COMRADES OF PERIL

By RANDALL PARRISH

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CHAPTER XII—Continued.

—13—

"And I have given you my heart long ago. Kiss me, Tom."

They sat there, closely pressed together in that narrow space, scarcely aware any longer of the danger at hand, eager only to hear each other's voice. Above the crackle of the flames, and the crashing of falling timbers, they could distinguish the intermittent crack of a rifle, and the echo of voices calling. Shelby began to dig with one hand at the pile of earth beside him so as to widen the space between its summit and the roof. The action caused his mind to revert to the imminent peril of their situation.

"It will be all over with before daylight," he said soberly, "and that will be our chance to get out."

"How do you suppose Macklin ever got through there?" she questioned wonderingly.

"That's what bothers me. Either he wasn't hurt much, or he had help. It is my notion the girl brought him out in some way. The shooting was an act of sudden anger, for which she was sorry the very next moment. They may be hiding there now, somewhere in the tunnel."

She lifted herself up and peered through the opening; the glare of the flames did not penetrate beyond the barrier of earth and she saw nothing but impenetrable blackness.

"Shall we go, and see?"

"Not yet; we are safer here, until those devils give up. You can hear their voices yet out there."

They had no way of telling time, and the hours dragged. The sound of firing had entirely ceased, and the shouts of voices died away one after the other. Shelby waited patiently, listening for the slightest sound, but, at last, could restrain himself no longer.

"I do not know how late it is," he said finally, "yet it must be nearly morning. Most of those fellows must be gone. Shall we try our luck, little girl?"

She put her hand silently into his.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Fugitives.

He led the way, finding little difficulty in crawling over the mound of earth, and Olga followed easily. The cool darkness into which they advanced was a great relief, while the sense of action restored their shattered nerves. They encountered no further obstruction of any kind, but suddenly reached a sharp turn toward the left. Shelby felt his passage around the corner, aware of the pressure of Olga's fingers on his sleeve, but his eyes could perceive nothing unusual beyond. Yet, with his first step forward, he came to a sudden halt.

"Stay where you are, senor," said a low voice, "not a move till I speak."

He caught his breath quickly, scarcely daring to set down an uplifted foot. There was no doubt who that was that spoke out of the darkness.

"But I am Shelby," he blurted forth swiftly. "You have no reason to fear me."

"Shelby! How you come here? You found the trap? And—and is she with you?"

"Yes, senorita. An accident revealed to us a way out. It was you, then, who took Macklin away; he was not killed?"

A moment there was silence; then she broke out suddenly, passionately, the words fairly falling over each other in her eagerness of expression.

"I am not afraid, Senor Shelby. No! No! I hav' ze pistol in my hand. I shoot. The dark eet make no difference, for you are there just before me—she an you are there. Listen, then; I tell you what happen. I hate an' I love—see! Then I make meestake. Madre de Dios! I know not how eet was, but I shoot the man I love. Eet was crazy thing; but I not keel heem; I know I not keel heem. How I know? Santa Marie! The good God would not let me believe that. What could I do? I ran away mad into the woods. I would maybe yet save heem, but how? You know, senor, eet was I who shoot Senor Macklin?"

"Yes, Pancha; the lady here saw your face."

"Yes, it was I, senor—I who love heem. Why should eet be so? I went there not for that—no! I tell you how eet all come. Eet was because of my brother, senor—you know my brother, Juan Villemonte? He dead, senor, dead. You know how he die? Eet was a quarrel with Senor Laud an' Senor Hanley—they keel heem, the two against the one. I not know what happen. I wait in the cabin for Juan to come, but he stay away. No one tell me teel an Indian boy come an' he tell. Then I know Juan is dead, an' I go crazy like that. I am Spanish, senor; I hate an' I love—then only I hate! I would avenge my brother; I would keel the man that keeled heem. I care only for th' do that. He was there in this cabin; I creep up an' see. Eet was dark in there, yet I saw hees face. He could not see me, but I am. Senor Macklin was there, he up the other girl, but I care not then for them at all. I hate an' I see only the one I hate. Santa Marie! Why was eet so?"

"You shot the wrong man?"

"Si, senor. Senor Macklin, he step forward quick just when I fire; he drop an' I run."

Shelby felt Olga grip him and heard her voice at his ear.

"She never heard what Macklin said; don't let her know."

He crushed the question already on his lips back into his throat.

"Yes," Shelby said; "I see how it happened, now. And what did you do then, Pancha?"

She was not sobbing, but her quick breathing gave the impression in the darkness.

"What I do, senor? I pray the Virgin that I may save heem. Then I remember this passage from the ravine. How I know eet? Juan and I, we live in the cabin a month; 'twas then I found eet. I was underneath when you fought, senor; then, when you were both outside I got heem—"

"Macklin, you mean? He was alive?"

