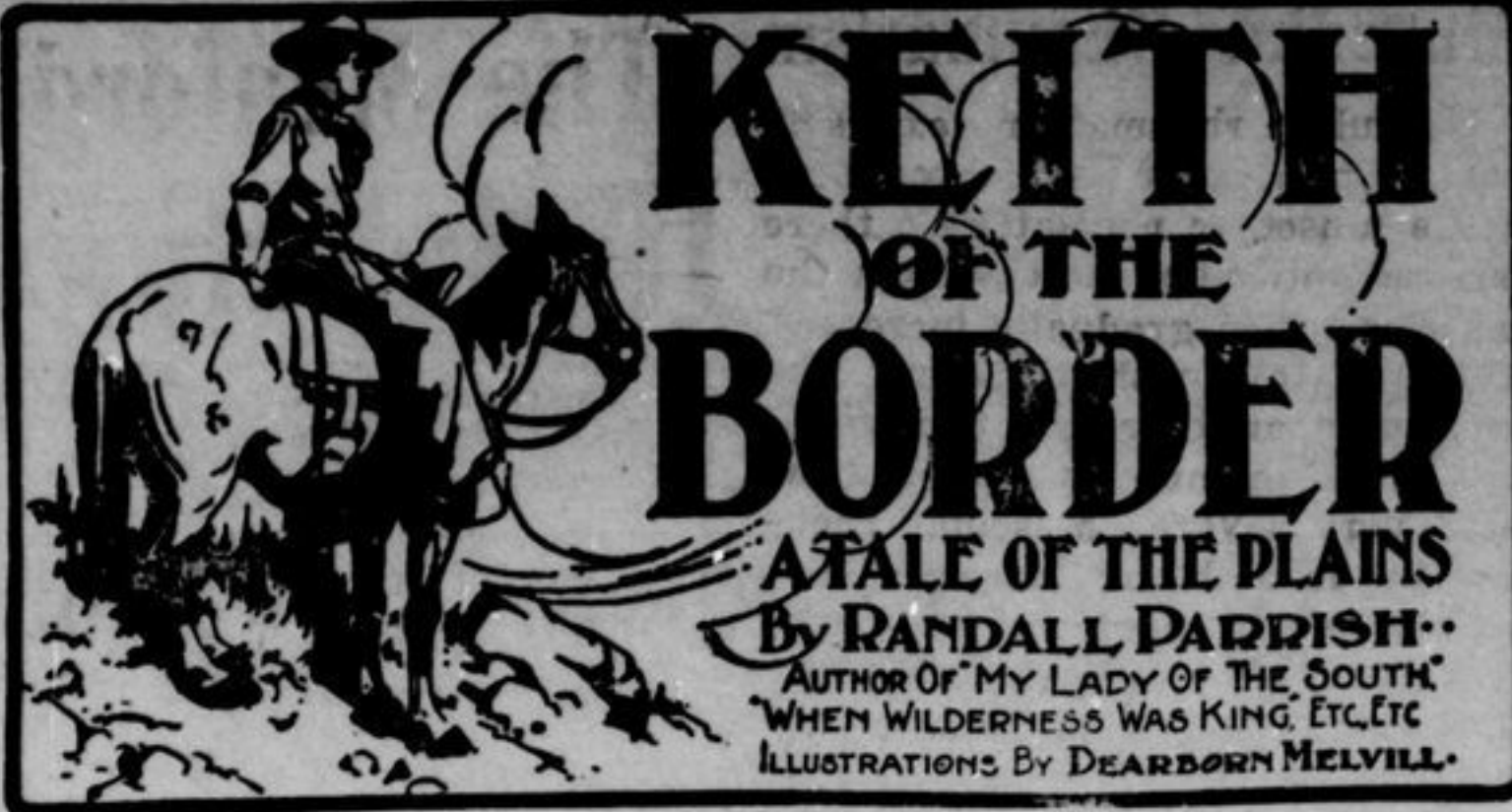


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# KEITH OF THE BORDER

A TALE OF THE PLAINS

By RANDALL DARRISH  
AUTHOR OF MY LADY OF THE SOUTH  
WHEN WILDERNESS WAS KING, ETC.  
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## CHAPTER XVIII.

Interviewing Willoughby.

