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KEITH OF THE BORDER
A TALE OF THE PLAINS
By RANDALL PARRISH
AUTHOR OF "MY LADY OF THE SOUTH"
WHEN WILDERNESS WAS KING
ILLUSTRATIONS BY DEARBORN MELVILL

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CHAPTER XXIII.

An Unexpected Meeting.

Keith paused at the landing, looking down into the deserted office, almost tempted to return and force Hawley into a confession of his purpose. It was easy for him to conceive what would be the final result of this interview between the artistic gambler and Miss MacLaire. In spite of the vague suspicion of evil which the plainsman had implanted within the woman's mind, the other possessed the advantage, and would certainly improve it. All conditions were decidedly in his favor. He merely needed to convince the girl that she was actually the party sought, and she would go forward, playing the game he desired, believing herself right, totally unconscious of any fraud. The very simplicity of it rendered the plot the more dangerous, the more difficult to expose. Hawley had surely been favored by fortune in discovering this singer who chanced to resemble Hope so remarkably, and who, at the same time, was in such ignorance as to her own parentage. She would be ready to grasp at a straw, and, once persuaded as to her identity and legal rights, could henceforth be trusted implicitly as an ally.

Realizing all this, and comprehending also how easily Hawley would win her confidence and overcome his warning by denouncing him as a fugitive from justice charged with murder, the temptation to return and fight it out then and there became almost overpowering. He had no fear of Hawley; indeed, physical fear had scarcely a place in his composition, but he was not as yet sufficiently fortified with facts for the seeking of such an encounter. He could merely guess at the truth, unable to produce any proof with which to meet the gambler's certain denial.

A man came in through the office, and began climbing the stairs. He was almost at the landing before Keith recognized him or the other glanced up.

"Ah—seen her, I suppose?"

"Yes," returned Keith, not thinking it worth while to mention the lady's denial of having sent for him. "I have just come from there."

"Hum—thought you'd be through by this time—fine looking girl, ain't she?—believe I'll run in and chat with her myself."

"I would advise you to select some other time, Doctor," said the younger, drily, "as the lady has a visitor at present."

"A visitor?" his face rosy, his shrewd eyes darkening. "Ah, indeed! Of the male sex?"

"I judge so—'Black Bart' Hawley."

"Good Lord!" so startled his voice broke. "Did he see you?"

"Rather; I backed him up against the wall with a gun while I made my adieu."

"But what brought him there? Are they acquainted?"

"Don't ask conundrums, Doctor. He may be your rival with the fair lady for all I know. If he is, my sympathies are all with you. Only I wouldn't try to see Miss Christie just now; I'd wait for a clearer field. Hawley is probably not in the best of humor."

Fairbairn stared into the face of the speaker, uncertain whether or not he was being laughed at.

"Reckon you're right," he acknowledged at last. "Tired, anyhow—been out all night—thought I'd like to see her again, though—finest looking woman I've met since I came West—remarkable eyes—well, I'll go along to bed—see you again to-morrow, Jack."

Keith watched the sturdy figure stamp heavily down the hall-way, loose boards creaking under his positive tread, and smiled to himself at the thought that he might have, indeed, become truly interested in the music hall singer. Somehow, the doctor did not harmonize with the conception of love, or fit graciously into the picture. Still, stranger matings had occurred, and Cupid does not ask permission before he plays pranks with hearts. Keith turned again toward the stairs, only to observe a woman slowly cross the office and commence the ascent. She was in the shadow, her face even more deeply shaded by her hat, yet he stared at her in amazement—surely, it was Miss MacLaire! Yet how could it be? He had left that person scarcely five minutes before in "26," and this stairway was the only exit. His hand grasped the rail, his heart throbbing strangely, as a suspicion of the truth crossed his brain. Could this be Hope? Could it be that she was here also? As her foot touched the landing, she saw him, her eyes lighting up suddenly in recognition, a wave of color flooding her cheeks.

"Why, Captain Keith," she exclaimed, extending her gloved hand frankly, "you have been to my room, and were going away. I am so glad I came in time."

"I hardly thought to meet you," he replied, retaining her fingers in his grasp. "When did you reach Sheridan?"

"Only last night, I had no idea you



"Was Your Call Upon Miss MacLaire Very Interesting?"

comfortable." She turned toward him, almost shyly, yet with womanly curiosity which would not be stilled. "Was your call upon Miss MacLaire very interesting? Did you admire her very much?"

Keith's eyes lifted to her face, his ears quick to detect the undertone in her voice.

"Interesting? Yes, for I was seeking after information, and met with some success. As to the other question, I am not sure whether I admire the lady or not. She is bright, pretty, and companionable, and in spite of her profession, at heart, I believe, a good woman. But really, Miss Hope, I was too deeply immersed in my purpose to give her personality much consideration. Among other things we spoke of you."