"Yes, senor, alive. Maybe he live, maybe he die; I know not. I do what I can. Eet took long time; even I carried heem alone."

"But how did you get across that cave-in of earth?"

"Eet was not there; eet come later," she explained. "I would go back, senor, when they fired the cabin, but the earth had caved and I could not get through."

"To help us?"

"Si, senor; to help you and me. What could I do alone? That is why I tell you; why I talk. Eet is not for you, nor for me. I would save heem an' only can eet be done if I have help. I do all I can—Madre de Dios, yes. But how I get heem out, senor?"

"But why not call the others?" Shelby asked suddenly in suspicion. "What danger is Macklin in?"

"You know not?" in surprise. "The Indian boy tell me—he an' Hanley. They plan eet all out. 'Twas because Juan would not be one of them they keel heem. They would hold her for ransom; they say a man comes soon here who would pay much; so they try to put out of the way Senor Macklin. 'Tis to get her that Slagin go to the cabin; he fail, and then Senor Laud try another way. He not know when he come that Senor Macklin get back. No one know."

Shelby smothered an oath; the whole foul plot suddenly revealed to him in all its hideousness. This then was what these fiends had been planning; it was plot within plot; criminal against criminal. He was blind not to have perceived the truth before; now it stood before him in all its sheer nakedness. Macklin's drunken boast had brought forth its full brood; Hanley, too brainless and cowardly to lead, had told all he knew to Indian Joe—embellished it, no doubt—and it was just the sort of thing the latter was eager to get his hands into—seemingly a safe game, with a good stake. Shelby reached out and drew Olga closer to him in the darkness.

"I understand, now," he said tersely. "We've got to fight this out together. All right, I'm ready. What is it you want me to do? Can Macklin walk?"

"No, senor; I think maybe he verra bad off; he not speak now for long time. Maybe you tell what we do for heem?"

"I'm afraid not, Pancha. I've doctored some wounds, but I'm no expert. Where is he? Oh, here."

He bent down in the dark and touched the motionless figure. His fingers sought the man's pulse, which showed weak but rapid.

"Where was the wound?"

"In the right chest, senor."

"And you have dressed and bandaged it?"

"Yes, senor; the best I could. I tore up my underskirt."

"Do you know if he bled much?"

"Not since I found heem—no; eet was very little. You think maybe he live, senor?"

"I am unable to answer that, Pancha," he replied soberly, rising to his feet. "The man is evidently hard hit, weak from loss of blood and in a coma now from fever. This is no place for him. If we could get him out into the open, bandage his wound properly and get a doctor for the ball he might have a fair chance. I can say no more than that."

"A doctor! Where would there be a doctor?"

"I know of none this side of Gerlasche; an army surgeon is at the camp there; no doubt he would come."

"Gerlasche! And—and he could save heem, senor?"

"He might; I can promise nothing; but that would be the only hope."

"But you will help me? You pledge that?"

"I will do whatever I can," Shelby said earnestly. "I hardly know how we are going to manage it. Once outside, we might find some poles, rig up a litter, and so get along, the three of us."

"Yes," interposed Olga sympathetically, "we must do that if possible. He cannot be left to die alone in this horrible place. I am strong, and will help all I can. Could we now start at once?"

"Just a moment. Is there an entrance not far away, Pancha?"

"Not 50 feet, senor."

"Then we ought to hear any firing or shouting without. Everything seems quiet. Let's make the effort now."

He sent the Mexican girl on in advance, and lifted the unconscious Macklin upon his back, Olga partially supporting the helpless body. The wounded man groaned at the first movement, but lapsed immediately into silence again, and Shelby moved slowly forward with his burden along the dark, narrow passage. It terminated in a small hole, well protected by a covert of brush, through which the fellow had to be drawn cautiously. Once on the outside, under the cold gleam of the stars, they found themselves protected by the high banks of a gully, that turned sharply to the left, connecting with a deeper ravine. The three clustered close, and listened, but no sound broke the stillness. Satisfied they were not observed, Shelby again picked up the wounded man, and, with Pancha guiding, her figure barely discernible in the gloom, slowly advanced down the depression.

It was hard, slow work, as Shelby had to carefully pick his way among the stones, seeking a safe resting place for each foot. They must move noiselessly. Their only hope lay in the confidence the Indians felt in their death within the cabin. If they were assured as to this, then they had probably scattered, willing to wait until morning to search the debris for their bodies. But this they couldn't know. As they turned into the ravine they obtained a glimpse of the burned cabin. One wall yet stood, ragged against the sky, and there was a gleam of red embers. Occasionally a gust of air sent sparks flying upward and spirals of black smoke were visible. No moving forms could be perceived about the ruins, and it was evident the spot was still in a condition to render exploration impossible.

