

Via Wireless

Novelized by Thompson Buchanan From the Successful Play of the Same Name By Winchell Smith, Frederic Thompson And Paul Armstrong

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start apart guiltily. Sommers looked up angrily. The big man with the shrewd eyes was standing beside the table, his face as unemotional as though carved from stone.

"What do you want?" asked the naval officer sharply.

"My name is Bradley," said the man. "United States secret service. I've brought a message to you from Washington, Henderson."

"Well?"

"You are wanted at Washington, Henderson, to answer some questions at the court of inquiry."

With an involuntary exclamation of fear and surprise, Frances stood closer to her lover. He was staring at the secret service man, astounded.

"A court of inquiry?"

Bradley nodded.

"Yes, sir. Your gun exploded three weeks ago. Two men were killed outright and three mangled. One will be blinded if he lives."

CHAPTER XIII.

"DON'T YOU SEE I LOVE YOU?"

"I WOULDN'T want three mangled; one blind!"

Slowly, in dazed, mechanical fashion, Sommers repeated the awful summary of his failure. Frances' face was horror-stricken, too, but with a quick, impulsive gesture of love and faith she put her hand on his arm.

"It isn't your fault," she said. "I know it isn't your fault."

His hand caught hers with a quick grip of thanks for the renewed courage and sympathy and faith brought him.

"Won't you leave us now?" he said, low.

"I'll see you and tell you what he has to say."

Reinforced by the girl bowed and hurried away into the hotel to wait there alone until she could see her husband and then Sommers turned quickly to Bradley.

The secret service man had been waiting there since his expressionless face, but his eyes were taking in and he knew from maintaining all that had transpired.

"Why was I not informed of this before?" asked Sommers, still partly dazed.

"They decided to keep it from you until your case was heard," replied the secret service man.

"How it all happened is a matter for the court of inquiry. I have been on the case since the accident occurred. Your gun stood the test at the proving ground. It's my opinion that it was killed in the tempering bath."

A wave of light swept over Sommers. He saw everything now. It was all plain. He understood why a drunken sailor had been left in charge of the job. He knew why Pinckney had been so solicitous. He realized why, finally, he himself had been assaulted in the last desperate effort to keep him from witnessing the transfer of the gun to the tempering bath.

Finally he understood why Frances had come there that night. She must have suspected, and she had come to save him. The thought of the dastardly trick enraged him.

"It was killed in the tempering bath," he swore it was. Sommers exclaimed fiercely. "Pinckney was in the room that night at the Durant works. He's here—here at this hotel. I'll settle with him!"

He had taken a step when the secret service man caught him by the arm.

"Easy, lad, easy!" he cautioned. "Don't lose your head! I've made investigations in Pittsburgh, and I'm going to question Mr. Pinckney myself."

With a desperate effort under the restraining hand Sommers regained his self control. His mind began to work again logically, shrewdly. He saw what he had to do and how he must help this friendly officer.

"May I ask when you were in Pittsburgh did you question a man named Marsh?"

"You mean the draughtsman? No," replied Bradley. "Do you think he knew anything of it?"

Sommers shook his head in puzzled fashion.

"He may have known something. He ought to. He was there."

"Did you ever see a Mr. Rhinestrom about there?" asked Bradley next.

Sommers still looked puzzled.

"No, I didn't see him, but I heard a great deal of him. Marsh was greatly interested in the gun Rhinestrom had invented."

Bradley looked keenly at the naval officer.

"Oh, Marsh was interested in that gun? But you never saw Rhinestrom about there?" he said significantly.

Again there came that startling flash to Sommers. He began to suspect just how blind he had been, but before he could say another word Pinckney came out quickly from the hotel. The general manager stopped, surprised at sight of the naval lieutenant.

"How are you, Sommers?" he said softly.

Sommers bowed with equal coldness

as Bradley stepped in between the two men.

"I've been most anxious to see you, Mr. Pinckney," the secret service agent began.

Pinckney looked at him, surprised.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"United States secret service man detailed on the Sommers gun case," came the quick reply.

Pinckney suppressed an involuntary start.

"Oh, I see," he said. "I'm downright sorry. Most unfortunate affair, indeed. But what can I do?"

Bradley smiled pleasantly.

"Why, answer a few questions, if you will," he suggested.

The general manager could not keep down all expression of annoyance, but he knew it would never do to completely antagonize the secret service man on the case, so he forced an apology for a smile.

"Of course, with pleasure. But I'm rather pushed for time. We sail at almost immediately."

"In that case, I'll begin at once."

He turned to the government agent undisturbed.

"Mr. Durant has kindly consented that I should make a thorough investigation at the works in Pittsburgh when I return. He is anxious to do all in his power to help me find upon whom the blame rests."

The general manager drew himself up.

"Blame," he said sternly.

"Yes, blame," was the pointed reply.

Again Pinckney made a move for delay. He wanted to get to Pittsburgh as quickly as he could to see Marsh and cover up all tracks before he answered any questions.

