

THE LAST SHOT

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BY FREDERICK PALMER



SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I—At their home on the frontier between the Browns and Grays Marta Galland and her mother, entertaining Colonel Westerling of the Grays, see Captain Lanstron, staff intelligence officer of the Browns, injured by a fall in his aeroplane.

CHAPTER II—Ten years later, Westerling, nominal vice but real chief of staff, reinforces South La Tir, meditates on war, and speculates on the comparative ages of himself and Marta, who is visiting in the Gray Capital.

CHAPTER III

The Second Prophecy.

Marta, when she had received the note from Westerling, had been in doubt as to her answer. Her curiosity to see him again was not of itself compelling. The actual making of the prophecy was rather dim to her mind until he recalled it. She had heard of his rise and she had heard, too, things about him which a girl of twenty-seven can better understand than a girl of seventeen. His reason for wanting to see her he had said was to "renew an old acquaintance." He could have little interest in her, and her interest in him was that he was head of the Gray army. His work had intimate relation to that which the Marta of twenty-seven, a Marta with a mission, had set for herself.

A page came to tell Westerling that Miss Galland would be down directly. When she appeared she crossed the room with a flowing, spontaneous vitality that appealed to him as something familiar.

"Ten years, isn't it?" she exclaimed as she seated herself on the other side of the tea-table. "And, let me see, you took two lumps, if I remember?"

"None now," he said.

"Do you find it fattening?" she asked.

He recognized the mischievous sparkle of the eyes, the quizzical turn of the lips, which was her asset in keeping any question from being personal. Nevertheless, he flushed slightly.

"A change of taste," he averred.

"Since you've become such a great man?" she hazarded. "Is that too strong?" This referred to the tea.

"No, just right!" he nodded.

He was studying her with the polite, veiled scrutiny of a man of the world. A materialist, he would look a woman over as he would a soldier when he had been a major-general making an inspection. She was slim, supple; he liked slim, supple women. Yes, she was twenty-seven, with the vivacity of seventeen retained, though she were on the edge of being an old maid according to the conventional notions. Necks and shoulders that happened to be at his side at dinner, had he found, when they were really beautiful, were not averse to his glance of appreciative and discriminating admiration of physical charm. But he saw her shrug slightly and caught a spark from her eyes that made him vaguely conscious of an offense to her sensibilities, and he was wholly conscious that the suggestion, bringing his faculties up sharply, had the pleasure of a novel sensation.

"How fast you have gone ahead!" she said. "That little prophecy of mine did come true. You are chief of staff!"

After a smile of satisfaction he corrected her.

"Not quite; vice-chief—the right-hand man of His Excellency. I am a buffer between him and the heads of divisions. This has led to the erroneous assumption which I cannot too forcibly deny."

He was proceeding with the phraseology habitual whenever men or women, to flatter him, had intimated that they realized that he was the actual head of the army. His Excellency, with the prestige of a career, must be kept soporifically enjoying the forms of authority. To arouse his jealousy might curtail Westerling's actual power.

"Yes, yes!" breathed Marta softly, arching her eyebrows a trifle as she would when looking all around and through a thing or when she found any one beating about the bush. The little frown disappeared and she smiled understandingly. "You know I'm not a perfect goose!" she added.

"Had you been made chief of staff in name, too, all the old generals would have been in the sulks and the young generals jealous," she continued. "The one way that you might have the power to exercise was by proxy."

This downright frankness was another reflection of the old days before he was at the apex of the pyramid. Now it was so unusual in his experience as to be almost a shock. On the point of arguing, he caught a mischievous, delightful "isn't that so?" in her eyes, and replied:

"Yes, I shouldn't wonder if it were! Why shouldn't he admit the truth to the one who had rung the bell of his secret ambition long ago by recognizing in him the ability to reach his

goal? He marvelled at her grasp of the situation.

"It wasn't so very hard to say, was it?" she asked happily, in response to his smile. Then, her gift of putting herself in another's place, while she strove to look at things with his purpose and vision, in full play, she went on in a different tone, as much to herself as to him: "You have labored to make yourself master of a mighty organization. You did not care for the non-essentials. You wanted the reality of shaping results."

