

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—Westerling calls on Marta. She tells him of her teaching children the follies of war and martial patriotism, begs him to prevent war while he is chief of staff, and predicts that if he makes war against the Browns he will not win.

CHAPTER IV.

Times Have Changed.

The 53d of the Browns had started for La Tir on the same day that the 128th of the Grays had started for South La Tir. While the 128th was going to new scenes, the 53d was returning to familiar ground. It had detoured in the capital of the province from which its ranks had been recruited. After a steep incline, there was a welcome bugle note and with shouts of delight the centipede's legs broke apart! Bankers, laborers, doctors, valets, butchers, manufacturers and judges' sons threw themselves down on the greenward of the embankment to rest. With their talk of home, of relatives whom they had met at the station, and of the changes in the town was mingled talk of the crisis.

Meanwhile, an aged man was approaching. At times he would break into a kind of trot that ended, after a few steps, in shortness of breath. He was quite withered, his bright eyes twinkling out of an area of moth patches, and he wore a frayed uniform coat with a medal on the breast.

"Is this the 53d?" he quavered to the nearest soldier.

"It certainly is!" some one answered. "Come and join us, veteran!"

"Is Tom—Tom Fragin here?"

The answer came from a big soldier, who sprang to his feet and leaped toward the old man.

"It's grandfather, as I live!" he called out, kissing the veteran on both cheeks. "I saw sister in town, and she said you'd be at the gate as we marched by."

"Didn't wait at no gate! Marched right up to you!" said grandfather. "Marched up with my uniform and medal on! Stand off there, Tom, so I can see you. My word! You're bigger'n your father, but not bigger'n I was! No, sir, not bigger'n I was in my day before that wigger sort o' bent me over. They say it's the lead in the blood. I've still got the bullet!"

The old man's trousers were threadbare but well darned, and the holes in the uppers of his shoes were carefully patched. He had a merry air of optimism, which his grandson had inherited.

"Well, Tom, how much longer you got to serve?" asked grandfather.

"Six months," answered Tom.

"One, two, three, four—" grandfather counted the numbers off on his fingers. "That's good. You'll be in time for the spring ploughing. My, how you have filled out! But, somehow, I can't get used to this kind of uniform. Why, I don't see how a girl'd be attracted to you fellows, at all!"

"They have to, for we're the only kind of soldiers there are nowadays. Not as gay as in your day, that's sure, when you were in the Hussars, eh?"

"Yes, I was in the Hussars—in the Hussars! I tell you with our sabres a-gleaming, our horses' bits a-jingling, our pennons a-flying, and all the color of our uniform—I tell you, the girls used to open their eyes at us. And we went into the charge like that—yes, sir, just that gay and grand. Colonel Galland leading!"

Military history said that it had been a rather foolish charge, a fine example of the valour of unreasoning bravery that accomplishes nothing, but no one would suggest such skepticism of an immortal event in popular imagination in hearing of the old man as he lived over that intoxicated rush of horses and men into a battery of the Grays.

"Well, didn't you find what I said was true about the lowlanders?" asked grandfather after he had finished the charge, referring to the people of the southern frontier of the Browns, where the 53d had just been garrisoned.

"No, I kind of liked them. I made a lot of friends," admitted Tom. "They're very progressive."

"Eh, eh? You're joking!" To like

the people of the southern frontier was only less conceivable than liking the people of the Grays. "That's because you didn't see deep under them. They're all on the outside—a slight bit. Why, if they'd done their part

In that last war we'd have licked the Grays until they cried for mercy! If their army corps had stood its ground at Volmer—"

"So you've always said," interrupted Tom.

"And the way they cook tripe! I couldn't stomach it, could you? And if there's anything I am partial to it's a good dish of tripe! And their light beer—like drinking froth! And their bread—why, it ain't bread! It's chips! Taint fit for civilized folks!"

"But I sort of got used to their ways," said Tom.

