COMRADES OF PERIL

By RANDALL PARRISH

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"SOME SCHEME."

Synopsis.—Tom Shelby, a rancher, rides into the frontier town of Ponca looking for a good time after a long spell of hard work and loneliness on the ranch. Instead, he runs into a funeral—that of Dad Calkins, a retired army man of whom little is known. A girl, still in her teens, survives Calkins. McCarthy, a saloon keeper and Ponca's leading citizen, decides that the girl, now alone in the world, should marry.

CHAPTER II—Continued.

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"If you go at it right—yes. This is a sporting proposition. That's where it will make a hit. Say we limit the chances to a dozen, or maybe fifteen; those fellows will bite at it like hungry fish. Everyone of them duffers will think he's a lady's man. I know them, and there never was a young fellow in pants who didn't secretly believe he was a regular lady-killer. That's what's going to round them up in a bunch; we'll give the girl a chance to take her pick. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

Shelby laughed, the situation as thus swiftly outlined appealing suddenly to his sense of humor.

"That's sure some scheme," he admitted cheerily, "and I'd rather like seein' it pulled off. But it's my notion that the girl is liable to create some disturbance. She didn't noways

"That Girl Ain't Even Halter Broke Yet."

look to me like the sort who could be driven. It's my idea that girl ain't even halter broke yet, let alone willin' to trot in double harness. Ain't that the truth, Mac?"

Shelby lit a cigar, waiting for the saloonkeeper to deliver his decision.

"She's a bit odd, an' sorter bullheaded, yer might say," the latter said finally. "That's true enough, Tom. I had a time gettin' her to go through them ceremonies this afternoon. She just wanted Old Dad planted quiet-like. She's mighty liable to be offish when the preacher first puts this proposition up to her. Likely as not she'll throw a fit, but we'll fetch her up to the trough just the same. You ain't got any better scheme, have yer? The only way ter save a girl out in this country is ter marry her—ain't that so?"

"I reckon it is. Got yer gang lined up yet?"

"Not yet; there's a plenty to choose from an' I aim ter write out the list over at the saloon. How about you?"

"Me? Not on your life, Mac; this is not my funeral."

"You'll help us out, though?"

"Sure; I'll talk it over with the boys and get 'em interested. I'll even throw fifty dollars into the jack pot to give the happy couple a start. There's nothin' that will put more 'pep' into a prospective bridegroom than a bunch o' money in sight. You two fellows figure it out an' I'll go over to the saloon and, sorter quite-like, feel the boys out a bit. Where'll you be in an hour?"

"In my office. Who was you aiming to talk with?"

"Oh, Cady, Jim Mack, 'Rowdy' Egan an' that bunch. They are the boys yer aimin' to interest, I reckon. How much of a jack pot do you aim to raise?"

McCarthy pondered a moment, his chin cupped in his hand.

"Well, I'll blow in two-fifty an' I reckon there are those who would raise it to a right smart figure. You kin talk a couple o' thousand, Tom. As yer say, that'll be quite a feature, an' there ain't no reason why we shouldn't pull the affair off ternight."

The delicious and delicate humor of the situation was what particularly appealed to Shelby—the affair promised excitement and a good laugh. He was even convinced that the scheme might work and thus really prove a benefit to the girl, if she only chose wisely; but at present his main interest centered on the fun he expected to extract from the preliminaries.

He had already decided on a general course of action; he would approach those whom he considered worthy, in a strictly diplomatic way, judiciously hinting at the possibility of Old Dad Calkins' girl being an heiress and suggesting the advantage of her being sought in early marriage. It was merely an idea he proposed to advance, to be implanted in their minds, that she should not be allowed to escape from the community with all that money, nor snapped up by some mercenary stranger.

During the next half hour Shelby managed to interview at least a half dozen whom he considered eligible bachelors or lonely widowers, artfully selecting those known to be of a somewhat sportive disposition, to whom such a proposition as he had to offer might naturally appeal. A few of these treated the suggestion profanely; others were rather evasive, but the majority thus diplomatically approached evinced sufficient interest to yield much encouragement. His wares had been brought to a good market and Old Dad's girl, rendered particularly attractive by a "dot" running up into the thousands, would find plenty of eager suitors. Now that the rumor of her eligibility was being privately circulated from mouth to mouth, any unnecessary delay would only render the affair more complicated.

