

Bob Hampton of Placer

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The last two waltzes ended, they walked slowly through the scattering throng, he striving vainly to arouse her to the former independence and intimacy of speech. Suddenly they came face to face with Mrs. Herndon, and Brant felt the girl's arm twitch.

"I have been looking everywhere for you, Naida," Mrs. Herndon said, a slight complaint in her voice. "We were going home."

Naida's cheeks reddened painfully.

"I am so sorry if I have kept you waiting," her words spoken with a rush, "but—but, Lieut. Brant was intending to accompany me. We were just starting for the cloakroom."

"Oh, indeed!" Mrs. Herndon's expression was noncommittal, while her eyes surveyed the lieutenant.

"With your permission, of course," he said.

"I hardly think I have any need to interfere."

They separated, the younger people walking slowly, silently toward the door. He held her arm, assisting her to descend the stairway, his lips murmuring a few commonplaces, to which she scarcely returned even monosyllabic replies, although she frequently flashed shy glances at his grave face. Both realized that some explanation was forthcoming, yet neither was quite prepared to force the issue.

"I have no wraps at the hotel," she said, as he attempted to turn that way. "That was a lie also; let us walk directly down the road."

He indulged in no comment, his eyes perceiving a pathetic pleading in her upturned face. Suddenly there came to him a belief that the girl was crying; he could feel the slight tremor of her form against his own. He glanced furtively at her, only to catch the glitter of a falling tear. To her evident distress, his heart made instant and sympathetic response. With all respect influencing the action, his hand closed warmly over the smaller one on his sleeve.

"Little girl," he said, forgetting the shortness of their acquaintance in the deep feeling of the moment, "tell me what the trouble is."

"I suppose you think me an awful creature for saying that," she blurted out, without looking up. "It wasn't ladylike or nice, but—but I simply couldn't help it, Lieut. Brant."

"You mean your sudden determination to carry me home with you?" he asked, relieved to think this might prove the entire difficulty. "Don't let that worry you. Why, I am simply rejoiced at being permitted to go. Do you know, I wanted to request the privilege all the time we were dancing together. But you acted so differently from when we were beneath the vines that I actually lost my nerve."

She looked up and he caught a fleeting glimpse into her unveiled eyes.

"I did not wish you to ask me."

"What?" He stopped suddenly. "Why, then, did you make such an announcement to Mrs. Herndon?"

"Oh, that was different," she explained, uneasily. "I had to do that; I had to trust you to help me out, but—but I really wanted to go home alone."

He swept his unbelieving eyes around over the deserted night scene, not knowing what answer to return to so strange an avowal. "Was that what caused you to appear so distant to me in the hall, so vastly different from

what you had been before?"

She nodded, but with her gaze still upon the ground.

"Miss Naida," he said, "it would be cowardly for me to attempt to dodge this issue between us. Is it because you do not like me?"

She looked up quickly, the moonlight revealing her flushed face.

"Oh, no, no! you must never think that. I told you I was a girl of moods; under those vines I had one mood, in the hall another. Cannot you understand?"

"Very little," he admitted, "for I am more inclined to believe you are the possessor of a strong will than that you are swayed by moods. Listen. If I thought that a mere senseless mood had caused your peculiar treatment of

me to-night, I should feel justified in yielding to a mood also. But I will not lower you to that extent in my estimation; I prefer to believe that you are the true-hearted, frankly spoken girl of the vine shadow. It is this abiding conviction as to your true nature which holds me loyal to a test. Miss Naida, is it now your desire that I leave you?"

He stepped aside, relinquishing her arm, his hat in hand, but she did not move from where he left her.

"It—it hurts me," she faltered, "for I truly desire you to think in that way of me, and I—I don't know what is best to do. If I tell you why I wished to come alone, you might misunderstand; and if I refuse, then you will suspect wrong, and go away despising me."

"I sincerely wish you might repose sufficient confidence in me as a gentleman to believe I never betray a trust, never pry into a lady's secret."

"Oh, I do, Lieut. Brant. It is not doubt of you at all; but I am not sure, even within my own heart, that I am doing just what is right. Besides, it will be so difficult to make you, almost a stranger, comprehend the peculiar conditions which influence my action. Even now you suspect that I am deceitful—a masked sham like those



"Do You Really Think I am So Very Bad, Because—Because I Like Bob Hampton?"

others we discussed to-night; but I have never played a part before, never skulked in the dark. To-night I simply had to do it."

"Then attempt no explanation," he said, gently, "and believe me, I shall continue to trust you. To-night, whatever you wish may be, I will abide by it. Shall I go, or stay? In either case you have nothing to fear."

She drew a deep breath, these open words of faith touching her more strongly than would any selfish fault-finding.

"Trust begets trust," she replied, with new firmness, and now gazing frankly into his face. "You can walk with me a portion of the way if you wish, but I am going to tell you the truth,—I have an appointment with a man."

