

BOB HAMPTON of PLACER

By **RAMM PARRISH** AUTHOR OF
"WHEN WILDERNESS WAS KING" "MY LADY OF THE NORTH"
"HISTORIC ILLINOIS ETC."

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they may prove unduly harsh. I—I feel—that these applications came through the special intercession of a certain young lady, and I am anxious not to hurt her feelings in any way, or to discourage her enthusiasm."

"Oh, I see! Would you mind telling me the names of the two gentlemen?"

"Mr. John Moffat and Mr. William McNeil. Unfortunately, I know neither personally."

"And the young lady?"

"A Miss Phoebe Spencer; she has but lately arrived from the east to take charge of our new school—a most interesting and charming young woman, and she is proving of great assistance to me in church work."

The lieutenant cleared his throat and emitted a sigh of suddenly awakened memory. "I fear I can offer you no advice, for if, as I begin to suspect, though she sought most bravely to avoid the issue and dispatch me upon a false trail,—she prove to be that same fascinating young person I met this morning, my entire sympathies are with the gentlemen concerned. I might even be strongly tempted to do likewise at her solicitation."

"You? Why, you arrived only this morning, and do you mean to say you have met already?"

"I at least suspect as much, for there can scarcely exist two in this town who will fill the description. My memory holds the vision of a fair young face, vivacious, ever changing in its expression, yet constantly both pliant and innocent; a perfect wealth of hair, a pair of serious eyes hiding mysteries within their depths, and lips which seem made to kiss. Tell me, is not this a fairly drawn portrait of your Miss Spencer?"

The minister gripped his hands nervously together. "Your description is not unjust; indeed, it is quite accurate from a mere outer point of view, yet beneath her vivacious manner I have found her thoughtful, and possessed of deep spiritual yearnings. In the east she was a communicant of the Episcopal church."

Brant did not answer him at once. He was studying the minister's down-cast face; but when the latter finally turned to depart, he inquired, "Do you expect to attend the reception to-morrow evening?"

Wynkoop stammered slightly. "I—I could hardly refuse under the circumstances; the committee sent me an especially urgent invitation, and I understand there is to be no dancing until late. One cannot be too straight-laced out here."

"Oh, never mind apologizing. I see no reason why you need hesitate to attend. I merely wondered if you could procure me an invitation."

"Did she tell you about it?"

"Well, she delicately hinted at it, and, you know, things are pretty slow here in a social way. She merely suggested that I might possibly meet her again there."

"Of course; it is given in her honor."

"So I understood, although she sought to deceive me into the belief that she was not the lady. We met purely by accident, you understand, and I am desirous of a more formal presentation."

The minister drew in his breath sharply, but the clasp of his extended hand was not devoid of warmth. "I will have a card of invitation sent you at the camp. The committee will be very glad of your presence; only I warn you frankly regarding the lady, that competition will be strong."

"Oh, so far as that is concerned I have not yet entered the running," laughed Brant, in affected carelessness, "although I must confess my sporting proclivities are somewhat aroused."

He watched the minister walking rapidly away, a short, erect figure, appearing slender in his severely cut black cloth. "Poor little chap," he muttered, regretfully. "He's hard hit. Still, they say all's fair in love and war."

CHAPTER XIV. In Honor of Miss Spencer.

Mr. Jack Moffat, president of the Bachelor Miners' Pleasure club, had embraced the idea of a reception for Miss Spencer with unbounded enthusiasm. Indeed, the earliest conception of such an event found birth within his fertile brain, and from the first he determined upon making it the most notable social function ever known in that portion of the territory.

The large space above the Occidental was secured for the occasion, the obstructing subdivisions knocked away, an entrance constructed with an outside stairway leading up from a vacant lot, and the passage connecting the saloon boarded up. Incidentally, Mr. Moffat took occasion to announce that if "any snoozer got drunk and came up them stairs" he would be thrown bodily out of a window. Mr. McNeil, who was observing the preliminary proceedings with deep interest from a pile of lumber opposite, sarcastically intimated that under such circumstances the attendance of club members would be necessarily limited. Mr. Moffat's reply to it was manifestly in-

possible to quote literally. Mrs. Guffy was employed to provide the requisite refreshments in the palatial dining-hall of the hotel, while Buck Mason, the vigilant town marshal, popularly supposed to know intimately the face of every "rounder" in the territory, agreed to collect the cards of invitation at the door, and bar out obnoxious visitors.