"Eh, eh?" Grandfather looked at grandson quizzically, seeking the cause of such heterodoxy in a northern man.



"But I Won't Fight for You!"

"Say, you ain't been falling in love?" he hazarded. "You—you ain't going to bring one of them southern girls home?"

"No!" said Tom, laughing.

"Well, I'm glad you ain't, for they're naturally light-minded. I remember 'em well." He wandered on with his questions and comments. "Is it a fact, Tom, or was you just joking when you wrote home that the soldiers took so many baths?"

"Yes, they do."

"Well, that beats me! It's a wonder you didn't all die of pneumonia!" He paused to absorb the phenomenon. Then his half-childish mind, prompted by a random recollection, fitted to another subject which set him to giggling. "And the little crawlers—did they bother you much, the little crawlers?"

"The little crawlers?" repeated Tom, mystified.

"Yes. Everybody used to get 'em just from living close together. Had to comb 'em out and pick 'em out of your clothes. The chase we used to call it."

"No, grandfather, crawlers have gone out of fashion. And no more epidemics of typhoid and dysentery either," said Tom.

"Times have certainly changed!" grumbled Grandfather Fragin.

Interested in their own reunion, they had paid no attention to a group of Tom's comrades nearby, sprawled around a newspaper containing the latest dispatches from both capitals.

"Five million soldiers to our three million!"

"Eighty million people to our fifty million!"

"Because of the odds, they think we are bound to yield, no matter if we are in the right!"

"Let them come!" said the butcher's son. "If we have to go, it will be on a wave of blood."

"And they will come some time," said the judge's son. "They want our land."

"We gain nothing if we beat them back. War will be the ruin of business," said the banker's son.

"Yes, we are prosperous now. Let well enough alone!" said the manufacturer's son.

"Some say it makes wages higher," said the laborer's son, "but I am thinking it's a poor way of raising your pay."

"There won't be any war," said the banker's son. "There can't be without credit. The banking interests will not permit it."

"There can always be war," said the judge's son, "always when one people determines to strike at another people—even if it brings bankruptcy."

"It would be a war that would make all others in history a mere exchange of skirmishes. Every able-bodied man in line—automatics a hundred shots a minute—guns a dozen shots a minute—and aeroplanes and dirigibles!" said the manufacturer's son.

"To the death, too!"

"And not for glory! We of the 53d

who live on the frontier will be fighting for our homes."

"If we lose them we'll never get them back. Better die than be beaten!"

Herbert Stransky, with deep-set eyes, slightly squinting inward, and a heavy jaw, an enormous man who was the best shot in the company when he cared to be, had listened in silence to the others, his rather thick but expressive lips curving with cynicism.

His only speech all the morning had been in the midst of the reception in the public square of the town when he said:

"This home-coming doesn't mean much to me. Home? Hell! The hedgerows of the world are my home!"

He appeared older than his years, and hard and bitter, except when his eyes would light with a feverish sort of fire which shone as he broke into a lull in the talk.

"Comrades," he began.

"Let us hear from the Socialist!" a Tory exclaimed.

"No, the anarchist!" shouted a Socialist.

"There won't be any war!" said Stransky, his voice gradually rising to the pitch of an agitator relishing the sensation of his own words. "Patriotism is the played-out trick of the ruling classes to keep down the proletariat. There won't be any war! Why? Because there are too many enlightened men on both sides who do the world's work. We of the 53d are a provincial lot, but throughout our army there are thousands upon thousands like me. They march, they drill, but when battle comes they will refuse to fight—my comrades in heart, to whom the flag of this country means no more than that of any other country!"

"Hold on! The flag is sacred!" cried the banker's son.

"Yes, that will do!"

"Shut up!"

Other voices formed a chorus of angry protest.

"I knew you thought it; now I've caught you!" This from the sergeant, who had seen hard fighting against a savage foe in Africa and therefore was particularly bitter about the Bodilpoo affair. The welt of a scar on the gaunt, fever-yellowed cheek turned a deeper red as he seized Stransky by the collar of the blouse.

