

The Last Shot

FREDERICK PALMER

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CHAPTER XXII—Continued.

"I think we have practically agreed that the two individuals who were invaluable to our cause were Partow and Miss Galland," Lanstron remarked tentatively. He waited for a reply. It was apparent that he was laying a foundation before he went any further.

"Certainly!" said the vice-chief. "And you?" put in another officer, which brought a chorus of assent.

"No, not I—only these two!" Lanstron replied. "Or, I, too, if you prefer. It little matters. The thing is that I am under a promise to both, which I shall respect. He organized and labored for the same purpose that she played the spy. When we sent the troops forward in a counter-attack and pursuit to clear our soil of the Grays; when I stopped them at the frontier—both were according to Partow's plan. He had a plan and a dream, this wonderful old man who made us all seem primary pupils in the art of war."

Could it be that terrible Partow, a stroke of whose pencil had made the Galland house an inferno? Marta wondered as Lanstron read his message—the message out of the real heart of the man, throbbing with the power of his great brain. His plan was to hold the Grays to stalemate; to force them to desist after they had battered their battalions to pieces against the Brown fortifications. His dream was the thing that had happened—that an opportunity would come to pursue a broken machine in a bold stroke of the offensive.

"I would want to be a hero of our people for only one aim, to be able to stop our army at the frontier," he had written. "Then they might drive me forth heaped with obloquy, if they chose. I should like to see the Grays demoralized, beaten, ready to sue for peace, the better to prove my point that we should ask only for what is ours and that our strength was only for the purpose of holding what is ours. Then we should lay up no legacy of revenge in their hearts. They could never have cause to attack again. Civilization would have advanced another step."

Lanstron continued to read to the amazed staff, for Partow's message had looked far into the future. Then there was a P. S. written after the war had begun, on the evening of the day that Marta had gone from tea on the veranda with Westerling to the telephone, in the impulse of her new purpose.

"I begin to believe in that dream," he wrote. "I begin to believe that the chance for the offensive will come, now that my colleague, Miss Galland, in the name of peace has turned practical. There is nothing like mixing a little practice in your dreams while the world is still well this side of Utopia, as the head of my old behemoth of a body well knows. She had the right idea with her school. The oath so completely expressed my ideas—the result of all my thinking—that I had a twinge of literary jealousy. My boy, if you do reach the frontier, in pursuit of a broken army, and you do not keep faith with my dream and with her ideals, then you will get a lesson that will last you forever at the foot of the Gray range. But I do not think so badly as that of you or of my judgment of men."

"Lanny! Lanny!" The dignity of a staff council could not restrain Marta. Her emotion must have action. She sprang to his side and seized his hand, her exultation mixed with penitence over the way she had wronged him and Partow. Their self-contained purpose had been the same as hers and they had worked with a soldier's fortitude, while she had worked with whims and impulses. She bent over him with gratitude and praise and a plea for forgiveness in her eyes, submerging the thing which he sought in them. He flushed boyishly in happy embarrassment, incapable of words for an instant; and silently the staff looked on.

"And I agree with Partow," Lanstron went on, "that we cannot take the range. The Grays still have numbers equal to ours. It is they, now, who will be singing 'God with us!' with their backs against the wall. With Partow's goes my own appeal to the army and the nation; and I shall keep faith with Partow, with Miss Galland, and with my own ideas, if the government orders the army to advance, by resigning as chief of staff—my work finished."

ment crinkle and become natural. The blue veins on his bulging temples were a little more pronounced, his thin features a little more pinched, but otherwise he was unchanged and he seemed equal to another strain as heavy as the one he had undergone.

"We have a new government, a new premier," he said. "The old premier was killed by a shot from a crowd that he was addressing from the balcony of the palace. After this, the capital became quieter. As we get in touch with the divisions, we find the army in better shape than we had feared it would be. There is a recovery of spirit, owing to our being on our own soil."

