

The Last Shot

By
FREDERICK PALMER

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CHAPTER XIX—Continued.

Now the automatics and the rifles from the redoubt to which the Browns had fallen back opened fire. So close together were these bullet-machines that the orbit of each one's swing made a spray of only a few yards' breadth over the redoubt, where the Browns' gun-fire had not for a moment ceased its persistent shelling, with increasingly large and solid targets of flesh for their practice. The thing for these targets to do, they knew, was to intrench and begin to return the infantry and automatics' fire. Desperately, with the last effort of courage, they rose in the attempt—rose into playing hose streams of bullets whose close hiss was a steady undertone between shell bursts. In the garish, jumping light brave officers impulsively stood up to hear their commands in their work, and dropped with half-uttered urgings, threats, and oaths on their lips.

The bullets from the automatics missing one mark were certain to find another, perhaps four or five in a row, such was their velocity and power of penetration. Where shells made gaps and tore holes in the human mass, the automatics cut with the regularity of the driven teeth of a comb. The men who escaped all the forms of slaughter and staggered on to the ruins of the redoubt, pressed their weight on top of those in the craters or hugged behind the pyramids of debris, and even made breastworks from the bodies of the dead. The more that banked up, the more fruitless the efforts of the officers to restore order in the frantic medley of shell screams and explosions at a time when a minute seemed an age.

Meanwhile, between them—this banked-up force at the charge's end—and the Brown redoubt with its automatics, the Gray gunners were making a zone of shell bursts in order to give the soldiers time to make their hold of the ground they had gained secure. Through this zone Stransky and his men were to lead the Browns in a counter-attack.

At the very height of the Gray charge, when all the reserves were in, dark objects fell out of the heavens, and where they dropped earth and flesh were mingled in the maceration. Like some giant reptile with its vertebrae breaking, gouged and torn and pinioned, the charge stopped, in writhing, throbbing confusion. Those on the outer circle of explosions were thrown against their fellows, who surged back in another direction from an explosion in the opposite quarter. From the rear the pressure weakened; the human hammer was no longer driving the ram. Blinded by the lightnings and dust, dizzy from concussions and noise, too blank of mind to be sane or insane, the atoms of the bulk of the charge in natural instinct turned from their goal and toward the place whence they had come, with death from all sides still buffeting them. Staggeringly, at first, they went, for want of initiative in their paralysis; then rapidly, as the law of self-preservation asserted itself in wild impulse.

As sheep driven over a precipice they had advanced; as men they fled. There was no longer any command, no longer any cohesion, except of legs struggling in and out over the uneven footing of dead and wounded, while they felt another pressure, that of the mass of the Browns in pursuit. Of all those of Fracasse's company whom we know only the judge's son and Jacob Pilzer were alive. Stained with blood and dust, his teeth showing in a grimace of mocking hate of all humankind, Pilzer's savagery ran free of the restraint of discipline and civilized convention. Striking right and left, he forced his way out of the region of shell fire and still kept on. Clutching his rifle, he struck down one officer who tried to detain him; but another officer, quicker than he, put a revolver bullet through his head.

Westerling, who had buried his face in his hands in Marta's presence at the thought of failure, must keep the pose of his position before the staff. With chin drawn in and shoulders squared in a sort of petrified military habit, he received the feverish news that grew worse with each brief bulletin. He, the chief of staff; he, Hedworth Westerling, the superman, must be a rock in the flood of alarm. When he heard that his human ram was in recoil he declared that the repulse had been exaggerated—repulses always were. With word that a heavy counter-attack was turning the retreat into an unmanageable rout, he broke into a storm. He was not beaten; he could not be beaten.

"Let our guns cut a few swaths in the mob!" he cried. "That will stop them from running and bring them back to a sense of duty to their country."

The irritating titter of the bell in the closet off the library only increased his defiance of facts beyond control. He went to the long distance with a reply to the premier's inquiry ready to his lips.

"We got into the enemy's works but had to fall back temporarily," he said. "Temporarily! What do you mean?" demanded the premier.

"I mean that we have only begun to attack!" declared Westerling. He liked that sentence. It sounded like the shibboleth of a great leader in a crisis. "I shall assault again to-morrow night."

"Then your losses were not heavy?" "No, not relatively. To-morrow night we press home the advantage we gained to-night."

"But you have been so confident each time. You still think that—" "That I mean to win! There is no stopping half-way."

"Well, I'll still try to hold the situation here," replied the premier. "But keep me informed."

