

Bob Hampton of Placer

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"Well, perhaps not. Like an amateur artist, madam may have laid the colors on a little thick. But I am no winged angel, Kid, nor exactly a model for you to copy after. I reckon you better stick to the woman and cut me."

She did not answer, yet he read an unchanged purpose in her eyes, and his own decision strengthened. Some instinct led him to do the right thing; he drew forth the locket from beneath the folds of her dress, holding it open to the light. He noticed now a name engraven on the gold case, and bent lower to decipher the delicate lettering.

"Was her name Naida?" he questioned, sharply. "It is an uncommon word."

"Yes."

Their eyes met, and those of both had perceptibly softened.

"Naida," his lips dwelt upon the peculiar name as though he loved the sound. "I want you to listen to me, child. I sincerely wish I might keep you here with me, but I can't. You are more to me than you dream, but it would not be right for me thus deliberately to sacrifice your whole future to my pleasure. I possess nothing to offer you,—no home, no friends, no reputation. Practically I am an outlaw, existing by my wits, disreputable in the eyes of those who are worthy to live in the world. She, who was your mother, would never wish you to remain with me. She would say I did right in giving you up into the care of a good woman. Naida, look on that face in the locket, your mother's face: It is sweet, pure, beautiful, the face of a good, true woman. Living or dead, it must be the prayer of those lips that you become a good woman also. She should lead you, not I, for I am unworthy. For her sake, and in her name, I ask you to go back to Mrs. Herndon."

He could perceive the gathering tears in her eyes, and his hand closed tightly about her own. It was not one soul alone that struggled.

"You will go?"

"O Bob, I wish you wasn't a gambler!"

A moment he remained silent. "But unfortunately I am," he admitted, soberly, "and it is best for you to go back. Won't you?"

Her gaze was fastened upon the open locket, the fair face pictured there smiling up at her as though in pleading also.

"You truly think she would wish it?"

"I know she would."

The girl gave utterance to a quick, startled breath, as if the vision frightened her. "Then I will go," she said, her voice a mere whisper, "I will go."

He led her down the steps, out into the jostling crowd below, as if she had been some fairy princess. Her locket hung dangling, and he slipped it back into its place and drew her slender form yet closer against his own, as they stepped forth into the black, deserted road. Half-way up the gloomy ravine they met a man and woman coming along the narrow path. Hampton drew her aside out of their way, then spoke coldly.

"Mrs. Herndon, were you seeking your lost charge? I have her here."

The two passing figures halted, peering through the darkness.

"I was not seeking her," she returned, icily. "I have no desire to cul-

tivate the particular friends of Mr. Hampton."

"So I have understood, and consequently relinquish here and now all claims upon Miss Gillis. She has informed me of your flattering opinion regarding me, and I have indorsed it as being mainly true to life. Do I state this fairly, Naida?"

"I have come back," she faltered, fingering the chain at her throat, "I have come back."

"Without Bob Hampton?"

The girl glanced uneasily toward him, but he stood motionless in the gloom.

"Yes—I—I suppose I must."

Hampton rested his hand softly upon her shoulder, his fingers trembling, although his voice remained coldly deliberate.

"I trust this is entirely satisfactory, Mrs. Herndon," he said. "I can assure you I know absolutely nothing regarding her purpose of coming to me tonight. I realize quite clearly my own deficiencies, and pledge myself hereafter not to interfere with you in any way. You accept the trust, I believe?"

She gave utterance to a deep sigh of resignation. "It comes to me clearly as a Christian duty," she acknowledged, doubtfully, "and I suppose I must take up my cross; but—"

"But you have doubts," he interrupted. "Well, I have none, for I have greater faith in the girl, and—perhaps in God. Good-night, Naida."

He bowed above the hand the girl gave him in the darkness, and ever after she believed he bent lower, and pressed his lips upon it. The next moment the black night had closed him out, and she stood there, half frightened at she knew not what, on the threshold of her new life.

CHAPTER IX.

At the Occidental.

Hampton slowly picked his way back through the darkness down the silent road, his only guide those dim yellow lights flickering in the distance.

It was Saturday night, and the mining town was already alive. The one long, irregular street was jammed with constantly moving figures, the numerous saloons ablaze, the pianos sounding noisily, the shuffling of feet in the crowded dance-halls incessant.

Riot reigned unchecked, while the quiet, sleepy town of the afternoon blossomed under the flickering lights into a saturnalia of unlicensed pleasure, wherein the wages of sin were death.

Hampton pushed his way through the noisy throng with eyes ever watchful for the faces. His every motion was that of a man who had fully decided upon his course. He swung up the broad wooden steps of the Occidental and entered the barroom, which was crowded by jostling figures, the ever-moving mass as yet good-natured, for the night was young. At the lower end of the long, sloppy bar he stopped for a moment to nod to the fellow behind.

"Anything going on to-night worth while, Jim?" he questioned, quietly.

"Rather stiff game, they tell me, just started in the back room," was the genial reply. "Two eastern suckers, with Red Slavin sitting in."

The gambler passed on, pushing rather unceremoniously through the throng of perspiring humanity. The large front room upstairs was ablaze with lights, every game in full operation and surrounded by crowds of devotees. He walked directly toward the

rear of the room. A thick, dingy red curtain hung there; he held back its heavy folds and stepped within the smaller apartment beyond.

