

Bob Hampton of Placer

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Murphy struggled to his feet and gripped the other's arm. "Never hed nuthin' like it—afore. But—but it was thar—all creepy—an' green—ain't seen that face—in 15 year."

"What face?"

"A—a fellow I knew—once. He—he's dead."

The other grunted disdainfully. "Bad luck ter see, them sort," he volunteered, solemnly. "Blame glad it warn't me es see it, an' I don't know as I keer much right now 'bout keepin' company with ye fer very long. However, I reckon if either of us calculates on doin' much ridin' ternight, we better stop foolin' with ghosts, an' go ter saddlin' up."

They made rapid work of it, the newcomer proving somewhat loquacious, yet holding his voice to a judicious whisper. It was he who led the way down the bank, the four horses slowly splashing through the shallow water to the northern shore. Before them stretched a broad plain, the surface rocky and uneven, the northern stars obscured by ridges of higher land. Murphy promptly gave his horse the spur, never once glancing behind, while the other imitated his example, holding his animal well in check, being apparently the better mounted.

They rode silently. The way became more broken and rough as they advanced, causing them to exercise greater caution. Flying clouds obscured the stars, yet through the rifts they caught fleeting glimpses sufficient to hold them to their course. And the encroaching hills swept in closer upon either hand, leaving them groping their way between as in a pocket, yet ever advancing north.

Finally they attained to the steep bank of a considerable stream, found the water of sufficient depth to compel swimming, and crept up the opposite shore dripping and miserable, yet with ammunition dry. Murphy stood swearing disjointedly, wiping the blood from a wound in his forehead where the jagged edge of a rock had broken the skin, but suddenly stopped with a quick intake of breath that left him panting. The other man crept toward him, leading his horse.

"What is it now?" he asked, gruffly. "Hev' ye got 'em agin'?"

The dazed old scout stared, pointing directly across the other's shoulder, his arm shaking desperately.

"It's thar!—an' it's his face! Oh, God!—I know it—15 year."

The man glanced backward into the pitch darkness, but without moving his body.

"There's nuthin' out there, 'less it's a firefly," he insisted, in a tone of contempt. "You're plum crazy, Murphy; the night's got on yer nerves. What is it ye think ye see?"

"His face, I tell ye! Don't I know? It's all green and ghasly, with snaky flames playin' about it! But I know; 15 years, an' I ain't fergot."

He sank down feebly—sank until he was on his knees, his head craned forward. The man watching touched the miserable, hunched-up figure compassionately, and it shook beneath his hand, endeavoring to shrink away.

"My God! was that you? I thought it was him a-reachin' fer me. Here, let me take yer hand. Oh, Lord! An' can't ye see? It's just there beyond them horses—all green, crawlin', devilish—but it's him."

"Who?"

"Brant! Brant—15 year!"

"Brant? Filtteen years? Do you mean Maj. Brant, the one Nolan killed over at Bethune?"

"He—he didn't—"

The old man heaved forward, his head rocking from side to side; then suddenly he toppled over on his face, gasping for breath. His companion caught him and ripped open the heavy flannel shirt. Then he strode savagely across in front of his shrinking horse, tore down the flaring picture, and hastily thrust it into his pocket, the light of the phosphorous with which it had been rubbed being reflected for a moment on his features.

"A dirty, miserable, low-down trick," he muttered. "Poor old devil! Yet I've got to do it for the little girl."

He stumbled back through the darkness, his hat filled with water, and dashed it into Murphy's face. "Come on, Murphy! There's one good thing 'bout spooks; they don't hang 'round fer long at a time. Likely es not this 'un is gone by now. Brace up, man, for you an' I have got ter get out o' here afore mornin'."

Then Murphy grasped his arm and drew himself slowly to his feet.

"Don't see nuthin' now, do ye?"

"No. Where's my—horse?"

The other silently reached him the loose rein, marking as he did so the quick, nervous peering this way and that, the starting at the slightest sound.

"Did ye say, Murphy, as how it wasn't Nolan after all who plugged the major?"

"I'm damned—if I did. Who—else was it?"

"Why, I dunno. Sorter blamed odd though, that ghost should be a-hauntin' ye. Darn if it ain't creepy 'nough ter make a feller believe most anythin'."

Murphy drew himself up heavily into his saddle. Then all at once he shoved the muzzle of a "45" into the other's face. "Ye say nuther word—'bout that, an' I'll make—a ghost outer ye—blame lively. Now, ye shet up—if ye ride with me."

They moved forward at a walk and reached a higher level, across which the night wind swept, bearing a touch of cold in its breath as though coming from the snow-capped mountains to the west. There was renewed life in this invigorating air and Murphy spurred forward, his companion pressing steadily after.

When the first signs of returning day appeared in the east, the two left their horses in a narrow canyon, and crept to the summit of a ridge. Below lay the broad valley of the Powder. Then Murphy turned his head and looked back into the other's face.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The Verge of Confession.

Murphy uttered one sputtering cry of surprise, flinging his hand instinctively to his hip, but attempted no more. Hampton's ready weapon was thrusting its muzzle into the astounded face, and the gray eyes gleaming along the polished barrel held the fellow motionless.

