

BOB HAMPTON of PLACER

By *RAN VALL PARRISH* AUTHOR OF
"WHEN WILD MEN WERE KING" "MY LADY OF THE NORTH"
"HISTORIC ILLINOIS ETC."

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with you until you have some other protector."

She accepted his proffered arm, feeling the constraint in his tone, the formality in his manner, most keenly. An older woman might have resented it, but it only served to sadden and embarrass her. He began speaking of the quiet beauty of the night, but she had no thought of what he was saying.

"Lieut. Brant," she said, at last, "you do not ask me who the man is."

"Certainly not, Miss Naida; it is none of my business."

"I think, perhaps, it might be; the knowledge might help you to understand. It is Bob Hampton."

He stared at her. "The gambler? No wonder, then, your meeting is clandestine."

She replied indignantly, her lips trembling. "He is not a gambler; he is a miner, over in the Black Range. He has not touched a card in two years."

"Oh, reformed has he? And are you the instrument that has worked such a miracle?"

Her eyes fell. "I don't know, but I hope so." Then she glanced up again, wondering at his continued silence. "Don't you understand yet?"

"Only that you are secretly meeting a man of the worst reputation, one known the length and breadth of this border as a gambler and fighter."

"Yes; but—don't you know who I am?"

He smiled grimly, wondering what possible difference that could make. "Certainly; you are Miss Naida Herndon."

"Is he your brother?"

She bowed her head. "Yes; do you understand now why I trust this Bob Hampton?"

"I perhaps might comprehend why you should feel grateful to him, but not why you should thus consent to meet with him clandestinely."

He could not see the deep flush upon her cheeks, but he was not deaf to the pitiful falter in her voice.

"Because he has been good and true to me," she explained, frankly, "better than anybody else in all the world. I don't care what you say, and those other who do not know him, but I believe in him; I think he is a man. They won't let me see him, the Herndons, nor permit him to come to the house. He has not been in Glencaid for two years, until yesterday. The Indian rising has driven all the miners out from the Black Range, and he came down here for no other purpose than to get a glimpse of me, and learn how I was getting on. I saw him over at the hotel just for a moment—Mrs. Guffy handed me a note—and I had only just left him when I encountered you at the door. I wanted to see him again, to talk with him longer, but I couldn't manage to get away from you, and I didn't know what to do. There, I've told it all; do you really think I am so very bad, because—because I like Bob Hampton?"

He stood a moment completely nonplussed, yet compelled to answer.

"I certainly have no right to question your motives," he said, at last, "and I believe your purposes to be above reproach. I wish I might give the same credit to this man Hampton. But, Miss Naida, the world does not often consent to judge us by our own estimation of right and wrong; it prefers to place its own interpretation on acts, and thus often condemns the innocent. Others might not see this as I do, nor have such unquestioning faith in you."

"I know," she admitted, stubbornly, "but I wanted to see him; I have been so lonely for him, and this was the only possible way."

Brant felt a wave of uncontrollable sympathy sweep across him, even while he was beginning to hate this man, who, he felt, had stolen a passage into the innocent heart of a girl not half his age, one knowing little of the ways of the world.

"May I walk beside you until you meet him?" he asked.

"You will not quarrel?"

"No; at least not through any fault of mine."

A few steps in the moonlight and she again took his arm, although they scarcely spoke. At the bridge she withdrew her hand and uttered a peculiar call, and Hampton stepped forth from the concealing bushes, his head bare, his hat in his hand.

"I scarcely thought it could be you," he said, seemingly not altogether satisfied, "as you were accompanied by another."

The younger man took a single step forward, his uniform showing in the moonlight. "Miss Gillis will inform you later why I am here," he said, striving to speak civilly. "You and I, however, have met before—I am Lieut. Brant, of the Seventh Cavalry."

Hampton bowed, his manner somewhat stiff and formal, his face imperturbable.

