COMRADES OF PERIL

By RANDALL PARRISH

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"YOU! HER HUSBAND?"

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. She agrees to pick out a husband from the score of men lined up in her home. To his consternation, she selects Shelby, who had gone along merely as a spectator. The wedding takes place and the couple set out for Shelby's ranch. With them is "Kid" Macklin, whom Shelby has hired as a helper. On the way the girl tells her husband her name is Olga Carlyn, and also tells him something of the peculiar circumstances of her life. Upon their arrival at the ranch Shelby is struck down from behind and left for dead. He recovers consciousness to find that Macklin and his wife have gone. He starts in pursuit. He learns his wife is an heiress, that her abduction has been carefully planned and that she has been taken to Wolves' Hole, a stronghold of bandits and bad Indians. Reaching Wolves' Hole, he is discovered by "Indian Joe" and forced to accompany him into the Hole.

CHAPTER VIII—Continued.

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Shelby rode away silently between the two, conscious that this brief conversation had in no way improved his position. To be sure he had escaped an immediate meeting with Hanley, but the fact that the latter had entirely failed to mention his probable arrival must have left an unpleasant suspicion in Laud's mind. The fellow said nothing, however, and apparently took no precautions, but Shelby was nevertheless fully aware that the other watched him cautiously, and would be quick to detect the slightest movement. They rode at a walk through a darkness so profound that he could not be sure they were even following a trail. The sound of boisterous voices rang out occasionally, but they bore off steadily toward the left away from the noise, and he noticed the Mexican had grasped the bridle of the buckskin, and was firmly guiding the animal.

"H—l!" said Laud suddenly, "I forgot all about the Kid. Wanter see him, Churchill?"

"Not specially tonight," Shelby admitted hastily, "mornin' will be soon enough."

"All right, then; 'tain't much farther, anyhow. There's the high rock, Juan; the light'll show round the next turn."

It did, shining out like a star, and they drove up in front of a log shack, an odd-shaped, rambling affair, built close in against a wall of rock. The door opened in response to the sound of the horses' hoofs, and a young woman appeared in the entrance, peering forth.

"That you, Juan?" she asked in Spanish.

"Sí; there are three of us, Pancha," replied the Mexican, "and we would eat quickly. Is the supper hot?"

"Not after waitin', Juan. He said little when he rode away, yet there has been enough I would talk with you about."

"'Tis well, little one—after we eat there will be time."

Laud swung heavily down from his horse, handing up his rein to Juan who remained in the saddle. He moved like one whose limbs were stiffened by being long in one position.

"Holy Smoke! I can hardly wait to be married. I'll go along with you to the corral in such a hurry it'll astonish ye. And as for you, Churchill," his voice deepening on the word, "go on into the cabin and wait there till we come."

There was nothing for Shelby to do but obey. Suspicion seized him to feel a thrill of apprehension from Indian Joe's cold manner, yet there was nothing in the words to resent, and no sign whatever of safety for him in an outward display of enthusiasm. The girl drew aside and he stepped forward into the room. An instant she lingered as he glanced hastily about at the plainly furnished interior, then closed the door, and began busying herself in arranging the table. She was young, not over eighteen, he judged, with dark hair and eyes, decidedly pretty, and with a quick movement, like the flight of a bird. Twice she passed him on her journeys to the fire place, without even glancing in his direction; then suddenly their eyes met, and she laughed outright.

"You verra dull, Americano. I not see a man like you before," she declared positively. "You not care talk with me?"

"Sure I do," and he straightened up, "I thought maybe you couldn't talk my language."

"Oh, that eet; you not speak Spanish, senor?"

"Well, hardly. I kin make out in a way what anybody says, but when it comes to talkin' the lingo, I'm a bit rusty."

"Where you learn?"

"When I was in the army, in Arizona."

"I in Arizona once—Tucson; you there? Good. You not soldier now?"

"Oh, no; that was quite a while ago; that is why I have forgotten my Spanish. There aren't many of your people up here."

She shook her head, resting back against the table, and gazing at him frankly with her dark eyes.

"Juan and I all alone here," she confessed. "Eet is not nice—no; I like not these Americanos. You do not look like the senor—vat vas ze funny name he call you?"

"Churchill."

