

The Last Shot

BY
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SYNOPSIS.

At their home on the frontier between the Browns and Grays, Marta Galland and her mother, entertaining Colonel Westering of the Grays, see Captain Lanstron, chief intelligence officer of the Browns, injured by a fall in his aeroplane. Ten years later, Westering, nominal vice but real chief of staff, reinforces South La Tré, meditates on war, and speculates on the comparative ages of himself and Marta, who is visiting in the Gray capital. Westering cuts 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. On the march with the 53d of the Browns Private Stransky, anarchist, declares war and played-out patriotism and is placed under arrest. Colonel Lanstron overhearing, begs him off. Lanstron calls on Marta at her home. He talks with Feller, the gardener. Marta tells Lanstron that she believes Feller to be a spy. Lanstron confesses it is true. Lanstron shows Marta a telephone which Feller has concealed in a secret passage under the tower for use to benefit the Browns in war emergency. Lanstron declares his love for Marta. Westering and the Gray premier plan to use a trivial international affair to foment warlike patriotism in army and people and strike before declaring war. Partow, Brown chief of staff, and Lanstron, made vice, discuss the trouble, and the Brown defenses. Partow reveals his plan to Lanstron. The Gray army crosses the border line and attacks. The Browns check them. Artillery, infantry, aeroplanes and dirigibles engage. Stransky, rising to make the anarchist speech of his life, draws the Gray artillery fire. Nicked by a shrapnel splinter, he goes berserk and fights "all a man."

CHAPTER IX—Continued.

But would one? He understood that with their smokeless powder the Gray guns could be located only by their flashes, which would not be visible unless the refraction of light were favorable. Then "thur-eeeh—thur-eeeh" above every other sound in a long wail. No man ever forgets the first crack of a shrapnel at close quarters, the first bullet breath on his cheek, or the first supporting shell from his side in flight that passes above him.

"That is ours!" called Dellarme. "Ours!" shouted the sergeant. "Ours!" sang the thought of every one of them.

Over the Gray batteries on the plain an explosive ball of smoke hung in the still air; then another beside it. "Thur-eeeh—thur-eeeh—thur-eeeh," the screaming overhead became a gale that built a cloud of blue smoke over the offending Gray batteries—beautiful, soft blue smoke from which a spray of steel descended. There was no spotting the flashes of the Browns' guns in order to reply to them, for they were under the cover of a hill, using indirect aim as nicely and accurately as if firing pointblank. The gunners of the Gray batteries could not go on with their work under such a hail-storm; they were checkmated. They stopped firing and began moving to a new position, where their commander hoped to remain undiscovered long enough to support the 125th by loosing his lightnings against the defenders at the critical moment of the next charge, which would be made as soon as Fracasse's men had been reinforced.

There was an end to the concussions and the thrashing of the air around Dellarme's men, and they had the relief of a breaking abscess in the ear. But they became more conscious of the spits of dust in front of their faces and the passing whistles of bullets. In return, they made the sections of Gray infantry in reserve rushing across the levels, leave many gray lumps behind. But Fracasse's men at the foot of the slope poured in a heavier and still heavier fire.

"Down there where we need the shells now!" spoke the thought of Dellarme's men, which he had anticipated by a word to the signal corporal, who waved his flag one—two—three—four—five times. Come on, now, with more of your special brand of death, fire-control officer! Your own head is above the sky-line, though your guns are hidden. Five hundred yards beyond the knoll is the range! Come on!

He came with a burst of screams so low in flight that they seemed to brush the back of the men's necks with a hair broom at the rate of a thousand feet a second. Having watched the result, Dellarme turned with a condemnatory gesture, which the corporal translated into the wigwag of "Correct!" The shrapnel smoke hanging over Fracasse's men appeared a heavenly blue to Dellarme's men.

"They are going to start for us soon! Oh, but we'll get a lot of them!" whispered Stransky gleefully to his rifle.