"I should have left Miss Gillis pre-

vious to her meeting with you," Brant continued, "but I desired to request the privilege of calling upon you tomorrow for a brief interview."

"With pleasure."

"Shall it be at ten?"

"The hour is perfectly satisfactory. You will find me at the hotel."

"You place me under obligations," said Brant, and turned toward the wondering girl. "I will now say good-night, Miss Gillis, and I promise to remember only the pleasant events of this evening."

Their hands met for an instant of warm pressure, and then the two left behind stood motionless and watched him striding along the moonlit road.

**CHAPTER XVII.
The Verge of a Quarrel.**

Brant's mind was a chaos of conflicting emotions, but a single abiding conviction never once left him—he retained implicit faith in her, and he purposed to fight this matter out with Hampton. Even in that crucial hour, had any one ventured to suggest that he was in love with Naida, he would merely have laughed, serenely confident that nothing more than gentlemanly interest swayed his conduct.

Nevertheless, he manifested an unreasonable dislike for Hampton. He had never before felt thus toward this person; indeed, he had possessed a strong man's natural admiration for the other's physical power and cool, determined courage. He now sincerely feared Hampton's power over the innocent mind of the girl, imagining his influence to be much stronger than it really was, and he sought after some suitable means for overcoming it. He alone, among those who might be considered as her true friends, knew of her secret infatuation, and upon him, alone, therefore, rested the burden of her release. It was his heart that drove him into such a decision, although he conceived it then to be the reasoning of the brain.

And so she was Naida Gillis, poor old Gillis' little girl! She stopped suddenly in the road, striving to realize the thought. He had never dreamed of such a consummation, and it staggered him. What was there in common between that outcast, and this well-groomed, frankly spoken young woman? Yet, whoever she was or had been, the remembrance of her could not be conjured out of his brain. He might look back with repugnance upon those others, those misty phantoms of the past, but the vision of his mind, his ever-changeable divinity of the vine shadows, would not become obscured, nor grow less fascinating. Suddenly there occurred to him a recollection of Silent Murphy, and his strange, unguarded remark. What could the fellow have meant? Was there indeed some secret in the life history of this young girl?—some story of shame, perhaps? If so, did Hampton know about it?

Already daylight rested white and solemn over the silent valley, and only a short distance away lay the spot where the crippled scout had made his solitary camp. Almost without volition the young officer turned that way, crossed the stream by means of the log, and clambered up the bank. But it was clear at a glance that Murphy had deserted the spot. Convinced of this, Brant retraced his steps toward the camp of his own troop, now already astray with the duties of early morning. Just in front of his tent he encountered his first sergeant.

"Watson," he questioned, as the latter saluted and stood at attention, "do you know a man called Silent Murphy?"

"The scout? Yes, sir; knew him as long ago as when he was corporal in your father's troop. He was reduced to the ranks for striking an officer."

Brant wheeled in astonishment. "Was he ever a soldier in the Seventh?"

"He was that, for two enlistments, and a mighty tough one; but he was always quick enough for a fight in field or garrison."

"Has he shown himself here at the camp?"

"No, sir; didn't know he was anywhere around. He and I were never very good friends, sir."

The lieutenant remained silent for several moments, endeavoring to perfect some feasible plan.

"Dispatch an order to the telegraph office," he finally commanded, "to inquire if this man Murphy receives any messages there, and if they know where he is stopping. Send an intelligent man and have him discover all the facts he can. When he returns bring him in to me."

He had enjoyed a bath and a shave, and was yet lingering over his coffee, when the two soldiers entered with their report. The sergeant stepped aside, and the orderly, a tall, boyish looking fellow with a pugnacious chin, saluted stiffly.

"Well, Bane," and the officer eyed his trim appearance with manifest approval, "what did you succeed in learning?"

"The operator said this yere Murphy had never bin thar himself, sir,

but there was several messages come for him. One got here this mornin'."

"What becomes of them?"

"They're called fer by another feller, sir."