"Of me? Why?"

"I told her something of our adventures together; of how both Hawley and I had been confused. She was anxious to learn who you were, but unfortunately, I have never, even yet, heard your name."

"You have not?"

"No; I left you at Fort Larned believing you Christie MacLaire—supposing it your stage name, of course—and was confirmed in this belief by finding in the holster of the saddle you had been riding an envelope bearing that address."

"I remember; it contained the note the man brought to me from Hawley; he had written it that way." She crossed the room, sinking down into a chair facing him. "And you have actually confused me with Christie MacLaire all this while? Have never known who I was?"

He shook his head.

"I told you to call me Hope; that is my name—I am Hope Waite."

"Waite!" he leaned forward, startled by the possibility—"not—not—"

"Yes," she burst in, holding out her hands, changing the lock, "and this was my father's; where did you get it?"

He took the trinket from her, turning it over in his fingers. Little by little the threads of mystery were being unraveled, yet, even now, he could not see very far. He looked up from the locket into her questioning face.

"Did I not tell you? No; then it was an oversight. This was about the throat of one of the men I buried at Cimmaron Crossing, but—but, Hope, it was not your father."

"I know," her voice choking slightly. "Mrs. Murphy found that out; that is why I am here. I heard my father came to Sheridan, and I wanted you to help me find him."

He was thinking and did not answer at once, and she went on in some alarm.

"Do you know anything about him, Captain Keith? Where is he? Why is he here? Don't be afraid to tell me."

He pressed the locket back into her hand, retaining the latter, unresisted, within his own.

"I have not seen your father, Hope, but he was certainly here a few days ago, for Fairbairn met him. They were together in the army. I am going to tell you all I know—it seems to be a tangled web, but the ends must be somewhere, although, I confess, I am all at sea."

He told it slowly and simply, bringing forth his earlier suspicion, and how he had stumbled upon facts apparently confirming them. He related her father's robbery, his loss of valuable papers, and the conversation between Hawley and Scott which led to the suspicion that these same papers had fallen into the hands of the former, and were the basis of his plot. Hope listened, breathless with interest, her widely opened eyes filled with wonder. As he concluded speaking she burst forth:

"But I don't understand in the least, Captain Keith. Why did this man Hawley send me to the Salt Fork?"

"He thought he was dealing with Christie MacLaire. He had some reason for getting her away; getting her where he could exercise influence over her."

"Yes—yes; but who is she?"

"That is what makes the matter so hard to unravel. She doesn't even know herself. Hawley is going to take advantage of her ignorance in this respect, and convince her that she is the person he wishes her to represent—but who is the person? If we knew that we might block the game."

Both sat silent, striving to figure out some reasonable explanation.

"Do you know of any special papers your father carried?" he asked.

"No; none outside his business agreements."

"Has any one ever disappeared connected with your family? Did you

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have an older sister?"

"Fred and I were the only children. Why should you ask that question?"

"Because something of that nature would seem to be the only rational explanation. Your brother must have told Hawley something—some family secret—which he felt could be utilized to his own advantage. Then he saw your picture, and was immediately reminded of the remarkable resemblance between you and Christie MacLaire. Evidently this discovery fitted into his plan, and made it possible for him to proceed. He has been trying ever since to get an interview with the woman, to sound her, and find out what he can do with her. He has written letters, sufficiently explicit to make it clear his scheme is based upon a will drawn, as he claims, by Christie's grandfather. No doubt by this time he has fully convinced the girl that she is the rightful heiress to property—as he stated to Scott—valued at over a million dollars. That's a stake worth fighting for, and these two will make a hard combination. He's got the papers, or claims to have, and they must be the ones stolen from your father. I have been trusting you might know something in your family history which would make it all plain."

"But I do not," decisively. "You must believe me; not so much as a hint of any secret has ever reached me. There are only the four of us, Father, Mother, Fred, and I. I am sure there can be no secret; nothing which I would not know. Perhaps, if I could see Miss MacLaire—"

"I am convinced that would be useless," he interrupted, rising, and pacing across the floor. "If Hawley has convinced her of the justice of the claim, he will also have pledged her to secrecy. He is working out of sight like a mole, for he knows the fraud, and will never come to the surface until everything is in readiness. I know a better way; I'll find Fred, and bring him here. He would tell you whatever it was he told Hawley, and that will give us the clue."

He picked up his hat from the table, but she rose to her feet, holding forth her hands.

"I cannot thank you enough, Captain Keith," she exclaimed frankly. "You are doing so much, and with no personal interest—"

"Oh, but I have."

The long lashes dropped over the brown eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"That I have a personal interest—in you, Hope."

She stood silent, her bosom rising and falling to rapid breathing.

Continued on page 7.

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