Dellarme glanced again toward the colonel's station. No sign of the retiring flag. He was glad of that. He did not want to fall back in face of a charge; to have his men silhouetted in the valley as they retreated, and the Grays would not endure this show-down long without going one way or the other. He gave the order to fix bayonets, and hardly was it obeyed when the first flashes of steel through the shrapnel smoke at the Grays' feet shined. The Grays had 500 yards to go; the Browns had the time that it takes running men to cover the distance in which to stop the Grays.

"Will you see any of those who has the luck to get this last?" whispered

Stransky to his rifle. The sentence was spoken in the midst of a salvo of shrapnel cracks, which he did not hear. He heard nothing, thought nothing, except to kill.

The Gray batteries on the plain, having taken up a new position and being reinforced, played on the crest at top speed instantly the Gray line rose and started up the slope at the run. With the purpose of confusing no less than killing, they used percussion, which burst on striking the ground, as well as shrapnel, which burst by a time-fuse in the air. Fountains of sod and dirt shot upward to meet descending sprays of bullets. The concussions of the earth shook the aim of Dellarme's men, blinded by smoke and dust, as they fired through a fog of bent figures whose legs were pumping fast in dim pantomime.

But the guns of the Browns, also, have word that the charge has begun. The signal corporal is waiting for the gesture from Dellarme agreed upon as an announcement. The Brown artillery commander cuts his fuses two hundred and fifty yards shorter. He, too, uses percussion for moral effect.

Half of the distance from the foot to the crest of the knoll Fracasse's men have gone in face of the hot, sizzling tornado of bullets, when there is a blast of explosions in their faces with all the chaotic and irresistible force of a volcanic eruption. Not only are they in the midst of the first lot of the Browns' shells at the shorter range, but one Gray battery has either made a mistake in cutting its fuses or struck a streak of powder below standard, and its shells burst among those whom it is aiming to assist.

The ground seems rising under the feet of Fracasse's company; the air is split and racked and wrenched and torn with hideous screams of invisible demons. The men stop; they act on the uncontrollable instinct of self-preservation against an overwhelming force of nature. A few without the power of locomotion drop, faces pressed to the ground. The rest flee toward a shoulder of the slope through the instinct that leads a hunted man in a street into an alley. In a confusion of arms and legs, pressing one on the other, no longer soldiers, only a mob, they throw themselves behind the first protection that offers itself. Fracasse also runs. He runs from the flame of a furnace door suddenly thrown open.

The Gray batteries have ceased firing; certain gunners' ears burn under the words of inquiry as to the cause of the mistake from an artillery commander. Dellarme's men are hugging the earth too close to cheer. A desire to spring up and yell may be in their hearts, but they know the danger of showing a single unnecessary inch of their craniums above the sky-line. The sounds that escape their throats are those of a winning team at a tug of war as diaphragms relax.

With the smoke clearing, they see 20 or 30 Grays plastered on the slope at the point where the charge was checked. Every one of those prostrate forms is within fatal range. Not one moves a finger; even the living are feigning death in the hope of surviving. Among them is little Peterkin, so faithful in forcing his refractory legs to keep pace with his comrades. If he is always-up with them they will never know what is in his heart and call him a coward. As he has been knocked unconscious, he has not been in the pell-mell retreat.

His first stabbing thought on coming to was that he must be dead; but, no; he was opening his eyes sticky with dust. At least, he must be wounded! He had not power yet to move his hands in order to feel where, and when they grew alive enough to move, what he saw in front of him held them frigidly still. His nerves went searching from his head to his feet and—miracle of heaven!—found no point of pain or spot soppy with blood. If he were really hit there was bound to be one or the other, he knew from reading.

