

BOB HAMPTON of PLACER

By RANDALL PARRISH AUTHOR OF
"WHEN WILDERNESS WAS KING" "MY LADY OF THE NORTH"
"HISTORIC ILLINOIS, ETC."

COPYRIGHT 1906 BY A.C. MCCLURG & CO.



CHAPTER V—(Continued)

"By God!" he exclaimed at last, rising to his feet and pointing toward the door. "I have shot men for less. Go, before I forget your cloth. You little impudent fool! See here—I saved that girl from death, or worse; I plucked her from the very mouth of hell; I like her; she's got sand; so far as I know there is not a single soul for her to turn to for help in all this wide world. And you, you miserable, snivelling hypocrite, you little creeping Presbyterian parson, you want me to shake her! What sort of a wild beast do you suppose I am?"

Wynkoop had taken one hasty step backward, impelled to it by the fierce anger blazing from those stern, gray eyes. But now he paused, and, for the only time on record, discovered the conventional language of polite society inadequate to express his needs.

"I think," he said, scarcely realizing his own words, "you are a damned fool."

Into Hampton's eyes there leaped a light upon which other men had looked before they died,—the strange mad gleam one sometimes sees in fighting animals, or amid the fierce charges of war. His hand swept instinctively backward, closing upon the butt of a revolver beneath his coat, and for one second he who had dared such utterance looked on death. Then the hard lines about the man's mouth softened, the fingers clutching the weapon relaxed, and Hampton laid one opened hand upon the minister's shrinking shoulder.

"Sit down," he said, his voice unsteady from so sudden a reaction. "Perhaps—perhaps I don't exactly understand."

For a full minute they sat thus looking at each other through the fast dimming light, like two prize-fighters meeting for the first time within the ring, and taking mental stock before beginning their physical argument. Hampton, with a touch of his old audacity of manner, was first to break the silence.

"So you think I am a damned fool. Well, we are in pretty fair accord as to that fact, although no one before has ever ventured to state it quite so clearly in my presence. Perhaps you will kindly explain?"

The preacher wet his dry lips with his tongue, forgetting himself when his thoughts began to crystallize into expression.

"I regret having spoken as I did," he began. "Such language is not my custom. I was irritated because of your haste in rejecting my advances before hearing the proposition I came to submit. I certainly respect your

evident desire to be of assistance to this young woman, nor have I the slightest intention of interfering between you. Your act in preserving her life was truly a noble one, and your loyalty to her interests since is worthy of all Christian praise. But I believe I have a right to ask, what do you intend for the future? Keep her with you? Drag her about from camp to camp? Educate her among the contaminating poison of gambling holes and dance-halls? Is her home hereafter to be the saloon and the rough frontier hotel? Her ideal of manhood the quarrelsome gambler, and of womanhood a painted harlot? Mr. Hampton, you are evidently a man of education, of early refinement; you have known better things; and I have come to you seeking merely to aid you in deciding this helpless young woman's destiny. I thought, I prayed, you would be at once interested in that purpose, and would comprehend the reasonableness of my position."

Hampton sat silent, gazing out of the window, his eyes apparently on the lights now becoming dimly visible in the saloon opposite. For a considerable time he made no move, and the other straightened back in his chair watching him.

"Well!" he ventured at last, "what is your proposition?" The question was quietly asked, but a slight tremor in the low voice told of repressed feeling.

"That, for the present at least, you confide this girl into the care of some worthy woman."

"Have you any such in mind?"

"I have already discussed the matter briefly with Mrs. Herndon, wife of the superintendent of the Golden Rule mines. She is a refined Christian lady, beyond doubt the most proper person to assume such a charge in this camp."

Hampton flung his sodden cigar butt out of the window. "I'll talk it over to-morrow with—Miss Gillis," he said, somewhat gruffly. "It may be this means a good deal more to me than you suppose, parson, but I'm bound to acknowledge there is considerable hard sense in what you have just said, and I'll talk it over with the girl."

Wynkoop held out his hand cordially and the firm grasp of the other closed over his fingers.

"I don't exactly know why I didn't kick you downstairs," the latter commented, as though still in wonder at himself. "Never remember being quite so considerate before, but I reckon you must have come at me in about the right way."

If Wynkoop answered, his words were indistinguishable, but Hampton remained standing in the open door

watching the missionary go down the narrow stairs.

"Nervy little devil," he acknowledged slowly to himself. "And maybe, after all, that would be the best thing for the Kid."

CHAPTER VI.

