Nan of Music Mountain

By
FRANK H. SPEARMAN
Author of "WHISPERING SMITH"

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CHAPTER XXIV.—Continued.

—16—

Another bullet, deliberately aimed, chipped the rock above him. Nan, agonizing in her suspense, cried out she must join him and go with him if he went. He steadied her with a few words. A bullet struck again viciously close between them. De Spain spoke slowly: "Give me your rifle." Without turning his head, he held out his hand, keeping his eyes rigidly on the suspicious spot on the ridge. "How far is it to that road, Nan?"

She looked toward the faint line that lay in the deep shadows below. "Three hundred yards."

"Nan, if it wasn't for you, I couldn't travel this country at all," he remarked with studious unconcern. "Last time I had no ammunition—this time, no rifle—you always have what's needed. How high are we, Nan?"

"Seven hundred feet."

"Elevate for me, Nan, will you?"

"Remember the wind," she faltered, adjusting the sight as he had asked.

With the cautioning words she passed the burnished weapon, glittering yet with the raindrops, into his hand. A flash came from the distant ridge. Throwing his rifle to his shoulder, De Spain covered a hardly perceptible black object on the trail midway between Sassoon's ranch-house and a little bridge. Then he fired before Nan could believe he had lined the sights. Once, twice, three times his hand fell and rose sharply on the lever, with every mark of precision, yet so rapidly Nan could not understand how he could discover what his shots were doing.

The fire came steadily back, and deliberately, without the least intimation of being affected by De Spain's return. She had never before seen a man shooting to kill another. The very horror of watching De Spain, at bay among the rocks, fascinated her. Since the first day they had met she had hardly seen a rifle in his hands. She strove to look. The butt of the hunting rifle lay close against the red-marked cheek she knew so well, and to the tips of the fingers every particle of the man's being was alive with strength and resource. Some strange fascination drew her senses out toward him as he knelt and threw shot after shot at the distant figure hidden on the ridge. She held out her arms and clasped her hands toward him in an act of devotion. Then, while she looked, breathlessly, he took his eyes an instant from the sights. "He's running!" exclaimed De Spain as the rifle butt went instantly back to his cheek. "Whoever he is, God help him now!"

The words were more fearful to Nan than an imprecation. He had driven his enemy from the scant cover of a rut in the trail, and the man was fleeing for new cover and for life. Bullet after bullet pitilessly led the escaping wretch. Suddenly De Spain jerked the rifle from his cheek, threw back his head, and swept his left hand across his straining eyes. Once more the rifle came up to place and flame shot again in the gray morning light from the hot muzzle. The rifle fell away from the shoulder. The black speck running toward the ranchhouse stumbled, as if stricken by an ax, and sprawled headlong on the trail. Throwing the lever again like lightning, De Spain held the rifle back to his cheek.

He did not fire. Second after second he waited. Nan watched the rifle slowly come down, unfired, and saw his drawn face slowly relax. Without taking his eyes off the sprawling speck, he rose stiffly to his feet. As if in a dream she saw his hand stretched toward her and heard, as he looked across the far gulf, one word: "Come!"

They reached the end of the trail. De Spain, rifle in hand, looked back. The sun, bursting in splendor across the great desert, splashed the valley and the low-lying ridge with ribboned gold. Farther up the gap horsemen, stirred by the firing, were riding rapidly down toward Sassoon's ranchhouse. But the black thing in the sunshine lay quite still.

CHAPTER XXV.

Lefever to the Rescue.

Lefever, chafing in the aspen grove under the restraint of waiting in the storm, was ready long before daylight to break orders and ride in to find De Spain.

With the first peep of dawn, and with his men facing him in their saddles, Lefever made a short explanation.

"I don't want any man to go into the gap with me this morning under any misunderstanding or any false pretense," he began cheerfully. "Bob Scott and Bull will stay right here. If, by any chance, De Spain makes his way out while the rest of us are hunting for him, you'll be here to signal us—three shots, Bob—or to ride in with De Spain to help carry the rest of us out. Now, it's like this," he added, addressing the others. "You, all of you know, or ought to know—everybody 'twixt here and the railroad knows—that De Spain and Nan Morgan have fastened up to each other for the long ride down the dusty trail together. That, I take it, is their business. But her uncle, old Duke, and Gale, and the whole bunch, I hear, turned dead sore on it, and have fixed it up to beat them. You all know the Morgans. They're some bunch—and they stick for one another like hornets, and all hold together in a fight. So I don't want any man to ride in there with me thinking he's going to a wedding. He isn't. He may or may not be going to a funeral, but he's not going to a shivaree."