"I naturally regret to learn this," he said, with assumed calmness. "But the way is so lonely I prefer walking with you until you have some other protector."

She accepted his proffered arm, feeling the constraint in his tone, the formality in his manner, most keenly. An older woman might have resented it, but it only served to sadden and embarrass her. He began speaking of the quiet beauty of the night, but she had no thought of what he was saying.

"Lieut. Brant," she said, at last, "you do not ask me who the man is."

"Certainly not, Miss Naida; it is none of my business."

"I think, perhaps, it might be; the knowledge might help you to understand. It is Bob Hampton."

He stared at her. "The gambler? No wonder, then, your meeting is clandestine."

She replied indignantly, her lips trembling. "He is not a gambler; he is a miner, over in the Black Range. He has not touched a card in two years."

"Oh, reformed has he? And are you the instrument that has worked such a miracle?"

Her eyes fell. "I don't know, but I hope so." Then she glanced up again, wondering at his continued silence. "Don't you understand yet?"

"Only that you are secretly meeting a man of the worst reputation, one known the length and breadth of this border as a gambler and fighter."

"Yes; but—but don't you know who I am?"

He smiled grimly, wondering what possible difference that could make. "Certainly; you are Miss Naida Herndon."

"I? You have not known? Lieut. Brant, I am Naida Gillis."

He stopped still, again facing her. "Naida Gillis? Do you mean old Gillis' girl? Is it possible you are the same we rescued on the prairie two years ago?"

She bowed her head. "Yes; do you understand now why I trust this Bob Hampton?"

"I perhaps might comprehend why you should feel grateful to him, but not why you should thus consent to meet with him clandestinely."

He could not see the deep flush upon her cheeks, but he was not deaf to the piteous falter in her voice.

"Because he has been good and true to me," she explained, frankly, "better than anybody else in all the world. I don't care what you say, you and those others who do not know him, but I believe in him; I think he is a man. They won't let me see him, the Herndons, nor permit him to come to the house. He has not been in Glencaid for two years, until yesterday. The Indian rising has driven all the miners out from the Black Range, and he came down here for no other purpose than to get a glimpse of me, and

learn how I was getting on. I—I saw him over at the hotel just for a moment—Mrs. Guffy handed me a note—and I—I had only just left him when I encountered you at the door. I wanted

to see him again, to talk with him longer, but I couldn't manage to get away from you, and I didn't know what to do. There, I've told it all; do you really think I am so very bad, because—because I like Bob Hampton?"

He stood a moment completely nonplussed, yet compelled to answer.

"I certainly have no right to question your motives," he said, at last, "and I believe your purposes to be above reproach. I wish I might give the same credit to this man Hampton. But, Miss Naida, the world does not often consent to judge us by our own estimation of right and wrong; it prefers to place its own interpretation on acts, and thus often condemns the innocent. Others might not see this as I do, nor have such unquestioning faith in you."

"I know," she admitted, stubbornly, "but I wanted to see him; I have been so lonely for him, and this was the only possible way."

Brant felt a wave of uncontrollable sympathy sweep across him, even while he was beginning to hate this man, who, he felt, had stolen a passage into the innocent heart of a girl not half his age, one knowing little of the ways of the world.

"May I walk beside you until you meet him?" he asked.

"You will not quarrel?"

"No; at least not through any fault of mine."

A few steps in the moonlight and she again took his arm, although they scarcely spoke. At the bridge she withdrew her hand and uttered a peculiar call, and Hampton stepped forth from the concealing bushes, his head bare, his hat in his hand.

"I scarcely thought it could be you," he said, seemingly not altogether satisfied, "as you were accompanied by another."

The younger man took a single step forward, his uniform showing in the moonlight. "Miss Gillis will inform you later why I am here," he said, striving to speak civilly. "You and I, however, have met before—I am Lieut. Brant, of the Seventh cavalry."

Hampton bowed, his manner somewhat stiff and formal, his face impenetrable.

"I should have left Miss Gillis previous to her meeting with you," Brant continued, "but I desired to request the privilege of calling upon you tomorrow for a brief interview."

"With pleasure."

"Shall it be at ten?"

"The hour is perfectly satisfactory. You will find me at the hotel."

"You place me under obligations," said Brant, and turned toward the wondering girl. "I will now say good-night, Miss Gillis, and I promise to remember only the pleasant events of this evening."

Their hands met for an instant of warm pressure, and then the two left behind stood motionless and watched him striding along the moonlit road.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Verge of a Quarrel.

Brant's mind was a chaos of conflicting emotions, but a single abiding conviction never once left him—he retained implicit faith in her, and he purposed to fight this matter out with Hampton. Even in that crucial hour, had any one ventured to suggest that he was in love with Naida, he would merely have laughed, serenely confident that nothing more than gentlemanly interest swayed his conduct.

(To be continued)