Between him and the faces of the Browns—yes, the actual, living, terrible Browns—above the glist of their rifle barrels, was no obstacle that could stop a bullet, though not more than three feet away was a crater made by a shell burst. The black circle of every muzzle on the crest seemed to be pointing at him. When were they going to shoot? When was he to be executed? Would he be shot in many places and die thus? Or would the very first bullet go through his head? Why didn't they fire? What were they waiting for? The suspense was unbearable. The desperation of overwhelming fear driving him in irresponsible impulse, he doubled up his legs and with a cat's leap sprang for the crater.

A blood-curdling burst of whistles passed over his head as a dozen rifles cracked. This time he was surely killed! He was in some other world! Which was it, the good or the bad? The good, for he had a glimpse of blue sky. No, that could not be, for he had been alive when he leaped for the crater, and there he was pressed against the soft earth of its bottom. He burrowed deeper blissfully. He

was the nearest to the enemy of any man of the 125th, and he certainly had passed through a gamut of emotions in the half-hour since Eugene Aronson had leaped over a white post.

"Confound it! If we'd kept on we'd have got them! Now we have to do it all over again!" growled Fracasse distractedly as he looked around at the faces hugging the cover of the shoulder—faces asking, What next? each in its own way: faces blank and white; faces with lips working and eyes blinking; faces with the blood rushing back to cheeks in baffled anger. One, however, was half smiling—Hugo Mallin's.

"You did your share of the running, I'll warrant, Mallin!" said Fracasse excitedly, venting his disgust on a particular object.

"Yes, sir," answered Hugo. "It was very hard to maintain a semblance of dignity. Yes, sir, I kept near you all the time. Wasn't that what you wanted me to do, sir?"

Three or four men burst into a hysterical laugh as if something had broken in their throats. Everybody felt better for this touch of drollery except the captain. Yet, possibly, it may have helped him in recovering his poise. Sometimes even a pin-prick will have this effect.

"Silence!" he said in his old manner. "I will give you something to joke about other than a little setback like this! Get up there with your rifles!"

He formed the nucleus of a firing-line under cover of the shoulder, and then set the remainder of his company to work with their spades mak-



A Blood-Curdling Burst of Whistles Passed Over His Head.

ing a trench. The second battalion of the 125th, which faced the knoll, was also digging at the base of the slope, and another regiment in reserve was deploying on the plain. After the failure to rush the knoll the Gray commander had settled down to the business of a systematic approach.

And what of those of Fracasse's men who had not run but had dropped in their tracks when the charge halted? There were between two lines of fire. They were no escape. Some of the wounded had a mercifully quick end, others suffered the consciousness of being hit again and again; the dead were bored through with bullet holes. In torture, the survivors prayed for death; for all had to die except Peterkin, the pasty-faced little valet's son.

Peterkin was quite safe, hugging the bottom of the shell crater under a swarm of hornets. In a surprisingly short time he became accustomed to the situation and found himself ravenously hungry, for the strain of the last 12 hours had burned up tissue. He took a biscuit out of his knapsack and began nibbling it, as became a true rodent.

CHAPTER X.

Marta's First Glimpse of War.

As Marta and the children came to the door of the chapel after the recitation of the oath, she saw the civil population moving along the street in the direction of the range. There was nothing for Marta to do but start homeward. The thought that her mother was alone made her hasten at a pace much more rapid than the procession of people, whose talk and exclamations formed a monotonous audible in its nearness, despite the continuous rifle-fire, now broken by the pounding of the guns.

"It's all done to beat the Grays, isn't it, Miss Galland? They are trying to take our land," said Jacky Werther as Marta parted from him.

"Yes, it is done to beat the Grays," she answered. "Good luck, Jacky!"

Yes, yes, to beat the Grays! The same idea—the fighting nature, the brute nature of man—animated both sides. Had the Browns really tried for peace? Had they, in the spirit of her oath, appealed to justice and reason? Why hadn't their premier before all the world said to the premier of the Grays, as one honest, friendly neighbor to another over a matter of dispute:

"Let us not play tricks in secret to gain points, we civilized nations, but be frank with each other. Let us not try to irritate each other or to influence our people, but to realize how much we have in common and that our only purpose is common progress and happiness."