"Can't you defer all questions until the investigation in Pittsburgh?" he suggested.

"I'm in a great hurry, and in Pittsburgh I will have all facts before me and can answer fully."

But Bradley was a man not to be denied.

"I should prefer asking one or two now," he said and without waiting for response put his first query bluntly.

"What is your belief, Mr. Pinckney, as to the cause of this unfortunate action?"

"My belief?" said the general manager blankly.

"Yes. Do you think the gun was killed in the tempering bath at your arsenal?"

Pinckney's face flushed.

"I do not," he retorted angrily. "I think the gun was constructed on theory, and the theory was unsound."

Sommers, standing by, made a quick, angry movement, but a sharp look from Bradley restrained him. The secret service man was apparently very much interested and thoroughly willing to accept Pinckney's idea.

In fact, agreeing with people was part of Bradley's stock in trade, and, in fact, in Washington it was generally admitted that this particular star of the secret service bureau could agree with more people and get more information without offense than any man in the service. Now, apparently, he was Pinckney's friend.

"I'm very interested," he said.

"Now, what do you think of the Rhinestrom gun, Mr. Pinckney?"

Pinckney looked at his questioner sharply, but the face before him showed only bland agreement and casual interest.

"I consider the Rhinestrom gun the best gun that has been invented," said the general manager firmly.

The face of the government agent continued to show bland interest only.

"And have you controlled the patents of the Rhinestrom gun?"

"The Durant steel works control them," corrected the general manager.

"And you have a large government order for the Rhinestrom gun now that the Sommers gun is out of the way?" persisted the unruffled questioner.

Pinckney had been losing more and more of his self control as each succeeding question thrust struck him.

"I don't like what that question implies, sir," he exclaimed angrily.

Bradley made a slight conventional nod.

"I'm sorry," he said indifferently.

The conspirator had begun to realize he was fencing a strong, shrewd antagonist and it would not do to lose his temper, so he hastened to explain.

"We had the Rhinestrom order before the Sommers gun was forged."

"Who is Rhinestrom?" commanded Bradley, with a sudden sternness that took the general manager completely by surprise. Pinckney had not anticipated that question. For a moment he hesitated, repeating blankly after the government agent:

"Who is he?"

Bradley's manner had changed abruptly from bland curiosity to stern determination to know.

"Yes," he said sharply, "who is Rhinestrom? Where does he come from? Where is he now? Whom did you deal with?"

Pinckney hesitated.

"Why, I have no idea who his friends are."

"Does Mr. Durant know?" asked the detective.

Still Pinckney fenced.

"I—I couldn't say, really. Better ask Mr. Durant."

"I did," retorted Bradley shortly.

Pinckney saw it was time to end this cross questioning if he was to get away safe. The government agent was shrewder than he thought, and this thin spot in his defense—the identity of Rhinestrom—seemed perilously weak. The only thing to do was to end it at once.

"I haven't time to talk to you further," he said.

Bradley made a restraining gesture.

"Just a moment more, Mr. Pinckney. Has Rhinestrom ever been at your works?"

"No, sir," returned the general manager promptly.

"Then how does Marsh know him?" demanded the government agent sternly.

It was pure bluff, but Pinckney had no idea of that, and he took the bait, hook, sinker and all.

"Marsh," he exclaimed blankly.

"Why, Marsh doesn't know him."

For the first time Bradley permitted himself a sneering smile.

"I can only go by what Marsh says," he declared. "Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Pinckney, that Marsh, the draughtsman of the Durant steel works, does not know the inventor of the Rhinestrom gun?"

Pinckney's face was brick red with anger now, but inside there was a quiver of apprehension that Marsh had talked. If so, all was up. Anyway this questioning must stop.

"I'm not going to talk to you further, sir," he declared angrily. "Your manner is distasteful to me."

Again there came that mocking, satirical apology.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. But, Mr. Pinckney, you must mind admitting that the man in charge of forging the Sommers gun was drunk?"

Pinckney hesitated.

"I do admit that," he said, "but he did his work properly. I was there myself to watch him. Mr. Sommers was there too."

Instantly the secret service agent turned on Sommers.

"Were you in the furnace room, Lieutenant Sommers, at the time the gun went into the bath?"

"Yes, sir," admitted the naval officer. "I was."

"Did it go in at the right temperature?"

It was Sommers' time to hesitate.

"I—I don't know," he admitted. "I didn't see it."

"You were in the furnace room," exclaimed the secret service man, "and you did not see your own gun go into the tempering bath?"

"There was a quarrel with the foreman," said Sommers hesitatingly.

"What were you quarreling about?" asked Bradley.

It was the one question that Sommers could not answer. How could he bring Frances into it? Bradley was waiting impatiently for his reply.

"I can't explain the cause of that quarrel," finally declared the naval officer firmly, and Pinckney permitted himself his first smile of satisfaction.

After all, there was a chance of this young fool, through insane jealousy, permitting himself to overlook his only means of vindication.

Bradley was still looking at Sommers with involuntary surprise when Pinckney made his next move.

