

BOB HAMPTON of PLACER

By RANPALL PARRISH AUTHOR OF
"WHEN WILDEBEASTS WALKING" "MY LADY OF THE NORTH"
"HISTORIC TELLING" ETC.

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prettier than that, even, the way I remember her best, with her hair all hanging down, coming to tuck me into bed at night. Someway that's how I always seem to see her.

The man drew a deep breath, and snapped shut the locket, yet still retained it in his hand. "Is—is she dead?" he questioned, and his voice trembled in spite of his steel nerves. "Yes, in St. Louis; dad took me there with him two years ago, and I saw her grave."

"Dad? Do you mean old Gillis?" She nodded, beginning dimly to wonder why he should speak so fiercely and stare at her in that odd way. He seemed to choke twice before he could ask the next question.

"Did he—old Gillis, I mean—claim to be your father, or her husband?"

"No, I don't reckon he ever did, but he gave me that picture, and told me she was my mother. I always lived with him, and called him dad. I reckon he liked it, and he was mighty good to me. We were at Randolph a long time, and since then he's been post-trader at Bethune. That's all I know about it, for dad never talked very much, and he used to get mad when I asked him questions."

Hampton dropped the locket from his grasp and arose to his feet. For several minutes he stood with his back toward her, apparently gazing down the valley, his jaw set, his dimmed eyes seeing nothing. Slowly the color came creeping into his face, and his hands unclenched. Then he wheeled about, and looked down upon her, completely restored to his old nature.

"Then it seems that it is just you and I, Kid, who have got to settle this little affair," he announced, firmly. "I'll have my say about it, and then you can uncork your feelings. I rather imagine I haven't very much legal right in the premises, but I've got a sort of moral grip on you by reason of having pulled you out alive from that canyon yonder, and I propose to play this game to the limit. You say your mother is dead, and the man who raised you is dead, and so far as either of us know, there isn't a soul anywhere on earth who possesses any claim over you, or any desire to have. Then, naturally, the whole jack-pot is up to me, provided I've got the cards. Now, Kid, waving your prejudice aside, I ain't just exactly the best man in this world to bring up a girl like you and make a lady out of her. I thought yesterday that maybe we might manage to hitch along together for awhile, but I've got a different think coming to-day. There's no use disguising the truth. I'm a gambler, something of a fighter on the side, and folks don't say anything too pleasing about my peaceful disposition around these settlements; I haven't any home, and mighty few friends, and the few I have got are nothing to boast about. I reckon there's a cause for it all. So, considering everything, I'm about the poorest proposition ever heard of to start a young ladies' seminary. The Lord knows, old Gillis was bad enough, but I'm a damned sight worse. Now, some woman has got to take you in hand, and I reckon I've found the right one."

"Goin' to get married, Bob?" "Not this year; it's hardly become so serious as that; but I'm going to find you a good home here, and I'm going to put up plenty of stuff, so that they'll take care of you all right and proper."

The dark eyes never wavered as they looked steadily into the gray ones, but the chin quivered slightly. "I reckon I'd rather try it alone," she announced stubbornly. "Maybe I might have stood it with you, Bob Hampton, but a woman is the limit." "I expect it will go rather hard at first, Kid," he admitted craftily, "but I think you might try it a while just to sort of please me."

"Who—who is she?" doubtfully. "Mrs. Herndon, wife of the superintendent of the 'Golden Rule' mine; and he waded his hand toward the distant houses. "They tell me she's a mighty fine woman."

"Oh, they do? Then somebody's been stirring you up about me, have they? I thought that was about the way of it. Somebody wants to reform me, I reckon. Well, maybe I won't be reformed. Who was it, Bob?"

"The Presbyterian missionary," he confessed reluctantly, "a nifty little chap named Wynkoop; he came in to see me last night while you were asleep." He faced her open scorn unshrinkingly, his mind fully decided, and clinging to one thought with all the tenacity of his nature.

"A preacher!" her voice vibrant with derision, "a preacher! Well, of all things, Bob Hampton! You led around by the nose in that way! Did he want you to bring me to Sunday school? A preacher! And I suppose the fellow expects to turn me over to one of his flock for religious instruction. He'll have you studying theology inside of a year. A preacher! Oh, Lord, and you agreed! Well, I won't go; so there!"

