

PEARL of the ARMY

Guy W. McConnell

STORIES.

Capt. Ralph Payne, U. S. A., is given secret plans of defense to deliver to Panama. He attends a ball at the home of his sweetheart, Colonel Dares' daughter, Pearl. As a climax to a series of mysterious incidents he is arrested for treason. The ambassador of Granada is found dead and the plans missing from Payne's coat. Major Brent, Payne's rival, enters into suspicious negotiations with Bertha Bonn. Pearl Dare follows a burglar from her home; is drugged and left in a field, and later overhears plotters, who almost capture her. Payne is sentenced to life imprisonment.

THIRD EPISODE

The Silent Menace.

Toward sunrise on the following day a corporal of the guard entered Captain Payne's room at the Washington barracks. He found the celebrated prisoner fully dressed and awaiting the punishment about to be his, whereby he would become one of the lost citizens of the republic which, according to the findings of the court, he was guilty of conspiring against with a southern neighbor.

Payne gazed with polite questioning at the hesitating figure on the threshold.

"Captain," whispered the latter who had served with him in the Philippines and also in the Boxer rebellion; "I've got to prepare you for something nasty." Forgetting himself for a moment, his eyes flashed and he swore. "They haven't done it since the '70's! You'd think it was war times! The good of the service!"

A cold light glittered in the captain's eyes. "You don't mean that they're going to drum me out, Smitty?" Payne unconsciously fell at that unguarded moment into barrack's mess vernacular.

The corporal nodded slowly. "Thanks!" grunted the officer, after a tense pause. "You've helped me a lot by that tip."

"I'd do more than that for you, captain," quickly insinuated Corporal Smitty.

"Get rid of yourself, sir!" sharply retorted his superior.

"Somebody will wake up about you when it's too late," muttered Smitty. "You're no more guilty than I be." Then he went out.

At that moment the Payne case was

A Story of "America First," Unmasking America's Secret Foes

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being discussed by a group secretly assembled in the library at the residence of the secretary of war in the city of Washington. Here after an all-night conference at the department came the chief of the army staff to report to the president and several members of his cabinet.

The thoughtful countenance of the country's chief magistrate reflected the serious import of this meeting. "The man you say was supposed to be dying?"

"Death was only a question of hours," replied the war secretary to whom the question was addressed.

"And there is no clue?"

"He has seemingly disappeared off the face of the earth leaving no trace."

"Your conclusion is that he has been stolen by an enemy who in some way gained knowledge of his discovery of our weakness in defense of the canal and his strategy to overcome it?"

"We believe that after Payne disposed of this mysterious author's invention to the Granadian ambassador," interposed the chief of the army staff; "or before he did so, either his or De Mira's lieutenants made away with him fearing that he might recover consciousness and tell everything, which under the circumstances, doubtless he would have done."

"Payne admitted at the court-martial that he was in the neighborhood when the stranger disappeared. Nor did he deny that he talked alone with the ambassador shortly before the latter's dead body was found. It was then, we believe, that Payne gave him the canal plans and the locket containing the wafers necessary to their interpretation. De Mira, after possessing our secret, must have lost his nerve and poisoned himself. He doubtless thought that Payne would at the last minute break down and confess his guilt."

A shade of regret stole into the harried features of the president. "Perhaps we hastened Payne's trial," he pondered. "Reflection might have brought repentance. We cannot expect him now, sulen and stubborn, to aid us in unearthing the one man, if he be still alive, who holds the key to the safety and security of our canal possession. Have we blundered, gentlemen?"

"No!" exclaimed some one. "Payne's swift and summary punishment was imperative to satiate a public desire to criticize everything pertaining to the army and the administration. Furthermore, I beg to differ with the president on one point. There is a way, I think, to make him talk."

The president raised his eyebrows, inclining his head toward the speaker. "He worships Pearl Dare. He will talk to her if she urges him."

"I know her well," warmly responded the chief of staff to that. "She loves or loved him. I understood from

her father tonight that they were on the point of announcing their engagement when this thing happened. There are, therefore, other than patriotic motives why she should undertake to get at the bottom of the man. The Dare's—" He stopped speaking listened intently a second or two and tip-toed to a window. They all heard a throbbing noise on the street. He turned with an explanatory exclamation. "Here she is now in her automobile!"

A curious hush fell upon the group and the war secretary hastened from the room. When he returned, after an interval, Pearl Dare, dazed and disheveled, leaned wearily upon his arm.

