

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 XXIV.—Continued

The explanation was never uttered. Out from the surrounding gloom of underbrush a hatless, disheveled individual on foot suddenly dashed into the center of that hesitating ring of horsemen. With skillful twist of his foot he sent a dismounted road agent spinning over backward and managed to wrench a revolver from his hand. There was a blaze of red flame, a cloud of smoke, six sharp reports, and a wild stampede of frantic horsemen.

Then Rev. Howard Wynkoop flung the empty gun disdainfully down into the dirt, stepped directly across the motionless outstretched body, and knelt humbly beside a slender, white-robed figure lying close against the fringe of bushes. Tenderly he lifted the fair head to his throbbing bosom and gazed directly down into the white, unconscious face. Even as he looked her eyes unclosed, her body trembling within his arms.

"Have no fear," he implored, reading terror in the expression of her face. "Miss Spencer—Phoebe—it is only I, Mr. Wynkoop."

"Oh, Howard—Mr. Wynkoop—it is all so strange, so bewildering; my nerves are so shattered! But it has taught me a great, great lesson. How could I have ever been so blind? I thought Mr. Moffat and Mr. McNeil were such heroes, and yet now in this hour of desperate peril it was you who flew gallantly to my rescue! It is you who are the true western knight!"

And Mr. Wynkoop gazed down into those grateful eyes and modestly confessed it true.

CHAPTER XXV. The Parting Hour.

To Lieut. Brant these proved days of bitterness. He had called twice upon Hampton, both times finding the wounded man propped up in bed, very affable, properly grateful for services rendered, yet avoiding all reference to the one disturbing element between them.

Once he had accidentally met Naida, but their brief conversation left him more deeply mystified than ever, and later she seemed to avoid him altogether. One day he deemed her but an idle coquette; the next, a warm-hearted woman, doing her duty bravely. Yet through it all her power over him never slackened.

The end of this nervous strain came in the form of an urgent dispatch recalling N troop to Fort Abraham Lincoln by forced marches. The commander felt no doubt as to the full meaning of this message, and the soldier in him made prompt and joyful

response. Brant had learned of the consolidation of the hostile savages, incited by Sitting Bull, into the fastness of the Big Horn range; he was aware that Gen. Cook was already advancing northward from the Nebraska line. Now he realized that he was to be a part of this chosen fighting force and his heart responded to the summons as to a bugle call in battle.

Instantly the little camp was astir, the men feeling the enthusiasm of their officers. With preparations well in hand, Brant's thoughts veered once again toward Naida. He rode down to the Herndon house with grave face and sober thought. He recalled long the plainly furnished room into which Mrs. Herndon ushered him to await the girl's appearance—the formal look of the old-fashioned hair-cloth furniture, the prim striped paper on the walls, the green shades at the windows, the clean rag carpet on the floor. The very stiffness chilled him, left him ill at ease. Then he heard the rustle of Naida's skirt and turned to meet her. She was pale from her weeks of nursing, and agitated for fear of what this unexpected call might portend. Yet to his thought she appeared calm, her manner restrained. Nor could anything be kinder than her first greeting, the frankly extended hand, the words expressive of welcome.

"Mr. Wynkoop informed me a few minutes ago that you had at last received your orders for the north," she said, her lips slightly trembling. "I wondered if you would leave without a word of farewell."

He bowed low. "I do not understand how you could doubt, for I have shown my deep interest in you even from the first. If I have lately seemed to avoid you, it has only been because I believed you wished it so."

There was an embarrassing pause, as though neither knew how to get through the interview.

"No doubt you are rejoiced to be sent on active service again," she said, at last.

"Yes, both as a soldier and as a man, Miss Naida. I am glad to get into the field again with my regiment, to do my duty under the flag, and I am equally rejoiced to have something occur which will tend to divert my thoughts. I had not intended to say anything of this kind, but now that I am with you I simply cannot restrain the words. This past month has been, I believe, the hardest I have ever been compelled to live through. You simply mystify me so that I alternately hope and despair. Your methods are cruel."

"Mine?" and she gazed at him with

parted lips. "Lieut. Brant, what can you mean? What is it I have done?"

"It may have been only play to you and so easily forgotten," he went on, bitterly. "But that is a dangerous game, very certain to hurt some one. Miss Naida, your face, your eyes, even your lips almost continually tell me one thing; your words another. I know not which to trust. I never meet you except to go away baffled and bewildered."

"You wish to know the truth?"

"Ay, and for all time! Are you false or true? Coquette or woman? Do you simply play with hearts for idle amusement or is there some true purpose ruling your actions?"