Huddled closely together in the shelter of the rocks the fugitives stared across the open space at the red gleam. The Mexican girl had lifted herself upon a projecting stone, and was searching the shadows with keen eyes.

"Where do we go?" Shelby questioned.

"Up the rock trail, senor; there is no other safe place."

"So I thought. Then we must get under cover before daylight. Dawn is not far off from the looks of the sky." He paused suddenly. "What kind of a looking guy is Hanley?"

"He tall, scrawny, red whiskers."

"Then I got him; plugged the fellow through the arm. He won't want any more for awhile. Come, let's move on," he added impatiently. "It's doing no good to remain here and stare at that fire, and it is no light load I've got on my back."

The way was a rough one, strewn with stones, but well protected by high banks, on either side. Pancha seemingly knew every inch of it, for she advanced confidently, selecting the

Lifted the Unconscious Macklin Upon His Back.

easier path. So they came to the end of the cleft, where it terminated at the bank of the creek.

The light from the slowly graying sky overhead scarcely penetrated the depths of the ravine, and to the burden of carrying the heavy body of Macklin was added the weariness of the frequent stumbling over the stones with which the path was strewn. Olga, fighting off the deadly faintness which threatened every moment to overcome her, bore her share of the burden with a courage that moved her husband strongly, inasmuch as he felt he was nearing the end of his strength and realized what the strain must be on her.

The events of the next hour remained in Shelby's mind more like some terrible dream than a remembrance. He was conscious of being excessively worn, hungry, tired. His mind did not function, yet he clung doggedly to his task, with teeth clinched, and every muscle aching from the effort. Macklin moaned once or twice, but without regaining consciousness, and twice Shelby felt compelled to lay the wounded man on the ground, while he regained sufficient strength to proceed. Once they endeavored to shift the burden, Olga insisting on helping him to bear the man. But this proved impracticable, and again Shelby shouldered the body and staggered blindly up stream.

The sky was gray, a heavy mist shrouding the valley below, when they finally attained the opening into the trail sought. Nothing could be seen of their enemies, and, convinced that, as yet, there was no pursuit, the three crept breathlessly into the shadow of the bushes, dragging the unconscious Macklin with them. For some minutes Shelby lay motionless, struggling for breath, feeling that all strength had deserted him. He scarcely realized that Olga had lifted his head into her lap, and was wiping the beads of perspiration from his face. At last, however, his eyes opened, and he saw her bending over him. The man's lips broke into an effort to smile.

"Some soft, ain't I, little girl?" he muttered, "but gee! That was a pull, and I was about all in. Where's Pancha?"

"Back there, where she can look out. Is it much farther?"

"To the cave, you mean? Yes, it is a hard climb yet, but we will have it easier. I'll be all right presently; we'll cut some stakes, and make a litter.

"I don't know what is the matter with me," he apologized, ashamed of his weakness, "hungry, and overstrained, I guess. Maybe I ought to have left the fellow there."

"Oh, no, Tom! We couldn't do that. The poor thing is nearly crazed."

"Pancha? Yes, I know; but she'd be a heap sight better off with the guy dead."

"But she will not believe that. She thinks it is all her fault, and—and she is such a wild, passionate little thing. I would do anything to save him for her."

"There is about one chance in a thousand. Still he's just about ornary enough to make it. We sure don't owe him anything."

"I am not so certain of that," she said softly. "I wonder when I would have known my husband, but for him? I doubt if you half believe all I confessed to you now."

"I can scarcely realize it is true, but belief is not absent."

The motionless girl at the end of the rock suddenly turned her head, and glanced back at them with her piercing black eyes.

"Senor, is it true that you love her—your wife?"

"True; of course, Pancha. I told you so even before I told her."

"An' she love you?"

"I am Senor Shelby's wife, Pancha," spoke up Olga quickly, a flush burning red on her cheeks. "I have no other ambition."

"But the money! You rich, he say that, Senor Macklin. You not even care for that?"

"Not very much—no. I know nothing about it, and am perfectly content if it never comes. You must know what I mean—you have loved."

"Yes, senora; I have loved and would still love; money is nothing, Senor."

"Yes, Pancha."

"I think as I lie here what it was best to do. They stir down there. I cannot see yet for the fog, but I hear sounds. Pretty soon they will know, perhaps. They hunt the burned cabin an' find no bone, no flesh. What will they do?"

"Laud will suspect the truth."

"'Tis so, perhaps; yet I believe we left no trail, senor. It was all rock an' water; even the Sioux cannot follow that. You know the way now?"

"To the cave—yes."

"It is safe. But if the senor lives he must have a doctor. You tell me that, and there is but one way; I must ride."

Shelby straightened up, instantly grasping her purpose

"You mean you will leave us here to go on alone?"