Drugged by his desperate stubbornness, Westerling was believing in his star again when he returned to the library. All the greater his success for being won against skepticism and fears! He summoned his chiefs of divisions, who came with the news that the Browns had taken the very redoubt from which the head of the Gray charge had started; but there they had stopped.

"Of course! Of course they stopped!" exclaimed Westerling. "They are not mad. A few are not going to throw themselves against superior numbers—our superior numbers beaten by our own panic! Lanstron is not a fool."

You'll find the Browns back in their old position, working like beavers to make new defenses in the morning. Meanwhile, we'll get that mob of ours into shape and find out what made them lose their nerve. To-morrow night we shall have as many more behind them. We are going to attack again!"

The staff exchanged glances of amazement, and Turcas, his dry voice crackling like parchment, exclaimed: "Attack again? At the same point?" "Yes—the one place to attack!" said Westerling. "The rest of our line has abundant reserves; a needless number for anything but the offensive. We'll leave enough to hold and draw off the rest to Engadir at once."

"But their dirigibles! A surprising number of them are over our lines," Bellini, the chief of intelligence, had the temerity to say.

"You will send our planes and dirigibles to bring down theirs!" Westerling commanded.

"I have—every last one; but they outnumber us!" persisted Bellini. "Even in retreat they can see. The air has cleared so that considerable bodies of troops in motion will be readily discernible from high altitudes. The reason for our failure last night was that they knew our plan of attack."

"They knew! They knew, after all our precautions! There is still a leak! You—"

Westerling raised his clenched hand threateningly at the chief of intelligence, his cheeks purple with rage, his eyes bloodshot. But Bellini, with

"Oh, the Murder of It—the Murder," He Breathed.

his boyish, small face and round head set close to his shoulders, remained undisturbedly exact.

We will waste no more time. The premier supports me. I have decided. We will set the troops in motion."

With fierce energy he set to work detaching units of artillery and infantry from every part of the line and starting them toward Engadir.

"This means an improvised organization; it breaks up the machine," said the tactical expert to Turcas when they were alone.

"Yes," replied Turcas. "He wanted no advice from us when he was taking counsel of desperation. If he succeeds, success will retrieve all the rest of his errors. We may have a stroke of luck in our favor."

In the headquarters of the Browns, junior officers and clerks reported the words of each bulletin with the relief of men who breathed freely again. The chiefs of divisions who were with Lanstron alternately sat down and paced the floor, their restlessness now that of a happiness too deeply thrilling to be expressed by hilarity. Each fresh detail only confirmed the completeness of the repulse as that memorable night in the affairs of the two nations slowly wore on. Shortly before three, when the firing had died after the Brown pursuit had stopped, a wireless from a dirigible flying over the frontier came, telling of bodies of Gray troops and guns on the march. Soon planes and other dirigibles flying over other positions were sending in word of the same tenor. The chiefs drew around the table and looked into one another's eyes in the significance of a common thought.

"It cannot be a retreat!" said the vice-chief.

"Hardly. That is inconceivable of Westerling at this time," Lanstron replied. "The bull charges when wounded. It is clear that he means to make another attack. These troops on the march across country are isolated from any immediate service."

It was Lanstron's way to be suggestive; to let ideas develop in council and orders follow as out of council.

"The chance!" exclaimed some one. "The chance!" others said in the same breath. "The God-given chance for a quick blow! The chance! We attack! We attack!"

It was the most natural conception to a military tactician, though any man who made it his own might have built a reputation on it if he knew how to get the ear of the press. Their faces were close to Lanstron as they leaned toward him eagerly. He seemed not to see them but to be looking at Partow's chair. In imagination Partow was there in life—Partow with the dome forehead, the pendulous cheeks, the shrewd, kindly eyes. A daring risk, this! What would Partow say? Lanstron always asked himself this in a crisis: What would Partow say?

"Well, my boy, why are you hesitating?" Partow demanded. "I don't know that I'd have taken my long holiday and left you in charge if I'd thought you'd be losing your nerve as you are this minute. Wasn't it part of my plan—my dream—that plan I gave you to read in the vaults, to strike if a chance, this very chance, were to come? Hurry up! Seconds count!"

"Yes, a chance to end the killing for good and all!" said Lanstron, coming abruptly out of his silence. "We'll take it and strike hard."

The staff bent over the map. Lanstron's finger flying from point to point, while ready expert answers to his questions were at his elbow and the wires sang out directions that made a drenched and shivering soldiery who had been yielding and holding and never advancing grow warm with the thought of springing from the mire of trenches to charge the enemy. And one, Gustave Feller, in command of a brigade of field-guns—the mobile guns that could go forward rambling to the horses' trot—saw his dearly beloved batteries swing into a road in the moonlight.