"Yes," replied Westerling, drowning in their stares and grasping at a straw. "Only a panic, as I said. If—his voice rising hoarsely and catching in his throat."

"We have a new government, a new premier!" Turcas repeated, with firm, methodical politeness. Westerling looking from one fact to another with flinty eyes, lowered them before Bouchard. "There's a room ready for Your Excellency upstairs," Turcas continued. "The orderly will show you the way."

Now Westerling grasped the fact that he was no longer chief of staff. He drew himself up in a desperate attempt at dignity; the staff saluted again, and, uncertainly, he followed the orderly, with the aide and valet still in loyal attendance.

Two figures were in the doorway: a heavy-set market woman with a fringe of down on her lip and a cadaverous, tidily dressed old man, who might have been a superannuated schoolmaster, with a bronze cross won in the war of forty years ago on his breast and his eyes burning with the youthful fire of Grandfather Fragnin's.

"They got the premier in the capital. We've come for Westerling! We want to know what he did with our sons! We want to know why he was beaten!" cried the market woman. "Yes," said the veteran. "We want him to explain his lies. Why did he keep the truth from us? We were ready to fight, but not to be treated like babies. This is the twentieth century!"

"We want Westerling! Tell Westerling to come out!" rose impatient shouts behind the two figures in the doorway.

"You are sure that he has one?" whispered Turcas to Westerling's aide.

"Yes," was the choking answer—"yes. It is better than that—with a glance toward the mob. 'I left my own on the table.'"

"We can't save him! We shall have to let them—"

Turcas's voice was drowned by a great roar of cries, with no word except "Westerling" distinguishable, that pierced every crack of the house.

A wave of movement starting from the rear drove the veteran and the market woman and a dozen others through the doorway toward the

stairs. Then the sound of a shot was heard overhead.

"The man you seek is dead!" said Turcas, stepping in front of the crowd, his features unrelenting in authority. "Now, go back to your work and leave us to ours."

"I understand, sir," said the veteran. "We've no argument with you."

"Yes!" agreed the market woman. "But if you ever leave this range alive we shall have one. So, you stay!"

Looking at the bronze cross on the veteran's faded coat, the staff saluted; for the cross, though it were hung on rags, wherever it went was entitled by custom to the salute of officers and "present arms" by sentries.

at a point in front of his fingers. If Lanstron resigned he became chief. "Partow might have this dream before he won, but would he now?" asked the vice-chief. "No. He would go on!"

"Yes," said another officer. "The world will ridicule the suggestion; our people will overwhelm us with their anger. The Grays will take it for a sign of weakness."

"Not if we put the situation rightly to them," answered Lanstron. "Not if we go to them as brave adversary to brave adversary, in a fair spirit."

"We can—we shall take the range!" the vice-chief went on in a burst of rigid conviction when he saw that opinion was with him. "Nothing can stop this army now!" He struck the table edge with his fist, his shoulders stiffening.

"Please—please, don't!" implored Marta softly. "It sounds so like Westerling!"

The vice-chief started as if he had received a sharp pin-prick. His shoulders unconsciously relaxed. He began a fresh study of a certain point on the table top. Lanstron, looking first at one and then at another, spoke again, his words as measured as they ever had been in military discussion and eloquent. He began outlining his own message which would go with Partow's to the premier, to the nation, to every regiment of the Browns, to the Grays, to the world. He set forth why the Browns, after tasting the courage of the Grays, should realize that they could not take their range. Partow had not taught him to put himself in other men's places in vain. The boy who had kept up his friendship with engine drivers after he was an officer knew how to sink the plummet into human emotions. He reminded the Brown soldiers that there had been a providential answer to the call of "God with us!" he reminded the people of the lives that would be lost to no end but to engender hatred; he begged the army and the people not to break faith with that principle of "Not for their, but for ours," which had been their strength.

"I should like you all to sign it—to make it simply the old form of 'the staff has the honor to report,'" he said finally.