Frank Elpaso glanced sourly at his companions. "I guess everybody here is wise, John."

"I know you are, Frank," retorted Lefever testily; "that's all right. I'm only explaining. And I don't want you to get sore on me if I don't show you a fight." Frank Elpaso grunted. "I am under orders." John waved his hand. "And I can't do anything—"

"But talk," growled Frank Elpaso, not waving his hand.

Lefever started hotly forward in his saddle. "Now look here, Frank." He pointed his finger at the objecting ranger. "I'm here for business, not for pleasure. Any time I'm free you can talk to me—"

"Not till somebody gags you, John," interposed Elpaso moodily.

"Look here, Elpaso," demanded Lefever, spurring his horse smartly toward the Texan, "are you looking for a fight with me right here and now?"

"Yes, here and now," declared Elpaso fiercely.

"Or, there and then," interposed Kennedy, ironically, "some time, somewhere, or no time, nowhere. Having heard all of which, a hundred and fifty times from you two fellows, let us have peace. You've pulled it so often, over at Sleepy Cat, they've got it in double-faced, red-seal records. Let's get started."

"Right you are, Farrell," assented Lefever, "but—"

"Second verse, John. You're boss here; what are we going to do? That's all we want to know."

"Henry's orders were to wait here till ten o'clock this morning. There's been firing inside twice since twelve o'clock last night. He told me to pay no attention to that. But if the whole place hadn't been under water all night, I'd have gone in, anyway. This last time it was two high-powered guns, picking at long range and, if I'm any judge of rifles and the men probably behind them, someone must have got hurt. It's all a guess—but I'm going in there, peaceably if I can, to look for Henry de Spain; if we are fired on—we've got to fight for it. And if there's any talking to be done—"

"You can do it," grunted Elpaso.

"Thank you, Frank. And I will do it. I need not say that Kennedy will ride ahead with me, Elpaso and Wickwire with Tommie Meggeson."

Leaving Scott in the trees, the little party trotted smartly up the road, picking their way through the pools and across the brawling streams that tore over the trail toward Duke Morgan's place. The condition of the trail broke their formation continually and Lefever, in the circumstances, was not sorry. His only anxiety was to keep Elpaso from riding ahead far enough to embroil them in a quarrel before he himself should come up.

Half-way to Duke's house they found a small bridge had gone out. It cut off the direct road, and, at Elpaso's suggestion, they crossed over to follow the ridge up the valley. Swimming their horses through the backwater that covered the depression to the south, they gained the elevation and proceeded, unmolested, on their way. As they approached Sassoon's place, Elpaso, riding ahead, drew up his horse and sat a moment studying the trail and casting an occasional glance in the direction of the ranch-house, which lay under the brow of a hill ahead.

When Lefever rode up to him, he saw the story that Elpaso was reading in the roadway. It told of a man shot in his tracks as he was running toward the house—and, in the judgment of these men, fatally shot—for, while his companions spread like a fan in front of him, Lefever got off his horse and, bending intently over the sudden page torn out of a man's life, recast the scene that had taken place, where he stood, half an hour earlier. Some little time Lefever spent patiently deciphering the story printed in the rutted road, and marked by a wide crimson splash in the middle of it. He rose from his study at length and followed back the trail of the running feet that had been stricken at the pool. He stooped in front of a fragment of rock jutting up beside the road, studied it a while and, looking about, picked up a number of empty cartridge-shells, examined them, and tossed them away. Then he straightened up and looked searchingly across the gap. Only the great, silent face of El Capitan confronted him. It told no tales.

"If this was Henry de Spain," muttered Elpaso, when Lefever rejoined his companions, "he won't care whether you join him now, or at ten o'clock, or never."

"That is not Henry," asserted Lefever with his usual cheer. "Not within forty rows of apple trees. It's not Henry's gun, not Henry's heels, not Henry's hair, and thereby, not Henry's head that was hit that time. But it was to a finish—and blamed if at first it didn't scare me. I thought it might be Henry. Hang it, get down and see for yourselves, boys."

Elpaso answered his invitation with an inquiry. "Who was this fellow fighting with?"

"That, also, is a question. Certainly not with Henry de Spain, because the other fellow, I think, was using soft-nosed bullets. No white man does that, much less De Spain."

"Unless he used another rifle," suggested Kennedy.