At the turn of the road in front of the castle she saw the gunners of the batteries making an emplacement for their guns in a field of carrots that had not yet been harvested. The roots of golden yellow were mixed with the teasing spadefuls of earth.

A shadow like a great cloud in mad flight shot over the earth, and with the gunners she looked up to see a Gray dirigible. Already it was turning homeward; already it had gained its object as a scout. On the fragile platform of the gondola was a man, seemingly a human mite aiming a tiny toy gun. His target was one of the Brown aeroplanes.

"They're in danger of cutting their own envelope! They can't get the angle! The plane is too high!" exclaimed the artillery commander. Both he and his men forgot their work in watching the spectacle of aerial David against aerial Goliath. "If our man lands with his little bomb, oh, my!" he grinned. "That's why he is so high. He's been waiting up there."

"Pray God he will!" exclaimed one of the gunners.

"Look at him volplane—motor at full speed, too!"

"Into it! Making sure! Oh, splendor!" cried the artillery commander. A ball of lightning shot forth sheets of flame. Dirigible and plane were hidden in an ugly, swirl of yellowish smoke, rolling out into a purple cloud that spread into prismatic mist over the descent of cavoring human bodies and broken machinery and twisted braces, flying pieces of tattered or burning cloth. David had taken Goliath down with him in a death grip.

An aeroplane following the dirigible as a screen, hoping to get home with information if the dirigible were lost, had escaped the sharpshooters in the church tower by flying around the town. However, it ran within range of the automatic and the sharpshooters on top of the castle tower. They failed of the bull's-eye, but their bullets, rimming the target, crippling the motor, and cutting braces, brought the crumpling wings about the helpless pilot. The watching gunners uttered "Ahs!" of horror and triumph as they saw him fall, gliding this way and that, in the agony of slow descent.

"Come, now!" called the artillery commander. "We are wasting precious time."

Entering the grounds of the Galland house, Marta had to pass to one side of the path, now blocked by army wagons and engineers' materials and tools. Soldiers carrying sand-bags were taking the shortest cut, trampling the flowers on their way.

"Do you know whose property this is?" she demanded in a burst of anger.

"Ours—the nation's!" answered one, perspiring freely at his work. "Sorry!" he added on second thought.

Already parts of the first terrace were shoulder-high with sand-bags and one automatic had been set in place, Marta observed as she turned to the veranda. There her mother sat in her favorite chair, hands relaxed as they rested on its arms, while she looked out over the valley in the super tranquility that comes to some women under a strain—as soldiers who have been on sieges can tell you—that some psychologists interpret one way and some another, none knowing even their own wives.

"Marta, did any of the children come?" Mrs. Galland asked in her usual pleasant tone. So far as she was concerned, the activity on the terrace did not exist. She seemed oblivious of the fact of war.

Marta's monosyllabic absently answering the question was expressive of her wonder at her mother. Most girls do not know their mothers much better than psychologists know their wives.

"Marta, whatever happens one should go regularly about what he considers his duty," said Mrs. Galland. "They have been as considerate as they could, evidently by Colonel Lanstron's orders," she proceeded, nodding toward the industrious engineers. "And they've packed all the paintings and works of art and put them in the cellar, where they will be safe."

The captain of engineers in command, seeing Marta, hurried toward her.

"Miss Galland, isn't it?" he asked. "I have been waiting for you. I—I—well, I found that I could not make the situation clear to your mother."

"He thinks me in my second childhood or out of my head," Mrs. Galland explained with a shade of tartness. "And he has been so polite in trying to conceal his opinion, too," she added with a comprehending smile.

The captain flushed in embarrassment.

"I—I can't speak too strongly," he declared when he had regained his composure. "Though everything seems to be safe here now, it may not be in an hour. You must go, all of you. This house will be an inferno as soon as the 53d falls back, and I can't possibly get your mother to appreciate the fact, Miss Galland."