Coolly, yet without in the least comprehending how best to proceed, Keith drew toward him the only chair in the room, and sat down. Miss Hope—more widely known as Christie MacLaire—had claimed this drunken lad as her brother, but, according to Hawley, he had vehemently denied any such relationship. Yet there must be some previous association between the two, and what this was the plainman proposed to discover. The problem was how best to cause the fellow to talk frankly—could he be reached more easily by reference to the girl or the gambler? Keith studying the sullen, obstinate face confronting him, with instinctive antagonism over his intrusion, swiftly determined on the girl.

"It was not very nice of me to come in on you this way," he began, apologetically, "but you see I happened to know your sister."

"My sister? Oh, I guess not!" "Yes, but I do," throwing a confidence into his tone he was far from feeling, "Miss Hope and I are friends."

The boy sprang to his feet, his face flushed.

"Oh, you mean Hope? Do you know her? Say, I thought you were giving me that old gag about Christie MacLaire."

"Certainly not; who is she?" "That's more than I know; fellow came to me at Carson, and said he'd met my sister on a stage west of Topeka. I knew he was lying, because she's home over in Missouri. Finally, I got it out of him that she claimed to be my sister, but her name was MacLaire. Why, I don't even know her, and what do you suppose she ever picked me out for her brother for?"

He was plainly puzzled, and perfectly convinced it was all a mistake. That his sister might have left home since he did, and drifted West under an assumed name, apparently never occurred to him as possible. To Keith this was the explanation, and nothing could be more natural, considering her work, yet he did not feel like shattering the lad's loyalty. Faith in the sister might yet save him.

"Perhaps the fellow who told you," he hazarded blindly, speaking the first thought which came to his mind, "had some reason to desire to make you think this MacLaire girl was your sister."

The suggestion caused him to laugh at first; then his face suddenly sobered, as though a new thought had occurred to him.

"Damn me, no, it couldn't be that," he exclaimed, one hand pressing his head. "He couldn't be workin' no trick of that kind on me."

"Whom do you mean?" "A fellow named Hawley," evasively. "The man who claimed to have met my sister."

"Black Bart" Hawley?" The boy lifted his head again, his eyes filled with suspicion.

"Yes, if you must know; he's a gambler all right, but he's stuck to me when I was down and out. You know him?"

"Just a little," carelessly; "but what sort of a trick could he be working trying to make you acknowledge Christie MacLaire as your sister?"

Willoughby did not answer, shifting uneasily about on the bed. Keith waited, and at last the boy blurted out:

"Oh, it wasn't nothing much. I told him something when I was drunk once, that I thought maybe might have stuck to him. Odd he should make that mistake, too, for I showed him Hope's picture. Bart's a schemer, and I didn't know but what he might have figured out a trick, though I don't see how he could. It wasn't no more than a pipe dream, I reckon. Where did you meet Hope? Back in Missouri?"

One thing was clearly evident—the boy's faith in his sister. If he was to be rightly influenced, and led back to her, he must have no suspicion aroused that her life was any different from what it had been before he left home. Besides if Keith hoped to gain any inkling of what Hawley's purpose could be, he must win the confidence of Willoughby. This could not be done by telling him of Hope's present life. These considerations flashed through his mind, and as swiftly determined his answer.

"Oh, I've known her some time. Not long ago I did her a service for which she is grateful. Did you know she was out in this country searching for you?"

"Out here? In Kansas?" "Sure; that isn't much of a trip for a spirited girl. She got it in her head from your letters that you were in trouble, and set out to find you and bring you home. She didn't tell me this, but that is the way I heard it. It was for her sake I came in here. Why not go to her, Willoughby, and then both of you return to Missouri?"

The sullenness had gone out of the boy's face; he looked tired, discouraged.

"Where is Home?" he asked.

"Fort Larned, I suppose. She went to Carson City first."

"Well, that settles it," shaking his head. "You don't suppose I could go brown 'round Larned, and not get snapped up, do you? They don't chase deserters very far out here, but that's the post I skipped from, and they'd jug me all right. Besides, I'm damned if I'll go back until I get a stake. I want to see a fellow first."

"What fellow?" "Well, it's Hawley, if you want to know so bad. He said if I would come here and wait for him he'd put me on to a good thing."