"Tell me how they could get his own rifle away from him if he could fire a gun at all. I don't put Henry quite as high with a rifle as with a revolver—if you want to split hairs—mind, I say, if you want to split hairs. But no man that's ever seen him handle either would want to try to take any kind of a gun from him. Whoever it was," Lefever got up into his saddle again, "threw some ounces of lead into that piece of rock back there, though I don't understand how anyone could see a man lying behind it.

"Anyway, whoever was hit here has been carried down the road. We'll try Sassoon's ranch-house if they don't fire on us before we get there."

In the sunshine a man in shirt sleeves, leaning against the jamb, stood in the open doorway of Sassoon's shack, watching the invaders as they rode around the hill and gingerly approached. Lefever recognized Satt Morgan. He flung a greeting to him from the saddle.

Satt answered in kind, but he eyed the horsemen with reserve when they drew up, and he seemed to Lefever altogether less responsive than usual. John sparred with him for information and Satterlee gave back nothing but words.

"Can't tell us anything about De Spain, eh?" echoed Lefever at length. "All right, Satt, we'll find somebody that can. Is there a bridge over to Duke's on this trail?"

Satt's nose wrinkled into his normal smile. "There's a bridge—" The report of three shots fired in the distance, seemingly from the mouth of the gap, interrupted him. He paused in his utterance. There were no further shots, and he resumed: "There is a bridge that way, yes, but it was washed out last night. They're blockaded. Duke and Gale are over there. They're pretty sore on your man De Spain. You'd better keep away from 'em this morning unless you're looking for trouble."

Lefever, having all needed information from Scott's signal, raised his hand quickly. "Not at all," he exclaimed, leaning forward to emphasize his words and adding the full orbit of his eye to his sincerity of manner. "Not at all, Satt. This is all friendly, all friendly. But," he coughed slightly, as if in apology, "if Henry shouldn't turn up O. K., we'll—ahem—be back."

None of his companions needed to be told how to get prudently away. At a nod from Lefever Tommie Meggeson, Elpaso and Wickwire wheeled their horses, rode rapidly back to the turn near the hill and, facing about, halted, with their rifles across their arms. Lefever and Kennedy followed leisurely, and the party withdrew leaving Satterlee, unmoved, in the sunny doorway. Once out of sight, Lefever led the way rapidly down the gap to the rendezvous.

Of all the confused impressions that crowded Nan's memory after the wild night on Music mountain, the most vivid was that of a noticeably light-stepping and not ungraceful fat man advancing, hat in hand, to greet her as she stood with De Spain, weary and bedraggled in the aspen grove.

A smile flamed from her eyes when, turning at once, he rebuked De Spain with dignity for not introducing him to Nan, and while De Spain made apologies Lefever introduced himself.

"And is this," murmured Nan, looking at him quizzically, "really Mr. John Lefever whom I've heard so many stories about?"

She was conscious of his pleasing eyes and even teeth as he smiled again. "If they have come from Mr. de Spain—I warn you," said John, "take them with all reserve."

"But they haven't all come from Mr. de Spain."

"If they come from any of my friends, discredit them in advance. You could believe what my enemies say," he ran on; then added ingenuously, "if I had any enemies!" To De Spain he talked very little. It seemed to take but few words to exchange the news. Lefever asked gingerly about the fight. He made no mention whatever of the crimson pool in the road near Sassoon's hut.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Puppets of Fate.

When Nan rode with De Spain into Sleepy Cat that morning, Lefever had already told their story to Jeffries over the telephone from Calabasas, and Mrs. Jeffries had thrown open her house to receive Nan. Weary from exposure, confusion and hunger, Nan was only too grateful for a refuge.

On the evening of the second day De Spain was invited to join the family at supper. In the evening the Jeffrieses went down town.

De Spain was talking with Nan in the living room when the telephone bell rang in the library.

De Spain took the call, and a man's voice answered his salutation. The speaker asked for Mr. de Spain and seemed particular to make sure of his identity.

"This," repeated De Spain more than once, and somewhat testily, "is Henry de Spain speaking."

"I'd like to have a little talk with you, Mr. de Spain."

"Who are you?"

The vein of sharpness in the question met with no deviation from the slow, even tone of the voice at the other end of the wire. "I am not in position to give you my name," came the answer, "at least, not over the wire."

A vague impression suddenly crossed De Spain's mind that somewhere he had heard the voice before.

"Do you suppose I could come up to where you are tonight for a few minutes' talk?" continued the man coolly.