"Shirchill—bah! I not say eet verra good. Maybe you hav' some other name I can say better? You tell me?"

"My given name, you mean; that is Tom."

She laughed, shrugging her shoulders.

"Tom! Oh, I know that; I call you Tom, then. I am Pancha Villemonte. Which you rather say?"

"Pancha, of course; and who is Juan?"

"Juan Villemonte; he is my brother—he. You not know heem, then?"

"No; we just met above. I had lost my way, and we ran into each other

"Because I Think You Are Straight."

up there. He and Indian Joe were driving cattle, and brought me along with them."

Her eyes opened wider, and her hands interlocked.

"You not here before, then? You never in Wolves' hole till now?"

"No."

"But why you come, then? Why they say you ride with them? Madre de Dios! You know what dis place is?"

"Yes, Pancha," he answered soberly, feeling her earnestness. "I know. I came to help a woman."

"You tell them that? Indian Joe?"

"Not just as I have you; I let them believe I was in on the game being played. In fact, I didn't have to say much of anything, for as soon as I mentioned the name of Churchill, Laud seemed to understand. What I failed to make clear was that my object was to help her."

"Why you tell me this?"

"Because you are a woman, I guess, and because I think you are straight."

She stared at him a moment in silence; then went over and stood with her back against the door. She was breathing hard, and her cheeks were red.

"She come from a ranch on the Cottonwood?"

"Yes."

Her white teeth gleamed angrily between the red of her lips.

"An' what this woman to you, senor? Why you care what happen to her?"

Shelby looked frankly into the girl's face, determined to risk all, suddenly convinced that this young Mexican had an interest in his answer beyond any mere curiosity.

"Because I am her husband," he said quietly.

"You! her husband?" She almost screamed the words, advancing toward him fiercely. "You not lie to me? They say to me you dead! They tell me that; they tell her that."

"Who told you?"

"Macklin; the Indians—all tell eet. Running Horse, he keel you—like zis, see!"

"Yes, he struck me all right, Pancha; at least someone did after they left me there. But I was not dead."

"An' what he want of her? What Senor Macklin want of her? You know that?"

"I know a little, but perhaps not all. I heard two fellows talking about it; you know them, likely—Matt Hanley and Hank Slagle?"

She nodded.

"Hanley had got Macklin drunk and pumped him. It's some matter of a big fortune down East. It seems Macklin's real name may be Churchill, and if so his father is trustee for all this property, which really belongs to the woman. Macklin has got an idea he can marry her and so cop all the coin."

"He marry her?"

"That is the way Hanley understood it."

"Then your name not Shirchill?"

"No; it's Shelby."

"And Senor Macklin—his name Shirchill?"

"I reckon likely; I don't know."

There was a sound without and she sprang instantly aside to the table, busying herself furiously. Laud and the Mexican entered, throwing their saddles down noisily into one corner and without paying the slightest attention to Shelby, prepared themselves for the meal. To the rather curt invitation of the former the ranchman drew up the bench to the table and joined them. Pancha asked her brother a few questions, but Indian Joe never uttered a word until he had eaten his fill. Once Shelby caught his eyes looking across at him, but except for that one glance the fellow seemed oblivious of any other presence. Finally he pushed back his chair, pulled his feet around to where the butt of a revolver was within easy reach of his hand and his eyes glared straight into Shelby's face.

"Had enough?"

"Plenty; Pancha is a good cook."

"She is that. Thought I'd wait till after supper before we talked business. Now, Churchill, or whatever your name is, maybe you'll tell me where you got that bronc with a Three Star brand on him?"

CHAPTER IX.

The Love of a Woman.

Shelby, while cautiously watchful of Laud's every motion, was yet aware that the girl leaned suddenly against the wall, her face white, her eyes staring toward him, and that Juan was leaning forward across the table with gleaming teeth exposed. He was calm enough himself, however, for he had imagined this unpleasant discovery might be made and was not entirely unprepared to meet it.

"What brand?" he asked coolly. "You mean the Three Stars?"

"That's exactly what I mean, pardner. I happen to know where that bronc com' from."

"Then you know more than I do, Laud. I bought the pony from a livery man at Gerlasche to ride out here on; some bucker, at that. Say, come to think about it, those cows you were driving in were Three Stars."

