

# BOB HAMPTON of PLACER

By RANDALL PARRISH AUTHOR OF  
"WHEN WILDERNESS WAS KING" "BY LADY OF THE NORTH"  
"HISTORIC ILLINOIS, ETC."



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him, the long lashes shadowing the expression of her lowered eyes. In spite of deep prejudice she felt impelled to like this man; he accomplished things, and he didn't talk.

It was nothing more serious than a hard and toilsome climb after that, a continuous struggle testing every muscle, straining every sinew, causing both to sink down again and again, panting and exhausted, no longer stimulated by imminent peril. The narrow cleft they followed led somewhere away from the exposed front of the precipice, yet arose steep and jagged before them. It was bridged finally by a cedar trunk, which Hampton wrenched from out its rocky foothold, and the two crept cautiously forward, to emerge where the sunlight rested golden at the summit. They sank face downward in the short grass, barely conscious that they had finally won their desperate passage.

Slowly Hampton succeeded in uplifting his tired body and his reeling head, until he could sit partially upright and gaze unsteadily about. The girl yet remained motionless at his feet, her thick hair, a mass of red gold in the sunshine, completely concealing her face, her slender figure quivering to sobs of utter exhaustion. Before them stretched the barren plain, brown, desolate, drear, offering in all its wide expanse no hopeful promise of rescue. With hand partially shading his aching eyes from the blinding glare, the man studied its every exposed feature, his face hardening again into lines of stern determination. The girl stirred from her position, flinging back her heavy hair with one hand, and looking up into his face with eyes that read at once his disappointment.

"Have—have you any water left?" she asked at last, her lips parched and burning as if from fever.

He shook the canteen dangling forgotten at his side. "There may be a few drops," he said, handing it to her, although scarcely removing his fixed gaze from off that dreary plain. "We shall be obliged to make those trees yonder; there ought to be water there in plenty, and possibly we may strike a trail."

There was nothing more said between them. Like two automatons, they started off across the parched grass, the heat waves rising and falling as they stumbled forward. Neither realized until then how thoroughly that hard climb up the rocks, the strain of continued peril, and the long abstinence from food had sapped their strength, yet to remain where they were meant certain death; all hope found its center amid those distant beckoning trees.

No one can explain later how such deeds are ever accomplished; how the tortured soul controls physical weakness, and compels strained sinews to perform the miracle of action when all ambition has died. Hampton surely must have both seen and known, for he kept his direction, yet never afterwards did he regain any clear memory of it.

## CHAPTER IV. On the Naked Plain.

It was 218 miles, as the crow flies, between old Fort Bethune and the rock ford crossing the Bear Water, every foot of that dreary, treeless distance Indian-haunted, the favorite skulking place and hunting ground of the restless Sioux. Winter and summer this wide expanse had to be suspiciously patrolled by numerous military scouting parties, anxious to learn more regarding the uncertain whereabouts of wandering bands and the purposes of malcontents.

One such company, composed of a dozen mounted infantrymen, accompanied by three Cree trailers, rode slowly and wearily across the brown exposed uplands down into the longer, greener grass of the wide valley bottom, until they emerged upon a barely perceptible trail which wound away in snake-like twistings, toward those high, barren hills whose blue masses were darkly silhouetted against the western sky. The animals moved steadily forward, reluctant and weary, their heads drooping dejectedly, their distended nostrils red and quivering, the oily perspiration streaking their dusted sides. The tired men, half blinded by the glare, lolled heavily in their deep cavalry saddles, with encrusted eyes staring moodily ahead.

Riding alone, and slightly in advance of the main body, his mount a rangy, broad-chested roan, streaked with alkali dust, the drooping head telling plainly of wearied muscles, was the officer in command. He was a pleasant-faced, stalwart young fellow, with the trim figure of a trained athlete, possessing a square chin smoothly shaven, his intelligent blue eyes half concealed beneath his hat brim, which had been drawn low to shade them from the glare, one hand pressing upon his saddle holster as he leaned over to rest. No insignia of rank served to distinguish him from those equally dusty fellows plodding gloomily behind, but a broad stripe of yellow running down the seams of his

trousers, together with his high boots, bespoke the cavalry service, while the front of his battered campaign hat bore the decorations of two crossed sabers, with a gilded "7" prominent between. His attire was completed by a coarse blue shirt, unbuttoned at the throat, about which had been loosely knotted a darker colored silk handkerchief, and across the back of the saddle was fastened a uniform jacket, the single shoulder strap revealed presenting the plain yellow of a second lieutenant.

