

# 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 XXXIV.—Continued

Safe beyond the range of the troopers' light carbines, the Indians, with their heavier rifles, kept hurling a constant storm of lead, hugging the gullies, and spreading out until there was no rear toward which the harassed cavalymen could turn for safety. One by one, continually under a heavy fire, the scattered troops were formed into something more nearly resembling a battle line—Calhoun on the left, then Keogh, Smith and Yates, with Tom Custer holding the extreme right. Thus they waited grimly for the next assault.

Nor was it long delayed. Scarcely had the troopers recovered, refilled their depleted cartridge belts from those of their dead comrades, when the onslaught came. The soldiers waited their coming. The short, brown-barrelled carbines gleamed at the level in the sunlight, and then belched forth their message of flame into the very faces of those reckless horsemen. It was not in flesh and blood to bear such a blow. With screams of rage, the red braves swerved to left and right, leaving many a dark, war-bedecked figure lying dead behind them, and many a riderless pony skurrying over the prairie. Exultant over their seemingly successful repulse, the men flung themselves again upon the earth, their cheers ringing out above the thud of retreating hoofs.

"We can hold them here, boys, until Reno comes," they shouted to each other.

The skulking red riflemen crept ever closer behind the ridges, driving their deadly missiles into those ranks exposed in the open. To the command of the bugle they discharged two roaring volleys from their carbines, hopeful that the combined sound might reach the ears of the lagging Reno. They were hopeful yet, although one troop had only a sergeant left in command, and the dead bodies of their comrades strewed the plain.

It was four o'clock. For two long hours they had been engaged in ceaseless struggle, and now barely a hundred men, smoke begrimed, thirsty, bleeding, half their carbines empty, they still formed an impenetrable ring around their chief. The struggle was over, and they realized the fact. When that wave of savage horsemen swept forth again it would be to ride them down, to crush them under their horses' pounding hoofs.

Like a whirlwind those red demons came—howling wolves, now certain of their prey. On both flanks of the short, slender line struck Gall and

Crazy Horse, while like a thunderbolt Crow-King and Rain-in-the-Face attacked the center. These three storms converged at the foot of the hill, crushing the little band of troopers. With ammunition gone, the helpless victims could meet that mighty on-rushing torrent only with clubbed guns, for one instant of desperate struggle. Shoulder to shoulder, in ever-contracting circle, officers and men stood shielding their commander to the last. Twenty or 30 made a despairing dash, in a vain endeavor to burst through the red enveloping lines, only to be tomahawked or shot; but the most remained, a thin struggling ring, with Custer in its center. Then came the inevitable end. The red waves surged completely across the crest, no white man left alive upon the field. They had fought a good fight; they had kept the faith.

Two days later, having relieved Reno from his unpleasant predicament in the valley, Terry's and Gibbons's infantry tramped up the ravine, and emerged upon the stricken field. In lines of motionless dead they read the fearful story; and there they found that man we know. Lying upon a bed of emptied cartridge shells, his body riddled with shot and mutilated with knives, his clothing torn to rags, his hands grasped a smashed and twisted carbine, his lips smiling even in death, was that soldier whom the Seventh had disowned and cast out, but who had come back to defend its chief and to die for its honor—Robert Hampton Nolan.

## CHAPTER XXXV. The Curtain Falls.

Bronzed by months of scouting on those northern plains, a graver, older look upon his face, and the bars of a captain gracing the shoulders of his new cavalry jacket, Donald Brant trotted down the stage road bordering the Bear Water, his heart alternating between hope and dread.

The familiar yellow house at the cross-roads appeared so unattractive as to suggest the thought that Naida must have been inexpressibly lonely during those months of waiting. He knocked at the sun-warped door. Without delay it was flung open, and a vision of flushed face and snowy drapery confronted him.

"Why, Lieut. Brant! I was never more surprised in my life. Do, pray, come right in. Yes, Naida is here, and I will have her seen for at once. Oh, Howard, this is Lieut. Brant, just back from his awful Indian fighting. How very nice that he should happen to arrive just at this time, isn't it?"

The young officer silently accepted

Mr. Wynkoop's extended hand, and found a convenient chair, as Miss Spencer hastened from the room to announce his arrival.