"Mr. Bradley, I want you to understand that I'm very sorry for Mr. Sommers about his whole affair. If I can be of any service to him or to you I shall be only too glad."

The secret service man was not one to be whimsical or chivalrous when he had started out to accomplish anything. Promptly he took Pinckney at his word.

"That's very good of you, sir, and you can be of the greatest service to us. Lieutenant Sommers goes to face the court of inquiry at Washington, and it is his desire and mine to reach there with as little delay as possible. No steamer sails from this port to New York for nearly a week."

"Now, the gun that made this trouble was forged at your works, and therefore, whether you wish it or not, you have a direct interest in the case. Perhaps I'm going to ask you something unusual, but it will be a great favor if you will allow Mr. Sommers and myself to sail with you on the Irvesa."

Pinckney and Sommers both stared at the secret service man in amazement. The cool audacity of the proposal took them both off their feet. Sommers was the first to recover.

"Bradley! No!" he exclaimed impetuously.

Pinckney bowed coldly.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "but you are asking too much. That'll be impossible."

He turned away just as Frances, tired of the waiting, re-entered the courtyard.

"Ah, Frances, you are ready?" he asked.

Without replying the girl came straight to Sommers.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked directly.

"I have been ordered to report at Washington at once to face the court of inquiry," returned the officer.

The girl smiled. There were both sadness and joy in it—sadness for his unfortunate situation, joy that they had a chance still to be together.

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"We are just starting," she suggested. "Come with us on the yacht."

Sommers shook his head.

"I'm sorry; I can't do that."

The girl stood looking at him, hurt and uncertain. She had not expected that refusal. She could not understand it. Again Bradley seized the situation.

"Miss Durant, Mr. Sommers goes to Washington to endeavor to show why he should not be court-martialed for neglect of duty the night his gun was forged. It's most important that he get there as soon as possible, and no ship sails from this port for a week."

Pinckney stepped forward angrily.

"Mr. Bradley, your explanation is most uncalculated," he exclaimed.

Then Frances began to see. Her head came up, and her eyes lighted.

"On the contrary, Mr. Bradley, I'm very much obliged to you for your explanation," she declared haughtily.

"Would it not be possible for you and Lieutenant Sommers to return with us?"

"It would be the greatest favor, Miss Durant," he said earnestly. "I had already requested it, but Mr. Pinckney objects."

The girl turned on Pinckney haughtily.

"When Mr. Pinckney realizes that the Irvesa is my father's yacht and that this gun was forged in my father's works and that it is my desire that

Lieutenant Sommers and Mr. Bradley sail with us at once I am sure he will have no objections to offer."

Rebuked, Pinckney bowed with ill grace.

"Since Miss Durant wishes it I am only too happy to have you come with us, of course," he said to Bradley.

The secret service man bowed in turn.

"Then we'll go, of course, with thanks," he said simply. "If you will excuse me I'll get ready. Lieutenant Sommers and I will be at the dock within an hour."

When Bradley and Pinckney both had gone Frances came over to where her lover was standing.

"That was wrong," she said, gently reproving. "You should have trusted me more. We must have no more misunderstandings. From now on what affects you affects me. You and I are one, but don't you see?"—she paused a moment, looking up at him, her heart in her eyes—"but don't you see I love you?"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PERILS OF THE SEA.

THE steamer Mongolian was pitching, tossing, pounding along steadily as best she could through the night. For ten hours she had fought her way up the coast in the face of the worst storm of the season.

Now, off Hatteras, the danger spot in the route from Porto Rico to New York, the sturdy little liner scarcely seemed able to make any progress. She had been forced miles off her course and closer in toward the dangerous reefs than her captain liked.

Not that the liner herself was in any grave danger, for the old Mongolian and her experienced captain had faced too many Atlantic storms for even a big one to alarm them. The hatches had all been battened down, the passengers were below, and the stanch steamer, stripped as much as possible, slowly rising to each attack of the waves, drove on with all the power of her engines under the storm.

Up in the little wireless room, the highest point on the ship, Harling, the young operator, clung to his berth and wondered what was going to happen. It was his second trip to sea and his first big storm, so no wonder the young operator felt the thrill of the struggle and just the faintest fear for the outcome.

Every officer and man connected with the liner was on post, waiting anxiously for whatever might happen. They had little fears for the stanch Mongolian, but there were many ships less sturdy in those waters, and on such a night, with the vessel out of her course, there was no telling what might occur. The captain's last instruction had been to look out for wrecks.

Most of the vessels of any size in these waters carried wireless outfits, and in case of trouble they would be sure at once to send out broadcast their appeals for help. Little could be done in any case, but at least the Mongolian could stand by to help as much as she could or, if absolutely necessary, take advantage of the warnings to keep clear of wrecks.

For hours the pitching of the ship, timed irregularly to the roaring drive of the storm, had held the wireless man fast at his post. It was now past midnight and with little chance of any abatement before dawn.

Harling's nerves