"But I said that I did appreciate it and that the Gallands have been in inferno before—perhaps not as bad as this one that is coming—but, then, the Gallands must keep abreast of the times," replied Mrs. Galland. "I have asked Minna and she prefers to remain. I am glad of that. I am glad now that we kept her. She is as loyal as my old maid and the butler and the cook were to your grand-

mother in the last war. Ah, the Gallands had many servants then!"

"This isn't like the old war. This place will be shelled, enflamed! And you two—" the captain protested desperately.

"I became a Galland when I married," said Mrs. Galland, "and the Galland women have always remained with their property in time of war. Naturally, I shall remain!"

"Miss Galland, it was you—your influence I was counting on to—" The captain turned to Marta in a final appeal.

Mrs. Galland was watching her daughter's face intently.

"We stay!" replied Marta, and the captain saw in the depths of her eyes, a cold blue-black, that further argument was useless.

Now came the sweep of a rising roar from the sky with the command to attention of the rush of a fast express-train past a country railway station. Two Gray dirigibles with their escort of aeroplanes were bearing toward the pass over the pass road. The automatic and the riflemen in the tower banged away to no purpose, but the central sections of the envelope of the rear dirigible had been torn in shreds; it was buckling. Clouds of blue shrapnel smoke broke around its gondola. A number of field-guns joined forces with a battery of high-angle guns in a havoc that left a drifting derelict; the remainder of the squadron had completed its loop and was pointing toward the plain.

From a great altitude, literally out of the blue of heaven, high over the Gray lines, Marta made out a Brown squadron of dirigibles and planes descending across the track of the Grays.

The Gray dirigibles, stern on, were little larger than umbrellas and the planes than swallows; the Brown dir-

gibles, side on, were big saucages and their planes specks. To the eye, this meeting was like that of two small flocks of soaring birds apparently unable to change their course. But imagination could picture the fearful clash of forces, whose wounded would find the succor of no hospital except impact on the earth below.

Marta put her hands over her eyes for only a second, she thought, before she withdrew them in vexation—hadn't she promised herself not to be cowardly—to see one Brown dirigible and two Brown aeroplanes ascending at a sharp angle above a cloud of smoke to escape the high-angle guns of the Grays.

"We've got them all! No lips survive to tell what the eye saw!" exclaimed the engineer captain, his words bubbling with the joy of water in the sunlight. "As I thought," he continued in professional enthusiasm and discrimination.

With high-power binoculars glued to his eyes, he then turned to see if the faint brown line of Dellarme's men were going to hold or break. If it held, he might have hours in which to complete his task; if it broke, he had only minutes.

Marta came up the terrace path from the ephraim bed in time to watch the shroud of shrapnel smoke billowing over the knoll, to visualize another scene in place of the collision of the squadrons, and to note the captain's exultation over Fracasse's repulse.

"How we must have punished them!" he exclaimed to his lieutenant. "How we must have mowed them down! Lanstron certainly knew what he was doing."

"You mean that he knew how we should mow them down?" asked Marta. Not until she spoke did he realize that she was standing near him.

"Why, naturally! If we hadn't mowed them down his plan would have failed. Mowing them down was the only way to hold them back," he said; and seeing her horror made haste to add: "Miss Galland, now you know what a ghastly business war is. It will be worse here than there."

"Yes," she said blankly. Her colorless cheeks, her drooping underlip convinced him that now, with a little show of masculine authority, he would gain his point.

"You and your mother must go!" he said firmly.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

INTERNATIONAL SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

(By E. O. SELLERS, Acting Director of Sunday School Course.)

LESSON FOR DECEMBER 27

JESUS, THE WORLD'S SAVIOR AND KING.

(Review.)

READING LESSON—II Cor. 5:14-21. GOLDEN TEXT—Far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.—Gal. 6:14 R. V.

