

THE LAST SHOT

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by FREDERICK PALMER



In this story Mr. Palmer, the noted war correspondent, has painted war as he has seen it on many battlefields, and between many nations. His intimate knowledge of armies and armaments has enabled him to produce a graphic picture of the greatest of all wars, and his knowledge of conditions has led him to prophecy an end of armed conflicts. No man is better qualified to write the story of the final world war than Mr. Palmer, and he has handled his subject with a master hand.

CHAPTER I.

A Speck in the Sky.

It was Marta who first saw the speck in the sky. Her outcry and her bound from her seat at the teatable brought her mother and Colonel Westerling after her onto the lawn, where they became motionless figures, screening their eyes with their hands. The newest and most wonderful thing in the world at the time was this speck appearing above the irregular horizon of the Brown range, in view of a landscape that centuries of civilization had fertilized and cultivated and formed.

At the base of the range ran a line of white stone posts, placed by international commissions of surveyors to the nicely of an inch's variation. In the very direction of the speck's flight a spur of foot-hills extended into the plain that stretched away to the Gray range, distinct at the distance of thirty miles in the bright afternoon light. Faithful to their part in refusing to climb, the white posts circled around the spur, hugging the levels.

In the lap of the spur was La Tir, the old town, and on the other side of the boundary lay South La Tir, the new town. Through both ran the dusty ribbon of a road, drawn straight across the plain and over the glistening thread of a river. On its way to the pass of the Brown range it skirted the garden of the Gallands, which rose in terraces to a seventeenth-century house overlooking the old town from its outskirts. They were such a town, such a road, such a landscape as you may see on many European frontiers. The Christian people who lived in the region were like the Christian people you know if you look for the realities of human nature under the surface differences of language and habits.

Beyond the house rose the ruins of a castle, its tower still intact. Marta always referred to the castle as the baron; for in her girlhood she had a way of personifying all inanimate things. If the castle walls were covered with hoar frost, she said that the baron was shivering; if the wind tore around the tower, she said that the baron was groaning over the democratic tendencies of the time. On such a summer afternoon as this, the baron was growing old gracefully, at peace with his enemies.

Centuries older than the speck in the sky was the baron; but the pass road was many more, countless more, centuries older than he. It had been a trail for tribes long before Roman legions won a victory in the pass, which was acclaimed an imperial triumph. To hold the pass was to hold the range. All the blood shed there would make a red river, inundating the plain.

"Beside the old baron, we are parvenus," Marta would say. "And what a parvenu the baron would have been to the Roman aristocrat!"

"Our family is old enough—none older in the province!" Mrs. Galland would reply. "Marta, how your mind does wander! I'd get a headache just contemplating the things you are able to think of in five minutes."

The first Galland had built a house on the land that his king had given him for one of the most brilliant feats of arms in the history of the pass.

Even the tower, raised to the glory of an older family whose descendants, if any survived, were unaware of their lineage, had become known as the Galland tower. The Gallands were rooted in the soil of the frontier; they were used to having war's hot breath blow past their door; they were at home in the language and customs of two peoples; theirs was a peculiar tradition, which Marta had absorbed with her first breath. Town and plain and range were the first vista of landscape that she had seen; doubtless they would be the last.

One or two afternoons a week Colonel Hedworth Westerling, commander of the regimental post of the Grays on the other side of the white posts, stretched his privilege of crossing the frontier and appeared for tea at the Gallands. It meant a pleasant half-hour breaking a long walk, a relief from garrison surroundings, and in view of the order, received that morning, this was to be a farewell call.

He had found Mrs. Galland an agreeable reflection of an aristocratic past. The daughter had what he defined vaguely as girlish piquancy. He found it amusing to try to answer her unusual questions; he liked the variety of her inventive mind, with its flashes of downright matter-of-factness.

Not until he was served did he men-

tion his new assignment; he was going to the general staff at the capital. Mrs. Galland murmured her congratulations in conventional fashion.

Marta's chair was drawn back from the table. She leaned forward in a favorite position of hers when she was intensely interested, with hands clasped over her knee, which her mother always found aggravatingly tomboyish. She had a mass of lustrous black hair and a mouth rather large in repose, but capable of changing curves of emotion. Her large, dark eyes, luminously deep under long lashes, if not the rest of her face, had beauty. Her head was bent, the lashes forming a line with her brow now, and her eyes had the still flame of wonder that they had when she was looking all around a thing and through it to find what it meant.