"To Be or Not to Be."

They were seated rather close together upon the steep hillside, gazing silently down upon squalid Glencald. At such considerable distance all the dull shabbiness of the mining town had disappeared, and it seemed almost ideal, viewed against the natural background of brown rocks and green trees. Everywhere was loneliness, no sound telling of the labor of man reached them, and the few scattered buildings far below resembling mere doll-houses.

They had conversed only upon the constantly changing beauty of the scene, or of incidents connected with their upward climb, while moving slowly along the trail through the fresh morning sunshine. Now they sat in silence, the young girl, with cheeks flushed and dreamy eyes aglow, gazed far off along the valley, the man watching her curiously, and wondering how best to approach his task.

Observing her now, sitting thus in total unconsciousness of his scrutiny, Hampton made no attempt to analyze the depth of his interest for this waif who had come drifting into his life.

Even to his somewhat prejudiced eyes she was not an attractive creature, for she possessed no clear conception of how to render apparent those few feminine charms she possessed. Negligence and total unconsciousness of self, coupled with lack of womanly companionship and guidance, had left her altogether in the rough. He marked now the coarse ragged shoes, the cheap patched skirt, the tousled auburn hair, the sunburnt cheeks with a suggestion of freckles plainly visible beneath the eyes, and some of the fastidiousness of early days caused him to shrug his shoulders. Yet underneath the tan there was the glow of perfect young health; the eyes were frank, brave, unflinching; while the rounded chin held a world of character in its firm contour. Somehow the sight of this brought back to him that abiding faith in her "dead gameness" which had first awakened his admiration.

"Kid," he ventured at last, "you were talking while we came up the trail about how we'd do this and that after awhile. You don't suppose I'm going to have any useless girl like you hanging around on to me, do you?"

She glanced quickly about at him, as though such unexpected expressions startled her from a pleasant reverie. "Why, I—I thought that was the way you planned it yesterday," she exclaimed, doubtfully.

"Oh, yesterday! Well, you see, yesterday I was sort of dreaming; to-day I am wide awake, and I've about decided, Kid, that for your own good, and my comfort, I've got to shake you."

A sudden gleam of fierce resentment leaped into the dark eyes, the unrestrained glow of a passion which had never known control. "Oh, you have, have you, Mr. Bob Hampton? You have about decided! Well, why don't you altogether decide? I don't think I'm down on my knees begging you for mercy. Good Lord! I reckon I can get along all right without you—I did before. Just what hap-

pened to give you such a change of heart?"

"I made the sudden discovery," he said, affecting a laziness he was far from feeling, "that you were too near being a young woman to go traipsing around the country with me, living at shacks, and having no company but gambling sharks, and that class of cattle."

"Oh, did you? What else?"

"Only that our tempers don't exactly seem to jibe, and the two of



"I Think You Are a Damned Fool."

us can't be bosses in the same ranch."

She looked at him contemptuously, swinging her body farther around on the rock, and sitting stiffly, the color on her cheeks deepening through the sunburn. "Now see here, Mister Bob Hampton, you're a fraud, and you know it! Didn't I understand exactly who you was, and what was your business? Didn't I know you was a gambler, and a 'bad man'? Didn't I tell you plain enough out yonder"—and her voice faltered slightly—"just what I thought about you? Good Lord! I haven't been begging to stick with you, have I? I just didn't know which way to turn to, after dad was killed, and you sorter hung on to me, and I let it go the way I supposed you wanted it. But I'm not particularly stuck on your style, let me tell you, and I reckon there's plenty of ways for me to get along. Only first, I propose to understand what your little game is. You don't throw down your hand like that without some reason."

Hampton sat up, spurred into instant admiration by such independence of spirit. "You grow rather good-looking, Kid, when you get hot, but you go at things half-cocked, and you've got to get over it. That's the whole trouble—you've never been trained, and I wouldn't make much of a trainer for a high-strung filly like you. Ever remember your mother?"

"Mighty little; reckon she must have died when I was about five years old. That's her picture."

Hampton took in his hand the old-fashioned locket she held out toward him, the long chain still clasped about her throat, and pried open the stiff catch with his knife blade. She bent down to fasten her loosened shoe, and when her eyes were uplifted his gaze was riveted upon the face in the picture.

"Mighty pretty, wasn't she?" she asked, with a sudden girlish interest, bending forward to look, regardless of his strained attitude. "And she was prettier than that, even, the way I remember her best, with her hair all

(Continued on page 11)