She looked directly at him, her hands clasped, her breath almost sobbing between the parted lips. At first she could not speak. "Oh, you hurt me so," she faltered at last. "I did not suppose you could ever think that. I—I did not mean it! Oh, truly I did not mean it! You forget how young I am; how very little I know of the world and its ways. Perhaps I have not even realized how deeply in earnest you were, have deceived myself into believing you were merely amusing yourself with me. Why, indeed, should I think otherwise?"

"I love you," he said, with simple honesty. "I seek you for my wife."

She started at these frankly spoken words, her hands partially concealing her face, her form trembling. "Oh, I wish you hadn't said that! It is not because I doubt you any longer; not that I fail to appreciate all you offer me. But it is so hard to appear ungrateful, to give nothing in return for so vast a gift."

"Then it is true that you do not love me?"

The blood flamed suddenly up into her face, but there was no lowering of the eyes, no shrinking back. She was too honest to play the coward before him.

"I shall not attempt to deceive you," she said, with a slow impressiveness instantly carrying conviction. "This has already progressed so far that I now owe you complete frankness. Donald Brant, now and always, living or dead, married or single, wherever life may take us, I shall love you."

Their eyes were meeting, but she held up her hand to restrain him from the one step forward.

"No, no; I have confessed the truth; I have opened freely to you the great secret of my heart. With it you must be content to leave me. There is nothing more that I can give you, absolutely nothing. I can never be your wife; I hope, for your sake and mine, that we never meet again."

Brant stood like a statue, his face grown white. He did not in the least doubt her full meaning of renunciation.

"You will, at least, tell me why?" It was all that would come to his dry lips.

She sank back upon the sofa as though the strength had suddenly deserted her body, her eyes shaded by an uplifted hand.

"I cannot tell you. I have no words, no courage. You will learn some day from others, and be thankful that I loved you well enough to resist temptation. But the reason cannot come to you from my lips."

He leaned forward, half kneeling at her feet, and she permitted him to clasp her hands within both his own. "Tell me, at least, this—is it some one else? Is it Hampton?"

She smiled at him through a mist of tears, a smile the sad sweetness of which he would never forget. "In the sense you mean, no. No living man stands between us, not even Bob Hampton."

"Does he know why this cannot be?"

"He does know, but I doubt if he will ever reveal his knowledge; certainly not to you. He has not told me all, even in the hour when he thought himself dying. I am convinced of that. It is not because he dislikes you, Lieut. Brant, but because he knew his partial revelation of the truth was a duty he owed us both."

"You leave me so completely in the dark," he said; "is there no possibility that this mysterious obstacle can ever be removed?"

"None. It is beyond earthly power—there lies between us the shadow of a dead man."

He stared at her as if doubting her sanity.

"A dead man! Not Gillis?"

"No, it is not Gillis. I have told you this much so that you might comprehend how impossible it is for us to change our fate. It is irrevocably fixed. Please do not question me any more. I cannot bear it!"

Brant rose to his feet and stood looking down upon her bowed head, her slender figure shaken by sobs.

"Naida, as you have asked it, I will go; but I go better, stronger, because I have heard your lips say you love me. I am going now, my sweetheart, but if I live I shall come again. I know nothing of what you mean about a dead man being between us, but I shall know when I come back, for, dead or alive, no man shall remain between me and the girl I love."

"This—this is different," she sobbed, "different; it is beyond your power."

"I shall never believe so until I have faced it for myself, nor will I even say good-by, for, under God, I am coming back to you."

He turned slowly and walked away. As his hand touched the latch of the door he paused and looked longingly back.

"Naida."

She glanced up at him.

"You kissed me once; will you again?"

She rose silently and crossed over to him, her hands held out, her eyes uplifted to his own. Neither spoke as he drew her gently to him and their lips met.

"Say it once more, sweetheart?"

"Donald, I love you."

A moment they stood thus face to face, reading the great lesson of eternity within the depths of each other's eyes. Then slowly, gently, she released herself from the clasp of his strong arms.

"You believe in me now? You do not go away blaming me?" she questioned, with quivering lips.

"There is no blame, for you are doing what you think right. But I am coming back, Naida, little woman; coming back to love and you."

An hour later N troop trotted across the rude bridge and circled the bluff on its way toward the wide plains.

CHAPTER XXVI. Mr. Hampton Resolves.

Mr. Bob Hampton stood in the bright sunshine on the steps of the hotel, his appreciative gaze wandering up the long, dusty, unoccupied street, and

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