"Yes, the results, the power!" he exclaimed.

"Fifteen hundred regiments!" she continued thoughtfully, looking at a given point rather fear at him. "Every regiment a blade which you would bring to an even sharpness! Every regiment a unit of a harmonious whole, knowing how to screen itself from fire and give fire as long as bidden, in answer to your will if war comes! That is what you live and plan for, isn't it?"

"Yes, exactly! Yes, you have it!" he said. His shoulders stiffened as he thrilled at seeing a picture of himself, as he wanted to see himself, done in bold strokes. It assured him that not only had his own mind grown beyond what were to him the narrow associations of his old La Tir days, but that hers had grown, too. "And you—what have you been doing all these years?" he asked.

"Living the life of a woman on a country estate," she replied. "Since you made a rule that no Gray officers should cross the frontier we have been a little lonelier, having only the Brown officers to tea. Did you really find it so bad for discipline in your own case?" she concluded with playful solemnity.

"One cannot consider individual cases in a general order," he explained. "And, remember, the Browns made the ruling first. You see, every year means a tightening—yes, a tightening, as arms and armies grow more complicated and the maintaining of staff secrets more important. And you have been all the time at La Tir, truly?" he asked, changing the subject. He was convinced that she had acquired something that could not be gained on the outskirts of a provincial town.

"No. I have traveled. I have been quite around the world."

"You have!" This explained much. "How I envy you! That is a privilege I shall not know until I am superannuated." While he should remain chief of staff he must be literally a prisoner in his own country.

"Yes, I should say it was splendid! Splendid—yes, indeed!" Snappy little nods of the head being unequal to expressing the joy of the memories that her exclamation evoked, she clasped her hands over her knees and swung back and forth in the ecstasy of seventeen. "Splendid! I should say so!" She nestled the curling tip of her tongue against her teeth, as if the recollection must also be tasted. "Splendid, enchanting, enlightening, stupendous and wickedly expensive! Another girl and I did it all on our own."

"O-oh!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she repeated after him.

"Oh, nothing!" he said. It was quite comprehensible to him how well equipped she was to take care of herself on such an adventure.

"Precisely, when you come to think it over!" she concluded.

"What interested you most? What was the big lesson of all your journeying?" he asked, ready to play the listener.

"Being born and bred on a frontier, of an ancestry that was born and bred on a frontier, why, frontiers interested me most," she said. "I collected impressions of frontiers as some people collect pictures. I found them all alike—stupid, just stupid! Oh, so stupid!" Her frown grew with the repetition of the word; her fingers closed in on her palm in vexation. He recollected that he had seen her like this two or three times at La Tir, when he had found the outbursts most entertaining. He imagined that the small fist pressed against the table edge could deliver a stinging blow. "As stupid as it is for neighbors to quarrel! It put me at war with all frontiers."

"Apparently," he said.

She withdrew her fist from the table, dropped the opened hand over the other on her knees, her body relaxing, her wrath passing into a kind of shamefacedness and then into a soft, prolonged laugh.

"I laugh at myself, at my own inconsistency," she said. "I was warlike against war. At all events, if there is anything to make a teacher of peace lose her temper it is the folly of frontiers."

"Yes?" he exclaimed. "Yes? Go on!" And he thought: "I'm really having a very good time."

"You see, I came home from my tour with an idea—an idea for a life occupation just as engrossing as yours," she went on, "and opposed to yours. I saw there was no use of working with the grown-up folks. They must be left to The Hague conference and the peace societies. But children are quite

alike the owl'd over. You can plant thoughts in the young that will take root and grow as they grow."

"Patriotism, for instance," he observed narrowly.

"No, the follies of martial patriotism! The wickedness of war, which is the product of martial patriotism! The follies of patriotism! This was the red flag of anarchy to him. He started to speak, flushing angrily, but held his tongue and only emitted a "whew!" in good-humored wonder.

"I see you are not very frightened by my opposition," she rejoined in a flash of amusement not wholly untempered by exasperation.

