

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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SYNOPSIS.

A detachment of the Eighteenth Infantry from Fort Bethune trapped by Indians in a narrow gorge. Among them is a rugged young woman known by the name of Hampton, also Gillis the post trader, and his daughter Naida, a majority of the soldiers are killed during a three days' siege. Hampton and the girl only escape from the Indians. They fall in around on the plains. A company of the Seventh Cavalry, under Brant in command, find them. Hampton and the girl stop at the Miners' Home in Glendale, Mrs. Duffy, proprietress. Hampton takes the future over with Miss Gillis—the Kid. She shows him her mother—she is still alive, with a secret of her parentage and life. They decide she shall live with Mrs. Herndon. Naida the Kid—runs away from Mrs. Herndon's and rejoins Hampton. He induces her to go back, and to have nothing more to do with him. Hampton plays a long game of cards. He announces to Red Stavin that he has quit, and then leaves Glendale. Miss Phoebe Spencer arrives in Glendale to teach its first school. Miss Spencer meets Naida, Rev. Wynkoop, etc. She boards at Mrs. Herndon's. Naida and Lieut. Brant again meet without his knowing who she is. She informs him of the coming Bachelor club ball in honor of Miss Spencer. Lieut. Brant meets St. M. Murphy, Custer's son. He reports training breakers and the Show Girl difficulties arise at the Bachelor club's ball among the admirers of Miss Spencer. Lieut. Brant meets Miss Spencer but she is not his acquaintance of the day before. She tells him of Naida, and he incidentally meets her again as he is returning to the ballroom with a fan for Miss Spencer.

CHAPTER XVI.—Continued.

"The case seems fully proved," she confessed, laughingly, "and it is surely not my duty to punish the culprit. What did you talk about? But, pshaw, I know well enough without asking—she told you how greatly she admired the romance of the west, and begged you to call upon her with a recital of your own exploits. Have I not guessed right?"

"Partially, at least; some such expressions were used."

"Of course, they always are. I do not know whether they form merely a part of her stock in trade, or are spoken earnestly. You would laugh to hear the tales of wild and thrilling adventure which she picks up, and actually believes. That Jack Moffat possesses the most marvelous imagination for such things, and if I make fun of his impossible stories she becomes angry in an instant."

"I am afraid you do not greatly admire this Miss Spencer?"

"Oh, but I do; truly I do. You must not think me ungrateful. No one has ever helped me more, and beneath this mask of artificiality she is really a noble-hearted woman. I do not understand the necessity for people to lead false lives. Is it this way in all society—eastern society, I mean? Do men and women there continually scheme and flirt, smile and stab, forever assuming parts like so many play-actors?"

"It is far too common," he admitted, touched by her naive questioning. "What is known as fashionable social life has become an almost pitiful sham, and you can scarcely conceive the relief it is to meet with one utterly uncontaminated by its miserable deceptions. Its shallow make-believes. It is no wonder you shock the nerves of such people; the deed is easily accomplished."

"But I do not mean to." And she looked at him gravely, striving to make him comprehend. "I try so hard to be—be commonplace, and—and satisfied. Only there is so much that seems silly, useless, pitifully contemptible that I lose all patience. Perhaps I need proper training in what Miss Spencer calls refinement; but why should I pretend to like what I don't like, and to believe what I don't believe? Cannot one act a lie as well as speak one? And is it no longer right to search after the truth?"

"I have always felt it was our duty to discover the truth wherever possible," he said, thoughtfully; "yet, I confess, the search is not fashionable, nor the earnest seeker popular."

A little trill of laughter flowed from between her parted lips, but the sound was not altogether merry.

"Most certainly I am not. They all scold me, and repeat with manifest horror the terrible things I say, being unconscious that they are evil. Why should I suspect thoughts that come to me naturally. I want to know, to understand. I grope about in the dark. It seems to me sometimes that this whole world is a mystery. I go to Mr. Wynkoop with my questions, and they only seem to shock him. Why should they? God must have put all these doubts and wonderings into my mind, and there must be an answer for them somewhere. Mr. Wynkoop is a good man, I truly respect him. I want to please him, and I admire his intellectual attainments; but how can he accept so much on faith and be content? I know I am a perfect heathen—Miss Spencer says I am—but do you think it is so awful for me to want to know these things?"