"That is just what they were most o' them. That's what struck me as d—n funny. Those cattle com' from up on the Cottonwood; they belonged to a feller named Shelby."

"You run 'em off?"

"That's none o' your d—n business. That's where they came from, an' Shelby's dead. But what I'm interested in is how the h—l you got his horse."

He dropped his gun down on the table and stared across into Shelby's imperturbable face with hard, threatening eyes.

"Now you look here, young fellow, you know who I am, I reckon. It's Indian Joe Laud talkin' to you. Maybe yer all right an' maybe yer ain't; only I don't take no chances. Your story ain't sounded just right to me from the start, but I'll give yer a chance to prove it. I ain't goin' ter plug you now; not if yer've got sense enough to behave yerself. Tomorrow I'll see what Matt Hanley has to say, but till that time yere goin' to be locked up. Goin' ter make any row over that program?"

"Not the least."

"All right, then. Juan, you take the gent's gun; he's better off without it. That's right; now feel him over an' see if he's got any other weapons. Better stand up, Churchill."

The ranchman, comprehending the utter futility of any attempt at resistance, did as he was told, managing to retain the same cool smile on his lips. The murderous eyes of the squaw-man never once deserted his face and Shelby realized that the slightest symptom of treachery would prove his undoing. Laud was in no mood to be argued with.

"Nice of you to wait until after I'd eaten," he said easily. "It will give me a comfortable night's rest."

"Glad you take it that way. Cleaned him up, have you Juan? Now, how about that room yonder? Empty, ain't it?"

"Sí, senor," it was Pancha who answered, opening the door.

Laud took a step forward and glanced into the apartment. The swift scrutiny apparently satisfied him, for he turned to the prisoner, his revolver still grasped in readiness for instant action.

"Go on in," he commanded tersely. "An' tomorrow we'll settle this case."

Shelby walked past him without so much as a side glance, to all outward appearance quite at his ease. Laud closed the door and the prisoner heard him secure it with a stout wooden bar. He stood there motionless, endeavoring to collect his thoughts, the smile no longer on his lips, adjusting his eyes to the darkness.

There was a window high up, but seemingly too small for the passage of his body, yet a slight gleam of starlight found its way through the opening, which was further barred by two stout wooden stakes. He stepped silently across and tested them, finding them solidly embedded in the logs. He felt his way cautiously about the room, which was of small dimensions, containing only a single stool, and a cot; the floor was puncheon and the walls of log, heavily plastered with mud. The place offered apparently no opportunity for escape, and Shelby sat down on the edge of the cot discouraged.

He could distinguish the voices of the three without plainly enough to determine who was speaking, but their words were indistinguishable. Then the murmur finally ceased, and he thought one of the men had left the house, perhaps both, yet that was hardly likely. Someone remained certainly, for there was movement, and the sound of feet, mingled with the clink of dishes. Pancha was evidently clearing off the table. His thought centered on her. Had he made a mistake in thus suddenly confiding his true story to her ears? Yet, so far as he knew, she had said nothing to injure him, and had made no effort to reveal his secret. Indeed her actions had rather expressed fear of Laud, and a certain sympathy for him; surely that was what he had read in the depths of her eyes. Yet how could this be accounted for? She must certainly be one with these others; brought up probably from childhood in the atmosphere of crime, and certainly loyal to her brother, if nothing else. What then could possibly influence her to show him the slightest consideration?

He sat with head in his hands, endeavoring to solve the mystery, and, out from the dark, a possible explanation flashed into his mind—Macklin. Could any relation she might have with this fellow account for a desire to wish his escape alive? It might; the fact that he was already the husband of the woman Macklin planned to marry would quite naturally explain the entire situation under certain conditions. If that rascal had made love to her, and now deliberately planned to desert her for another, the Spanish blood would account for all the rest. By heaven; that must be it! He recalled the insistence of her questioning; the flash of her eyes, the threatening gleam of her white teeth. Unconsciously he had touched the secret spring, and unloosed the tiger. Jealousy was the weapon—a love turned to hate, the fury of a woman scorned. To get Olga out of her path forever, she would risk anything, dare anything. Here then, was his one and only chance.

