

The Last Shot

By **FREDERICK PALMER**

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 trench 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 hearten 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 sleep 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. Clinging 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 ungovernable 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 of 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 is clear 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!"

Westerling raised his clenched hand threateningly at the chief of intelligence, his cheeks purple with rage, his eyes bloodshot. But Bellini, with his boyish, small face and round head set close to his shoulders, remained undisturbedly exact.

"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,

ter 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 rumbling 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!"

CHAPTER XX.

Turning the Tables.

Through the door which the aide had left open the division chiefs, led by Turcas, filed in. To Westerling they seemed like a procession of ghosts. The features of one were the features of all, graven with the weariness of the machine's treadmill. Their harness held them up. A moving legion under their feet kept their legs moving. They grouped around the great man's desk silently. Turcas, his lips a half-opened arch, his eyes that of crinkling amusement, acted as spokesman.

"The enemy seized his advantage," he said, "when he found that our reserves were on the march, out of touch with the wire to headquarters."

Westerling forced a smile which he wanted to be a knowing smile.

"However, we had not prepared our positions for the defensive," continued that very literal parchment voice. "They began an assault on our left flank first and we've just had word that they have turned it. Nor is that the worst of it. They are pressing at other well-chosen points. They threaten to pierce our center."

"Our center!" gibed Westerling.

"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 our division commanders," put in Bellini, the chief of intelligence.

"Yes, our organization, so dependent on communication, is in danger of disruption," concluded Turcas. "To avoid disorder, we think it best to retreat across the plain to our own range."

At the word "retreat" Westerling sprang to his feet, his cheeks purple, the veins of his neck and temples sculptured as he took a threatening step toward the group, which fell back before the physical glare of the man, all except the vice-chief, his mouth a thin, ashy line, who held his own.

"Ashy cows!" Westerling thundered. "Retreat when we have five millions to their three!"

"We have not that odds now," replied the parchment voice. "All their men are engaged. They have caught us at a disadvantage, unable to use our numbers except in detail in trying to hold on in face of—"

"I tell you we cannot retreat!" West-

terling interrupted. "That is the end. I know what you do not know. I am in touch with the government. Yes, I know—"

This brought fresh alarm into faces which had become set in grim gloom by many alarms. If the people were in ignorance of the losses and the army in ignorance of the nation's feeling, the officers of the staff were no less in ignorance of what passed over the long-distance wire between the chief of staff and the premier.

"I know what is best—I alone!" Westerling continued, driving home his point. "Tell our commanders to hold. Neither general nor man is to budge. They are to stick to the death. Any one who does not I shall hold up to public shame as a poltroon. Who knows but Lanstron's attack may be a council of desperation? The Browns may be worse off than we are. Hold, hold! If we are tired, they are tired. Frequently it takes only an ounce more of resolution to turn the tide of battle."

"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—decimation 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."

"Would that stop the retreat of the army? We must sue for peace."

"Sue for peace! Sue for peace when we have five millions against their three!"

"It seems so, as the three millions are winning!" said the premier.

"Sue for peace because women go hysterical? Do you suppose that the Browns will listen now when they think they have the advantage? Leave peace to me! Give me forty-eight hours more! I have told our troops to hold and they will hold. I don't mistake cowardly telegraphers' rumors for facts—"

"Pardon me a moment," the premier interrupted. "I must answer a local call." So astute a man of affairs as he knew that Westerling's voice, storming, breaking, tightening with effort at control, confirmed all reports of disaster. "In fact, the crockery is broken—for you and for me!" said the premier when he spoke again. His life had been a gamble and the gamble had turned against him in playing for a great prize. There was an admirable stoicism in the way he announced the news he had received from the local call. "The chief of police calls me up to say that the uprising is too vast for him to hold. There isn't any mutiny, but his men simply have become a part of public opinion. A mob of women and children is starting for the palace to ask me what I have done with their husbands, brothers, sons, and fathers. They won't have to break in to find me. I'm very tired. I'm ready. I shall face them from the balcony. Yes, Westerling, you and I have achieved a place in history, and they're far more bitter toward you than me. However, you don't have to come back."

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At the word "retreat" Westerling sprang to his feet, his cheeks purple, the veins of his neck and temples sculptured as he took a threatening step toward the group, which fell back before the physical glare of the man, all except the vice-chief, his mouth a thin, ashy line, who held his own.

"Ashy cows!" Westerling thundered. "Retreat when we have five millions to their three!"