"Oh, they are! Who?"

"Red Slavin; 'us the name he give me of the other buck."

When the two had disappeared, Brant sat back thinking rapidly. There was a mystery here, and such actions must have a cause. Something either in or about Glencaid was compelling Murphy to keep out of sight—but what? Who? Brant was unable to get it out of his head that all this secrecy centered around Naida. Perhaps Hampton knew; at least he might possess some additional scrap of information which would help to solve the problem. He looked at his watch, and ordered his horse to be saddled.

It did not seem quite so simple now, this projected interview with Hampton, as it had appeared the night before. In the clear light of day, he began to realize the weakness of his position, the fact that he possessed not the smallest right to speak on behalf of Naida Gillis. Nevertheless, the die was cast, and perhaps, provided an open quarrel could be avoided, the meeting might result in good to all concerned.

Hampton welcomed him with distant but marked courtesy, having evidently thought out his own immediate plan of action, and schooled himself accordingly. Standing there, the bright light streaming over them from the open windows, they presented two widely contrasting personalities, yet each exhibited in figure and face the evidences of hard training and iron discipline. Hampton was clothed in black, standing straight as an arrow, his shoulders squared, his head held proudly erect, while his cool gray eyes studied the face of the other as he had been accustomed to survey his opponents at the card table. Brant looked the picture of a soldier on duty, trim, well built, erect, his resolute blue eyes never flinching from the steady gaze bent upon him, his bronzed young face grave from the seriousness of his mission. In both minds the same thought lingered—the vague wonder how much the other knew. The elder man, however, retained a better self-control and was first to break the silence.

"Miss Gillis informed me of your kindness to her last evening," he said, quietly, "and in her behalf I sincerely thank you. Permit me to offer you a chair."

Brant accepted it and sat down, feeling the calm tone of proprietorship in the words of the other as if they had been a blow. His face flushed, yet he spoke firmly. "Possibly I misconstrue your meaning," he said, with some bluntness, determined to reach the gist of the matter at once. "Did Miss Gillis authorize you to thank me for these courtesies?"

Hampton smiled with provoking calmness, holding an unlighted cigar between his fingers. "Why, really, as to that I do not remember. I merely mentioned it as expressing the natural gratitude of us both."

"You speak as if you possessed full authority to express her mind as well as your own."

The other bowed gravely, his face impassive. "My words quite naturally bear some such construction."

The officer hesitated, feeling more doubtful than ever regarding his own position. Chagrined, disarmed, he felt like a prisoner standing bound before his mocking captor. "Then I fear my mission here is useless."

"Entirely so, if you come for the purpose I suspect," said Hampton, sitting erect in his chair, and speaking with more rapid utterance. "To lecture me on morality, and demand my yielding up all influence over this girl—such a mission is assuredly a failure. I have listened with some degree of calmness in this room already to one such address, and surrendered to its reasoning. But permit me to say quite plainly, Lieut. Brant, that you are not the person from whom I will quietly listen to another."

"I had very little expectation that you would."

"You should have had still less, and remained away entirely. However, now that you are here, and the subject broached, it becomes my turn to say something, and to say it clearly. It seems to me you would exhibit far better taste and discrimination for from now on you would cease forcing your attentions upon Miss Gillis."

Brant leaped to his feet, but the other never deigned to alter his position.

"Forcing my attentions!" exclaimed the officer. "God's mercy, man! do you realize what you are saying? I have forced no attentions upon Miss Gillis."

"My reference was rather to future possibilities. Young blood is proverbially hot, and I thought it wise to warn you in time."

Brant stared into that imperturbable face, and somehow the very sight of its calm, inflexible resolve served to clear his own brain. He felt that this cool, self-controlled man was speaking with authority.

