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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 XII. Under Orders.

It was no pleasant assignment to duty which greeted First Lieut. Donald Brant, commanding Troop N, Seventh cavalry, when that regiment came once more within the environs of civilization, from its summer exercises in the field. Bethune had developed into a somewhat important post, socially as well as from a strictly military standpoint, and numerous, indeed, were the attractions offered there to any young officer whose duty



“You Must Be an Odd Sort of a Girl,”
He Commented, Soberly.

called him to serve the colors on those bleak Dakota prairies. Brant frowned at the innocent words, reading them over again with gloomy eyes and an exclamation of unmitigated disgust, yet there was no escaping their plain meaning. Trouble was undoubtedly brewing among the Sioux, trouble in which the Cheyennes, and probably others also, were becoming involved. Every soldier patrolling that long northern border recognized the approach of some dire development, some early coup of savagery.

Brant was not blind to all this, nor to the necessity of having in readiness selected bodies of seasoned troops, yet it was not in soldier nature to refrain from grumbling when the earliest detail chanced to fall to him. But orders were orders in that country, and although he crushed the innocent paper passionately beneath his heel, five hours later he was in saddle, riding steadily westward, his depleted troop of horsemen clattering at his heels.

Up the valley of the Bear Water, slightly above Glencaid,—far enough beyond the saloon radius to protect his men from possible corruption, yet within easy reach of the military telegraph,—they made camp in the early morning upon a wooded terrace overlooking the stage road, and settled quietly down as one of those numerous posts with which the army chiefs sought to hem in the dissatisfied redmen, and learn early the extent of their hostile plans.

Brant was now in a humor considerably happier than when he first rode forth from Bethune. He watched the men of his troop while with quip and song they made comfortable camp, and then strolled slowly up the valley, his own affairs soon completely forgotten in the beauty of near-by hills beneath the golden glory of the morning sun. Once he paused and looked back upon ugly Glencaid, dingy and forlorn even at that distance; then he crossed the narrow stream by means of a convenient log, and clambered up the somewhat steep bank. A heavy fringe of low bushes clung close along the edge of the summit, but a plainly defined path led among their intricacies. He pressed his way through, coming into a glade where sunshine flickered through the overarching branches of great trees, and the grass was green and short, like that of a well-kept lawn.

As Brant emerged from the underbrush he suddenly beheld a fair vision of young womanhood resting on the grassy bank just before him. She was partially reclining, as if startled by his unannounced approach, her face turned toward him, one hand grasping an open book, the other shading her eyes from the glare of the sun. Something in the graceful pose, the piquant, uplifted face, the dark gloss of heavy hair, and the unfrightened gaze held him speechless until the picture had been impressed forever upon his memory. He beheld a girl on the verge of womanhood, fair of skin, the red glow of health flushing her cheeks, the lips parted in surprise, the sleeve fallen back from one white, rounded arm, the eyes honest, sincere, mysterious. She recognized him with a glance, and her lips closed as she remembered how and when they had met before. But there was no answering recollection within his eyes, only admiration—nothing clung about this Naida to remind him of a neglected waif of the garrison. She read all this in his face, and the lines about her mouth changed quickly into a slightly quizzical smile, her eyes brightening.

“You should at least have knocked, sir,” she ventured, sitting up on the

grassy bank, the better to confront him, “before intruding thus uninvited.”

He lifted his somewhat dingy scouting hat and bowed humbly.

“I perceived no door giving warning that I approached such presence, and the first shock of surprise was perhaps as great to me as to you. Yet, now that I have blundered thus far, I beseech that I be permitted to venture upon yet another step.”

She sat looking at him, a trim, soldierly figure, his face young and pleasant to gaze upon, and her dark eyes sensibly softened.

“What step?”

“To tarry for a moment beside the divinity of this wilderness.”

She laughed with open frankness, her white teeth sparkling behind the red, parted lips.

“Perhaps you may, if you will first consent to be sensible,” she said, with returning gravity; “and I reserve the right to turn you away whenever you begin to talk or act foolish. If you accept these conditions, you may sit down.”

He seated himself upon the soft grass ledge, retaining the hat in his hands. “You must be an odd sort of a girl,” he commented, soberly, “not to welcome an honest expression of admiration.”