"As I understand the affair," Hampton continued, as she paused for breath, "it was Lieut. Brant who suggested the idea of his coming to me. Brant knew Gillis, and remembered you, and realizing your unpleasant situation, thought such an arrangement would be for your benefit."

"Brant!" she burst forth in renewed anger; "he did, did he! The putty-faced dandy! I used to see him at Bethune, and you can bet he never bothered his head about me then. No, and he didn't even know me out yonder, until after the sergeant spoke up. What business has that fellow got planning what I shall do?"

Hampton made no attempt to answer. It was better to let her indignation die out naturally, and so he asked a question. "What is this Brant doing at Bethune? There is no cavalry stationed there."



"Good Lord! I Haven't Been Begging to Stick with You, Have I?"

"She glanced up quickly, interested by the sudden change in his voice. 'I heard dad say he was kept there on some special detail. His regiment is stationed at Fort Lincoln, somewhere farther north. He used to come down and talk with dad evenings, because daddy saw service in the Seventh when it was first organized after the war.'"

"Did you—did you ever hear either of them say anything about Maj. Alfred Brant? He must have been this lad's father."

"No, I never heard much they said. Did you know him?"

"The father, yes, but that was years ago. Come, Kid, all this is only ancient history, and just as well forgotten. Now, you are a sensible girl, when your temper don't get away with you, and I am simply going to leave this matter to your better judgment. Will you go to Mrs. Herndon's, and find out how you like it? You needn't stop there an hour if she isn't good to you, but you ought not to want to remain with me, and grow up like a rough boy."

"You—you really want me to go, don't you?"

"Yes, I want you to go. It's a chance for you, Kid, and there isn't a bit of a show in the kind of a life I lead. I never have been in love with myself, and only took to it in the first place because the devil happened to drive me that way. The Lord knows I don't want to lead any one else through such a muck. So it is a try?"

The look of defiance faded slowly out of her face as she stood gravely regarding him. The man was in deadly earnest, and she felt the quiet insistence of his manner.

"You bet, if you put it that way," she consented, simply, "but I reckon that Mrs. Herndon is likely to wish I hadn't."

Together, yet scarcely exchanging another word, the two retraced their steps slowly down the steep trail leading toward the little town in the valley.

CHAPTER VII.

"I've Come Here to Live."

Widely as these two companions differed in temperament and experience, it would be impossible to decide which felt the greater uneasiness at the prospect immediately before them. The girl openly rebellious, the man extremely doubtful, with reluctant steps they approached that tall, homely, yellow house—outwardly the most pretentious in Glencald.

They were so completely opposite, these two, that more than one chance passer-by glanced curiously toward them as they picked their way onward through the red dust. Hampton, slender yet firmly knit, his body held erect as though trained to the profession of arms, his features finely chiselled, with threads of gray hair beginning to show conspicuously about the temples. His attire of fashionable cut black cloth, and his immaculate linen, white neat and unobtrusive, yet appeared extremely unusual in that careless land of clay-baked overalls and dingy woollens. Beside him, in vivid contrast, the girl trudged in her heavy shoes and bedraggled skirts, her sullen eyes fastened doggedly on the road, her hair showing ragged and disreputable in the brilliant sunshine. Hampton himself could not remain altogether indifferent to the contrast.

"You look a little rough, Kid, for a society call," he said. "If there was any shebang in this mud-hole of a town that kept any women's things on sale fit to look at, I'd be tempted to fix you up a bit."

"Well, I'm glad of it," she responded, grimly. "I hope I look so blame tough that woman won't say a civil word to us. You can bet I ain't going to strain myself to please the likes of her."

"You certainly exhibit no symptoms of doing so," he admitted, frankly. "But you might, at least, have washed your face and fixed your hair."

She flashed an angry glance at him, stopping in the middle of the road, her head flung back as though ready for battle. Then, as if by some swift magic of emotion, her expression changed. "And so you're ashamed of me, are you?" she asked, her voice sharp but unsteady. "Ashamed to be seen walking with me? I know you are! But I tell you, Mr. Bob Hampton, you won't be the next time. And what's more, you just don't need to traipse along another step with me now. I don't want you. I reckon I ain't very much afraid of tackling this Presbyterian woman all alone."