Attaining to the summit of a slight knoll, whence a somewhat wider vista lay outspread, he partially turned his face toward the men straggling along in the rear, while his hand swept across the dreary scene.

"If that line of trees over yonder indicates the course of the Bear Water, Carson," he questioned quietly, "where are we expected to hit the trail leading down to the ford?"

The sergeant, thus addressed, a little stocky fellow wearing a closely clipped gray moustache, spurred his exhausted horse into a brief trot, and drew up short by the officer's side, his heavy eyes scanning the vague distance, even while his right hand was uplifted in perfunctory salute.

"There's no trail I know about along this bank, sir," he replied respectfully, "but the big cottonwood with the dead branch forking out at the top is the ford guide."

They rode down in moody silence into the next depression, and began wearily climbing the long hill opposite, apparently the last before coming directly down the banks of the stream. As his barely moving horse topped the uneven summit, the lieutenant suddenly drew in his rein, and uttering an exclamation of surprise, bent forward, staring intently down in his immediate front. For a single instant he appeared to doubt the evidence of his own eyes; then he swung hastily from the saddle, all weariness forgotten.

"My God!" he cried, sharply, his eyes suspiciously sweeping the bare slope. "There are two bodies lying here—white people!"

They lay all doubled up in the coarse grass, exactly as they had fallen, the man resting face downward, the slender figure of the girl clasped vice-like in his arms, with her tightly closed eyes upturned toward the glaring sun. Never once questioning but that he was confronting the closing scene of a grewsome tragedy, the thoroughly aroused lieutenant dropped upon his knees beside them, his eyes already moist with sympathy, his anxious fingers feeling for a possible heart-beat. A moment of hushed, breathless suspense followed, and then he began flinging terse, eager commands across his shoulder to where his men were clustered.

"Here! Carson, Perry, Ronk, lay hold quick, and break this fellow's clasp," he cried, briefly. "The girl retains a spark of life yet, but the man's arms fairly crush her."

With all the rigidity of actual death those clutching hands held their tenacious grip, but the aroused soldiers wrenched the interlaced fingers apart with every tenderness possible in such emergency, shocked at noting the expression of intense agony stamped upon the man's face when thus exposed to view. The whole terrible story was engraven there—how he had toiled, agonized, suffered, before finally yielding to the inevitable and plunging forward in unconsciousness, written as legibly as though by a pen. Carson, who in his long service had witnessed much of death and suffering, bent tenderly above him, seeking for some faint evidence of lingering life. The anxious lieutenant, bareheaded under the hot sun-glare, strode hastily across from beside the unconscious man, breathing girl, and stood gazing doubtfully down upon them.

"Any life, sergeant?" he demanded, his voice rendered husky by sympathy.

"He doesn't seem entirely gone, sir," and Carson glanced up into the officer's face, his own eyes filled with feeling. "I can distinguish just a wee bit of breathing, but it's so weak the pulse hardly stirs."

"What do you make of it?"

"Starving at the bottom, sir. The only thing I see now is to get them down to water and food."

The young officer glanced swiftly about him across that dreary picture of sun-burnt, desolate prairie stretching in every direction, his eyes pausing slightly as they surveyed the tops of the distant cottonwoods.

"Sling blankets between your horses," he commanded, decisively. "Move quickly, lads, and we may save one of these lives yet."

As if by some magic discipline the rude, effective litters were rapidly made ready, and the two seemingly lifeless bodies gently lifted from off the ground and deposited carefully within. Down the long, brown slope they advanced slowly, a soldier grasping the rein and walking at each horse's head, the supporting blankets, securely fastened about the saddle pommels, swaying gently to the measured tread of the trained animals. Be-

neath the protecting shadows of the first group of cottonwoods, almost on the banks of the muddy Bear Water, the little party let down their senseless burdens, and began once more their seemingly hopeless efforts at resuscitation. A fire was hastily kindled from dried and broken branches, and broth was made, which was forced through teeth that had to be pried open. Water was used unsparingly, the soldiers working with feverish eagerness, inspired by the constant admonitions of their officer, as well as their own curiosity to learn the facts hidden behind this tragedy.