He would report at once the success of his mission and urge his co-conspirators to immediate action. It would sure be a fine sight to see these fellows lined up while that girl looked them over, deliberately making a choice. Suddenly his gaze rested on a young man, dejectedly hanging over the end of the bar, arguing with a bartender, who only shook his head impassively. Shelby moved along until he ranged up beside the fellow.

"What's your name?"

"Joe Macklin."

"They call you 'Kid,' don't they, 'round here?"

"Sure; mostly. What are yer drivin' at, anyhow?"

"Why, this. I got a ranch over on the Cottonwood, an' come in here to pick up a cow-hand. I got a half-breed, but I need another. That's where I stand."

"What'll it pay?"

"Forty dollars. You got a horse?"

"Well, the critter looks like one; turned out in Powell's corral, but I ain't got no money to pay fer his feed. Yer'll have ter blow me some coin."

"All right; here's ten and I'll pay Powell for the horse keep. You show up here sober at ten tomorrow, or else I'll leave you here; that's straight."

He strode away across the big crowded room and opened a door at the further end. Stepping across the threshold he closed the door behind him and faced McCarthy and the ex-preacher from Buffalo Gap, both of whom glanced up expectantly. Shelby leaned back against the wall and contemplated the two, chewing on the butt of a cigar.

"Well," he said bluntly, "the cards are stacked, gents; now, all you got to do is to play your hands."

"What do you mean? The boys are for it?"

"Hungry and snapping. I talked to quite a bunch. The one thing I'm afraid of is that some galoot may take a notion to hunt the girl up before we can get things into shape. That's why I hurried in here. We got to pull the affair tonight."

The preacher spread his hands, waving the suggestion aside.

"No, no; that really wouldn't be decent, so soon after the funeral. The poor girl must be given opportunity to mourn in peace."

"Shucks! It will give her something else to think about. Anyhow, that whole bunch will be after her by morning. What do you say, Mac?"

"I don't see no objections. The sooner it's cleaned up the better and there won't be no hard feelin's among the boys if we don't give 'em any time to mill around."

"You aim to run the bunch in on her with no notice?"

"No; that's up to the preacher. He invented this game and has got to take care of that end of it. I don't know nothin' 'bout females and don't aim to learn. We'll leave the girl to this gent from Buffalo Gap. Let him mosey right over and talk it out with her straight. He can put it sorter religious-like. Say we give him an hour an' then shoot the bunch over to the shack; that ought to be long enough for him to get the girl into the right frame of mind, if she's ever goin' to be. Maybe she'll take it all right and maybe she won't. You ready to try your luck, Dominie?"

"There is no question in my mind," he answered solemnly, "but that this is the proper method of procedure. I am therefore resigned to do my part. I shall undertake the mission in the high spirit of my calling."

"Well," said McCarthy who had been writing industriously, "here's the list of gazabos I've made out. There ain't no angels among 'em, but she sure ought to pull a prize out o' that bunch, if she looks 'em over."

The preacher got to his feet.

"Tis as the Lord wills," he said gravely. "I go humbly forth to do my part."

CHAPTER III.

The Choice of the Lady.

Shelby, accompanied by "Red" Kelly, who had been unceremoniously routed out of bed after a hard day's work, were the last to join the company of selects crowded into Dan McCarthy's office. The majority were unshaven and roughly dressed, inclined to look on the whole affair as a lark, but there were serious faces among them and altogether, in Shelby's judgment as he looked them over, they were not a bad lot. He pushed his way through the throng and joined Mac, who stood with his back to the desk.

"That's all of them," he said quietly. "Now give 'em your spiel an' we'll see what comes of it."

McCarthy cleared his throat and removed the stump of cigar from between his teeth.

"Is the door shut tight? All right. What I've got to say is just fer you, boys, an' ain't ter be told 'round promiscuse. We started in ter give Ol' Dad Calkins a proper kind of a funeral an' sure pulled it off in some style, if I say it myself. Then we decided it was up to us to give the gurl a decent send-off an' this town chucked in about five hundred bucks an' never batted an eye. When that was over with, I sorter considered that Ponca had about done its share, but the preacher what come down from Buffalo Gap didn't think the same. He sed here was a poor girl left with no home an' no protection and that unless she was taken care of she'd maybe

"What I've Got to Say Is Just for You Boys."

drift ter h—l an' back, an' he argued that it was Ponca's business to see that she got started off right. His idee was that she ought ter be married afore she had any chance ter drift and git reckless like a lot o' them females."