"Some day you will be chief of staff, the head of Gray army!" she suddenly exclaimed.

Westerling started as if he had been surprised in a secret. Then he flushed slightly.

"Why?" he asked with forced carelessness. "Your reasons? They're more interesting than your prophecy."

"Because you have the will to be," she said without emphasis, in the impersonal revelations of thought. "You want power. You have ambition."

He looked the picture of it, with his square jaw, his well-moulded head set close to the shoulders on a sturdy neck, his even teeth showing as his lips parted in an unconscious smile.

"Marta, Marta! She is—is so explosive," Mrs. Galland remarked apologetically to the colonel.

"I asked for her reasons. I brought it on myself—and it is not a bad compliment," he replied. Indeed, he had never received one so thrilling.

His smile, a smile well pleased with itself, remained as Mrs. Galland began to talk of other things, and its lingering satisfaction disappeared only with Marta's cry at sight of the speck in the sky over the Brown range. She was out on the lawn before the others had risen from their seats.

"An aeroplane! Hurry!" she called. How fast the speck grew!

Naturally, the business of war, watching for every invention that might serve its ends, was the first patron of flight. Captain Arthur Lanstron, pupil of a pioneer aviator, had been warned by him and by the chief of staff of the Browns, who was looking on, to keep in a circle close to the ground. But he was doing so well

that he thought he would try rising a little higher. The summits of the range shot under him, unfolding a variegated rug of landscape. He dipped the plane slightly, intending to follow the range's descent and again they answered to his desire. The tower loomed before him as suddenly as if it had been shot up out of the earth. He must turn, and quickly, to avoid disaster; he must turn, or he would be across the white posts in the enemy's country.

"Oh!" groaned Marta and Mrs. Galland together.

In an agony of suspense they saw the fragile creation of cloth and bamboo and metal, which had seemed as secure as an albatross riding on the lap of a steady wind, dip far over, career back in the other direction, and then the whirling noise that had grown with its flight ceased. It was no longer a thing of winged life, defying the law of gravity, but a thing dead, falling under the burden of a living weight.

"Good-by!" he called to the young girl, who was still watching him with big, sympathetic eyes. "I am coming back soon and land in the field, there, and when I do, I'll claim a bunch of flowers."

"The engine has stopped!" exclaimed Westerling, any trace of emotion in his observant imperturbability that of satisfaction that the machine was the enemy's. He was thinking of the ex-

hibition, not of the man in the machine.

Marta was thinking of the man who was about to die. She rushed down the terrace steps wildly, as if her going and her agonized prayer could avert the inevitable. The plane, descending, skimmed the garden wall and passed out of sight. She heard a thud, a crackling of braces, a ripping of cloth, but no noise.

Westerling had started after her, exclaiming, "This is a case for first aid!" while Mrs. Galland, taking the steps as fast as she could, brought up the rear. Through the gateway in the garden wall could be seen the shoulders of a young officer, a streak of red coursed down his cheek, rising from the wreck. An inarticulate sob of relief broke from Marta's throat, followed by quick gasps of breath. Captain Arthur Lanstron was looking into the startled eyes of a young girl that seemed to reflect his own emotions of the moment after having shared those in the air.

"The way he refused to give in—that was fine!" said Marta.

Westerling, who had been engrossed in his own thoughts, looked up.

"Courage is the cheapest thing an army has! You can get hundreds of young officers who are glad to take a risk of that kind. The thing is," and his fingers pressed in on the palm of his hand in a pounding gesture of the forearm, "to direct and command—head work—organization!"

"If war should come again—" Marta began.

Mrs. Galland nudged her. A Brown never mentioned war to an officer of the Grays; it was not at all in the accepted proprieties. But Marta rushed on:

"So many would be engaged that it would be more horrible than ever."

"You cannot make omelets without breaking eggs," Westerling answered with suave finality.

"The aeroplane will take its place as an auxiliary," he went on, his mind still running on the theme of her prophecy, which the meeting with Lanstron had quickened. "But war will, as ever, be won by the bayonet that takes and holds a position. We shall have no miracle victories, no—"

There he broke off. He did not accompany Mrs. Galland and Marta back to the house, but made his adieus at the garden gate.

