

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 XXXIII—Continued

"Gentlemen," he commented to the little group gathered about him, yet without glancing up from the paper in his hand, "Crook was defeated over on the Rosebud the 17th, and forced to retire. That will account for the unexpected number of hostiles fronting us up here, Cook; but the greater the task, the greater the glory. Ah, I thought as much. I am advised by the department to keep in close touch with Terry and Gibbons, and to hold off from making a direct attack until infantry can arrive in support. Rather late in the day, I take it, when we are already within easy rifle-shot. I see nothing in these orders to interfere with our present plans, nor any military necessity for playing hide and seek all summer in these hills. That looks like a big village down yonder, but I have led the dandy Seventh into others just as large."

He stopped speaking, and glanced up inquiringly into the face of the silent messenger, apparently mistaking him for one of his own men.

"Where did you get this?"

"Cheyenne, sir."

"What! Do you mean to say you brought it through from there?"

"Silent Murphy carried it as far as the Powder river. He went crazy there, and I was compelled to strap him. I brought it the rest of the way."

"Where is Murphy?"

"Back with the pack train, sir. I got him through alive, but entirely gone in the head."

"Run across many hostiles in that region?"

"They were thick this side the Rosebud; all bucks and traveling north."

"Sioux?"

"Mostly, sir; but I saw one band wearing Cheyenne war bonnets."

A puzzled look slowly crept into the strong face of the abrupt questioner, his stern, commanding eyes studying the man standing motionless before him, with freshly awakened interest. The gaze of the other faltered, then came back courageously.

"I recognize you now," Custer said, quietly. "Am I to understand you are again in the service?"

"My presence here is purely accidental, Gen. Custer. The opportunity came to me to do this work, and I very gladly accepted the privilege."

The commander hesitated, scarcely knowing what he might be justified in saying to this man.

"It's a brave deed, well performed," he said at last, with soldierly cordial-

ity, "although I can hardly offer you a fitting reward."

"There is little I desire," he replied, slowly, "and that is to be permitted to ride once more into action in the ranks of the Seventh."

The true-hearted, impulsive, manly soldier, noting him reddened to the root of his fair hair, his proud eyes softening.

"Spoken like a true soldier," he exclaimed, a new warmth in his voice. "You shall have your wish. Take position in Calhoun's troop yonder."

Hampton turned quietly away, leading his horse, yet had scarcely advanced three yards before Custer halted him.

"I shall be pleased to talk with you again after the fight," he said, briefly, as though half doubting the propriety of such words.

The other bowed, his face instantly brightening. "I thank you sincerely."

The perplexed commander stood motionless, gazing after the receding figure, his face grown grave and thoughtful. Then he turned to the wondering adjutant beside him.

"You never knew him, did you, Cook?"

"I think not, sir; who is he?"

"Capt Nolan—you have heard the story."

"Is that so?" he exclaimed, in evident surprise. "He has a manly face."

"Ay, and he was as fine a soldier as ever fought under a flag," declared Custer, frankly. "Poor devil. The hardest service I was ever called upon to perform was the day we broke him. I wonder if Calhoun will recognize the face; they were good friends once."

He stopped speaking, and for a time his field-glasses were fastened upon a small section of the Indian village nestled in the green valley.

"I doubt if many warriors are there," he commented at last. "They may have gone up the river to intercept Reno's advance, and if so, this should be our time to strike. Return to your commands, gentlemen, and with the order of march see personally that your men move quietly. We must strike quick and hard, driving the wedge home with a single blow. That will be all at present, gentlemen; you will require no further instructions until we deploy. Capt. Calhoun, just a word."

The captain thus directly addressed, a handsome, stalwart man of middle age, reined in his horse and waited.

"Captain, the messenger who has just brought us dispatches from Chey-

enne is a civilian, but has requested permission to have a share in this coming fight. I have assigned him to your troop."

Calhoun bowed.

"I thought to spare you any possible embarrassment by saying that the man is not entirely unknown to you."

"May I ask his name?"

"Robert Nolan."