"Not unless you have something very important."

"What I have is more important to you than to me."

De Spain took an instant to decide. "All right," he said impatiently; "come along. Only—" he paused to let the word sink in, "—if this is a game you're springing—"

"I'm springing no game," returned the man evenly.

"Come along, then. I'll tell you just how to get here. Do you hear?"

"I'm listening."

"Leave Main street at Rancherio street. Follow Rancherio north four blocks, turn west into Grant avenue. Mr. Jeffries' house is on the corner.

"I'll find it."

"Don't come any other way. If you do, you won't see me."

"I'm not afraid of you, Mr. de Spain, and I'll come as you say. There's only one thing I should like to ask. It would be as much as my life is worth to be seen talking to you. And there are other good reasons why I shouldn't like to have it known I had talked to you. Would you mind putting out the lights before I come up—I mean, in the front of the house and in the room where we talk?"

"Not in the least. I mean—I am always willing to take a chance against any other man's. But I warn you, come prepared to take care of yourself."

"If you will do as I ask, no harm will come to anyone."

De Spain heard the receiver hung up at the other end of the wire. He signaled the operator hastily and got hold of Bob Scott. To him he explained rapidly what had occurred, and what he wanted. "Get up to Grant and Rancherio, Bob, as quick as the Lord will let you. Come by the back streets. There's a high mulberry hedge at the southwest corner you can get behind. This chap may have been talking for somebody else. Anyway, look the man over when he passes under the arc light. If it is Sassoon or Gale Morgan, come into Jeffries' house by the rear door. Wait in the kitchen for my call from the living room, or a shot. I'll arrange for your getting in."

Leaving the telephone, De Spain rejoined Nan in the living room. He told her briefly of the expected visit and explained, laughingly, that his caller had asked to have the lights out and to see him alone. He made so little of the incident that Nan walked up the stairs on De Spain's arm reassured. When he kissed her at her room door and turned down the stairs again, she leaned in the half-light over the banister, waving one hand at him and murmuring the last caution: "Be careful, Henry, won't you?"

"Dearie, I'm always careful."

"'Cause you're all I've got now," she whispered.

"You're all I've got, Nan, girl."

"I haven't got any home—or anything—just you. Don't go to the door yourself. Leave the front door open. Stand behind the end of the piano till you are awfully sure who it is."

"What a head, Nan!"

De Spain cut off the lights, threw open the front door, and in the darkness sat down on the piano stool. A heavy step on the porch, a little while later, was followed by a knock on the open door.

"Come in!" called De Spain roughly. The bulk of a large man filled and obscured for an instant the opening, then the visitor stepped carefully over the threshold. "What do you want?" asked De Spain without changing his tone. He awaited with keenness the sound of the answer.

"Is Henry de Spain here?"

The voice was not familiar to De Spain's ear. He told himself the man was unknown to him. "I am Henry de Spain," he returned without hesitation. "What do you want?"

The visitor's deliberation was reflected in his measured speaking. "I am from Thief River," he began, and his reverberating voice was low and distinct. "I was sent in to Morgan's gap some time ago to find out who burned the Calabasas barn."

"And you report to—?"

"Kennedy."

De Spain paused. A fresh conviction had flashed across his mind. "You called me up on the telephone one night last week," he said suddenly.

The answer came without evasion. "I did."

"You gave me a message from Nan Morgan that she never gave you."

"I did. I thought she needed you right off. She didn't know me as I rightly am. I knew what was going on. I rode into town that evening and rode out again. It was not my business, and I couldn't let it interfere with the business I'm paid to look after. That's the reason I dodged you."

"There is a chair at the left of the door; sit down. What's your name?"

The man feeling around slowly, deposited his angular bulk with care upon the little chair. "My name"—in the tenseness of the dark the words seemed to carry added mystery—"is Pardaloe."

"You've got a brother—Joe Pardaloe?" suggested De Spain to trap him.

"No, I've got no brother. I am just plain Jim Pardaloe."

"Say what you have got to say, Jim."

"The only job I could get in the gap was with old Duke Morgan—I've been working for him, off and on, and spending the rest of my time with Gale and Dave Sassoon. There were three men in the barn-burning. Dave Sassoon put up the job."

"Where is Dave Sassoon now?"

"Dead."

Both men were silent for a moment.

"Yesterday morning's fight?" asked De Spain reluctantly.

"Yes, sir."

"How did he happen to catch us on El Capitan?"