"Hands up! Not a move, Murphy! I have the drop!" The voice was low, but stern, and the old frontiersman obeyed mechanically, although his seamed face was fairly distorted with rage.

"You! Damn you!—I thought I knew—the voice."

"Yes, I am here all right. Rather odd place for us to meet. Isn't it? But

you see, you've had the advantage all these years; you knew whom you were running away from, while I was compelled to plod along in the dark. But I've caught up just the same, if it has been a long race."

"What do ye—want me fer?" The look in the face was cunning.

"Hold your hands quiet—higher, you fool! That's it. Now, don't play with me. I honestly didn't know for certain I did want you, Murphy, when I first started out on this trip. I merely suspected that I might, from some things I had been told. When somebody took the liberty of slashing at my back in a poker-room at Glencaid, and drove the knife into Slavin by mistake, I chanced to catch a glimpse of the hand on the hilt, and there was a scar on it. About 15 years before, I was acting as officer of the guard one night at Bethune. It was a bright starlit night, you remember, and just as I turned the corner of the old powder-house there came a sudden flash, a report, a sharp cry. I sprang forward only to fall headlong over a dead body; but in that flash I had seen the hand grasping the revolver, and there was a scar on the back of it, a very peculiar scar. It chanced I had the evening previous slightly quarreled with the officer who was killed; I was the only person known to be near at the time he was shot; certain other circumstantial evidence was dug up, while Slavin and one other—no, it was not you—gave some damaging, manufactured testi-



"Hands Up! Not a Move, Muhpry! I Have the Drop!"

mony against me. As a result I was held guilty of murder in the second degree, dismissed from the army in disgrace, and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. So, you see, it was not exactly you I have been hunting. Murphy,—it was a scar."

Murphy's face was distorted into a hideous grin.

"I notice you bear exactly that kind of a scar, my man, and you spoke last night as if you had some recollection of the case."

The mocking grin expanded; into the husky voice crept a snarl of defiance, for now Murphy's courage had come back—he was fronting flesh and blood. "Oh, stop preachin'—an' shoot—an' be dammed ter ye!"

"You do me a grave injustice, Murphy. Your slashing at me down in Glencaid hasn't left so much as a sting behind. It's completely blotted out, forgotten. I haven't the slightest desire to kill you, man; but I do want to clear my name of the stain of that crime. I want you to tell the whole truth about that night's work at Be-

truffe, and when you have done so, you can go. I'll never lay a finger on you; you can go where you please."

"Bah!—ye ain't got no proof—agin me—sides, the case is closed—it can't be opened agin—by law."

"You devil! I'd be perfectly justified in killing you," exclaimed Hampton, savagely.

Murphy stared at him stupidly, the cunning of incipient insanity in his eyes. "En' whar—do ye expect—me ter say—all this, pervidin', of course—I wus fule 'nough—ter do it?"

"Up yonder before Custer and the officers of the Seventh, when we get in."

"They'd nab me—likely."

"Now, see here, you say it is impossible for them to touch you, because the case is closed legally. But I've had to suffer for your crime, Murphy, suffer for 15 years, ten of them behind stone walls; and there are others who have suffered with me. It has cost me love, home, all that a man holds dear. The very least you can do in ordinary decency is to speak the truth now. It will not hurt you, but it will lift me out of hell."

"Well—maybe I might. Anyhow, I'll go on—with ye. Kin I sit up? I'm dog tired—lyin' yere."

"Unbuckle your belt, and throw that over first."

"I'm damned—if I will. Not—in no Injun—country."

"I know it's tough," retorted Hampton, with exasperating coolness, his revolver's muzzle held steady; "but, just the same, it's got to be done. I know you far too well to take chances on your gun. So unlimber."

"Oh, I—guess not," and Murphy spat contemptuously. "Do ye think—I'm afeard o' yer—shootin'? Ye don't dare—fer I'm no good ter ye—dead."

"You are perfectly right. You are quite a philosopher in your way. You would be no good to me dead, Murphy, but you might prove fully as valuable maimed. Now I'm playing this game to the limit, and that limit is just about reached. You unlimber before I count ten, you murderer, or I'll spoil both your hands!"

The mocking, sardonic grin deserted Murphy's features.

"Unlimber! It's the last call."

With a snarl the scout unclasped his army belt, dropped it to the ground and sullenly kicked it over toward Hampton. "Now—now—you, you gray-eyed—devil, kin I—sit up?"

The other nodded. He had drawn the fangs of the wolf, and now that he no longer feared, a sudden, unexplainable feeling of sympathy took possession of him. Murphy sputtered and swore, but his victorious companion neither spoke nor moved. There were several distant smokes out to the northward now, evidently the answering signals of different bands of savages, while far away, beneath the shadow of the low bluffs bordering the stream, numerous black, moving dots began to show against the light brown background. Hampton, noticing that Murphy had stopped swearing to gaze, swung forward his field-glasses for a better view.

"They are Indians, right enough," he said, at last. "Here, take a look, Murphy. I could count about 20 in that bunch and they are traveling north."

The older man adjusted the tubes to his eyes and looked long and steadily at the party.

"They seem—to be a-closin' in," he declared, finally, staring around into the other's face, all bravado gone. "There's another lot—bucks, all o' 'em