It was the dark eyes of the girl which opened first, instantly closing again as the glaring light swept into them. Then slowly, and with wonder-



"Now Miss, Just Take a Sip of This."

ment, she gazed up into those strange, rough faces surrounding her, pausing in her first survey to rest her glance on the sympathetic countenance of the young lieutenant, who held her half reclining upon his arm.

"Here," he exclaimed, kindly, interpreting her glance as one of fear, "you are all right and perfectly safe now, with friends to care for you. Peters, bring another cup of that broth. Now, Miss, just take a sip and two of this, and your strength will come back in a jiffy. What was the trouble? Starving?"

She did exactly as he bade her, every movement mechanical, her eyes fastened upon his face.

"I—I reckon that was partly it," she responded at last, her voice faint and husky. Then her glance wandered away, and finally rested upon another little kneeling group a few yards farther down stream. A look of fresh intelligence swept into her face.

"Is that him?" she questioned, tremblingly. "Is—is he dead?"

"He wasn't when we first got here, but mightly near gone, I'm afraid. I've been working over you ever since."

She shook herself free and sat weakly up, her lips tight compressed, her eyes apparently blind to all save that motionless body she could barely distinguish. "Let me tell you, that fellow's a man, just the same; the gamest, nerviest man I ever saw. I reckon he got hit, too, though he never said nothing about it. That's his style."

The deeply interested lieutenant removed his watchful eyes from off his charge just long enough to glance inquiringly across his shoulder. "Has the man any signs of a wound, sergeant?" he asked, loudly.

"A mighty ugly slug in the shoulder, sir; has bled scandalous, but I guess it's the very luck that's goin' to save him; seems now to be comin' out all right."

The officer's brows knitted savagely. "It begins to look as if this might be some of our business. What happened? Indians?"

"Yes."

"How far away?"

"I don't know. They caught us in a canyon somewhere out yonder, maybe three or four days ago; there was a lot killed, some of them soldiers. My dad was shot, and then that night he got me out up the rocks, and he—he was carrying me in his arms when I—I fainted. I saw there was blood on his shirt, and it was dripping down on the grass as he walked. That's about all I know."

"Who is the man? What's his name?"

The girl looked squarely into the lieutenant's eyes, and, for some reason which she could never clearly explain even to herself, lied calmly. "I don't know; I never asked."

Sergeant Carson rose stiffly from his knees beside the extended figure and strode heavily across toward where they were sitting, lifting his hand in soldierly salute, his heels clicking as he brought them sharply together in military precision.

"The fellow is getting his eyes open, sir," he reported, "and is breathing more regular. Purty weak yit, but he'll come round in time." He stared curiously down at the girl now sitting up unsupported, while a sudden look of surprised recognition swept across his face.

"Great guns!" he exclaimed, eagerly, "but I know you. You're old man Gillis' gal from Bethune, ain't ye?"

"Yes," she acknowledged simply, "but he's dead."

"Never mind, little girl," the lieutenant said, with boyish sympathy. "I knew Gillis, and, now the sergeant has spoken, I remember you quite well. Thought all the time your face was familiar, but couldn't quite decide where I had seen you before. So poor old Gillis has gone, and you are left all alone in the world! Well, he was an old soldier, could not have hoped to live much longer anyway, and would rather go fighting at the end. We'll take you back with us to Bethune, and the ladies of the garrison will look after you."

The recumbent figure lying a few yards away half lifted itself upon one elbow, and Hampton's face, white and haggard, stared uncertainly across the open space. For an instant his gaze dwelt upon the crossed sabers shielding the gilded "7" on the front of the lieutenant's scouting hat, then settled upon the face of the girl. With one hand pressed against the grass he pushed himself slowly up until he sat fronting them, his teeth clinched tight, his gray eyes gleaming feverishly in their sunken sockets.

"I'll be damned if you will!" he said, hoarsely. "She's my girl now."

