

# BOB HAMPTON of PLACER

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



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## CHAPTER VII.—Continued

"I've come to live here," announced the girl, sullenly. "That is, if I like it." The woman continued to gaze at her as if tempted to laugh outright, then the pleasant blue eyes hardened as their vision swept beyond toward Hampton.

"It is extremely kind of you, I'm sure," she said at last. "Why is it I am to be thus honored?"

The girl backed partially off the doorstep, her hair flapping in the wind, her cheeks flushed.

"Oh, you needn't put on so much style about it," she blurted out. "You're Mrs. Herndon, ain't you? Well, then, this is the place where I was sent; but I reckon you ain't no more particular about it than I am. There's others."

"Who sent you to me?" and Mrs. Herndon came forth into the sunshine. "The preacher."

"Oh, Mr. Wynkoop; then you must be the homeless girl whom Lieut. Brant brought in the other day. Why did you not say so at first? You may come in, my child."

There was a sympathetic tenderness apparent now in the tones of her voice, which the girl was swift to perceive and respond to, yet she held back, her independence unshaken. With the quick intuition of a woman, Mrs. Herndon bent down, placing one hand on the defiant shoulder.

"I did not understand, at first, my dear," she said, soothingly, "or I should never have spoken as I did. Some very strange callers come here. But you are truly welcome. I had a daughter once; she must have been nearly your age when God took her. Won't you come in?"

While thus speaking she never once glanced toward the man standing in silence beyond, yet as the two passed through the doorway together he followed, unasked. Once within the plainly furnished room, and with her arm about the girl's waist, the lines about her mouth hardened. "I do not recall extending my invitation to you," she said, coldly.

He remained standing, hat in hand, his face shadowed, his eyes picturing deep perplexity.

"For the intrusion I offer my apology," he replied, humbly; "but you see I—I feel responsible for this young woman. She—sort of fell to my care when none of her own people were left to look after her. I only came to show her the way, and to say that I stand ready to pay you well to see to her a bit, and show her how to get hold of the right things."

"Indeed!" and Mrs. Herndon's voice was not altogether pleasant. "I understood she was entirely alone and

friendless. Are you that man who brought her out of the canyon?"

Hampton bowed as though half ashamed of acknowledging the act.

"Oh! then I know who you are," she continued, unhesitatingly. "You are a gambler and a bar-room rough. I won't touch a penny of your money. I told Mr. Wynkoop that I shouldn't, but that I would endeavor to do my Christian duty by this poor girl. He was to bring her here himself, and keep you away."

The man smiled slightly, not in the least disconcerted by her plain speech. "Probably we departed from the hotel somewhat earlier than the minister anticipated," he explained, quietly, his old ease of manner returning in face of such open opposition. "I greatly regret your evident prejudice, madam, and can only say that I have more confidence in you than you appear to have in me. I shall certainly discover some means by which I may do my part in shaping this girl's future, but in the meanwhile will relieve you of my undesired presence."

He stepped without into the glare of the sunlight, feeling utterly careless as to the woman who had affronted him, yet somewhat hurt on seeing that the girl had not once lifted her downcast eyes to his face. Yet he had scarcely taken three steps toward the road before she was beside him, her hand upon his sleeve.

"I won't stay!" she exclaimed, fiercely, "I won't, Bob Hampton. I'd rather go with you than be good."

His sensitive face flushed with delight, but he looked gravely down into her indignant eyes. "Oh, yes, you will, Kid," and his hand touched her roughened hair caressingly. "She's a good, kind woman, all right, and I don't blame her for not liking my style."

"Do—do you really want me to stick it out here, Bob?"

It was no small struggle for him to say so, for he was beginning to comprehend just what this separation meant. She was more to him than he had ever supposed, more to him than she had even been an hour before, and now he understood clearly that from this moment they must ever run farther apart—her life tending upward, his down. Yet there was but one decision possible. Then he answered, "This is your best chance, little girl, and I want you to stay and fight it out."

Their eyes met, each dimly realizing, although in a totally different way, that here was a moment of important decision. Mrs. Herndon darkened the doorway and stood looking out.

"Well, Mr. Bob Hampton," she questioned, plainly, "what is this going to

be?"

He glanced toward her, slightly lifting his hat, and promptly releasing the girl's clinging hand.