Three men sat at the single table, cards in hand, and Hampton involuntarily whistled softly behind his teeth at the first glimpse of the money openly displayed before them. This was apparently not so bad for a starter, and his waning interest revived. A red-bearded giant, sitting so as to face the doorway, glanced up quickly at his entrance, his coarse mouth instantly taking on the semblance of a smile.

"Ah, Bob," he exclaimed, with an evident effort at cordiality; "been wondering if you wouldn't show up before the night was over. You're the very fellow to make this a four-handed affair, provided you carry sufficient stuff."

Hampton came easily forward into the full glow of the swinging oil lamp, his manner coolly deliberate, his face expressionless. "I feel no desire to intrude," he explained, quietly, watching the uplifted faces. "I believe I have never before met these gentlemen."

Slavin laughed, his great white fingers drumming the table.

"It is an acquaintance easily made," he said, "provided one can afford to trot in their class, for it is money that talks at this table to-night. Mr. Hampton, permit me to present Judge Hawes, of Denver, and Mr. Edgar Willis, president of the T. P. & R. I have no idea what they are doing in this hell-hole of a town, but they are dead-game sports, and I have been trying my best to amuse them while they're here."

Hampton bowed, instantly recognizing the names.

"Glad to assist," he murmured, sinking into a vacant chair. "What limit?"

"We have had no occasion to discuss that matter as yet," volunteered Hawes, sneeringly. "However, if you have scruples we might settle upon something within reason."

Hampton ran the dealt pack carelessly through his fingers, his lips smiling pleasantly. "Oh, never mind, if it chances to go above my pile I'll drop out. Meanwhile, I hardly believe there is any cause for you to be modest on my account."

The play opened quietly and with some restraint, the faces of the men remaining impassive, their watchful glances evidencing nothing either of success or failure. Hampton played with extreme caution for some time, his eyes studying keenly the others about the table, seeking some deeper understanding of the nature of his opponents, their strong and weak points, and whether or not there existed any prior arrangement between them. He was there for a purpose, a clearly defined purpose, and he felt no inclination to accept unnecessary chances with the fickle Goddess of Fortune. To one trained in the calm observation of small things, and long accustomed to weigh his adversaries with care, it was not extremely difficult to class the two strangers, and Hampton smiled softly on observing the size of the rolls rather ostentatiously exhibited by them. His satisfaction was in noways lessened by the sound of their voices, when incautiously raised in anger over some unfortunate play. He immediately recognized them as the identical individuals who had loudly and vainly protested over his occupancy of the best rooms at the hotel. He chuckled grimly.

But what bothered him particularly

was Slavin. The cool, gray eyes, glancing with such apparent negligence across the cards in his hands, noted every slight movement of the red-bearded gambler, in expectation of detecting some sign of trickery, or some evidence that he had been selected by this precious trio for the purpose of easy plucking. Knavery was Slavin's style, but apparently he was now playing a straight game, no doubt realizing clearly, behind his impassive mask of a face, the utter futility of seeking to outwit one of Hampton's enviable reputation.

It was, unquestionably, a fairly fought four-handed battle, and at last, thoroughly convinced of this, Hampton settled quietly down, prepared to play out his game. The stakes grew steadily larger. Several times drinks were served, but Hampton contented himself with a gulp of water, always gripping an unlighted cigar between his teeth. He was playing now with apparent recklessness, never hesitating over a card, his eye as watchful as that of a hawk, his betting quick, confident, audacious. The contagion of his spirit seemed to affect the others, to force them into desperate wagers. The perspiration was beading Slavin's forehead, and now and then an oath burst unrestrained from his hairy lips. Hawes and Willis sat white-faced, bent forward anxiously over the table, their fingers shaking as they handled the fateful cards, but Hampton played without perceptible tremor, his utterances few and monosyllabic, his calm face betraying not the faintest emotion.

And he was steadily winning. Occasionally some other hand drew in the growing stock of gold and bank notes, but not often enough to offset those continued gains that began to heap up in such an alluring pile upon his portion of the table. The lookers-on who had come in began to observe this, and gathered more closely about his chair, fascinated by the luck with which the cards came floating into his hands, the cool judgment of his critical plays, the reckless abandon with which he forced success. Suddenly he forced the fight to a finish. The opportunity came in a jack-pot which Hawes had opened. The betting began with a cool thousand. Then Hampton's turn came. Without drawing, his cards yet lying downward before him on the board, his calm features as immovable as the Sphinx, he quietly pushed his whole accumulated pile to the center, named the sum, and leaned back in his chair, his eyes cold, impassive. Hawes threw down his hand, wiping his streaming face with his handkerchief; Willis counted his remaining roll, hesitated, looked again at the faces of his cards, flung aside two, drawing to fill, and called loudly for a show-down, his eyes protruding. Slavin, cursing fiercely under his red beard, having drawn one card, his perplexed face instantly brightening as he glanced at it, went back into his hip pocket for every cent he had, and added his profane demand for a chance at the money.

(To be continued)

Massed Experience.

It may be worth while recording that the list of prominent Chicago citizens who are reported as about to put into effect a new method of raising children comprises five families, with a total of two children.—New York Post.