But could the girl serve him, even if she desired to do so? He realized the seriousness of his position; his helplessness without some outside aid. He had been a blind fool to venture into this den alone; and even a blinder fool to claim friendship with Hanley. The morning would find him completely exposed, and he had little doubt what form vengeance would assume at the hands of these men. He was like a condemned man in his cell waiting helplessly for the certain hour of execution. Worse than that, even; for his fate must inevitably seal also the fate of his wife. Her only chance of rescue lay in his efforts, and he was helpless. There was not a thing he could do; yet he tried again and again desperately, testing the punchеons of the door, block by block, digging at the dried mud between the logs of the wall; endeavoring to gain some leverage upon the hinges of the door, and tugging once again furiously at those wooden stakes protecting the narrow window. His fingers bled from the frantic effort to thus loosen something, to yield him an opportunity to really exert his strength. These efforts were utterly useless; there was not a spot of weakness to be discovered. If the place had been originally constructed as a prison it could not have been more securely built. Mentally and physically exhausted, he flung himself upon the floor, and lay there, quivering from head to foot, with nerves completely shattered.

"Tomorrow We'll Settle This Case."

The silence became ghastly; any sound would have been a relief. There was no one moving about even in that other room, and the door between fitted too closely for him to perceive any gleam of light. He listened intently, holding his breath, but his head sank back once more in dejection. Why in God's name hadn't he fought it out like a man? Why had he ever permitted himself to be thus caught like a trapped rat? The frenzy of disgust he felt caused him to sit up and stare once more at the single star shining through the window. What was that? A shadow? Surely something out yonder moved!

Silently, cautiously, he stepped on the stool, and looked out between the bars, his heart beating like a drum. At first he saw nothing, the blood seeming to stand still as he gazed—then the fingers of a hand grasped one of the wooden bars, and a face rose slowly just in front of his own. A whisper revealed the identity of his visitor.

"Senor, come quietly to window; do not speak loud."

"Pancha, you! You would talk with me, then?"

"I must know some things, senor; I must be sure," she said fiercely. "You tell me tonight the truth, senor; you not lie to me."

"Not a single word," he assured her eagerly, his heart beginning to beat with new hope, his face advanced until only the bars divided them. "I trusted you."

"You are Senor Shelby?"

"Yes."

"And she, this woman, is your wife?"

"Yes."

"She is pretty woman, verra pretty; you not married long?"

"No, only a few days; we had just come to the ranch when she was taken away."

"But, senor, why she go away if she be just married like you say? Why she leave you, an' run off with Senor Macklin? She love heem better than you?"

"Love him! She did not run off. He stole her, he and four Indians, after leaving me for dead."

"He not tell eet to me like that; he say she want to marry heem, an' not you. That he took her to save her from you; that she would not let heem leave her. Then you fight, an' so get keeled."

Shelby laughed softly.

"So that was Macklin's story, was it? Well, it is not exactly true. I ain't saying she's in love with me, or nothin' like that, but she sure don't handle tone after that chap. I'll tell yer why he took her—cause she's got a bunch o' money comin' her way down east that Macklin would like to get his hands on."

"He marry her?"

"That's his game, no doubt, if it works. If not, he'll evolve some other. I don't think he gives a cuss how it's done, so he gets it—he and his precious father."

She stared at him with lips parted.

"Maybe I see it more clear now," she exclaimed. "He not love her, then; he just want her money, bah! I care not how he got that, if he not get her. You take her away, Senor Shelby, where he never see her again?"

"Of course."

"An' you keep her married to you?"

"I'll do the best I can. What do you mean, Pancha? Can you get us out of here?"

"You lie hid, Senor, and trust all to me."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The Wonder of Eggs.

One cannot find among the multitude of wonders in nature anything more marvelous than the development of an egg, writes Elsa G. Allen in the American Forestry Magazine. Whether it be a butterfly which flourishes for a day only to die after depositing its eggs, or a reptile which lazily leaves its eggs with only the warm sand to mother them, or a fish, like the salmon, which, with incredible strength, jumps the rapids to spawn in the upper reaches of rivers, or most appealing of all, a bird which builds a beautiful nest for its treasures, the egg in every case is structurally the same, and the miracle of life unfolds according to the same laws of cell division.

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