

COMRADES of PERIL

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Tom Shelby, a rancher, rides in to the frontier town of Ponca looking for a good time after a long spell of hard work and loneliness on the ranch. Instead, he runs into a funeral that of Dad Calkins, a retired army man of whom little is known. A girl, still in her teens, survives Calkins.

CHAPTER II.—McCarthy, a saloon-keeper and Ponca's leading citizen, decides that the girl, now alone in the world, should marry. Shelby starts a hunt for eligible husbands and the minister goes to confer with the girl.

CHAPTER III.—She agrees to pick a husband from a score of men lined up in her home. To his consternation, she selects Shelby, who had gone along merely as a spectator. He declines the honor. Indignant, the girl dismisses the assembly. Later, Shelby goes back to make an explanation. She receives him good naturedly.

CHAPTER IV.—Leaving her, Shelby runs into two of the rejected suitors, and in a fight wounds them both. Angered at their remarks, he returns to the girl, determined to marry her, if she will have him. After his explanation she agrees to marry him.

CHAPTER V.—The wedding takes place and the couple set out for Shelby's ranch. With them is the "Kid," Macklin, whom Shelby has hired as a helper on the ranch. On the way the girl tells her husband her name is Olga Carlyn, and also tells him something of the peculiar circumstances of her life.

It was gray dawn when Shelby stirred once more, and with eyes only partially open, stared in bewilderment at the pale arch of sky. Slowly memory came back, and he managed to lift one hand to his head, his numb fingers touching a ghastly scarp wound, the clotted blood matting his hair. He had been struck a desperate blow, and was down, left lying there in the belief that he was dead, yet apparently the skull was not crushed, and the night air had congealed the blood. With a supreme effort he drew himself into a sitting posture, and stared rather blankly about at the objects revealed in the gray dawn.

The sight as instantly restored his memory; the cabin door stood wide open, just as he left it, and within the lamp still burned on the table, in the midst of the dirtied dishes. She had not returned, then; he had been lying there alone all night. The realization maddened him to effort, and, by grasping at the door for support he attained his feet, and stood there for a moment, swaying dizzily. Exactly what had occurred he could not determine; the whole affair seemed more like a dream than a reality. He had left her there apparently cheerful and happy, the laughter in her eyes a memory to linger with him; he had not been absent to exceed thirty minutes, and not so far away but what any cry would surely have reached his ears. Yet when he returned she had vanished utterly, leaving everything untouched. Whatever occurred must have been brought to pass almost immediately upon his departure, before she even began the work of cleaning up. But how could such a thing happen without any alarm? Why, the Kid was working within ten feet of the house, and must have heard the slightest sound of a struggle. The Kid! where was he anyway? What had become of the fellow all this time? He was nowhere in sight when Shelby retraced his steps up the path. Could it be that the Kid was the one guilty of this deed? If so, what was his object? Not robbery, surely, for the place had not been ransacked, or anything removed from his pockets. Yet surely this was not Indian work; it bore no resemblance to a savage raid. The questions were unanswerable; no mental effort gave him any clue, yet his strength was rapidly coming back, and with it a grim, determined anger, which urged him into action.

First he went through the deserted house, room by room, seeking for the slightest sign of guidance, but finding none. Everything remained precisely as he remembered seeing it the night before. He blew out the light, took down one of the rifles from the wall, loaded it, and then, feeling his old strength returning, cautiously stepped out through the front door. The buckboard stood there, gaunt and stripped, except for the box between the rear wheels. He peered into this, and found it still half filled with bundles. Macklin had not completed his job, other evidence being furnished by the extinguished and overturned lantern on the ground just beyond. But there was no sign visible of any struggle.

Surely she had not left of her own choice. That was unthinkable. She had appeared cheerful and contented, even actually interested in the new life; besides, if she possessed the slightest desire to escape, he had offered her every opportunity on the way out, and she had refused. Surely she would never have come way out there to make her disagreeable journey over again at night. Even if c-

enough for such an attempt, she would never be made upon foot, and all three ponies were in the corral; he had seen them while coming down. No, that theory might be dismissed at once, and secretly he was glad it was so easily disposed of—it had vaguely haunted him at first, causing him to dread the discovery that it might be true.

Then what was true? Who could be guilty of such an outrage? Indians? White outlaws? Joe Macklin? These three possibilities alone remained, but the first two seemed quite impossible. He was used to Indian forays, but this act bore no resemblance to the work of savages on the warpath. There had been no attempt to plunder, or destroy. The very fact that the ponies remained undisturbed convinced him that this was no deed of Indian raiders. That it might have been white outlaws was not quite so easily dismissed. There were desperate men hiding out yonder in the Bad Lands, but he never had known of their venturing to attack any settler, except occasionally to run off cattle on the range. In this case there was no apparent object—they had taken nothing, neither food nor stock. Then it must have been Macklin.