With the exception of the temperance lesson, all the lessons of the quarter have to do with the death and resurrection of our Lord. In the first quarter we considered Jesus as the great Teacher; in the second, he is presented chiefly as the seeking Savior; in the third, we observed him as he acted in judgment upon Israel and sin; in this last, he is seen in his supreme office as Savior and king. The king of love, he is also the world's Savior. Deny him his kingship, refuse to become a subject of that kingdom of which he is the head and we bring upon ourselves the condemnation of a righteous judgment. This past quarter particularly reveals him in that final ministry which resulted in the initiation of the new enterprise of proclaiming his gospel, to the end that his kingdom shall be established. We shall consider the lessons under four headings:

Story of Love.

I. Those of Preparation for His Passion. These embrace the first three lessons. (1) In the first, we have the beautiful story of the love which anointed him for burial, which he accepted and immortalized. This was not because of the greatness of the act, but because of the appreciation of himself and of his words. (2) Here we observe him presiding over and instituting that lasting memorial, the symbolic feast, wherein the old passes away and the new dispensation is ushered in. (3) In the third lesson we view with awe the agony of the garden wherein he dedicated himself to the coming suffering. "Not as I will, but as thou wilt"—absolute surrender and delight in the Father's will.

II. Those That Preceded His Passion. These next five lessons lead us through those dark shadows, yea, through a darkness which is yet unfathomable and which ended in the total darkness of Calvary. (4) In this lesson Judas is presented, the incarnation of evil, and the agent of Satan, who betrayed his Lord and "Friend" by a kiss. Here we see the utter ruin of a soul which chose private ambition instead of fellowship with Jesus. (5) This is a presentation of the greatest and most appalling travesty of justice the world has ever seen. Humanity never descended to any lower depths, yet he is serene, calm, dignified and strong. (6) The Temperance Lesson. (7) This lesson considers the heart-breaking rashness of Peter. (8) This is the story of the ignoble failure of a weak, vacillating, time-server.

Story of the Cross.

III. His Passion. (9) This brings us to the story of the cross itself, as considered in this sequence of lessons. Before that awe-inspiring, wonder-creating event we stand with bared head. Here sin was unmasked and did its utmost. Her also we behold grace unveiled and active.

IV. The Post-Passion Lessons. We are now in a new atmosphere and light, a new glory is to be seen. (10) In this lesson we behold the empty tomb, for "He could not be holden of death." We share with them the glorious, the joyful consciousness that he whom we have just seen die in ignominy and shame and suffering is now alive and "ever liveth" to be our advocate and ever-present friend. This is a glorious fact, that of the literal, bodily resurrection of Christ from among the dead. Hallelujah! (11) In lesson eleven this same thought is again emphasized and with the suggestion of its accompanying obligation, in that "we are witnesses of these things."

In "Tarbell's Teachers' Guide" is a good suggestion for review Sunday, viz., that a series of elliptical phrases be written upon a board or chart, that will fix the chief idea or serve to recall the lessons, as follows:

- (1) Let her alone (2) For ye have the poor (3) Where-soever this gospel shall be preached (4) Verily I say unto you, One (5) For the Son of Man goeth (6) This is my blood (7) Take ye (8) My soul is (9) Father, all things (10) Watch and (11) My God, my (12) Why seek ye (13) Ye shall be my
- These phrases may be written upon cards or slips of paper and distributed to classes or individuals, the entire sentence to be recited when called for. It would also be well to make mention of the two years' work in the Synoptic Gospels. Define what the gospel is (I Cor. 15:1-4), what the word synoptic means, and wherein these Gospels differ from the Fourth Gospel.
- Drill the school in giving book and chapter of the following: The Lord's Prayer, the parable of the good Samaritan, the mustard seed, the leaven, the prodigal son, the great commandment, the last supper, Gethsemane, the trial of Jesus, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the great commission, the ascension.