"Wait just a moment," he said at last. "I wish this made perfectly clear, and for all time. I met Miss Gillis first through pure accident. She impressed me strongly then, and I confess I have since grown more deeply interested in her personality. I have reasons to suppose my presence not altogether distasteful to her, and she has certainly shown that she reposes confidence in me. Not until late last night did I ever suspect she was the same girl whom we picked up with you out on the desert. It came to me from her own lips and was a total surprise. She revealed her identity in order to justify her proposed clan-

destine meeting with you."

"And hence you request this pleasant conference," broke in Hampton, coolly, "to inform me, from your calm eminence of respectability, that I was no fit companion for such a young and innocent person, and to warn me that you were prepared to act as her protector."

Brant slightly inclined his head.

"I may have had something of that nature in my mind."

"Well, Lieut. Brant," and the older man rose to his feet, his eyes still smiling, "some might be impolite enough to say that it was the conception of a cad, but whatever it was, the tables have unexpectedly turned. Without further reference to my own personal interests in the young lady, which are, however, considerable, there remain other weighty reasons that I am not at liberty to discuss, which make it simply impossible for you to sustain any relationship to Miss Gillis other than that of ordinary social friendship."

"You—you claim the right—"

"I distinctly claim the right, for the reason that I possess the right, and no one has ever yet known me to relinquish a hold once fairly gained. Lieut. Brant, if I am any judge of faces, you are a fighting man by nature as well as profession, but there is no opportunity for your doing any fighting here. This matter is irrevocably settled—Naida Gillis is not for you."

Brant was breathing hard. "Do you mean to insinuate that there is an understanding, an engagement between you?" he faltered, scarcely knowing how best to resent such utterance.

"You may place your own construction upon what I have said," was the quiet answer. "The special relations existing between Miss Gillis and myself chance to be no business of yours. However, I will consent to say this—I do enjoy a relationship to her that gives me complete authority to say what I have said to you. I regret having been obliged by your persistence to speak with such plainness, but this knowledge should prove sufficient to control the actions of a gentleman."

For a moment the soldier did not answer, his emotions far too strong to permit of calm utterance, his lips tightly shut. He felt utterly defeated. "Your language is sufficiently explicit," he acknowledged at last. "I ask pardon for my unwarranted intrusion."

At the door he paused and glanced back toward that motionless figure yet standing with one hand grasping the back of the chair.

"Before I go, permit me to ask a single question," he said, frankly. "I was a friend of old Ben Gillis, and he was a friend of my father before me. Have you any reason to suspect that he was not Naida Gillis' father?"

Hampton took one hasty step forward. "What do you mean?" he exclaimed fiercely, his eyes two coals of fire.

Brant felt that the other's display of irritation gave him an unexpected advantage.

"Nothing that need awaken anger, I am sure. Something caused me to harbor the suspicion, and I naturally supposed you would know about it. Indeed, I wondered if some such knowledge might not account for your very deep interest in keeping her so entirely to yourself."

Hampton's fingers twitched in a nervousness altogether unusual to the man, yet when he spoke his voice was like steel. "Your suspicions are highly interesting, and your cowardly insinuations base. However, if, as I suppose, your purpose is to provoke a quarrel, you will find me quite ready to accommodate you."

An instant they stood thus, eye to eye. Suddenly Brant's memory veered to the girl whose name would be smirched by any blow struck between them, and he forced back the hasty retort burning upon his lips.

"You may be, Mr. Hampton," he said, standing like a statue, his back to the door, "but I am not. As you say, fighting is my trade, yet I have never sought a personal quarrel. Nor is there any cause here, as my only purpose in asking the question was to forewarn you, and her through you, that such a suggestion had been openly made in my hearing. I presume it was a lie, and wished to be able to brand it so."

"By whom?"

"A fellow known as Silent Murphy, a government scout."

"I have heard of him. Where is he?"

"He claimed to be here waiting orders from Custer. He had camp up the creek two days ago, but is keeping well out of sight for some reason. Telegrams have been received for him at the office, but another man has called for them."

"Who?"

"Red Slavin."

"The cur!" said Hampton. "I reckon

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