

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 XXVII.—Continued

"Sure; looks like the hair of a bear. He said it was powder under the skin."

A new look of reviving determination swept into Hampton's gloomy eyes—beyond doubt this must be his man.

"How many horses did he have?"
"Two."

"Did you overhear him say anything definite about his plans for the trip?"

"What, him? He never talks, that fellow. He can't do nothing but sputter if he tries. But I wrote out his orders, and they give him to the 25th to make the Big Hoyn. You wasn't planning to strike out after him, was you?"

"I might risk it if I only thought I could overtake him within two days; my business is of some importance."

"Well, stranger, I should reckon you might do that with a dog-gone good outfit. Murphy's sure to take things pretty easy to-day, and he's almost certain to follow the old mining trail as far as the ford over the Belle Fourche, and that's plain enough to travel. Beyond that point the devil only knows where he will go, for then is when his hard ridin' begins."

The moment the operator mentioned that odd scar on Murphy's hand, every vestige of hesitation vanished. Beyond any possibility of doubt he was on the right scent this time. Murphy was riding north upon a mission as desperate as ever man was called upon to perform. The chance of his coming forth alive from that Indian-haunted land was, as the operator truthfully said, barely one out of a hundred. To the end, to the death if need were, he would follow!

The memory of his old plain craft would not permit any neglect of the few necessities for the trip. He bought without haggling over prices, but insisted on the best. So it was four in the afternoon when he finally struck into the trail leading northward. He rode a mettlesome, half-broken bronco, a wicked-eyed brute, which required to be conquered twice within the first hour of travel; a second and more quiet animal trailed behind at the end of a lariat, bearing the necessary equipment.

He had, by persistent questioning, acquired considerable information, during that busy hour spent in Cheyenne, regarding the untracked regions lying before him, as well as the character and disposition of the man he pursued. Both by instinct and training he was able to comprehend those brief hints that must prove of vast benefit in the pathless wilderness.

The night was already dark, but stars were gleaming brilliantly over-

head, and the trail remained easily traceable. It became terribly lonely on that wilderness stretching away for unknown leagues in every direction, yet Hampton scarcely noted this, so watchful was he lest he miss the trail. To his judgment, Murphy would not be likely to ride during the night until after he had crossed the Fourche. There was no reason to suspect that there were any hostile Indians south of that stream, and probably therefore the old scout would endeavor to conserve his own strength and that of his horses, for the more perilous travel beyond.

About midnight, the trail becoming obscure, the rider made camp, confident he must have already gained heavily on the man he pursued. He lariatd his horses and flung himself down on some soft turf, almost immediately dropped asleep. He was up again before daylight, and, after a hasty meal, pressed on. The nature of the country had changed considerably, becoming more broken, the view circumscribed by towering cliffs and deep ravines.

Late in the afternoon he reined up his horse and gazed forward into a broad valley, bounded with precipitous bluffs. The trail led directly down toward where a considerable stream of water shone silvery in the sun, half concealed behind a fringe of willows. And yonder, close in against those distant willows, some black dots were moving. Hampton glued his anxious eyes to the glass. The leveled tubes clearly revealed a man on horseback, leading another horse. The animals were walking. There could be little doubt that this was Silent Murphy.

Hampton lariatd his tired horses behind the bluff and returned to the summit, lying flat upon the ground, with the field-glass at his eyes. The distant figures passed slowly forward into the midst of the willows, and for half an hour the patient watcher scanned the surface of the stream beyond, but there was no sign of attempted passage. The sun sank lower and finally disappeared behind those desolate ridges to the westward. Hampton's knowledge of plainscraft rendered Murphy's actions sufficiently clear. This was the Fourche; beyond those waters lay the terrible peril of Indian raiders. Further advance must be made by swift, secret night riding, and never-ceasing vigilance. This was what Murphy had been saving himself and his horses for. Beyond conjecture, he was resting now within the shadows of those willows, studying the opposite shore and making ready for the dash northward. Hampton be-

lieved he would linger thus for some time after dark, to see if Indian fires would afford any guidance. Confident of this, he passed back to his horses, rubbed them down with grass, and then ate his lonely supper, not venturing to light a fire, certain that Murphy's eyes were scanning every inch of skyline.

Darkness came rapidly, while Hampton sat planning again the details of his night's work. Then, with the two animals trailing cautiously behind, he felt his slow way on foot down the steep bluff, into the denser blackness of the valley.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The Haunting of a Crime.