"Why just at this time?" he questioned.

Mr. Wynkoop cleared his throat. "Why—why, you see, we are to be married this evening—Miss Spencer and myself. We shall be so delighted to have you witness the ceremony. It is to take place at the church, and my people insist upon making quite an affair out of the occasion—Phoebe is so popular, you know."

The lady again bustled in, her eyes glowing with enthusiasm. "Why, I think it is perfectly delightful. Don't you, Howard? Now Lieut. Brant and Naida can stand up with us. You will, won't you, Lieutenant?"

"That must be left entirely with Naida for decision," he replied, soberly.

There was a rustle at the inner door, and Naida stood there. Their eyes met, and the color mounted swiftly to the girl's cheeks. Then he stepped resolutely forward, forgetful of all other presence, and clasped her hand in both his own. Neither spoke a word, yet each understood something of what was in the heart of the other.

"Will you walk outside with me?" he asked, at last. "I have much to say which I am sure you would rather hear alone."

She bent her head, and with a brief word of explanation to the others, the young officer conducted her forth into the bright July sunshine. They walked in silence side by side along the bank of the little stream. Brant glanced furtively toward the sweet, girlish face. Then he spoke.

"Naida," he said, gravely, "I have come back, as I said I would, and surely I read welcome in your eyes?"

"Yes."

"And I have come to say that there is no longer any shadow of the dead between us."

She looked up quickly, her hands clasped, her cheeks flushing. "Are you sure? Perhaps you misunderstand; perhaps you mistake my meaning."

"I know it all," he answered, soberly, "from the lips of Hampton."

"You have seen him? Oh, Lieut. Brant, please tell me the whole truth. I have missed him so much, and since the day he rode away to Gheyenne not one word to explain his absence has come back to me. You cannot understand what this means, how much he has become to me through years of kindness."

"You have heard nothing?"

"Not a word."

Brant drew a long, deep breath. He had supposed she knew this. At last he said gravely: "Naida, the truth will prove the kindest message, I think. He died in that unbroken ring of defenders clustered about Gen. Custer on the bluffs of the Little Big Horn."

Her slight figure trembled so violently that he held her close within his arms.

"There was a smile upon his face when we found him. He performed his full duty, Naida, and died as became a soldier and a gentleman."

"But—but, this cannot be! I saw the published list; his name was not among them."

"The man who fell was Robert Nolan."

Gently he drew her down to a seat upon the soft turf of the bank. She looked up at him helplessly, her mind seemingly dazed, her eyes yet filled with doubt.

"Robert Nolan? My father?"

He bent over toward her, pressing his lips to her hair and stroking it tenderly with his hand.

"Yes, Naida, darling; it was truly Robert Hampton Nolan who died in battle, in the ranks of his old regiment—died as he would have chosen to die, thank God! completely cleared of every stain upon his honor. Sit up, little girl, and listen while I tell you. There is in the story no word which does not reflect nobility upon the soldier's daughter."

She uplifted her white face. "Tell me," she said, simply, "all you know."

He recounted to her slowly, carefully, the details of that desperate journey northward, of their providential meeting on the Little Big Horn, of the papers left in his charge, of



He Held Her Close Within His Arms.

Hampton's riding forward with dispatches, and of his death at Custer's side. While he spoke, the girl scarcely moved; her breath came in sobs and her hands clasped his.

"These are the papers, Naida. I opened the envelope as directed, and found deeds to certain properties, including the mine in the Black Range; a will, duly signed and attested, naming you as his sole heir, together with a carefully prepared letter, addressed to you, giving a full account of the crime of which he was convicted, as well as some other matters of a personal nature. That letter you must read alone as his last message, but the truth of all he says has since been proved."

She glanced up at him quickly. "By Murphy?"

"Yes, by Murphy, who is now lying

in the hospital at Bethune, slowly recovering. His sworn deposition has been forwarded to the department at Washington, and will undoubtedly result in the honorable replacing of your father's name on the army list. I will tell you briefly the man's confession, together with the few additional facts necessary to make it clear.

"Your father and mine were for many years friends and army comrades. They saw service together during the great war, and afterward upon the plains in Indian campaigning. Unfortunately a slight misunderstanding arose between them. One night they openly quarreled when heated

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