COMRADES OF PERIL

—BY—

RANDALL PARRISH

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(Continued From Yesterday)

CHAPTER XVII.

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 damn 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 damn business. That's where they came from, an' Shelby's dead. But what I'm interested in is how the hell 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. Tomorror I'll see what Matt Hanley has to say, but till that time yer 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. That's your Winchester over in the corner, I reckon? Cleaned him up, have you, Juan? Now how about that room yonder? Empty, ain't it?"

"Si, 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 harshly. "An' tomorror we'll settle this case."

Shelby walked past him without so much as a side glance, to all outward appearance quite at his ease. The girl had slipped silently to one side, while Juan remained in the middle of the room, his white teeth still gleaming. 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 egress thru the opening, which was further barred by two stout wooden stakes. He stepped silently across and tested these, 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, apparently laid directly on the earth, 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? He had obeyed an impulse, inspired by the artless speech and manner of the girl, which now he almost regretted. 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 had 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. By God, that would be it! 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. Mercy was plainly no part of their code, and there was no plea he could advance which would have any weight with them. 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. Shelby cursed his stupidity, pacing the floor from wall to wall, but it all ended with him upon his knees, with his face buried in his hands. There was not a thing he could do; yet he tried again and again desperately, testing the puncheons of the floor, 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.

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 permitteed himself to be thus caught like a trapped rat? With gun in hand he was not afraid of Indian Joe Laud, or that grinning Mexican with him; and yet he had let them play with him, strip him of his weapons, and throw him into this hole. The frenzy of disgust he felt caused him to sit up and stare once more at the single star shining thru 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. Perhaps it was a bird, a wisp of cloud sweeping by, the flutter of some near-by shrubbery. 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. In the darkness he could not tell who this was, and leaned back so as not to be seen by the one peering in. 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 assuerd her eagerly, his heart beginning to beat with new hope, his face advanced until only the bars divided them. He could perceive now the outline of the girl's features, and touched the fingers clinging to the wooden stakes. "I trusted you."

"Because I was a woman?"

"Yes, and because I thought you could be trusted."

"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 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 hanker none after that chap. I'll tell yer why he took her—cause she's got a bunch of 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."

"Hees father?"

"Sure; the old man is back of the whole scheme. Macklin's real name, I am told, is Churchill, and that was the name of Olga's mother."

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 get 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?"

"Si, senor; I know the way that others do not. I get you out, but," passionately, "eet is not to save you. I belong here—see; with Juan, my brother. I am born outlaw, yet she must go! That I resolve. If she stay here I keel her. But 'tis easier way to have her married to you, an' safe."

"You love Macklin?"

"Si, senor," proudly, "why not? He say he love me; yet she come. Madre de Dios? I hate her! She take my love! She! Eet shall not be. You swear, senor, that she go with you, an' never come back any more?"

"Yes, Pancha, I swear that. Once we are away she shall never come back," he answered soberly, impressed by the violence of her passion, "yet how is that to be done?"

She glanced apprehensively behind, still clinging tightly to her perch, lowering her voice again into its former cautious whisper.

"Listen, senor; I tell you. Eet is late now, for I wait before I come, an' think eet all out, so I know what to say. Indian Joe, he bad man, verra bad man, an' I much afraid. But now he sleep in there; I creep past while he breathe, an' not wake heem. 'Tis because he drank. Juan, my brother, go up to the cove to find Senor Hanley, an' he not be back teel morning. Tonight eet must be done, an' so they will not know I helped. Is eet so?"