The boy edged along the edge of the bed, evidently half ashamed of himself, yet obstinate and unyielding. Keith sat watching his face, unable to evolve any means of changing his decision. Hawley's influence just at present was greater than Hope's, because the lad naturally felt ashamed to go slinking home penniless and defeated. His pride held him to Hawley, and his faith that the man would redeem his promise. Keith understood all this readily enough, and comprehended also that if "Black Bart" had any use for the boy it would be for some criminal purpose. What was it? Was there a deeply laid plot back of all these preparations involving both Willoughby and his sister? What was it Hawley was scheming about so carefully, holding this boy deserter in one hand, while he reached out the other after Christie MacLaire? Surely, the man was not working blindly; he must have a purpose in view. Willoughby had acknowledged he had told the fellow something once when he was drunk—about his family history, no doubt, for he had shown him Hope's picture. What that family secret was Keith had no means of guessing, but Hawley, the moment he saw the face on the cardboard, had evidently recognized Christie MacLaire—had thought of some way in which what he now knew could be turned to advantage. The few scattered facts which Keith had collected all seemed to point to such a conclusion—Hawley had sent the boy to Sheridan, where he would be out of sight, with orders to wait for him there, and the promise of a "stake" to keep him quiet. Then he had gone to Independence and Topeka seeking after Christie MacLaire. Evidently he meant to keep the two apart until he had gained from each whatever it was he sought. But what could that be? What family secret could Willoughby have blurted out in his cups, which had so stimulated the gambler's wits?

Two things combined to cause Keith to determine he would uncover this rascality—his desire to repay Hawley, and his interest in the girl rescued on the Salt Fork. This gossamer web of intrigue into which he had stumbled unwittingly was nothing to him personally; had it not involved both Hawley and Miss Hope, he would have left it unsolved without another thought. But under the circumstances it became his own battle. There was a crime here—hidden as yet, and probably not consummated—involving wrong, perhaps disgrace, to the young girl. He had rescued her once from out the clutches of this man, and he had no intention of deserting her now. Whatever her life might be, she was certainly an innocent victim in this case, deserving his protection. The memory came to him of her face upturned toward him in that little room of the Occidental, her eyes teardimmed, her lips asking him to come back to her again. He could not believe her a bad woman, and his lips compressed, his eyes darkened, with fixed determination. He would dig into this until he uncovered the truth; he would find out what dirty trick "Black Bart" was up to.

As he thought this out, not swiftly as recorded, but slowly, deliberately, placing the bits together within his mind, blindly feeling his way to a final conclusion, the boy had sunk back upon the bed, overcome with liquor, and fallen asleep. Keith stepped over, and looked down upon him in the dim light. He could recognize something of her features in the upturned face, and his eyes softened. There was no use seeking again to arouse him; even had he been sober, he would not have talked freely. Keith lifted the dangling feet into a more comfortable position, turned the lamp lower, went out, and latched the door. Two men were tramping heavily up the stairs, and they turned into the hall at the very moment he disappeared within his own room. He still retained his grasp upon the latch, when a voice outside asked:

"What number did you say, Bill—29?"

Keith straightened up as though suddenly pricked by a knife; he could never forget that voice—it was Hawley's.

## CHAPTER XIX.

A Glimpse at Conspiracy.

Leaning against the inside of his own door, startled by the rapid sequence of events, Keith was able, from different points reaching him, to

mentally picture most of what occurred in the next room. He heard Bill sink down into the convenient chair, and drink from the bottle, while the gambler apparently advanced toward the bed, where he stood looking down on its unconscious occupant.

"The fool is dead drunk," he declared disgustedly. "We can't do anything with him tonight."

"I say—throw bucket water over him," hiccoughed the other genially, "allers sobers me off."

Hawley made no response, evidently finding a seat on one end of the washstand.

"Hardly worth while, Scott," he returned finally. "Perhaps I better have some understanding with Christie, anyhow, before I pump the boy any further. If we can once get her working with us, Willoughby won't have much hand in the play—we shan't need him. Thought I told you to keep sober?"

"Am sober," solemnly, "ain't had but six drinks; just nat'rly tired out."

"Oh, indeed; well, such a room as this would drive any man to drink. Did you get what I sent you here after?"

"I sure did, Bart," and Keith heard the fellow get to his feet unsteadily. "Here's the picture, an' some letters. I didn't take only what he had in the grip."

Hawley shuffled the letters over in his hands, apparently hastily reading them with some difficulty in the dim light.

"Nothing there to give us any help," he acknowledged reluctantly, "mostly advice as far as I can see. Damn the light; a glow worm would be better."

There was a pause; then he slapped his leg. "However, it's clear they live in Springfield, Missouri, and this pho-



"Let Up! Damn Yer! He Called Himself Jack Keith."

tograph is a peach. Just look here, Bill! What did I tell you? Ain't Christie a dead ringer for this girl?"