Stransky raised his free hand as if to strike, but paused as he faced the company's boyish captain, slender of figure, aristocratic of feature. His indignation was as evident as the sergeant's, but he was biting his lips to keep it under control.

"You heard what he said, sir?"

"The latter part—enough!"

"It's incitation to mutiny! An example!"

"Yes, put him under arrest."

The sergeant still held fast to the collar of Stransky's blouse. Stransky could have shaken himself free, as a mastiff frees himself from a puppy, but this was resistance to arrest and he had not yet made up his mind to go that far. His muscles were wearying under the sergeant's grip, his eyes glowing as with volcanic fire waiting on the madness of impulse for eruption.

"I wonder if it is really worth while to put him under arrest?" said some one at the edge of the group in amiable inquiry.

The voice came from an officer of about thirty-five, who apparently had strolled over from a near-by aeroplane station to look at the regiment. From his shoulder hung the gold cords of the staff. It was Col. Arthur Lanstron, whose plane had skimmed the Gallands' garden wall for the "easy bump" ten years ago. There was something more than mere titular respect in the way the young captain saluted—admiration and the diffident, boyish glance of recognition which does not presume to take the lead in recalling a slight acquaintance with a man of distinction.

"Dellarme! It's all of two years since we met at Miss Galland's, isn't it?" Lanstron said, shaking hands with the captain.

"Yes, just before we were ordered south," said Dellarme, obviously pleased to be remembered.

"I overheard your speech," Lanstron continued, nodding toward Stransky. "It was very informing."

A crowd of soldiers was now pressing around Stransky, and in the front rank was Grandfather Fragin.

"Said our flag was no better'n any other flag, did he?" piped the old man.

"Beat him to a pulp! That's what the Hussars would have done."

"If you don't mind telling it in public, Stransky, I should like to know your origin," said Lanstron, prepared to be as considerate of an anarchist's private feelings as of anybody's.

Stransky squinted his eyes down the bony bridge of his nose and grinned sardonically.

"That won't take long," he answered. "My father, so far as I could identify him, died in jail and my mother of drink."

"That was hardly to the purple!" observed Lanstron thoughtfully.

"No, to the red!" answered Stransky sardonically.

"I mean that it was hardly inclined to make you take a roseate view of life as a beautiful thing in a well-ordered world where favors of fortune are evenly distributed," continued Lanstron.

"Rather to make me rejoice in the hope of a new order of things—the recreation of society!" Stransky uttered the sentiment with the triumphant pride of a pupil who knows his text-book thoroughly.

By this time the colonel commanding the regiment, who had noticed the excitement from a distance, appeared, forcing a gap for his passage through the crowd with sharp words. He, too, recognized Lanstron. After they had shaken hands, the colonel scowled as he heard the situation explained, with the old sergeant, still holding fast to Stransky's collar, a capable and insistent witness for the prosecution; while Stransky, the fire in his eyes dying to coals, stared straight ahead.

"It is only a suggestion, of course," said Lanstron, speaking quite as a spectator to avoid the least indication

of interference with the colonel's authority, "but it seems possible that Stransky has clothed his wrongs in a garb that could never set well on his nature if he tried to wear it in practice. He is really an individualist. Enraged, he would fight well. I should like nothing better than a force of Stranskys if I had to defend a redoubt in a last stand."

"Yes, he might fight." The colonel looked hard at Stransky's rigid profile, with its tight lips and chin as firm as if cut out of stone. "You never know who will fight in the pinch, they say. But that's speculation. It's the example that I have to deal with."

"He is not of the insidious, plotting type. He spoke his mind openly," suggested Lanstron. "If you give him the limit of the law, why, he becomes a martyr to persecution. I should say that his remarks might pass for barracks-room gassing."

"Very well," said the colonel, taking the shortest way out of the difficulty. "We will excuse the first offense."