Her eyes at once caught the figure of the president. She tottered toward him dropping on her knees. He raised her gently, motioning the others aside to give her a chance to collect herself for it was apparent that she was deeply agitated.

"Captain Payne!" presently burst from her lips. She gestured dumbly toward the telephone. "A great mistake has been made! Stop it—he's innocent!"

Then she became inarticulate and grew very pale. A clock on the mantel was striking the hour of six.

Pearl slowly bowed her head, choking back tears. Through a slit in the window blinds filtered a streak of sunlight.

"God forbid if we have erred!" murmured the secretary of war, at the conclusion of the sixth stroke, his eyes fixed upon the clock. "The sentence of Ralph Payne has been executed."

Pearl turned upon them furiously, crying out: "You idiots!" Then she fainted. They carried her to a sofa and summoned the colonel from the barracks. To him, when she had sufficiently recovered, she related her wild and incomprehensible adventure.

The colonel listened doubtfully to her tale. He called in the chauffeur, Toko, inquiring whether any of the Dare servants had mentioned burglars in the house during the night.

Toko nodded. "Mimi—the smell of chloroform. Say someone knock her out!"

The colonel dismissed him, more perplexed than ever, for this much of Pearl's story was corroborated. But he could not wholly believe that a band of gentlemen such as she described the foreign alliance to be was secretly plotting to overthrow the government by casting the guilt upon De Mira and the former officer Ralph Payne. Rather from her appearance and condition, and the fact that she could but vaguely recall the rendezvous and not at all designate its whereabouts, was he inclined to the opinion that she had fallen into the hands of common ruffians of De Mira or Payne, escaping in some miraculous manner after being drugged.

Pearl stuck to her testimony, however, repeating it clearly and concisely to the president and his counsellors.

To her emphatic reiteration that the leader of this mysterious group of political criminals was a man of distinguished rank and great personality, the president gave sphinxlike attention.

"You would recognize his figure—his voice—you think?"

Pearl hesitated. "I am not sure." She ran her hand wearily across her forehead. "I'm so confused."

After a silence, the president with a significant glance at the others, took Pearl kindly by the hand. "Perhaps you would be willing to do me a personal service, Miss Dare, and thus satisfy your own peace of mind in this whole matter?"

Colonel Dare's daughter flushed under the implied confidence of the nation's executive. She nodded eager assent.

"Suppose you carry from me a note to Mr. Payne. After reading it, if he is innocent, he will tell you so. And if he is guilty as the facts unfortunately point, I think that he will confide in you. Is this requesting too much?"

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She gazed tremulously into the president's eyes. They were very human. "All I ask is that our interview be a private one," she replied, simply.

The president scribbled a few words upon a sheet of paper and gave it to her. Pearl rose, bowed deferentially and left the room on her father's arm followed by a battery of attentive and admiring eyes.

Then began a long discussion.

That evening Pearl, accompanied only by Toko, took the "limited" south. At the Washington barracks a special stop was made and two federal guards hustled Payne up the steps and into a private compartment. Knowing that the trip would consume the better part of forty-eight hours, Pearl postponed the dreaded interview until morning in the hope that a night of much needed repose would steel her heart to the trial no matter what the outcome; and she did not notify the prisoner that she was on the train.

Few of the passengers were aware of the celebrated company they were in that night; not even Bertha Bonn, who, dismayed to find herself mixed up with Payne, had delayed her departure for the Paso del Norte with the packet and locker pending further developments. Nor did Bertha know that the girl, to marry whom Major Brent sought to silence her, occupied the drawing room in the coach ahead. Otherwise in her agitated frame of mind she might have gone and told her everything about the major. She spent most of the night studying time tables and wondering what secret the packet in her traveling case contained.

Pearl sat alone in her unmade berth until a very late hour, unable to restrain a natural curiosity concerning the import of the message she carried from the president to the disgraced ex-officer.

the crash of glass, steel demolishing steel, an explosion or two and an outburst of human cries. A little later she climbed out of the debris of her coach and leaped unharmed to the railroad tracks below.