"You bet she is, Bart," admitted the other in maudlin admiration, "only, I reckon, maybe some older."

"Well, she ought to be accordin' to Willoughby's story, an' them peckers bear him out all right, so I reckon he's told it straight—this Phyllis would be twenty-six now, and that's just about what Christie is. It wouldn't have it better if he had made it on purpose. If the girl will only play up to the part we won't need any other evidence—her face would be enough."

Keith could hear the beating of his own heart in the silence that followed. Here was a new thought, a new understanding, a complete new turn to affairs. Christie MacLaire, then, was not Willoughby's sister Hope. The girl he rescued on the desert—the girl with the pleading brown eyes, and the soft blur of the South on her lips—was not the music hall singer. He could hardly grasp the truth at first, it antagonized so sharply with all he had previously believed. Yet, if this were true his own duty became clearer than ever; aye, and would be more willingly performed. But what did Hawley know? Did he already realize that the girl he had first met on the stage coach, and later inveigled into the desert, was Hope, and not the music hall artist? He, of course, fully believed her to be Christie MacLaire at that time, but something might have occurred since to change that belief. Anyhow, the man was not now seeking Hope, but the other. Apparent-

ly the latter was either already here in Sheridan or expected soon. And exactly what was it the gambler desired this MacLaire woman to do? This was the important matter, and for its solution Keith possessed merely a few hints, a few vague suggestions. She was expected to represent herself as Phyllis—Phyllis who? Some Phyllis surely whose physical resemblance to Hope must be sufficiently marked to be once noticeable. Willoughby had evasively revealed to Hawley some hidden family secret, having money involved, no doubt, and in which the discovery of this mysterious Phyllis figured. She might, perhaps, be a sister, or half-sister, who had disappeared, and remained ignorant as to any inheritance. Hope's picture shown by the boy, and reminding Hawley at once of Christie MacLaire, had been the basis of the whole plot. Exactly what the details of that plot might be Keith could not figure out, but one thing was reasonably certain—it was proposed to defraud Hope. And who in the very truth was Hope? It suddenly occurred to him as a remarkably strange fact that he possessed not the slightest inkling as to the girl's name. Her brother had assumed to be called Willoughby when he enlisted in the army, and his companions continued to call him this. If he could interview the

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get now for only five minutes he should be able probably to straighten out the whole intricate tangle. But where was she? Would she have remained until this time at Fort Larned with Kate Murphy?

There was a noise of movement in the next room. Apparently as Hawley arose carelessly from his edge of the washstand he had dislodged the glass, which fell shivering on the floor. Scott swore audibly at the loss.

"Shut up, Bill," snapped the gambler, irritated, "you've got the bottle left. I'm going; there's nothing for any of us to do now, until after I see Christie. You remain here! Do you understand?—remain here. Damn me, if that drunken fool isn't waking up."

There was a rattling of the rickety bed, and then the sound of Willoughby's voice, thick from liquor.

"Almighty glad to see you, Bart—am, indeed. Want money—Bill an' I both want money—can't drink with out money—can't eat without money—shay, when you goin' stake us?"

"I'll see you again in the morning, Fred," returned the other briefly. "Go on back to sleep."

"Will when I git good an' ready—go sleep, stay wake, just as I please—don't care damn what yer do—go new friend now."

"A new friend? Who?" Hawley spoke with aroused interest.

"Oh, he's all right—he's mighty like fellow—come in wisout in—invitation—called her Hope—you fool, Bart. Hawley, think my sister Christie—Christie—damn me the name—my sister, Hope—don't want yer money—my—my new friend, he'll stake me—he knows my sister—Hope."

The gambler grasped the speaker, shaking him into some slight semblance of sobriety.

"Now, look here, Willoughby, I want the truth, and mean to have it," he insisted. "Has some one been in here while Scott was gone?"

"Sure—didn't I just tell yer?—friend o' Hope's."

"Who was he? Speak up! I want the name!"

There was a faint gurgling sound, as though the gambler's vice-like fingers were at the boy's throat; a slight struggle, and then the choked voice gasped out:

"Let up! damn yer! He called himself Jack Keith."

The dead silence which ensued was broken only by heavy breathing. Then Scott swore, bringing his fist down with a crash on the washstand.

"That rascal stumps yer, don't it, Bart? Well, I don't me. I tell yer it's just as I said from the first. It was Keith an' that nigger what

Continued on page 7.

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