"Miss Gillis consents to remain," he announced shortly, and, denying himself so much as another glance at his companion, strode down the narrow path to the road. A moment the girl's eyes followed him through the dust cloud, a single tear stealing down her cheek. Only a short week ago she had utterly despised this man, now he had become truly more to her than any one else in the wide, wide world. Then Mrs. Herndon came forth quietly and led the girl, now sobbing bitterly, within the cool shadows of the house.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A Last Revolt.

It proved a restless day, and a sufficiently unpleasant one, for Mr. Hampton. For a number of years he had been diligently training himself in the school of cynicism, endeavoring to persuade himself that he did not in the least care what others thought, nor how his own career ended; impelling himself to constant recklessness in life and thought. He had thus successfully built up a wall between the present and that past which long haunted his lonely moments, and had finally decided that it was hermetically sealed. Yet now, this odd chit of a girl, this waif whom he had plucked from the jaws of death, had overturned this carefully constructed barrier as if it had been originally built of mere cardboard, and he was compelled again to see himself, loathe himself, just as he had in those past years.

One thing he grasped clearly,—the girl should be given her chance nothing in his life must ever again soil her or lower her ideals. Mrs. Herndon was right, and he realized it; neither his presence nor his money were fit to influence her future. He swore between his clinched teeth, his face grown haggard. The sun's rays bridged the slowly darkening valley with cords of red gold, and the man pulled himself to his feet by gripping the root of a tree. He realized that he had been sitting there for hours, and that he was hungry.

Down beneath, amid the fast awakening noise and bustle of early evening, the long discipline of the gambler reasserted itself—he got back his nerve. It was Bob Hampton, cool, resourceful, sarcastic of speech, quick of temper, who greeted the loungers about the hotel, and who sat, with his back to the wall, in the little dining-room, watchful of all others present. And it was Bob Hampton who strolled carelessly out upon the darkened porch an hour later, leaving a roar of laughter behind him, and an enemy as well. Little he cared for that, however, in his present mood, and he stood there, amid the black shadows, looking contemptuously down upon the stream of coatless humanity trooping past on pleasure bent, the blue smoke circling his head, his gray eyes glowing half angrily. Suddenly he leaned forward, clutching the rail in quick surprise.

"Kid," he exclaimed, harshly, "what does this mean? What are you doing alone here?"

She stopped instantly and glanced up, her face flushing in the light streaming forth from the open door of the Occidental.

"I reckon I'm alone here because I want to be," she returned, defiantly. "I ain't no slave. How do you get up there?"

He extended his hand, and drew her up beside him into the shaded corner. "Well," he said, "tell me the truth."

"I've quit, that's all, Bob. I just couldn't stand reform any longer, and so I've come back here to you."

The man drew a deep breath. "Didn't you like Mrs. Herndon?"

"Oh, she's all right enough, so far as that goes. 'T ain't that; only I just didn't like some things she said and did."

"Kid," and Hampton straightened up, his voice growing stern. "I've got to know the straight of this. You say you like Mrs. Herndon well enough, but not some other things. What were they?"

The girl hesitated, drawing back a little from him until the light from the saloon fell directly across her face. "Well," she declared, slowly, "you see it had to be either her or—or you, Bob, and I'd rather it would be you."

"You mean she said you would have to cut me out entirely if you stayed there with her?"

She nodded, her eyes filled with entreaty. "Yes, that was about it. I wasn't ever to have anything more to do with you, not even to speak to you if we met—and after you'd saved my life, too."

"Never mind about that little affair, Kid," and Hampton rested his hand gently on her shoulder. "That was all in the day's work, and hardly counts for much anyhow. Was that all she said?"

"She called you a low-down gambler, a gun-fighter, a—a miserable barroom thug, a—a murderer. She—she said that if I ever dared to speak to you again, Bob Hampton, that I could leave her house. I just couldn't stand for that, so I came away."

Hampton never stirred, his teeth set deep into his cigar, his hands clinched about the railing. "The fool!" he muttered half aloud, then caught his breath quickly. "Now see here, Kid," and he turned her about so that he might look down into her eyes, "I'm mighty glad you like me well enough to put up a kick, but if all this



"Kid, What Does This Mean and What Are You Doing Here Alone?"

is true about me, why shouldn't she say it? Do you believe that sort of a fellow would prove a very good kind to look after a young lady?"

"I ain't a young lady!"

"No; well, you're going to be if I have my way, and I don't believe the sort of a gent described would be very apt to help you much in getting there."

"You ain't all that."

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