"We got the appropriation for an additional army corps this year," he explained contentedly, his repose completely regained.

"Thus increasing the odds against us. But perhaps not; for we are dealing with the children not with recruits, as I said. We call ourselves the teachers of peace. I organized the first class in La Tir. I have the chil-



This Was the Red Flag of Anarchy to Him.

dren come together every Sunday morning and I tell them about the children that live in other countries. I tell them that a child a thousand miles away is just as much a neighbor as the one across the street. At first I feared that they would find it uninteresting. But if you know how to talk to them they don't."

"Naturally they don't, when you talk to them," he interrupted.

She was so intent that she passed over the compliment with a gesture like that of brushing away a cobweb. Her eyes were like deep, clear wells of faith and purpose.

"I try to make the children of other countries so interesting that our children will like them too well ever to want to kill them when they grow up. We have a little peace prayer—they have even come to like to recite it—a prayer and an oath. But I'll not bother you with it. Other women have taken up the idea. I have found a girl who is going to start a class on your side in South La Tir, and I came here to meet some women who want to inaugurate the movement in your capital."

"I'll have to see about that!" he rejoined, half-banteringly, half-threateningly.

"There is something else to come, even more irritating," she said, less intently and smiling. "So please be prepared to hold your temper."

"I shall not beat my fist on the table defending war as you did defending peace!" he retallated with significant enjoyment.

But she used his retort for an opening.

"Oh, I'd rather you would do that than jest! It's human. It's going to war because one is angry. You would go to war as a matter of cold reason."

"If otherwise, I should lose," he replied.

"Exactly. You make it easy for me to approach my point. I want to prevent you from losing!" she announced cheerfully yet very seriously.

"Yes? Proceed. I brace myself against an explosion of indignation!"

"It is the duty of a teacher of peace to use all her influence with the people she knows," she went on. "So I am going to ask you not to let your country ever go to war against mine while you are chief of staff."

"Mine against yours?" he equivocated. "Why, you live almost within gunshot of the line! Your people have as much Gray as Brown blood in their veins. Your country! My country! Isn't that patriotism?"

war, regardless of sides. Promise me that you will not permit it!"

"I not permit it!" He smiled with the kindly patronage of a great man who sees a charming woman floundering in an attempt at logic. "It is for the premier to say. I merely make the machine ready. The government says the word that makes it move. I able to stop war! Come, come!"

"But you can—yes, you can with a word!" she declared positively.

"How?" he asked, amazed. "How?" he repeated blandly.

Was she teasing him? he wondered.

What new resources of confusion had ten years and a tour around the world developed in her? Was it possible that the whole idea of the teachers of peace was an invention to make conversation at his expense? If so, she carried it off with a sincerity that suggested other depths yet un sounded.

"Very easily," she answered. "You can tell the premier that you cannot win. Tell him that you will break your army to pieces against the Browns' fortifications!"

He gasped. Then an inner voice prompted him that the cue was comedy.

"Excellent fooling—excellent!" he said with a laugh. "Tell the premier that I should lose when I have five million men to their three million! What a harlequin chief of staff I should be! Excellent fooling! You almost had me!"

Again he laughed, though in the fashion of one who had hardly unbent his spine, while he was wishing for the old days when he might take tea with her one or two afternoons a week. It would be a fine tonic after his isolation at the apex of the pyramid surveying the deference of the lower levels. Then he saw that her eyes, shimmering with wonder, grew dull and her lips parted in a rigid, pale line as if she were hurt.

"You think I am joking?" she asked.

"Why, yes!"

"But I am not! No, no, not about such a ghastly subject as a war today!" She was leaning toward him, hands on knees and eyes burning like coals without a spark. "I—she paused as she had before she broke out with the first prophecy—"I will quote part of our children's oath: 'I will not be a coward. It is a coward who strikes first. A brave man even after he receives a blow tries to reason with his assailant, and does not strike back until he receives a second blow. I shall not let a burglar drive me from my house. If an enemy tries to take my land I shall appeal to his sense of justice and reason with him, but if he then persists I shall fight for my home. If I am victorious I shall not try to take his land but to make the most of my own. I shall never cross a frontier to kill my fellowmen.'"