"We have not that odds now," replied the parchment voice. "All their men are engaged. They have caught us at a disadvantage, unable to use our numbers except in detail in trying to hold on in face of—"

"I tell you we cannot retreat!" West-

terling interrupted. "That is the end. I know what you do not know. I am in touch with the government. Yes, I know—"

This brought fresh alarm into faces which had become set in grim gloom by many alarms. If the people were in ignorance of the losses and the army in ignorance of the nation's feeling, the officers of the staff were no less in ignorance of what passed over the long-distance wire between the chief of staff and the premier.

"I know what is best—I alone!" Westerling continued, driving home his point. "Tell our commanders to hold. Neither general nor man is to budge. They are to stick to the death. Any one who does not I shall hold up to public shame as a poltroon. Who knows but Lanstron's attack may be a council of desperation? The Browns may be worse off than we are. Hold, hold! If we are tired, they are tired. Frequently it takes only an ounce more of resolution to turn the tide of battle."

"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—decimation 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."

"Would that stop the retreat of the army? We must sue for peace."

"Sue for peace! Sue for peace when we have five millions against their three!"

"It seems so, as the three millions are winning!" said the premier.

"Sue for peace because women go hysterical? Do you suppose that the Browns will listen now when they think they have the advantage? Leave peace to me! Give me forty-eight hours more! I have told our troops to hold and they will hold. I don't mistake cowardly telegraphers' rumors for facts—"

"Pardon me a moment," the premier interrupted. "I must answer a local call." So astute a man of affairs as he knew that Westerling's voice, storming, breaking, tightening with effort at control, confirmed all reports of disaster. "In fact, the crockery is broken—for you and for me!" said the premier when he spoke again. His life had been a gamble and the gamble had turned against him in playing for a great prize. There was an admirable stoicism in the way he announced the news he had received from the local call. "The chief of police calls me up to say that the uprising is too vast for him to hold. There isn't any mutiny, but his men simply have become a part of public opinion. A mob of women and children is starting for the palace to ask me what I have done with their husbands, brothers, sons, and fathers. They won't have to break in to find me. I'm very tired. I'm ready. I shall face them from the balcony. Yes, Westerling, you and I have achieved a place in history, and they're far more bitter toward you than me. However, you don't have to come back."

"No, I don't have to go back! No, I was not to go back if I failed!" said Westerling dizzily.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XX.

Turning the Tables.

Through the door which the aide had left open the division chiefs, led by Turcas, filed in. To Westerling they seemed like a procession of ghosts. The features of one were the features of all, graven with the weariness of the machine's treadmill. Their harness held them up. A moving legion under their feet kept their legs moving. They grouped around the great man's desk silently. Turcas, his lips a half-opened arch, his eyes that of crinkling amusement, acted as spokesman.

"The enemy seized his advantage," he said, "when he found that our reserves were on the march, out of touch with the wire to headquarters."

Westerling forced a smile which he wanted to be a knowing smile.

"However, we had not prepared our positions for the defensive," continued that very literal parchment voice. "They began an assault on our left flank first and we've just had word that they have turned it. Nor is that the worst of it. They are pressing at other well-chosen points. They threaten to pierce our center."

"Our center!" gibed Westerling.

"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."

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"Yes, our organization, so dependent on communication, is in danger of disruption," concluded Turcas. "To avoid disorder, we think it best to retreat across the plain to our own range."

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"A Whole Brigade Mine! I Live."

Hold, hold! To-morrow will tell a different story! We are going to win yet! Yes, we are going to win!"

"It is for you to decide, Your Excellency," said Turcas, slowly and precisely. "You take the responsibility."

"I take the responsibility. I am in command!" replied Westerling in unflinching pose.

"Yes, Your Excellency."

And they filed out of the room, leaving him to his isolation.

After Marta had learned, over the telephone, from Lanstron of the certain repulse of the Gray assault fatigue—sheer physical fatigue such as made soldiers drop dead in slumber on the earth, their packs still on their backs—overcame her. Her work was done. The demands of nature overwhelmed her faculties. She slept with a nervous twitching of her muscles, a restless tossing of her lithe body, until hammers began beating on her temples, beating, beating with the sound of shell bursts, as if to warn her that punishment for her share in the killing was to be the eternal concussion of battle in her ears. At length she realized that the cannonading was real.

Hastening out-of-doors, as her glance swept toward the range she saw bursts of shrapnel smoke from the guns of the Browns nearer than since the fighting had begun on the main line, and these were directed at bodies 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 pured out more questions, and still no reply. She pressed the button and tried again, but

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