There was a hush as he finished—the hush of a deep impression when one man waits for another to speak. All were looking at him except the vice-chief, who was still staring at the table as if he had heard nothing. Yet every word was etched on his mind. The man whose name was the symbol of victory to the soldiers, who would be more than ever a hero as the news of his charge with the African Braves traveled along the lines, would go on record to his soldiers as saying that they could not take the Gray range. This was a handicap that the vice-chief did not care to accept; and he knew how to turn a phrase as well as to make a soldierly decision. He looked up smilingly to Marta.

"I have decided that I had rather not be a Westerling, Miss Galland," he said. "We'll make it unanimous. And you," he burst out to Lanstron—"you legatee of old Partow; I've always said that he was the biggest man of our time. He has proved it by catching the spirit of our time and incarnating it."

Vaguely, in the whirl of her joy, Marta heard the chorus of assent as the officers sprang to their feet in the elation of being at one with their chief again. Lanstron caught her arm, fearing that she was going to fall, but a burning question rose in her mind to steady her.

"Then my shame—my sending men to slaughter—my sacrifice was not in vain!" she exclaimed.

The sea of people packed in the great square of the Brown capital made a roar like the thunder of waves against a breakwater at sight of a white spot on a background of gray stone, which was the head of an eminent statesman.

"It looks as if our government would last the week out," the premier chuckled as he turned to his colleagues at the cabinet table.

As yet only the brief bulletins whose publication in the newspapers had aroused the public to a frenzy had been received. The cabinet, as eager for details as the press, had remained up, awaiting a fuller official account.

"We have a long communication in preparation," the staff had telegraphed. "Meanwhile, the following is submitted."

"Good heavens! It's not from the army! It's from the grave!" exclaimed the premier as he read the first paragraphs of Partow's message. "Of all the concealed dynamite ever!" he gasped as he grasped the full meaning of the document, that piece of news, as staggering as the victory itself, that had lain in the staff vaults for years. "Well, we needn't give it out to the press; at least, not until after mature consideration," he declared when they had reached the end of Partow's appeal. "Now we'll hear what the staff has to say for itself after gratifying the wish of a dead man," he added as a messenger gave him another sheet.

"The staff, in loyalty to its dead leader who made victory possible, and in loyalty to the principles of defense for which the army fought, begs to say to the nation—"

in the great square would look like in a rage. He was between the people in a passion for retribution and a headless army that was supposed to charge across the frontier at dawn.

"The thing is sheer madness!" he cried. "It's insubordination! I'll have it suppressed! The army must go on to gratify public demand. I'll show the staff that they are not in the saddle. They'll obey orders!"

He tried to get Lanstron on the long distance. "Sorry, but the chief has retired," answered the officer on duty sleepily. "In fact, all the rest of the staff have, with orders that they are not to be disturbed before ten."

"Tell them that the premier, the head of the government, their commander, is speaking!"

"Yes, sir. The orders not to disturb them are quite positive, and as a junior I could not do so except by their orders as superiors. The chief, before retiring, however, repeated to me, in case any inquiry came from you, sir, that there was nothing he could add to the staff's message to the nation and the army. It is to be given to the



"Good Heavens! It's Not From the Army. It's From the Grave!"

soldiers the first thing in the morning, and he will let you know how they regard it."

"Confound these machine minds that spring their surprises as fully executed plans!" exclaimed the premier. "It's true—Partow and the staff have covered everything—met every argument. There is nothing more for them to say," said the foreign minister.

"But what about the indemnity?" demanded the finance minister. He was thinking of victory in the form of piles of gold in the treasury.