There was an uneasy movement among the crowd and Shelby was amused at the varied expression upon the faces before him. McCarthy paused as though gathering himself together for his main effort.

"All I got ter say is when I thought it all over I concluded the preacher sure had it sized up about right. That girl is decent an' has been brought up decent, even if Ol' Dad was a rounder. He kept her straight an' giv' her a good education. Now what's goin' ter become of her when she's left alone? I told the preacher I'd do my share an' see to it that Ponca came up to the scratch. I naturally can't marry her myself, seeing as how I've got a wife and five kids already, but I'll do the next best thing—I'll cough up enough coin to give the fellow who will give her a chance ter make good. She's goin' ter have cash ter back her."

"How much?"

"What's the figure, Dan?"

"Two thousand, besides the five hundred already subscribed. That's more'n some o' you ducks ever saw."

"Say, Mac, what was the plan? Cut the cards for furst chance?"

"No; this is a sportin' proposition, with everyone havin' a fair show," explained the saloonkeeper. "We sorter picked you boys out as the most likely runts 'round town and intend ter line you up an' then let her pick out the one she takes a fancy to. It's only fair she has a chance to take the duffer she'd rather have."

There was a confused murmur of voices, some reckless, others muttering opposition, but it was evident the proposition rather appealed to the majority, who saw in it a chance for some unusual fun and excitement, with only a vague probability of being caught. Shelby slipped in a word.

"I'll bet five to one," he said quietly, "that she turns down the whole gang."

"Ter h—l she will! Not after she gets one glimpse o' Cowan. She'll think he owns the town."

"That's it, boys! Come on, you fellers; the bunch o' us don't run no risk. She'll copper on Cowan an' if she misses him them sideburns o' Archibald's will sure get her goat."

"Is this yere two thousand a sure thing?" It was Cowan who asked somewhat anxiously. "It ain't got no string tied to it?"

A yell greeted the question, punctuated with various remarks.

"Takin' it seriously, old man?"

"Goin' to start an opposition store?"

"I guarantee the sum," said McCarthy, "every last cent of it. Whoever the girl chooses, when he marries her, I'll pay him the money. That's flat an' you boys know whose talking."

There was a surging forward indicative of readiness. Evidently the proposition had caught on, and the bunch was eager to learn the result.

"Lead us to it, Mac," someone cried gayly, "gittin' married is my long suit."

"All right, boys," and McCarthy glanced at his watch. "I reckon the preacher ought ter have her ready for the delegation by this time. How about it, Tom?"

They moved slowly out, jostling each other, and indulging in horse play and rude jokes, none taking the affair seriously, but eager to learn how it would terminate.

McCarthy led the way, directly across the main street, and down the path past the dance hall, which by this time was in full blaze. Beyond they were plunged into darkness, but could see ahead of them the faint gleam of a light through the window of Calkins' shack. One or two sought to drop out, but Shelby collared them promptly, so that the entire bunch finally lined up behind McCarthy as he rapped on the closed door. The preacher opened it, his round face beaming benignantly in the glare of the single oil-lamp within, his bulk absolutely blocking the entrance. Beyond, those close at hand had a vague glimpse of the girl, who stood back against the wall, staring toward them with wide-open eyes. The Buffalo Gap man smiled blandly in welcome, impressed by the number of faces he saw, and stepped heavily aside.

"Come right in, gentlemen," he exclaimed, gesturing impressively with one hand, "our accommodations are not extensive, as you will perceive, yet ample, I trust. Just circle about the wall there—to the left, please. You have explained the circumstances, Mr. McCarthy?"

"Sure."

"Very well, then," his voice assuming a soothing tone. "We need waste no unnecessary time in preliminaries. I have very frankly laid the entire matter before the young lady and have finally convinced her of the righteousness of our purpose. Do I fitly express your state of mind, my child?"

She lifted her eyes slightly, a red flush burning on either cheek.

"I suppose so; that's what you told me to say."