Very impressive she made the oath. Her deliberate recital of it had the quality which justifies every word with an urgent faith.

"You see, with that teaching there can be no war," she proceeded, "and those who strike will be weak; those who defend will be strong."

"Perhaps," he said.

"You would not like to see thousands, hundreds of thousands, of men killed and maimed, would you?" she demanded, and her eyes held the horror of the sight in reality. "You can prevent it—you can!" Her heart was in the appeal.

"The old argument! No, I should not like to see that," he replied. "I only do my duty as a soldier to my country."

"The old answer! The more reason why you should tell the premier you can't! But there is still another reason for telling him," she urged gently.

Now he saw her not at twenty-seven but at seventeen, girlish, the subject of no processes of reason but in the spell of an intuition, and he knew that something out of the blue in a flash was coming.

"For you will not win!" she declared.

This struck fire. Square jaw and sturdy body, in masculine energy, resolute and trained, were set indomitably against feminine vitality.

"Yes, we shall win! We shall win!" he said without even the physical demonstration of a gesture and in a hard, even voice which was like that of the machinery of modern war itself, a voice which the aristocratic sniff, the Louis XVI curls, or any of the old gallery-display heroes would have thought utterly lacking in histrionics suitable to the occasion. He remained rigid after he had spoken, handsome, self-possessed.

There was no use of beating feminine fists against such a stone wall. The force of the male was supreme. She smiled with a strange, quivering loosening of the lips. She spread out her hands with fingers apart, as if to let something run free from them into the air, and the flame of appeal that had been in her eyes broke into many lights that seemed to scatter into space, yet ready to return at her command. She glanced at the clock and rose, almost abruptly.

"I was very strenuous riding my hobby against yours, wasn't I?" she exclaimed in a flutter of distraction that made it easy for him to descend from his own steed. "I stated a feeling. I made a guess, a threat about your winning—and all in the air. That's a woman's privilege; one man grant, isn't it?"

"We enjoy doing so," he replied, all urbanity.

"Thank you!" she said simply. "I must be at home in time for the children's lesson on Sunday. My sleeper is engaged, and if I am not to miss the train I must go immediately."

With an undeniable shock of regret he realized that the interview was over. Really, he had had a very good

time; not only that but—

"Will it be ten years before we meet again?" he asked.

"Perhaps, unless you change the rules about officers crossing the frontier to take tea," she replied.

"Even if I did, the vice-chief of staff might hardly go."

"Then perhaps you must wait," she warned him, "until the teachers of peace have done away with all frontiers."

"Or, if there were war, I should come!" he answered in kind. He half wished that this might start another argument and she would miss her

train. But she made no reply. "And you may come to the Gray capital again. You are not through traveling!" he added.

This aroused her afresh; the flame was back in her eyes.

"Yes. I have all the memories of my journeys to enjoy, all their lessons to study," she said. "There is the big world, and you want to have had the breath of all its climates in your lungs, the visions of all its peoples yours. Then the other thing is three acres and a cow. If you could only have the solidarity of the Japanese, their public spirit, with the old Chinese love of family and peace, and a cathedral nearby on a hill! Patriotism? Why, it is in the soil of your three acres. I love to feel the warm, rich earth of our own garden in my hands! Hereafter I shall be a stay-at-home; and if my children win," she held out her hand in parting with the same frank, earnest grip of her greeting, "why, you will find that tea is, as usual, at four-thirty."

He had found the women of his high official world—a narrower world than he realized—much alike. Striking cer-

tain keys, certain chords responded. He could probe the depths of their minds, he thought, in a single evening. Then he passed on, unless it was in the interest of pleasure or of his career to linger. This meeting had left his curiosity baffled. He understood how Marta's vitality demanded action, which exerted itself in a feminine way for a feminine cause. The cure for such a fad was most clear to his masculine perception. What if all the power she had shown in her appeal for peace could be made to serve another ambition? He knew that he was a great man. More than once he had wondered what would happen if he were to meet a great woman. And he should not see Marta Galland again unless war came.

(To be continued)

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