She swung off fiercely, and the man chuckled softly as he followed, watchfully, through the circling, red dust cloud created by her hasty feet. The truth is, Mr. Hampton possessed troubles and scruples of his own in connection with this contemplated call. He had never met the lady, but he retained some memory of the husband as having been associated with a strenuous poker game at Placer, in which he also held a prominent place, and it would seem scarcely possible that the wife did not know whose bullet had turned her for some weeks into a sick nurse. A cordial reception could hardly be anticipated, and Hampton mentally braced himself for the worst.

It was a cheerless looking house, painted a garish yellow, having staring windows, and devoid of a front porch, or slightest attempt at shade to render its uncomely front less unattractive. Had the matter been left at that moment to his own decision, this glimpse of the house would have turned him both back, but the girl unhesitatingly pressed forward and turned defiantly in through the gateless opening. He followed in silence along the narrow foot-path bordered by weeds, and stood back while she stepped boldly up on the rude stone slab and rapped sharply against the warped and sagging door. A moment they stood thus waiting with no response from within. Once she glanced suspiciously around at him, only to wheel back instantly and once more apply her knuckles to the wood. Before he had conjured up something worth saying the door was partially opened, and a rounded dumpling of a woman, having rosy cheeks, her hair iron-gray, her blue eyes half smiling in uncertain welcome, looked out upon them questioningly.

"I've come to live here," announced the girl, sullenly. "That is, if I like it." The woman continued to gaze at her as if tempted to laugh outright, then the pleasant blue eyes hardened as their vision swept beyond toward Hampton.

"It is extremely kind of you, I'm sure," she said at last. "Why is it I am to be thus honored?" The girl backed partially off the doorstep, her hair flapping in the wind, her cheeks flushed.

"Oh, you needn't put on so much style about it," she blurted out. "You're Mrs. Herndon, ain't you? Well, then, this is the place where I was sent; but I reckon you ain't no more particular about it than I am. There's others."

"Who sent you to me?" and Mrs. Herndon came forth into the sunshine.

"The preacher."

"Oh, Mr. Wynkoop; then you must be the homeless girl whom Lieut. Brant brought in the other day. Why did you not say so at first? You may come in, my child."

There was a sympathetic tenderness apparent now in the tones of her voice, which the girl was swift to perceive and respond to, yet she held back, her independence unshaken. With the quick intuition of a woman, Mrs. Herndon bent down, placing one hand on the defiant shoulder.

"I did not understand, at first, my dear," she said, soothingly, "or I should never have spoken as I did. Some very strange callers come here. But you are truly welcome. I had a daughter once; she must have been nearly your age when God took her. Won't you come in?"

While thus speaking she never once glanced toward the man standing in silence beyond, yet as the two passed through the doorway together he followed, unasked. Once within the plainly furnished room, and with her arm about the girl's waist, the lines about her mouth hardened. "I do not recall extending my invitation to you," she said, coldly.

He remained standing, hat in hand, his face shadowed, his eyes picturing deep perplexity.

"For the intrusion I offer my apology," he replied, humbly; "but you see I—I feel responsible for this young woman. She—sort of fell to my care when none of her own people were left to look after her. I only came to show her the way, and to say that I stand ready to pay you well to see to her a bit, and show her how to get hold of the right things."

"Indeed!" and Mrs. Herndon's voice was not altogether pleasant. "I understood she was entirely alone and friendless. Are you that man who brought her out of the canyon?" Hampton bowed as though half ashamed of acknowledging the act.

"Oh! then I know you are," she continued, unhesitatingly. "You are a gambler and a bar-room rough. I won't touch a penny of your money. I

told Mr. Wynkoop that I shouldn't, but that I would endeavor to do my Christian duty by this poor girl. He was to bring her here himself, and keep you away."

The man smiled slightly, not in the least disconcerted by her plain speech. "Probably we departed from the hotel somewhat earlier than the minister anticipated," he explained, quietly, his old ease of manner returning in face of such open opposition. "I greatly regret your evident prejudice, madam, and can only say that I have more confidence in you than you appear to have in me. I shall certainly discover some means by which I may do my part in shaping this girl's future, but in the meanwhile will relieve you of my undesired presence."