Murphy rested on his back in the midst of a thicket of willows, wide awake, yet not quite ready to ford the

Fourche and plunge into the dense shadows shrouding the northern shore. Crouched behind a log, he had so far yielded unto temptation as to light his pipe.

Murphy had been amid just such unpleasant environments many times before, and the experience had grown somewhat prosaic. Even Indian-scouting degenerates into a commonplace at last. So Murphy puffed contentedly at his old pipe.

But suddenly there was the faint crackle of a branch to his left, and one hand instantly closed over his pipe bowl, the other grasping the heavy revolver at his hip. There came a plain, undisguised rustling in the grass,—some prowling coyote, probably; then his tense muscles immediately relaxed, and he cursed himself for being so startled, yet he continued to grasp the "45" in his right hand, his eyes alert.

"Murphy!"

That single word, hurled thus unex-



"Hampton Glued His Anxious Eyes to the Glass."

pectedly out of the black night, startled him more than would a volley of rifles. He sprang half erect, then as swiftly crouched behind a willow, utterly unable to articulate. For the instant his very blood ran cold; he appeared to shrivel up.

"Oh, come, Murphy; speak up, man; I know you're in here."

That terror of the unknown instantly vanished. This was the familiar language of the world, and, however the fellow came to be there, it was assuredly a man who spoke.

"Who—the hell—are ye?" he blurted out.

The visitor laughed, the bushes

rustling as he pushed toward the sound of the voice. "It's all right, old boy. Gave ye quite a scare, I reckon."

Murphy could now dimly perceive the other advancing through the intervening willows, and his Colt shot up to the level. "Stop!—ye take another—step an' I'll—let drive. Ye tell me—first—who ye be."

The invader paused, but he realized the nervous finger pressing the trigger and made haste to answer. "It's all right, I tell ye. I'm one o' Terry's scouts."

"Ye are? Jist the same—I've heard—yer voice—afore."

"Likely 'nough. I saw service in the Seventh."

Murphy was still a trifle suspicious. "How'd ye git yere? How'd ye come ter know—whar I was?"

The man laughed again. "Sorter hurts yer professional feelins, don't it, old feller, to be dropped in on in this unceremonious way? But it was dead easy, old man. Ye see I happened thro' Cheyenne only a couple o' hours behind ye, with a bunch o' papers fer the Yellowstone. The trail's plain enough out this far, and I loped 'long at a pretty fair hickory, so that I was up on the bluff yonder, and saw ye go into camp yere jist afore dark. You was a-keepin' yer eyes skinned across the Fourche, and naturally didn't expect no callers from them hills behind. The rest wus nuthin', an' here I am. It's a darn sight pleasanter ter hev company travelin', ter my notion. Now kin I cum on?"

Murphy reluctantly lowered his Colt, every movement betraying annoyance. "I reckon. But I'd—a damn sight—rather risk it—alone."

The stranger came forward without further hesitation. The night was far too dark to reveal features, but to Murphy's strained vision the newcomer appeared somewhat slender in build, and of good height.

"Whar'd—ye say ye—wus bound?"
"Mouth o' the Powder. We kin ride tergether fer a night or two."

"Ye kin—do as ye—please, but—I ain't a huntin'—no company,—an' I'm a—goin' 'cross now."

He advanced a few strides toward his horses. Then suddenly he gave vent to a smothered cry, so startling as to cause the stranger to spring hastily after him.

"Oh! My God! Oh! Look there!"
"What is it, man?"

"There! there! The picture! Don't you see?"

"Naw; I don't see nuthin'. Ye ain't gone cracked, hev ye? Whose picture?"

"It's there!—O Lord!—it's there! My God! can't ye see?—An' it's his face—all a-gleamin' with green flames—Holy Mary—an' I ain't seen it—afore in—15 year!"

He seemed suddenly to collapse, and the stranger permitted him to drop limp to the earth.

"Darn if I kin see anythin', old man, but I'll scout 'round thar a bit, jest ter ease yer mind, an' see what I kin skeer up."

He had hardly taken a half dozen steps before Murphy called after him: "Don't—don't go an' leave me—it's not there now—that's queer!"

The other returned and stood gazing down upon his huddled figure. "You're a fine scout! afeard o' spooks. Do ye take these yere turns often? Fer if ye do, I reckon as how I'd sooner be ridin' alone."

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