"You merely express clearly what thousands feel without the moral courage to utter it. The saddest part of it all is, the deeper we delve the less we are satisfied in our intellectual natures. We merely succeed in learning that we are the veriest pygmies. Men like Mr. Wynkoop are simply driven back upon faith as a last resort, abso-



lutely baffled by an impenetrable wall, against which they batter mentally in vain."

"Are you a church member?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe those things you do not understand?"

He drew a deep breath, scarcely knowing at that moment how best to answer, yet sincerely anxious to lead this girl toward the light.

"The majority of men do not talk much about such matters. They hold them sacred. Yet I will speak frankly with you. I could not state in words my faith so that it would be clearly apprehended by the mind of another. I am in the church because I believe its efforts are toward righteousness, because I believe the teachings of Christ are perfect, His life the highest possible type of living, and because through Him we receive all the information regarding a future existence which we possess."

"And you do not mean, even now, to make clear the mystery?" he asked.

"Not—now," she answered, almost timidly. "It is nothing much, only I would rather not now."

The sudden sound of voices and laughter in the street beneath brought them both to their feet.

"Why, they are coming across to supper," she exclaimed, in surprise. "How long we have been here, and it has seemed scarcely a moment! I shall certainly be in for a scolding, Lieut. Brant; and I fear your only means of saving me from being promptly sent home in disgrace will be to escort me in to supper."

"A delightful punishment!" He drew her hand through his arm, and said: "And then you will pledge me the first dance following?"

"Oh, you mustn't ask me. Really, I have not been on the floor to-night; I am not in the mood."

"Do you yield to moods?"

"Why, of course I do. Is it not a woman's privilege? If you know me long it will be to find me all moods."

"If they only prove as attractive as the particular one swaying you to-night, I shall certainly have no cause for complaint. Come, Miss Naida, I am so glad you have spoken in that way," she confessed. "I shall never feel quite so much alone in the world again, and I shall see these matters from a different viewpoint. Is it wrong—unwomanly, I mean—for me to question spiritual things?"

"I am unable to conceive why it should be. Surely woman ought to be

do not remember any other subjects she talks about."

"Yet it was the most natural topic imaginable—yourself."

"You were discussing me? Why, how did that happen?"

"Very simply, and I was wholly to blame. To be perfectly honest, Miss Naida, I attended the dance to-night for no other object than to meet you again. But I had argued myself into the belief that you were Miss Spencer. The discovery of my mistake merely intensified my determination to learn who you really were. With this purpose, I interviewed Miss Spencer, and during the course of our conversation the facts of my first meeting with you became known."

"You told her how very foolish I acted?"

"I told her how deeply interested I had become in your outspoken manner."

"Oh! And she exclaimed, 'How romantic!'"

"Possibly; she likewise took occasion to suggest that you were merely a child, and seemed astonished that I should have given you a second thought."

"Why, I am 18."

"I told her I believed you to be of that age, and she ignored my remark. But what truly surprised both of us was, how you happened to know my name."

The girl did not attempt to answer, and she was thankful enough that there was not sufficient light to betray the reddening of her cheeks.

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as deeply concerned in things spiritual as man."

"How very strange it is that we should thus drift into such an intimate talk at our second meeting!" she exclaimed.

"But it seems so easy, so natural, to converse frankly with some people—they appear to draw out all that is best in one's heart. Then there are others who seem to parch and wither up every germ of spiritual life."

"There are those in the world who truly belong together," he urged, daringly. "They belong to each other by some divine law. They may never be privileged to meet; but if they do, the commingling of their minds and souls is natural. This talk of ours to-night has, perhaps, done me as much good as you."

"Oh, I am so glad if it has! I—I do not believe you and Miss Spencer conversed in this way?"

"Heaven forbid! And yet it might puzzle you to guess what was the main topic of our conversation."

"Did it interest you?"

"Deeply."

"Well, then, it could not be dress, or men, or western romance, or society in Boston, or the beautiful weather. I guess it was books."

"Wrong; they were never mentioned."

"Then I shall have to give up, for I

changed to one of buoyant, careless happiness, her dark eyes smiling, her lips uttering freely whatever thought came uppermost. Outwardly she pictured the gay and merry spirit of the night, yet to Brant, already observing her with the jealousy of a lover, she appeared distract and restless, her affection of abandon a mere mask to her feelings. Perhaps these things might have passed unnoticed but for their contrast with the late confidential chat.

