirt.

"A Mex! Say, fellows, this looks like Arizona. Lay hold here, Mags! Call the sergeant, somebody! I've got this bird!"

He was all this about young lady's white, a Dapping; it bit him showing his face; the other, an Indian, wrapped in a blanket moodily. Her head gave a sharp bound, but she stepped up carelessly, as the fellow reined into the trail. He peered curiously into her face.

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