His sudden disappearance was, at least, proof he must have had a hand in it. But why? To what end? Shelby straightened up, a new flash of intelligence in his eyes. Perhaps this all harked back to that early mystery in her life. She had told him that Calkins had taken her from place to place, apparently always afraid that he was being followed. Was it possible that he had been hunted down at last; that he recognized the approach of the end, and had committed suicide on that account? And was this strange seizure of Olga part of the plot, either of revenge, or restitution? This explanation seemed more probable than any other; in a way it appeared to fit the case, although he possessed no more knowledge of what it all meant than he did before. Only, evidently all that had been desired was possession of the girl, and that was deemed of sufficient importance to even justify murder. He had been left for dead, in order that she might be borne away alive.

No longer doubting but what this theory at least approximated the



He Followed Their Passage.

truth, Shelby faced the facts frankly, and with no further hesitation. It was up to him to act promptly; there was no one to whom he could turn for help. His eyes darkened, and his jaws set. All right then, he would certainly give the Kid a run for his money. There must be some trail left; such a deed as this could never be accomplished without leaving some mark behind. Whether they traveled on foot, or horseback, the party must surely leave some trace of passage, and Shelby, who had been the best trailer in his regiment, felt confident of being able to run the outfit down.

With this once settled in his mind, and his plan of pursuit outlined, Shelby threw off his depression, and became cool and resolute. First he searched over every foot of ground within a quarter of a mile of the house, seeking to discover just how Macklin had operated, and whether or not, he was alone. The result was only partially successful. The hard-packed earth revealed little of value. Down below the cabin on the sloping side of the hill, he found the mark of a high-heeled boot such as the Kid wore, and, a foot or so beyond, the plain impression of a moccasin. A hundred yards to the north the impressions were again visible, making it clear to his mind that the fugitives were then making for the lower ford. The girl was evidently being carried, and two men must have been engaged on the job, one of them possibly an Indian. He passed straight on to the ford to verify this theory, and here the mud exhibited clearly the movements of both the fellows, while close at the water's edge he came upon a narrow pink ribbon, which the girl had evidently hurriedly dropped in guidance.

It was clearly manifest now the direction in which they had disappeared, but Shelby remained unsatisfied. He could not believe that they would attempt to escape thus on foot with their burden. If Macklin had one assistant, it was highly probable there

would be others also engaged in the affair. The opposite shore was deserted, and he crossed over, wading to his thighs in the swift water, with rifle slung forward, and eyes intently searching the further bank. The trail was plain at this point; he could easily trace the steps of both men passing up a narrow gully into the first line of bluffs, and there, in a little open glade, he found where horses had been tethered and tramped the turf. They had evidently been held for some time; had entered from the north down a slight coulee, and departed westward along a shelving bank. There were five animals, all mounted, to judge from the deep impression of hoofs, and he followed their passage as far as the crest of the bluff. They were well beyond view, of course by this time, across that rough, broken country, but he satisfied himself that they were heading straight for the Bad Lands.

Shelby knew now something of what he must contend with. The act of abduction, and attempted murder, was no sudden temptation assailing Macklin, but undoubtedly part of a well-organized plot. Whatever their object, five men were concerned in the outrage, their intention probably the making of the girl a prisoner. In Shelby's judgment she was probably in no immediate danger. If the fellows had intended taking her life, she would never have thus been spared and carried away, apparently uninjured. Their purpose evidently required that she be kept alive, but helpless in their hands.

He was cool now; grimly determined, but intent on preparing himself for a long and dangerous quest. He was to be one man pitted against five, and every instinct of long experience on the plains, warned him against being rash. He recrossed the stream, built a fire in the stove, and, after washing the blood from his head, ate heartily; then packed a leather haversack with food, and was ready. He took this time in which to plan out his course, and then went forward unhesitatingly, filling his pockets with rifle cartridges, and flinging the haversack over his shoulder, before starting for the corral. He decided upon the buckskin as being the better animal for his purpose—a vicious brute, harder to handle, but tireless, and able to exist where either of the others would starve. It required a good half-hour to rope and saddle the beast, but he had plenty of time. Once on the trail he could easily outstride the party he was following, and he had no desire to approach them closely until well after dark.