## CHAPTER V. A New Proposition.

To one in the least inclined toward fastidiousness, the Miners' Home at Glencaid would scarcely appeal as a desirable place for long-continued residence. But such a one would have had small choice in the matter, as it chanced to be the only hotel there. The Miners' Home was unquestionably unique as regards architectural details, having been constructed by sections, in accordance with the rapid development of the camp, and enjoyed the further distinction—there being only two others equally stylish in town—of being built of sawn plank, although, greatly to the regret of its unfortunate occupants, lack of seasoning had resulted in wide cracks in both walls and stairway, while strict privacy within the chambers was long ago a mere reminiscence. Without the Miners' Home put up a good front, and was in reality the most pretentious structure gracing the single cluttered street of Glencaid. Directly across the street, its front a perfect blaze of glass, stood invitingly the Occidental saloon, but the Widow Guffy, who operated the Miners' Home with a strong hand, possessed an antipathy to strong liquor, which successfully kept all suspicion of intoxicating drink absent from those sacredly guarded precincts, except as her transient guests imported it internally.

Mr. Hampton during the course of his somewhat erratic career had previously passed several eventful weeks in Glencaid. He was neither unknown nor unappreciated at the Miners' Home, and having on previous occasions established his reputation as a spender, experienced little difficulty now in procuring promptly the very best accommodation which the house afforded. That this arrangement was accomplished somewhat to the present discomfort of two vociferous eastern tourists did not greatly interfere with his pleasurable interest in the situation.

"Send those two fellows in here to argue it out," he said, languidly, after listening disgustedly to their loud lamentations in the hallway, and addressing his remarks to Mrs. Guffy, who had glanced into the room to be again assured regarding his comfort, and to express her deep regret over the unseemly racket. "The girl has fallen asleep, and I'm getting tired of hearing so much noise."

"No, be livings, an' ye don't do nuthin' of that sort, Bob," returned the widow, good-naturedly, busying herself with a dust-rag. "This is me own house, an' I've tended ter the folks I them sort er fellers afore. There'll be no more bother this time. Besides, it's a peaceful house O'm rummin', an' O' know ye'r way of sittin' them things. It's too strenuous ye are, Misther Hampton. And what did ye do wid the young lady. O' make bould to ask?"

Hampton carelessly waved his hand toward the rear room, the door of which stood ajar, and blew a thick cloud of smoke into the air, his eyes continuing to gaze dreamily through the open window toward the distant hills.

"Who's running the game over at the Occidental?" he asked, professionally.

"Red Slavin, bad cess to him!" and her eyes regarded her questioner with renewed anxiety. "But sure now, Bob, ye mustn't think of playin' yit awhile. Yer nerves are in no fit shape, an' won't be fer a wake yit."

He made no direct reply, and she hung about, flapping the dust-rag uneasily.

"An' what did ye mane ter be doin' wid the young gurl?" she questioned at last, in womanly curiosity.

Hampton wheeled about on the hard chair, and regarded her quizzingly. "Mrs. Guffy," he said, slowly, "you've been a mother to me, and it would certainly be unkind not to give you a straight tip. Do? Why, take care of her, of course. What else would you expect of one possessing my kindly disposition and well-known motives of philanthropy? Can it be that I have resided with you, off and on, for ten years past without your ever realizing the fond yearnings of my heart? Mrs. Guffy, I shall make her the heiress to my millions; I shall marry her off to some eastern nabob, and thus attain to that high position in society I am so well fitted to adorn—sure, and what else were you expecting, Mrs. Guffy?"

"A lolkely story," with a sniff of disbelief. "They tell me she's old Gillis' daughter over to Bethune."

"They tell you, do they?" a sudden gleam of anger darkening his gray eyes. "Who tell ye?"

"Sure, Bob, an' that's nuthin' ter git mad about, so fur as I kin see. The story is in everybody's mouth. It was thim sojers what brought ye in that tould most ov it, but the lieutenant—Brant of the Seventh cavalry, no less,—who took dinner here afore he wint back after the dead bodies, give me her name."

"Brant of the Seventh?" He faced her fairly now, his face again haggard and gray, all the slight gleam of fun gone out of it. "Was that the lad's name?"

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