The strong, lion-like face flushed under its tan, then quickly lit up with a smile. "I thank you. Capt. Nolan will not suffer at my hands."

He rode straight toward his troop, his eyes searching the ranks until they rested upon the averted face of Hampton. He pressed forward, and leaned from the saddle, extending a gauntleted hand. "Nolan, old man welcome back to the Seventh!"

For an instant their eyes met, those of the officer filled with manly sympathy, the other's moistened and dim, his face like marble. Then the two hands clasped and clung, in a grip more eloquent than words. It was Calhoun who spoke.

"I mean it all, Nolan. From that day to this I have believed in you—have held you friend."

For a moment the man reeled; then, as though inspired by a newborn hope, he sat firmly erect, and lifted his hand in salute. "Those are words I have longed to hear spoken for 15 years. They are more than



"You Shall Have Your Wish. Take Position in Calhoun's Troop."

life to me. May God help me to be worthy of them. Oh, Calhoun, Calhoun!"

For a brief space the two remained still and silent, their faces reflecting repressed feeling. Then the voice of command sounded out in front; Calhoun gently withdrew his hand from the other's grasp, and with bowed head rode slowly to the front of his troops.

In columns of four, silent, with not a canteen rattling, with scabbards thrust under their stirrup leathers, each man sitting in his saddle like a statue, ready carbine slung forward across the pommel, those sunburnt troopers moved steadily down the broad coulee. The troopers riding at either side of Hampton wondering still at their captain's peculiar words and actions, glanced curiously at the new comrade, marveling at his tightly pressed lips, his moistened eyes. Yet in all the glorious column, no heart lighter than his, or happier.

pressed forward to meet a warrior's death.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

The Last Stand.

It was shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon when that compact column of cavalrymen moved silently forward down the concealing coulee toward the more open ground beyond. Custer's plan was surprise, the sudden smiting of that village in the valley from the rear by the quick charge of his horsemen. From man to man the whispered purpose travelled down the ranks, the eager troopers greeting the welcome message with kindling eyes. It was the old way of the Seventh, and they knew it well.

With Custer riding at the head of the column, and only a little to the rear of the advance scouts, his adjutant Cook, together with a volunteer aide, beside him, the five depleted troops filed resolutely forward, dreaming not of possible defeat. Suddenly distant shots were heard far off to their left and rear, and deepening into a rumble, evidencing a warm engagement. The interested troopers lifted their heads, listening intently, while eager whispers ran from man to man along the closed files.

"Reno is going in, boys; it will be our turn next."

"Close up! Quiet there, lads, quiet," officer after officer passed the word of command.

Yet there were those among them who felt a strange dread—that firing sounded so far up the stream from where Reno should have been by that time. Still it might be that those overhanging bluffs would muffle and deflect the reports. All about them hovered death in dreadful guise. None among them saw those cruel, spying eyes watching from distant ridges, peering at them from concealed ravines; none marked the rapidly massing hordes, hideous in war-paint, crowded into near-by coulees and behind protecting hills.

It burst upon them with wild yells. The gloomy ridges blazed into their startled faces, the dark ravines hurled at them skurrying horsemen, while, wherever their eyes turned, they beheld savage forms leaping forth from hill and coulee, gulch and rock shadow. Horses fell, or ran about neighing; men flung up their hands and died in that first awful minute of consternation, and the little column seemed to shrivel away as if consumed by the flame which struck it, front and flank and rear. It was as if those men had ridden into the mouth of hell.

Yet it was scarcely for more than a minute. Men trained, strong, clear of brain, were in those stricken lines—men who had seen Indian battle before. The recoil came, swift as had been the surprise. Voice after voice rang out old familiar orders, steady-

ing instantly the startled nerves; discipline conquered disorder, and the shattered column rolled out, as if by magic, into the semblance of a battle line.

It was magnificently done. Custer and his troop commanders brought their sorely smitten men into a position of defense, even hurled them cheering forward in short, swift charges, so as to clear the front and gain room in which to deploy. Out of confusion emerged discipline, confidence, esprit de corps.

(To be continued)