Once firm in the saddle, however, rifle under the flap, with haversack strapped on the opposite side, and blanket-roll behind, he gave the plunging, bucking demon between his legs little mercy. The man was in no mood for play of any sort, and set himself to conquering the brute in the quickest possible way. It was a rough, hard struggle, but the human won, and, under the merciless sting of the quirt, the maddened but subdued animal, nostrils distended, and eyes vicious as ever, yielded final obedience to the rein.

CHAPTER VII.

An Hour Behind.

There was no marked trail, but the instincts of a plainsman kept Shelby's course directly to the northwest. The bronco, now thoroughly tamed, and obedient to the slightest pressure of the rider's leg, kept a tireless gait, picking out unaided the easiest paths. From the general direction of the trail left by the raiders he had decided they were heading for a certain portion of the Bad Lands, and, if this theory was correct, he ought easily to cut across their tracks again late in the afternoon. Sitting upright in the deep saddle, with the straight back of the cavalryman, his eyes watchful, his lips grimly set, he rode steadily on hour after hour, thinking, planning, beginning now to realize the depth of his own interest in this effort at rescue. He had hardly comprehended before that this girl was really his wife—that her life had become his to guard. The affair between them had occurred so swiftly, so unexpectedly, he had not before awakened to its true meaning. But now it became very real, and he was positively surprised to learn the strength of hold she already had upon him.

His mind would linger over a thousand little womanly peculiarities which somehow had unconsciously impressed him—the soft glow in her eyes, the wistfulness of her smile; the slight dimple in her chin; the pulsing of blood in her cheeks; the round firmness of the white neck; the peculiar gracefulness of her walk; the nameless attractiveness of poise, all came back now in odd fascination. He was not aware before that he had even noticed these things, but now their memory dominated him, caused his pulses to quicken. He had known little of women since boyhood, and never before had he encountered on terms of intimacy this type of a woman. She had been a revelation to him even in his blindness, but now, under the spell of memory, she had suddenly changed to an inspiration. His wife, Olga Carlyn, his wife! He said the words over, as though he recalled a dream, the sound of the words causing the startled buckskin to cast back an evil eye at his unconscious rider.

Yet it was actually true; impossible as it seemed, it was nevertheless an incontrovertible fact. He had never spoken to her a single word of love; he had never even kissed her, and still, before both God and man, she was his wife. The strangeness of the situation bewildered him. Why, he

did not even know who she was; what right she had to claim the family name under which he had married her; what strange story of crime might shadow her history. It was all mystery, a mystery in which he was becoming deeply involved. Calkins had evidently been hiding her from some fate, but whether of good or evil, could not yet be determined. This present abduction, beyond question, had to do with that concealed past, perhaps with some happening before she was even born. These fellows were not robbers; their raid was not intended for any such purpose; they had touched nothing, even the horses were left undisturbed in the corral, and the moment they gained possession of her they had hurriedly departed. It had all been carefully planned, with Macklin to choose the time, and then executed quietly. Their only mistake was in leaving him behind alive. But for that one error no one ever would have known what had occurred, or dreamed of her fate. And now, assured of safety, believing the dead would tell no tales, that they had left behind no evidence of their crime, the outfit was riding carelessly across the lonely prairie, seeking somewhere a safe rendezvous.

Shelby reined his horse to the left, and sought a water hole he remembered, himself drinking first, and then standing by while the animal quenched its thirst. Leaving the buckskin there, with rein trailing on the ground, he climbed the steep side of a butte, and swept the distant horizon with a field glass. It was a trackless waste, drear and deserted of all life. Not a thing that moved crossed his range of vision; and, at last, he snapped the field glasses back into their case, slipped down the steep face of the butte, and silently remounted.

The sun was some time past the meridian, and he felt convinced those he followed could not be far from the trail he was endeavoring to locate. He came upon it in less than an hour, leading straight down a narrow valley, whose general course was directly west. He dismounted, and studied the tracks with care. This was his party beyond a doubt—five horses, one with a split hoof.

An hour later he found where the party had halted, made a fire among some rocks, and prepared food. He studied every sign with care, hoping



He Circled the Two Groves.

for some message of guidance from her; but there was none. Either she had been too carefully watched by her captors, or had given up in despair any thought of rescue. Doubtless she believed him dead also; perhaps had even witnessed the blow struck, but if not would assuredly have been informed of what had happened. The stamping of the ponies' hoofs indicated that the party had remained in that spot for some time, in no hurry to proceed. Shelby studied the footprints, satisfying himself that four were Indian, and one white, unquestionably Macklin. With only five horses this meant that the girl rode with one of the men, probably the Kid. He discovered where she probably was sitting during the meal, a torn piece of crumpled sacking bearing mute testimony that her hands had been bound, and released so that she might eat. The fellows were evidently unafraid of her any longer, and had not tied her up again when they resumed the journey.