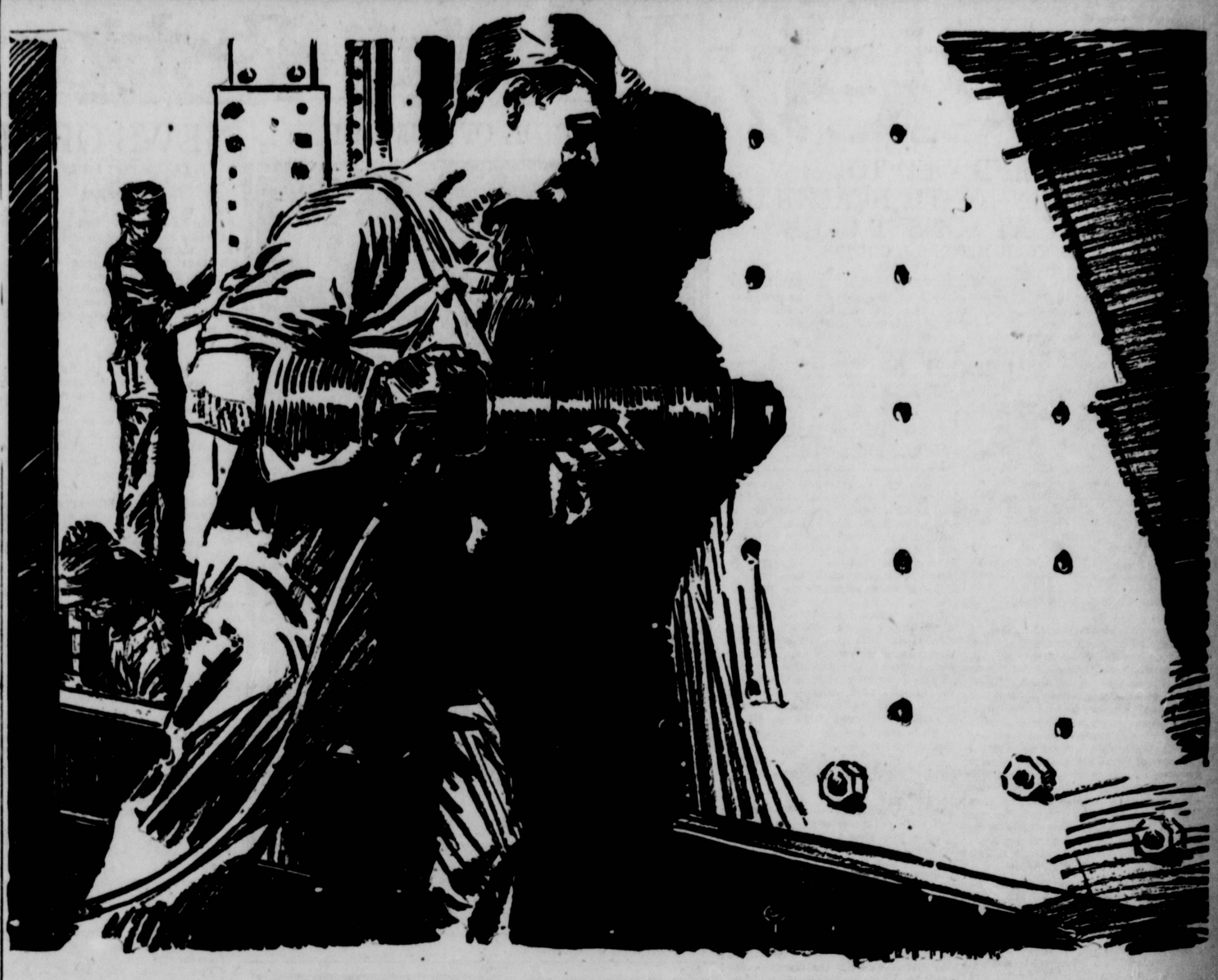
"Yes; I understand; yer have opportunity tonight; but I must get away so no one shall suspect yer had any hand in it."

"That is eet," eagerly. "Indian Joe, he keel me if he found out; maybe my brother, too. I see heem keel men, quick, like that. Then he laugh. So I think; he look in here, but not to search, so he not sure what might be. Perhaps there was a knife under the bed, or dropped somewhere what you found—see? Maybe you had eet hid in your boot—how he know that?"

"Yes, but I haven't, Pancha."

"So I know; but I breeng one—see," and she pressed the handle into his hand. "How he know how you get eet? Eet is strong, sharp, so you cut these bars, an' when morning come you are not here. Who knows how eet happen, senor? I am also asleep, an' you are gone; 'tis the mercy of God."

(Continued Tomorrow.)



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