He stepped without into the glare of the sunlight, feeling utterly careless as to the woman who had affronted him, yet somewhat hurt on seeing that the girl had not once lifted her downcast eyes to his face. Yet he had scarcely taken three steps toward the road before she was beside him, her hand upon his sleeve.

"I won't stay!" she exclaimed, fiercely, "I won't, Bob Hampton. I'd rather go with you than be good."

His sensitive face flushed with delight, but he looked gravely down into her indignant eyes. "Oh, yes, you will, Kid," and his hand touched her roughened hair caressingly. "She's a good, kind woman, all right, and I don't blame her for not liking my style. 'Do—do you really want me to stick it out here, Bob?'"

It was no small struggle for him to say so, for he was beginning to comprehend just what this separation meant. She was more to him than he had ever supposed, more to him than she had even been an hour before, and now he understood clearly that from this moment they must ever run farther apart—her life tending upward, his down. Yet there was but one decision possible. Then he answered, "This is your best chance, little girl, and I want you to stay and fight it out."

Their eyes met, each dimly realizing, although in a totally different way, that there was a moment of important decision. Mrs. Herndon darkened the doorway and stood looking out.

"Well, Mr. Bob Hampton," she questioned, plainly, "what is this going to be?"

He glanced toward her, slightly lifting his hat, and promptly releasing the girl's clinging hand.

"Miss Gillis consents to remain," he announced shortly, and denying himself so much as another glance at his companion, strode down the narrow path to the road. A moment the girl's eyes followed him through the dust cloud, a single tear stealing down her cheek. Only a short week ago she had utterly despised this man, now he had become truly more to her than any one else in the wide, wide world. Then Mrs. Herndon came forth quietly and led the girl, now sobbing bitterly, within the cool shadows of the house.

CHAPTER VIII.

A Last Revolt.

It proved a restless day, and a sufficiently unpleasant one, for Mr. Hampton. For a number of years he had been diligently training himself in the school of cynicism, endeavoring to persuade himself that he did not in the least care what others thought, nor how his own career ended; impelling himself to constant recklessness in life and thought. He had thus successfully built up a wall between the present and that past which long haunted his lonely moments, and had finally decided that it was hermetically sealed. Yet now, this odd child of a girl, this wail whom he had plucked from the jaws of death, had overturned this carefully constructed barrier as if it had been originally built of mere cardboard, and he was compelled again to see himself, loathe himself, just as he had in those past years.

One thing he grasped clearly,—the girl should be given her chance nothing in his life must ever again soil her or lower her ideals. Mrs. Herndon was right, and he realized it; neither his presence nor his money were fit to influence her future. He swore between his clinched teeth, his face grown haggard. The sun's rays bridged the slowly darkening valley with cords of red gold, and the man pulled himself to his feet by gripping the root of a tree. He realized that he had been sitting there for hours, and that he was hungry.

Down beneath, amid the fast awakening noise and bustle of early evening, the long discipline of the gambler reassured itself—he got back his nerve. It was Bob Hampton, cool, resourceful, sarcastic of speech, quick of temper, who greeted the loungers about the hotel, and who sat, with his back to the wall, in the little dining-room, watchful of all others present. And it was Bob Hampton who strolled carelessly out upon the darkened porch an hour later, leaving a roar of laughter behind him, and an enemy as well. Little he cared for that, however, in his present mood, and he stood there, amid the black shadows, looking contemptuously down upon the stream of coatless humanity trooping past on pleasure bent, the blue smoke circling his head, his gray eyes glowing half angrily. Suddenly he leaned forward, clutching the rail in quick surprise.

"Kid," he exclaimed, harshly, "what does this mean? What are you doing alone here?"

She stopped instantly and glanced up, her face flushing in the light streaming forth from the open door of the Occidental.

"I reckon I'm alone here because I want to be," she returned, defiantly. "I ain't no slave. How do you get up there?"

He extended his hand, and drew her up beside him into the shaded corner. "Well," he said, "tell me the truth."

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