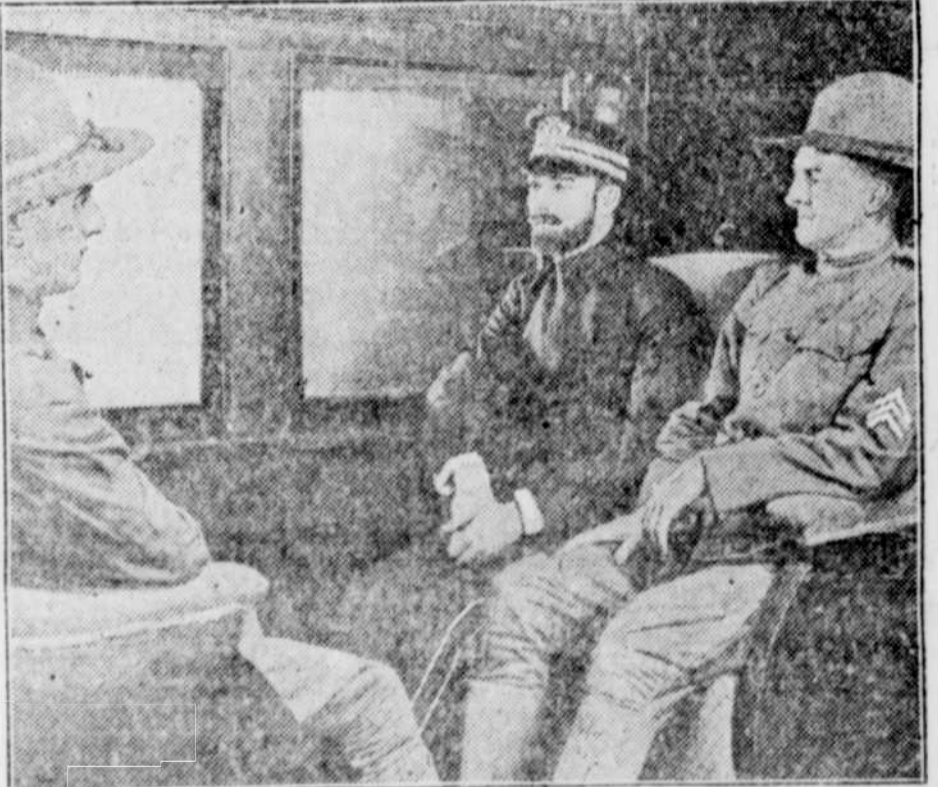
Below her appalled gaze lay the gauged, twisted and telescoped ruins of the luxurious train. Fires were breaking out and in the rising steam she caught glimpses of disfigured dead, dying and wounded travelers and partly clad people running about wildly. She realized that she was in the midst of a frightful railroad catastrophe.

Immediately she thought of both Payne and Toko and began a frantic search for the former, blindly following the lead of trainmen with lanterns.

A thunderstorm which had been prevailing now ceased, but the night remained inky black, illumined only by the conflagration of the wreck. After a fruitless hour the bodies of first one and then the other of Payne's guards were found lying fully a car's length apart. At this point Pearl discovered a woman seated on some broken rucks. Her clothing was torn; her hair was streaming; and she was acting queerly. In one hand she held something taken out of a small traveling case. Pearl saw her stuff it into the bosom of her shirtwaist and caught the gleam of a gold locket jangling at her neck.

It was Bertha Bonn. Pearl wondered where she had seen this person before.

Then in the avalanche of junk behind the woman, Pearl, a man with a lantern hitherto unnoticed, and Toko, who suddenly appeared from somewhere, simultaneously saw a huddled-up form in army clothes. Pearl uttered a little cry. Toko muttered



Payne on His Way to Life Imprisonment.

She was in a sense glad for the train ride for it gave her an opportunity to relax. She found herself taking a passing interest in scenes and incidents noticeable from the car window. Her mind began to grow sluggish and her eyes to droop and she was on the point of calling the vestibule porter to prepare her bed.

Then to the swiftly-speeding "flyer" came a series of terrific shocks, hurling her to the floor just as the lights went out and the car began to pitch and roll.

A portion of the top berth fell barely missing where she half lay, half crouched, stunned, and as all the world seemed to stand still, she heard

something unintelligible. The woman rose and following their stares, stifled a choking sound. Pearl, drawing near to the still figure seeing in it the only too familiar outlines, gave a little shudder.

The stranger with the lantern sternly waved her back, but too late. In the fitful light she observed a hideously crushed and unrecognizable bearded face.

She stooped trembling and examined the man's clothing, jerking a slip of paper from the coat pocket.

Her eyes filled, for the penciled scrawl she read with the lantern's aid

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