"Yes, senor; eet is best. They will not stop me; they will not know. Unless I meet Senor Laud there is no danger; perhaps even he will not suspect, or interfere. There are horses there, and I ride often—sometimes even up onto the mesa; no one will care."

"You are sure you can pass?"

"I am sure I will pass," she said firmly. "I ride for hees life, senor."

It was the better plan, nor could Shelby deny the probability of its success. No one, unless possibly it might be Laud, or Hanley, had any reason to suspect her now. It was a long journey to Gerlasche, too long to be made on foot, and if the girl went with them up the trail, every effort at rescue would be delayed.

"You are right, Pancha," he admitted. "We'll get him up there someway. But you better go now, before the fog rises."

"Yes, senor."

She came over and knelt beside Macklin, who was moaning slightly, his head resting on a pillow made by Shelby's coat. As she bent over him his eyes partially opened, but with no light of intelligence in them; they were dull, lusterless.

"Senor, senor," she sobbed, pressing his hand between both her own, "I am going to ride for you."

Some angel of mercy must have put the words on his lips, for certainly he knew her not, yet faint, fitful, there came from his lips the cry:

"Pancha! I want you, Pancha!"

She must have understood, known, and yet the comfort of that call was hers.

She looked at him dry-eyed, motionless; then bent and kissed his lips. Slowly, regretfully she arose to her feet, and faced them, her cheeks white.

"'Tis all," she said simply, "now I go."

She vanished without a sound, gliding through the fringe of bushes and down the steep bank to the protection

"Now I Go."

of the creek. They were alone, but with their own work to do. Shelby went at his with quiet efficiency. Selecting two stout limbs, similar in size and length, he ran these through the arms of his strong corduroy jacket, binding them into position by two cross-pieces, hastily prepared, and lashed firmly with strips torn from his neckerchief. Macklin, now once again silent, and motionless, his eyes closed, was lifted gently onto the outspread coat, his limbs upheld by one of the cross-bars, and then the jacket buttoned securely about him, forming a swinging cradle finely adapted for the purpose. Shelby straightened up, quite himself again.

"There, that will answer nicely," he said confidently. "It is bound to be a hard climb, but we'll take our time to it and rest when we are tired. No one can see us from below after we once pass the point yonder."

"Is the trail up hill all the way?" asked the girl, her eyes searching the steep face of the bluff.

"Yes, pretty sharp at times, but we'll manage. It follows a deep cleft through the rocks, and once found cannot be lost. I'll take this end; that will give me the most of the weight, and you lead the way; take it slowly and you'll be all right."

They picked the litter up between them, Olga relieved to discover how lightly, thus distributed, her share of the burden rested upon her. She was able to advance easily and pick her way among the rocks without experiencing great discomfort. The weight of the man's body came far heavier upon Shelby, but the rest and change had largely restored his strength and he felt no doubt of his ability to sustain this end of the burden. Unable to see just where he was placing his feet in the stony path, he stumbled occasionally, causing the wounded man to groan in some sudden spasm of pain; yet it was evident he did not suffer greatly. The trail they followed had so impressed itself on his memory that he recalled every turn clearly and could call out directions to her in a low voice.

"Turn sharply to the right there; we will have to hold the litter higher to get by that rock; here is the only point exposed; once in the shadow of those trees the way is completely covered. Yes, we can move rapidly around this point; from now on there are rocks on both sides. Take it easy, and if you need to rest, say so."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The Preacher's Topic.

Billy, not very fond of Sunday school, was promised a dime every time he remembered the sermon. For once he expressed great interest. "Just think, daddy, it was about flying machines." "What?" said daddy, "you're mistaken." And he answered: "No, sir, I'm not. The preacher said Esau sold his heirship to his brother Jacob."

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Not So Bad.

A returned vacationist tells us that he was fishing in a pond one day when a country boy who had been watching him from a distance approached him and asked, "How many fish yer got, mister?"

"None yet," he was told.

"Well, yer ain't doin' so bad," said the youngster. "I know a feller what fished here for two weeks an' he didn't get any more than you got in half an hour."—Boston Transcript.

A Very Real Danger.

First Playwright—You don't mean to say you are dubious about your play?

Second Playwright—I certainly am. They liked it so well in Danbury, Conn., that I'm afraid it's over the head of Broadway.—Life.

The Witching Hour.

Heavy Dater—I have never seen such dreamy eyes!

Sleepy Datee—Maybe you never stayed so late before—Virginia Reel.

Strenuous Diversion.

"Would you advise me to travel for my health?"

"No," replied the doctor. "A man wants to be in first-class physical condition before he takes on the worries of travel nowadays."

A Vague Idea.

"What's the play?"

"The Merchant of Venice."

"What's the plot?"

"I dunno. I think he was hopin' it'd be interesting."—Louisville Courier-Journal.