He could not reconcile this sudden change with what he believed of her. It was not carried out with the practiced art of one accustomed to deceit. There must be something real influencing her action. These misgivings burdened his mind even as he swung lightly with her to the music, and they talked together in little snatches.

The last two waltzes ended, they walked slowly through the scattering throng, he striving vainly to arouse her to the former independence and intimacy of speech. Suddenly they came face to face with Mrs. Herndon, and Brant felt the girl's arm twitch.

"I have been looking everywhere for you, Naida," Mrs. Herndon said, a slight complaint in her voice. "We were going home."

Naida's cheeks reddened painfully.

"I am so sorry if I have kept you waiting," her words spoken with a rush, "but—but, Lieut. Brant was intending to accompany me. We were just starting for the cloakroom."

"Oh, indeed!" Mrs. Herndon's expression was noncommittal, while her eyes surveyed the lieutenant.

"With your permission, of course," he said.

"I hardly think I have any need to interfere."

They separated, the younger people walking slowly, silently toward the door. He held her arm, assisting her to descend the stairway, his lips murmuring a few commonplaces, to which she scarcely returned even monosyllabic replies, although she frequently flashed shy glances at his grave face.

Both realized that some explanation was forthcoming, yet neither was quite prepared to force the issue.

"I have no wraps at the hotel," she said, as he attempted to turn that way. "That was a lie also; let us walk directly down the road."

He indulged in no comment, his eyes perceiving a pathetic pleading in her upturned face. Suddenly there came to him a belief that the girl was crying; he could feel the slight tremor of her form against his own. He glanced furtively at her, only to catch the glitter of a falling tear. To her evident distress, his heart made instant and sympathetic response. With all respect influencing the action, his hand closed warmly over the smaller one on his sleeve.

"Little girl," he said, forgetting the shortness of their acquaintance in the deep feeling of the moment, "tell me what the trouble is."

"I suppose you think me an awful creature for saying that," she blurted out, without looking up. "It wasn't ladylike or nice, but—but I simply couldn't help it, Lieut. Brant."

"You mean your sudden determination to carry me home with you?" he asked, relieved to think this might prove the entire difficulty. "Don't let that worry you. Why, I am simply rejoiced at being permitted to go. Do you know, I wanted to request the privilege all the time we were dancing together. But you acted so differently from when we were beneath the vines that I actually lost my nerve."

She looked up and he caught a fleeting glimpse into her unwell eyes.

"I did not wish you to ask me."

"What?" He stopped suddenly. "Why, then, did you make such an announcement to Mrs. Herndon?"

"Oh, that was different," she explained, uneasily. "I had to do that; I had to trust you to help me out, but—but I really wanted to go home alone."

He swept his unbelieving eyes around over the deserted night scene, not knowing what answer to return to so strange an avowal. "Was that what caused you to appear so distant to me in the hall, so vastly different from what you had been before?"

She nodded, but with her gaze still upon the ground.

"Miss Naida," he said, "it would be cowardly for me to attempt to dodge this issue between us. Is it because you do not like me?"

She looked up quickly, the moonlight revealing her flushed face.

"Oh, no, no! you must never think that. I told you I was a girl of moods; under those vines I had one mood, in the hall another. Cannot you understand?"

"Very little," he admitted, "for I am more inclined to believe you are the possessor of a strong will than that you are swayed by moods. Listen. If I thought that a mere senseless mood had caused your peculiar treatment of me to-night, I should feel justified in yielding to a mood also. But I will not lower you to that extent in my estimation; I prefer to believe that you are the true-hearted, frankly spoken girl of the vine shadow. It is this abiding conviction as to your true nature which holds me loyal to a test. Miss Naida, is it now your desire that I leave you?"

He stepped aside, relinquishing her arm, his hat in hand, but she did not move from where he left her.

"It—it hurts me," she faltered, "for I truly desire you to think in that way of me, and I—I don't know what is best to do. If I tell you why I wished to come alone, you might misunderstand; and if I refuse, then you will suspect wrong, and go away despising me."

"I sincerely wish you might repose sufficient confidence in me as a gentleman to believe I never betray a trust never prey into a lady's secret."

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