Shelby, slipping in through the door last of all, had found a precarious seat on the sill of the window, where he had a full view of the room. His glance wandered appreciatingly along that solemn line of men backed up rigidly against the wall. They were an odd-looking bunch, crowded together under the glare of the oil-lamp, the most of them roughly dressed and unshaven and all of them visibly embarrassed and a little ashamed. The girl stood alone just before them and to Shelby she appeared younger and far better looking than in the afternoon. She would have been almost pretty but for the pathetic droop at the corners of her mouth and the rebellious, sullen look in her eyes. The preacher spread his hands in disapprobation of her remark.

"Oh, no, my dear," he protested. "I merely labored with you and urged this upon you as the better course. I even made it the subject of prayer that we might be divinely guided. It is now a matter entirely for your own decision."

She looked from him to the row of breathless men facing her, impatiently, her bosom rising and falling tumultously.

"And I've got to choose which one I'd rather marry?"

"Well, yes, that is the idea crudely expressed. Not that you are compelled in any way; only we feel it highly desirable; that—well, perhaps I may say, it is the will of God that you make some such choice."

Her eyes wandered up and down the shrinking line, resting calmly on face after face. If she felt any humor in the situation, there was no expression of it visible. She retained an appearance of sullen indifference, which was almost insolent.

"There ain't no more of 'em?"

"No; this is all."

"And I got to pick from these?"

The preacher nodded his head, as she glanced inquiringly in his direction. The pent-up breath came in a sigh from between her lips.

"Well, if I've got to, I have, I suppose, and, so far as I can see, it don't make no difference. I'll take the fel-

"I'll Take the Fellow Sittin' Over There."

low sittin' over there on the window; the one with the pink shirt."

Shelby was upon his feet instantly, so thoroughly startled by this sudden denouement as to scarcely find words.

"But say, hold on!" he exclaimed excitedly. "I don't belong to this bunch; I don't even live in Ponca. I just came along to help out."

The girl looked from face to face in bewilderment, which, judging from the expression of her eyes, was already verging on anger.

"What does the man mean?" she asked hurriedly of the preacher, who stood nearest. "You said I was to choose and now he refuses. Did this one not come pledged?"

"I am afraid not, my dear. I did not know, but he claims otherwise. He is not a Ponca man."

She fronted Shelby, standing straight, indignant, her eyes flashing coldly.

"And you won't marry me?"

"I—I can't—that's all," he stammered. "Oh, h—l! What did you want to pick me out for?"

The girl's eyes rested hard on his face, then wandered slowly down the line of the others and her lips set firmly.

"Well, then, this play has gone far enough," she said shortly. "I've been square with you all, but I ain't going to be made a fool of no longer. Now it is time for you gents to get out o' here. I pointed out the fellow I'd take an' there ain't another one o' the bunch I'll even look at. I ain't so crazy 'bout gettin' married; it's only because he said it was the will o' God that I have. Now I'm done. I picked my man an' there ain't nuthin' else here I'd touch with a pair of tongs, so you might as well save your breath and get out. I don't want to talk any more to any of you."

"But, my dear child—"

"Stop that! I'm no dear child; I'm a woman; an' this place is mine, even if it is a shack. You get right out o' here, the whole kit an' caboodle of you."

Shelby was the first to slide forth through the half-open door, glad enough to escape into the cool night air, his face burning as though on fire, his mind in a tumult of emotion. He had no sense of humor left, just an ill-defined feeling of mortification and regret. She had been justly indignant and he felt profoundly sorry for the part he had played. By heavens! She was some girl; no mere wishy-washy creature to be laughed at and ignored. He'd like to tell her so. Perhaps he would; there would be reaction after awhile, when those fellows were all gone. Her burst of anger would die away and she would shed tears of mortification. It would be a nice thing then if he could go back there all alone and comfort her; explain how it happened and show her how impossible it was for him to marry.

He could see the men plainly enough, outlined in the light, as they descended the steps one by one and then faded away in the darkness. They were a disconsolate, discomfited bunch, with downcast faces and silent lips. The preacher and McCarthy came last, the former still talking, his voice imploring, but evidently to no purpose, for something behind kept impelling him forward and even while he clung to the step for one final effort the door slammed in his face and Shelby heard the sharp snap of a lock.

"Well, I'll be d——d!" ejaculated Mac, his temper utterly giving way. "If she ain't a wildcat! Lord, but I'd sure pity the feller who did marry her. Come on, old buck, there is no use stayin' here. I wonder where Shelby went?"

"You an' her are in cahoots for that money."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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