“Oh, was that it? Then I duly bow my acknowledgment. I took your words for one of those silly compliments by which men believe they honor women. I am not a baby, nor am I seeking amusement.”

He glanced curiously at her book. “And yet you condescend to read love stories,” he said, smiling. “I expected to discover a treatise on philosophy.”

“I read whatever I chance to get my hands on, here in Glencaid,” she retorted, “just as I converse with whoever comes along. I am hopeful of some day discovering a rare gem hidden in the midst of the trash. I am yet young.”

“You are indeed young,” he said, quietly, “and with some of life’s lessons still to learn. One is that frankness is not necessarily flippancy, nor honesty harshness. However, if you will offer me a topic worthy the occasion, in either philosophy, science, or literature, I will endeavor to feed your mind.”

She uplifted her innocent eyes demurely to his face. “You are so kind. I am deeply interested just now in the Japanese conception of the transmigration of souls.”

“How extremely fortunate! It chances to be my favorite theme, but my mental processes are peculiar, and you must permit me to work up toward it somewhat gradually. For instance, as a question leading that way, how, in the incarnation of this world, do you manage to exist in such a hole of a place?—that is, provided you really reside here.”

“Why, I consider this a most delightful nook.”

“My reference was to Glencaid.”

“Oh! Why, I live from within, not without. Mind and heart, not environment, make life, and my time is occupied most congenially. I am being faithfully nurtured on the Presbyterian catechism, and also trained in the graces of earthly society. These alternate, thus preparing me for whatever may happen in this world or the next.”

His face pictured bewilderment, but also a determination to persevere. “An interesting combination, I admit. But

from your appearance this cannot always have been your home?”

“Oh, thank you. I believe not always; but I wonder at your being able to discern my superiority to these surroundings. And do you know your questioning is becoming quite personal? Does that yield me an equal privilege?”

He bowed, perhaps relieved at thus permitting her to assume the initiative, and rested lazily back upon the grass, his eyes intently studying her face.

“I suppose from your clothes you must be a soldier. What is that figure 7 on your hat for?”

“The number of my regiment, the Seventh cavalry.”

Her glance was a bit disdainful as she coolly surveyed him from head to foot. “I should imagine that a strong, capable appearing fellow like you might do much better than that. There is so much work in the world worth doing, and so much better pay.”

“What do you mean? Isn’t a soldier’s life a worthy one?”

“Oh, yes, of course, in a way. We have to have soldiers, I suppose; but if I were a man I’d hate to waste all my life tramping around at \$16 a month.”

He smothered what sounded like a rough ejaculation, gazing into her demure eyes as if he strongly suspected a joke hid in their depths. “Do—do you mistake me for an enlisted man?”

“Oh, I didn’t know; you said you were a soldier, and that’s what I always heard they got. I am so glad if they give you more. I was only going to say that I believed I could get you a good place in McCarthy’s store if you wanted it. He pays \$65 and his clerk has just left.”

Brant stared at her with open mouth, totally unable for the moment to decide whether or not that innocent, sympathetic face masked mischief. Before he succeeded in regaining confidence and speech, she had risen to her feet, holding back her skirt with one hand.

“Really, I must go,” she announced calmly, drawing back toward the slight opening between the bushes. “No doubt you have done fully as well as you could, considering your position in life; but this has proved another disappointment. You have fallen, far, very far, below my ideal. Good-by.”

He sprang instantly erect, his cheeks flushed. “Please don’t go without a further word. We seem predestined to misunderstand. I am even willing to confess myself a fool in the hope of some time being able to convince you otherwise. You have not even told me that you live here; nor do I know your name.”

She shook her head positively, repressed merriment darkening her eyes and wrinkling the corners of her mouth. “It would be highly improper to introduce myself to a stranger—we Presbyterians never do that.”

“But do you feel no curiosity as to who I may be?”

“Why, not in the least; the thought is ridiculous. How very conceited you must be to imagine such a thing!”

He was not a man easily daunted, nor did he recall any previous embarrassment in the presence of a young woman. But now he confronted something utterly unique; those quiet eyes seemed to look straight through him. His voice faltered sadly, yet succeeded in asking: “Are we, then,

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