"He saw a fire on Music mountain and watched the lower end of the gap all night. Sassoon was a wide-awake man."

"Well, I'm sorry, Pardaloe," continued De Spain after a moment. "Nobody could call it my fault. It was either he or I—or the life of a woman who never harmed a hair of his head, and a woman I'm bound to protect. He was running when he was hit. If he had got to cover again there was nothing to stop him from picking both of us off."

"He was hit in the head."

De Spain was silent.

"It was a soft-nose bullet," continued Pardaloe.

Again there was a pause. "I'll tell you about that, too, Pardaloe," De Spain went on collectedly. "I lost my rifle before that man opened fire on us. Nan happened to have her rifle with her—if she hadn't, he'd've dropped one or both of us off El Capitan. We were pinned against the wall like a couple of targets. If there were soft-nose bullets in her rifle it's because she uses them on game—bobcats and mountain lions. I never thought of it till this minute. That is it."

"What I came up to tell you has to do with Dave Sassoon. From what happened today in the gap I thought you ought to know it now. Gale and Duke quarreled yesterday over the way things turned out; they were pretty bitter. This afternoon Gale took it up again with his uncle, and it ended in Duke's driving him clean out of the gap."

"Where has he gone?"

"Nobody knows yet. Ed Wickwire told me once that your father was shot from ambush a good many years ago. It was north of Medicine Bend, on a ranch near the Peace river; that you never found out who killed him, and that one reason why you came up into this country was to keep an eye out for a clue."

"What about it?" asked De Spain, his tone hardening.

"I was riding home one night about a month ago from Calabasas with Sassoon. He'd been drinking. I let him do the talking. He began cussing you out, and talked pretty hard about what you'd done, and what he'd done, and what he was going to do—" Nothing, it seemed, would hurry the story. "Finally, Sassoon says: 'That hound don't know yet who got his dad. It was Duke Morgan; that's who got him. I was with Duke when he turned the trick. We rode down to De Spain's ranch one night to look up a rustler.' That," concluded Pardaloe, "was all Sassoon would say."

He stopped. He seemed to wait. There was no word of answer, none of comment from the man sitting near him. But, for one, at least, who heard the passionless, monotonous recital of a murder of the long ago, there followed a silence as relentless as fate, a silence shrouded in the mystery of the darkness and striking despair into two hearts—a silence more fearful than any word.

Pardaloe shuffled his feet. He coughed, but he evoked no response. "I thought you was entitled to know," he said finally. "Now that Sassoon will never talk any more."

De Spain moistened his lips. When he spoke his voice was cracked and harsh, as if with what he had heard he had suddenly grown old.

"You are right, Pardaloe. I thank you. I—when I—in the morning, Pardaloe, for the present, go back to the gap. I will talk with Wickwire—tomorrow."

"Good night, Mr. de Spain."

"Good night, Pardaloe."

Bending forward, limp, in his chair, supporting his head vacantly on his hands, trying to think and fearing to think, De Spain heard Pardaloe's measured tread on the descending steps, and listened mechanically to the retreating echoes of his footsteps down the shaded street. Minute after minute passed. De Spain made no move. A step so light that it could only have been the step of a delicate girlhood, a step free as the footfall of youth, poised as the tread of womanhood and beauty, came down the stairs. Slight as she was, and silent as he was, she walked straight to him in the darkness, and, sinking between his feet, wound her hands through his two arms. "I heard everything, Henry," she murmured, looking up. An involuntary start of protest was his only response. "I was afraid of a plot against you. I stayed at the head of the stairs. Henry, I told you long ago some dreadful thing would come between us—something not our fault. And now it comes to dash our cup of happiness when it is filling."

She stopped, hoping perhaps he would say some little word, that he would even pat her head, or press her hand, but he sat like one stunned. "If it could have been anything but this!" she pleaded, low and sorrowfully. "Oh, why did you not listen to me before we were engulfed! My dear Henry! You who've given me all the happiness I have ever had—that the blood of my own should come against you and yours!" The emotion she struggled with, and fought back with all the strength of her nature, rose in a resistless tide that swept her on, in the face of his ominous silence, to despair. Her breath, no longer controlled, came brokenly, and her voice trembled.

"You have been very kind to me, Henry—you've been the only man I've ever known that always, everywhere, thought of me first. I told you I didn't deserve it, I wasn't worthy of it—"

His hands slipped silently over her hands. He gathered her close into his arms, and his tears fell on her upturned face.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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