"This question, too, was answered. 'War has never brought prosperity,' Partow had written. 'Its purpose is to destroy, and destruction can never be construction. The conclusion of a war has often assured a period of peace; and peace gave the impetus of prosperity attributed to war. A man is strong in what he achieves, not through the gifts he receives or the goods he steals. Indemnity will not raise another blade of wheat in our land. To take it from a beaten man will foster in him the desire to beat his adversary in turn and recover the amount and more. Then we shall have the apprehension of war always in the air, and soon another war and more destruction. Remove the danger of a European cataclysm, and any sum extorted from the Grays becomes paltry beside the wealth that peace will create. An indemnity makes the purpose of the courage of the Grays in their assaults and of the Browns in their resistance that of the burglar and the looter. There is no money value to a human life when it is your own, and our soldiers gave their lives. Do not cheapen their service.'

"Considering the part that we played at The Hague," observed the foreign minister, "it would be rather inconsistent for us not to—"

"There is only one thing to do. Lanstron has got us!" replied the premier. "We must jump in at the head of the procession and receive the mud or the bouquets, as it happens."

With Partow's and the staff's appeals went an equally earnest one from the premier and his cabinet. Naturally, the noisy element of the cities was the first to find words. It shouted in rising anger that Lanstron had betrayed the nation. Army officers whom Partow had retired for leisurely habits said that he and Lanstron had struck at their own calling. But the average man and woman, in a daze from the shock of the appeals after a night's celebration, were reading and wondering and asking their neighbors' opinions. If not in Partow's then in the staff's message they found the mirror that set their own ethical professions staring at them.

Before they had made up their minds the correspondents at the front had set the wires singing to the evening editions; for Lanstron had directed that they be given the run of the army's lines at daybreak. They told of soldiers awakening after the debauch of yesterday's fighting, normal and rested, glowing with the security of possession of the frontier and responding to their leaders' sentiment; of officers of the type favored by Partow who would bring the industry that

commands respect to any calling, taking Lanstron's views as worthy of their profession; of that irrepressible post laureate of the soldiers, Captain Stransky, I. C. (Iron cross), breaking forth in a new song to an old tune, expressing his brotherhood ideas in a "We have ours—let them keep theirs" chorus that was spreading from regiment to regiment.

This left the retired officers to grumble in their corners that war was no longer a gentleman's vocation, and silenced the protests of their natural ally in the business of making war, the noisy element, which promptly adapted itself to a new fashion in the relation of nations. Again the great square was packed and again a wavelike roar of cheers greeted the white speck of an eminent statesman's head. All the ideas that had been fomenting in the minds of a people for a generation became a living force of action to break through the precedents born of provincial passion with a new precedent; for the power of public opinion can be as swift in its revolutions as decisive victories at arms. The world at large, after rubbing its forehead and readjusting its eye-glasses and clearing its throat, exclaimed:

"Why not! Isn't that what we have all been thinking and desiring? Only nobody knew how or where to begin."

The premier of the Browns found himself talking over the long distance to the premier of the Grays in as neighborly a fashion as if they had adjoining estates and were arranging a matter of community interest.

"You have been so fine in waiting an indemnity," said the premier of the Grays, "that Turcas suggests we pay for all the damage done to property on your side by our invasion. I'm sure our people will rise to the suggestion. Their mood has overwhelmed every preconceived notion of mine. In place of the old suspicion that a Brown could do nothing except with a selfish motive is the desire to be as fair as the Browns. And the practical way the people look at it makes me think that it will be enduring."

"I think so, for the same reason," responded the premier of the Browns. "They say it is good business. It means prosperity and progress for both countries."

"After all, a soldier comes out the hero of the great peace movement," concluded the premier of the Grays. "A soldier took the tricks with our own cards. Old Partow was the greatest statesman of us all."

"No doubt of that!" agreed the premier of the Browns. "It's a sentiment to which every premier of ours who ever tried to down him would have readily subscribed!"

The every-day statesman smiles when he sees the people smile and grows angry when they grow angry. Now and then appears an inscrutable genius who finds out what is brewing in their brains and brings it to a head. He is the epoch maker. Such an one was that little Corsican, who gave a stagnant pool the storm it needed, until he became overfed and mistook his ambition for a continuation of his youthful presence.