It was nearly sundown when the trail he followed swerved to the right up a steep bank, where the ponies' hoofs slipped in their struggle to attain the top. Shelby gave the buckskin his head, and the game little devil went scrambling up, until they came forth on a flat plain above. Shelby dropped his rein, and climbed to a higher point of rock, lying concealed behind its summit, while he swept the scene below through the field glasses. He never had been there before, yet he knew about where he was; this must be Dragoon creek, and not far below would be Wolves' hole, of which he often had heard—a famous hiding place for cattle thieves and border outlaws. These fellows evidently were heading for there, but would they try to complete the journey? His hope centered on their camping somewhere until morning; if sufficiently assured of safety this would probably be their choice. Through the field glasses he studied the course of the stream, and the little patches of wood intently. At

last he was rewarded—a faint spurt of blue smoke arose above some distant trees, the evidence of a campfire. He lay there motionless, silent, his eyes glued to the glass, planning his action, and waiting for the night.

As the gloom slowly deepened Shelby was able to distinguish the flicker of that far-off fire, but the distance was too great to permit any knowledge of its surroundings. The trail leading down was narrow, and rock-strewn, and he determined to try the passage while a faint glimmer of twilight yet lingered. Leading the buckskin, and moving with the utmost caution, he began the descent.

The gloom did not greatly retard his movements, for, through the glasses, he had mapped out the salient features, and so impressed them upon his memory as to go forward now confidently. The camp fire was located in the third grove of trees, and there were no signs of human presence between. However, he took no chance, but advanced quietly on foot, leading his horse, and using every precaution against discovery.

He circled the two groves, keeping close in their shadow, and searching their depths anxiously for any sign of life. They were desolate and deserted, but, from the outer fringe of the second he could perceive plainly the dull glow of the fire a hundred yards ahead. It was no longer a flame, but a mere glimmer of red ashes, casting no reflection about, although clearly visible. He fastened the bronco to a limb, within the circle of trees, and crouched forward alone, Winchester in hand, choosing his passage beneath the bank of the stream, and advancing with every precaution, pausing every few steps, to peer over the protecting bank, and thus assure himself that all remained quiet. When almost exactly opposite the red glow of the coals, he lay still, endeavoring vainly to learn the situation, and becoming more and more puzzled.

The camp appeared deserted, as though the party which had halted there had already passed on. He could hear no sound, see no movement. The fire had died down into a mere glimmer of red ashes, barely perceptible amid the surrounding gloom. Shelby drew himself forward, creeping like a snake, convinced that he was alone, yet no less alert and watchful. His progress was up a shallow depression, and he had attained the deeper shade of the trees, when, suddenly, a voice, apparently speaking not two yards distant, gave utterance to an oath of disgust.

"H—l!" the voice said roughly, "there is no use waitin' for that guy any longer; no tellin' where he is at by now."

Shelby dropped flat on his face almost ceasing to breathe. The unseen party addressed stretched himself lazily, as evidenced by the rustle of leaves.

"I reckon ye're right, Hank," he admitted slowly, his speech heavy and coarse. "No tenderfoot ain't goin' ter make that trail at night. Mor'n likely he's aimin' ter com' through the other way."

"What'll we do, then—ride on?" "After a bit; it's early yet, an' maybe it'll do no harm to lie quiet awhile. But we kin light up, an' be comfortable."

He struck a match, hollowing the flame in his hands, revealing the bearded face of a man of fifty, shadowed beneath a soft hat brim. Beyond him appeared the obscure outline of the other, a mere smudge. A moment the two puffed away contentedly, Shelby not venturing to move a muscle.

"Say, Hanley, I've allers played my hand the best I knew how, but I do like ter know what the game is I'm playin' at. What do yer know, anyhow?"

The other chuckled in his beard, rustling his feet in the leaves. "Easier ter ask about than explain, Hank," he answered slowly, "specially as there is things I don't just cotton



"What's the Idea of Stealin' the Girl?"

to myself. Mostly I pulled the facts out of that Kid Macklin when he was drunk, 'cause he wanted me to help him. But it seems he's only hired for the job; it's that guy we're waitin' for who has got the real dope, and likewise the long-green."

"Churchill's his name, ain't it?"