"Yes, sir!" said the sergeant mechanically as he released his grip of the offender. "We had two anarchists in my company in Africa," he observed in loyal agreement with orders. "They fought like devils. The only trouble was to keep them from shooting innocent natives for sport."

Stransky's collar was still crumpled on the nape of his neck. He remained stock-still, staring down the bridge of his nose. For a full minute he did not vouchsafe so much as a glance upward over the change in his fortunes. Then he looked around at Lanstron gloweringly.

"I know who you are!" he said. "You were born in the purple. You have had education, opportunity, position—everything that you and your kind want to keep for your kind. You are smarter than the others. You would hang a man with spider webs instead of hemp. But I won't fight for you! No, I won't!"

He threw back his head with a determination in his defiance so intense that it had a certain kind of dignity that freed it of theatrical affectation.

"Yes, I was fortunate; but perhaps nature was not altogether unkind to you," said Lanstron. "In Napoleonic times, Stransky, I think you might even have carried a marshal's baton in your knapsack."

"You—what rot!" A sort of triumph played around Stransky's full lips and his jaw shot out challengingly. "No, never against my comrades on the other side of the border!" he concluded, his dogged stare returning.

Now the colonel gave the order to fall in; the bugle sounded and the centipede's legs began to assemble on the road. But Stransky remained a statue, his rifle untouched on the sward. He seemed of a mind to let the regiment go on without him.

"Stransky, fall in!" called the sergeant.

Still Stransky did not move. A comrade picked up the rifle and fairly thrust it into his hands.

"Come on, Bert, and knead dough with the rest of us!" he whispered.



A Speck in the Blue Far Away.

"Come on! Cheer up!" Evidently his comrades liked Stransky.

"No!" roared Stransky, bringing the

rifle down on the ground with a heavy blow.

Then impulse broke through the restraint that seemed to characterize the Lanstron of thirty-five. The Lanstron of twenty-five, who had met catastrophe because he was "wool-gathering," asserted himself. He put his hand on Stransky's shoulder. It was a strong though slim hand that looked as if it had been trained to do the work of two hands in the process of its owner's own transformation. Thus the old sergeant had seen a general remonstrate with a brave veteran who had been guilty of bad conduct in Africa. The old colonel gasped at such a subversion of the dignity of rank. He saw the army going to the devil. But young Dellarme, watching with eager curiosity, was sensible of no familiarity in the act. It all depended on how such a thing was done, he was thinking.

"We all have minutes when we are more or less anarchists," said Lanstron in the human appeal of one man to another. "But we don't want to be judged by one of those minutes. I got a hand mashed up for a mistake that took only a second. Think this over tonight before you act. Then, if you are of the same opinion, go to the colonel and tell him so. Come, why not?"

"All right, sir, you're so decent about it!" grumbled Stransky, taking his place in the ranks.

Hep-hep-hep! The regiment started on its way, with Grandfather Fragin keeping at his grandson's side.

"Makes me feel young again, but it's darned solemn beside the Hussars, with their horses' bits a-jingling. Times have certainly changed—officers' hands in their pockets, saying 'if you don't mind' to a man that's insulted the flag! Kicking ain't good enough

for that traitor! Ought to hang him—yes, sir, hang and draw him!"

Lanstron watched the marching column for a time.

"Hep-hep-hep! It's the brown of the infantry that counts in the end," he mused. "I liked that wall-eyed giant. He's all man!"

Then his living glance swept the heavens inquiringly. A speck in the blue, far away in the realms of atmospheric infinity, kept growing in size until it took the form of the wings with which man flies. The plane volplaned down with steady swiftness, till its racing shadow lay large over the landscape for a few seconds before it rose again with beautiful ease and precision.

"Bully for you, Etzel!" Lanstron thought, as he started back to the aeroplane station. "You belong in the corps. We shall not let you return to your regiment for a while. You've a cool head and you'd charge a church tower if that were the orders."

(To be continued)

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