Marta had yet to bear the shock of Westerling's death. After learning the manner of it she went to her room, where she spent a haunted, sleepless night. The morning found her still tortured by her visualization of the picture of him, irresolute as the mob pressed around the Gray headquarters.

"It is as if I had murdered him!" she said. "I let him make love to me—I let my hand remain in his once—but that was all, Lanny. I—I couldn't have borne any more. Yet that was enough—enough!"

"But we know now, Marta," Lanstron pleaded, "that the premier of the Grays held Westerling to a compact that he should not return alive if he lost. He could not have won, even though you had not helped us against him. He would only have lost more lives and brought still greater indignation on his head. His fate was inevitable—and he was a soldier."

But his reasoning only racked her with a shudder. "If he had only died fighting!" Marta replied. "He died like a rat in a trap and I—I set the trap!"

"No, destiny set it!" put in Mrs. Galland. Lanstron dropped down beside Marta's chair. "Yes, destiny set it," he said, imploringly. "Just as it set your part for you. And, Marta, Mrs. Galland went on gently, with what Marta had once called the wisdom of mothers, "Lanny lives and lives for you. Your destiny is life and to make the most of life, as you always have. Isn't it, Marta?"

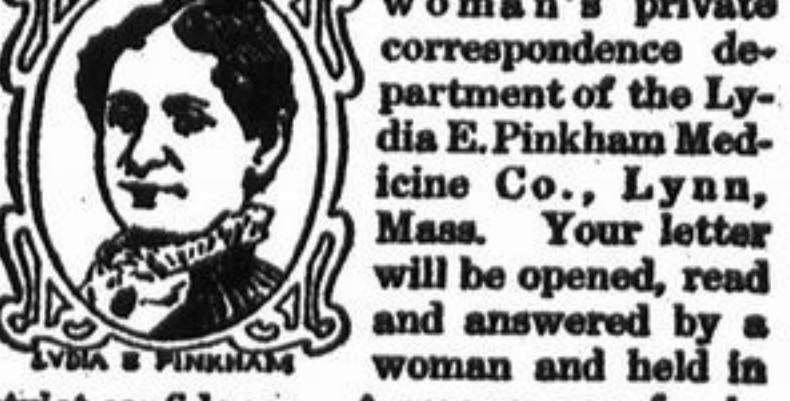
"Yes," she breathed after a pause, in conviction, as she pressed her mother's hands. "Yes, you have a gift of making things simple and clear." Then she looked up to Lanstron and the flame in her eyes, whose leaping, spontaneous passion he already knew, held something of the eternal, as her arms crept around his neck. "You are life, Lanny! You are the destiny of today and tomorrow!"

(THE END.)

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SATISFIED AS THEY WERE

Couples, Victims of Curate's Mistake, Decided That They Would Let the Thing Go.

A vicar of a certain English parish was sitting in his study one morning when in burst the verger in a great state of excitement.

"Mr. —," mentioning the curate's name, "wants you at once, sir," he exclaimed. "He has married two couples and married the two men to the wrong women, and he does not know what to do."

"Have they signed the register?" inquired the clergyman. "No," was the verger's response. "Then they can be married again," said the vicar. "Tell Mr. — I will be at the church in a minute or two to perform the ceremony."

In due course the incumbent made his way to the church and found the parties gathered at the entrance. Before he could say anything one of the bridegrooms approached and said: "We have been talking it over, sir, and we have made up our minds to remain as we are." And they did so.

Another Echo of That Song. An old negro who had his savings in a Birmingham bank that recently suspended was telling his troubles to a business man. "Don't worry," said the business man. "I understand the suspension is only temporary."

"But, Boss," said the old negro, still perturbed, "de white folks say it's er long, long way ter temporary."—Birmingham Age-Herald.

Open Game. "Let me make the songs of a nation and I care not who makes its laws." "Well, have a try. Many people seem to think there's room for improvement in both just now."

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