"La, la, la! The worm will turn!" he clucked. "It's a merry, gambling old world and I'm right fond of it—so full of the unexpected for the Grays! That lead horse is a little lame, but he'll last the night through. Lots of lame things will! Who knows? Maybe we'll be cleaning the mud off our boots on the white posts of the frontier to-morrow! A whole brigade mine! I live! You old brick, Lanny! This time we are going to spank the enemy on the part of his anatomy where spanks are conventionally given. La, la, la!"

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"Yes, there is a leak, and from the staff," he answered. "Until I have found it this army ought to suspend any aggressive—"

"I was not asking advice!" interrupted Westerling.

"But, I repeat, the leak is not necessary to disclose this new movement that you plan. Their air craft will disclose it," Bellini concluded. He had done his duty and had nothing more to say.

"Dirigibles do not win battles!" Westerling announced. "They are won by getting infantry in possession of positions and holding them. No matter of we don't surprise the enemy. Haven't the Browns held their line with inferior numbers? If they have, we can hold the rest of ours. That gives us overwhelming forces at Engadir."

"You need rest. Our center, where we have the column of last night's attack still concentrated! If anything would convince me that I have to fight this war alone—I—" Westerling choked in irritation.

"Yes. The ground is such that it is a tactically safe and advantageous move for Lanstron to make. He strikes at the vitals of our machine."

"But what about the remainder of the force that made the charge? What about all our guns concentrated in front of Engadir?"

"I was coming to that. The rout of the assaulting column was much worse than we had supposed. Those who are strong enough cannot be got to reform. Many were so exhausted that they dropped in their tracks. Our guns are at this moment in retreat—or being captured by the rush of the Browns' infantry. Your Excellency, the crisis is sudden, incredible."

"Our wire service has broken down. We cannot communicate with many of

of infantry that were in confused retreat down the slopes, while all traffic on the pass road was moving toward the rear. Impelled by a new apprehension she hurried to the tunnel. Lanstron answered her promptly in a voice that had a ring of relief and joy in place of the tension that had characterized it since the outbreak of the war.

"Thanks to you, Marta!" he cried. "Everything goes back to you—thanks to you came this chance to attack, and we are succeeding at every point! You are the general, you the maker of victories!"

"Yes, the general of still more killing!" she cried in indignation. "Why have you gone on with the slaughter? I did not help you for this. Why?"

No reply came. She poured out more questions, and still no reply. She pressed the button and tried again, but she might as well have been talking over a dead wire.

One man alone against the tide—rather, the man who has seen a tide rise at his orders now finding all its sweep against him—Westerling, accustomed to have millions of men move at his command, found himself, one man out of the millions, still and helpless while they moved of their own impulses.

As news of positions lost came in, he could only grimly repeat, "Hold! Tell them to hold!" fruitlessly, like adjurations to the wind to cease blowing. The bell of the long distance kept ringing unheeded, until at last his aide came to say that the premier must speak either to him or to the vice-chief. Westerling staggered to the chair in a heap, staring at the telephone mouthpiece. Again the bell rang. Clenching his hands in a rocking effort, he was able to stiffen his spine once more as he took down the receiver. To admit defeat to the premier—no, he was not ready for that yet.

"The truth is out!" said the premier without any break in his voice and with the fatalism of one who never allows himself to blink a fact. "Telegraphers at the front who got out of touch with the staff were still in touch with the capital. Once the reports began to come, they poured in—declaration of the attacking column, panic and retreat in other portions of the line—chaos!"

"It's a lie!" Westerling declared vehemently.

"The news has reached the press," the premier proceeded. "Editions are already in the streets."

"What! Where is your censorship?" gasped Westerling.

"It is helpless, a straw protesting against a current," the premier replied. "A censorship goes back to physical force, as every law does in the end—to the police and the army; and all, these days, finally to public opinion. After weeks of secrecy, of reported successes, when nobody really knew what was happening, this sudden disillusioning announcement of the truth has sent the public mad."

"It is your business to control the public!" complained Westerling.

"With what, now? With a speech or a lullaby? As well could you stop the retreat with your naked hands. My business to control the public, yes, but not unless you win victories. I gave you the soldiers. We have nothing but police here, and I tell you that the public is in a mob rage—the whole public, bankers and business and professional men included. I have just ordered the stock exchange and all banks closed."

"There's a cure for mobs!" cried Westerling. "Let the police fire a few volleys and they'll behave."

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