"I'm sure that I shall never marry a soldier!" Marta burst out as she and her mother were ascending the steps.

"Do! What fun!" she cried, as the car started.

"The field-marshall was Partow, their chief of staff?" Westerling asked.

"Yes," said Mrs. Galland. "I remember when he was a young infantry officer before the last war, before he had won the iron cross and become so great. He was not of an army family—doctor's son, but very clever and skillful."

"Getting a little old for his work!" remarked Westerling. "But apparently he is keen enough to take a personal interest in anything new."

"Wasn't it thrilling and—terrible!" Marta exclaimed.

"Yes, like war at our own door again," replied Mrs. Galland, who knew war. She had seen war raging on the pass road. "Lanstron, the young man said his name was," she resumed after pause. "No doubt the Lanstrons of Thorbourg. An old family and many of them in the army."

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CHAPTER II.

Ten Years Later.

His Excellency the chief of staff of the Grays was seldom in his office. His Excellency had years, rank, prestige. The breast of his uniform sagged with the weight of his decorations. He appeared for the army at great functions; his picture was in the shop-windows. Hedworth Westerling, the new vice-chief of staff, was content with this arrangement. His years would not permit him the supreme honor. This was for a figurehead, while he had the power.

His appointment to the staff ten years ago had given him the field he wanted, the capital itself, for the play of his abilities. His vital energy, his impressive personality, his gift for courting the influences that counted, whether man's or woman's, his astute readiness in stooping to some measures that were in keeping with the times but not with army precedent, had won for him the goal of his ambition. He had passed over the heads of older men, whom many thought his betters, rather ruthlessly. Those who would serve loyally he drew around him; those who were bitter he crowded out of his way.

Westerling ran through the papers that Turcas had prepared for him. If Turcas had written them, Westerling knew that they were properly done.

Westerling cleared his desk into the hands of his executive clerk, he looked at the clock. It had barely turned four. He picked up the final staff report of observations on the late Balkan campaign, just printed in book form, glanced at it and laid it aside. Already he knew the few lessons afforded by this war "done on the cheap," with limited equipment and over bad roads. No dirigibles had been used and few planes. It was no criterion, except in the effect of the fire of the new pattern guns, for the conflict of vast masses of highly trained men against vast masses of highly trained men, with rapid transportation over good roads, complete equipment, thorough organization, backed by generous resources, in the cataclysm of two great European powers.

"TO BE CONTINUED."

ELECTRICITY IN RAIN DROPS

German Scientist Has Measured the Charge—Describes Results of His Investigation.

"Rain drops are almost always charged with electricity. The charge is often positive, rarely negative. Many observers have measured the charge approximately and made it from 0.000,000,000,000,001 to 0.000,000,000,001 amperes per square centimetre. Prof. F. Herath of Kiel describes in the *Revue Electrique* the experiments by which he has measured them.

He received the rain on a fine metal cloth 25 metres square insulated and attached to a galvanometer in a cellar. The galvanometer registered photographically. Among the facts he proves are these:

"Rains with a constantly positive charge are much more frequent than those that change to a negative. The passage from a positive to a negative charge corresponds to a momentary cessation of the shower. The quantity of positive electricity brought by the rain is fifteen times greater than that of the negative. The positive currents in a steady rainfall are about 0.000,000,000,000,001 amperes per square centimetre; the negative currents never exceed 0.000,000,000,001 amperes per square centimetre."

"Disappointing the Gleaners."

"I want 'ave a tooth drawn," said the younger with the pugnacious face, "and I want gas."

"Tut! Tut!" murmured the dentist.

"You're not old enough for gas. And I see you're not afraid of a little pain."

"A man!"

"Isn't that?" runs a British weekly.

"Yes?" His voice had a ring of laughter in it. "You are a frightfully bad typist," he added.

"I have improved wonderfully lately," said Edna, with an echo of his laughter.

"What do you look like?" asked Peter.

After a prolonged conversation Edna hung up the receiver and Peter called up Calvin Asten.

"I say, what do you know about Edna Glover?" he asked the astonished Asten.

"Peach," came back the prompt reply. "Have proposed to her a dozen times and intend to again tonight."

"No you don't," said Peter. "I'll tell you why later."

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