"That's the duffer; some big feller

down East; Virginia, as I understand—Judge Cornelius Churchill; the whole story goes a h—l of a long ways back."

He leaned his head against the tree trunk behind him, puffing away at the cigarette between his bearded lips, the dull glow barely touching his face. The younger man leaned forward waiting.

"Well," he said impatiently, "that ain't all of it; what started the rumpus? What's the idea of stealin' the girl? An' just whar do you an' me come in?"

"Well, as I figure it, we've got to make our own medicine. You saw that outfit go along afore dark—Macklin an' the four reds?"

"Sure; they had a woman with 'em?"

"That's the ticket, an' they was bound for Wolves' hole. I thought maybe they'd camp down here, but they didn't—just kept movin'. Well, that's one thing you an' I laid out here for, to get a line on Macklin. The other thing is that this yere Cornelius Churchill is about due also, an' is most likely to blow in along this same trail. It is my notion to have a word privetlike with that gent before Joe gets to him—see?"

"Can't say that I do, Hanley, exactly. What's it all about—the girl?"

"Mostly, I reckon, an' a h—l of a slice of money down East. This is how the Kid blew it to me. It seems an army officer named Carlyn 'bout the time the Civil war closed, ran away with a Rose Churchill down in Virginia, and married her. All he cared for was the girl, an' he never even knew she was rich, only that her family objected to him, an' that they'd have to skip out. I reckon, maybe, she didn't know it herself at the time, nor the rest o' the Churchill family, for they didn't make no great effort to find her for some while. Then, when they opened a will, they discovered that most all the Churchill fortune had been left to this Rose, and they naturally becom' mighty interested. Cornelius, as I understand, was the brother of Rose's father, an' the property was put in his hands as trustee on behalf of the girl. Maybe he was a straight enough guy generally speaking, but he had expected to get most of this dough after the girl skipped out, an' was consequently almighty hot. Naturally he wanted to keep the stuff, an' he didn't make no great effort to locate the heiress. By the time he did learn who she had married, Rose died, leaving a daughter. By the terms of the will if she died childless the entire estate reverted to Cornelius, and he wasn't the sort o' guy to lose that kind o' bet."

"An' this soldier never suspected nothing?"

"Not a thing. He was a colonel by this time, out at some frontier post, and left his baby to the care of some relatives in the East. There wasn't no fuss made, an' so Churchill sorter let affairs slide along. He had the use of the money, an' begun to think there never would be no trouble. Of course he kept a line on the husband, but lost trace of the kid entirely."

"Yer mean the colonel never even know'd he'd married a rich girl?"

"So it seems. I reckon she didn't even know it, his wife. But after awhile some inkling of the truth must have reached him, for he went East, and began to make inquiries through a lawyer. When Churchill heard about this he got scared. I reckon he'd played h—l with the trust funds by that time, an' with the husband on his trail got mighty desperate. Meanwhile the daughter was in some convent school, and not to be found. Carlyn struck a hot trail all right, but, before he could take any action, was shot and killed in a street fight with some roughs in Sheridan. Nobody knows for sure just how it happened, but it's my opinion Churchill got up the row just to get him out o' the way. It all happened sudden, an' unexpected, the only fellow with the colonel at the time being an old sergeant, named Calkins. Calkins was shot himself, but got away, and took care of Carlyn till he died, maybe an hour later. Enyhow he kept the fellows from getting hold o' any papers, an' I reckon the colonel give him an idea of what was up."

"What makes you think so?"

"The way he acted afterward. Churchill had got Carlyn out of the way, but he couldn't locate the girl. He didn't suspect the sergeant at first, nor for a long time. He was a foxy guy, and stuck to the army for several years, never makin' a move, just payin' for the girl's schoolin', but never goin' near her. Then, when everybody had quit watchin' him, Calkins took his discharge papers, and skipped out, takin' the girl with him."

"How could he do that?"

"That's what I asked Macklin, an' he said they'd finally found out that durin' the time between when Carlyn was shot, an' when he died, he'd signed a paper makin' Calkins the girl's guardian, an' gave him the key to a deposit box in Kansas City, where all his papers was. A lawyer named Weeks, at Sheridan, did it for him. You see the colonel didn't have no near relatives, an' he an' Calkins had been soldiering together for years; he sorter trusted the sergeant to play square, an' he sure did!"

"The h—l he did! Never made a peep for the money, did he? An' just hid out all 'round the country with the girl. I don't call that playin' very square."

"Well, it was, just the same, d—d square, if you ask me. It was what Weeks advised him to do, after he went to Virginia, an' got a peep at a

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