The invited guests arrived from the sparsely settled regions round about, not a few riding for a hundred miles over the hard trails. The majority came early, arrayed in whatever apparel their limited wardrobes could supply, but ready for any wild frolic. The men outnumbered the gentler sex five to one, but every feminine representative within a radius of about 50 miles, whose respectability could possibly pass muster before the investigations of a not too critical invitation committee, was present.

Lieut. Brant was somewhat delayed in reaching the scene. Certain military requirements were largely responsible for this delay, and he had patiently wrestled with an unsatisfactory toilet, mentally exhorting a service which would not permit the transportation of dress uniforms while on scouting detail.

The dance was already in full swing when he finally pushed his way through the idle loungers gathered about the door, and gained entrance to the hall. Many glanced curiously at him, attracted by the glitter of his uniform, but he recognized none among them, and therefore passed steadily

with her hand. "Who is that fine-looking young officer?" she questioned softly, yet without venturing to remove her glance from his face.

Mr. Wynkoop started. "Oh, exactly; I had forgotten my mission. He has requested an introduction." He drew the lieutenant forward. "Lieut. Brant, Miss Spencer."

The officer bowed, a slight shadow of disappointment in his eyes. The lady was unquestionably attractive, her face animated, her reception most cordial, yet she was not the maiden of the dark, fathomless eyes and the wealth of auburn hair.

"Such a pleasure to meet you," exclaimed Miss Spencer. "Do you know, lieutenant, that actually I have never before had the privilege of meeting an officer of the army. Your appearance supplies the one touch of color that was lacking to make the picture complete. Mr. Moffat has done so much to make me realize the breadth of western experience, and now, I do so hope, you will some time find opportunity to recount to me some of your army exploits."

The lieutenant smiled. "Most gladly; yet just now, I confess, the music invites me, and I am sufficiently bold to request your company upon the floor."

Miss Spencer sighed regretfully. "Why, really, Lieut. Brant, I scarcely see how I possibly can. I have already refused so many this evening, and now I almost believe I must be under direct obligation to some one of those gentlemen. Still, hesitatingly, 'your being a total stranger here must be taken into consideration. Mr. Moffat, Mr. McNeil, Mr. Mason, surely you will grant me release this once?'"

There was no verbal response to the appeal, only an uneasy movement; but her period of waiting was extremely brief.

"Oh, I knew you would; you have all been so kind and considerate." She arose, resting her daintily gloved hand upon Brant's blue sleeve, her pleased eyes smiling up confidently into his. Then with a charming smile, "Oh, Mr. Wynkoop, I have decided to claim your escort to supper. You do not care?"

Wynkoop bowed, his face like a poppy.

"I thought you would not mind obliging me in this. Come, lieutenant."

Miss Spencer, when she desired to be, was a most vivacious companion, and always an excellent dancer. Brant easily succumbed to her sway, and became, for the time being, a victim to her charms. To Brant the experience brought back fond memories of his last cadet ball at the Point, and he hesitated to break the mystic spell with abrupt questioning. Curiosity, however, finally mastered his reticence.

"Miss Spencer," he asked, "may I inquire if you possess such a phenomenon as a 'star' pupil?"

The lady laughed merrily, but her expression became somewhat puzzled. "Really, what a very strange question! Why, not unless it might be little Sammy Worrell; he can certainly use the longest words I ever heard of outside a dictionary. Why, may I ask? Are you especially interested in prodigies?"

"Oh, not in the least; certainly not in little Sammy Worrell. The person I had reference to chances to be a young woman, having dark eyes, and a wealth of auburn hair. We met quite by accident, and the sole clue I now possess to her identity is a claim she advanced to being your 'star' pupil."

Miss Spencer sighed somewhat regretfully, and her eyes fell. "I fear it must have been Naida, from your description. But she is scarcely more than a child. Surely, lieutenant, it cannot be possible that you have become interested in her?"

He smiled pleasantly. "At least I am, is she not? I was somewhat impressed with her evident originality and hoped to renew our slight acquaintanceship here in more formal manner. She is your 'star' pupil, then?"

"Why, she is not really in my school at all, but I outline the studies she pursues at home, and lend her such books as I consider best adapted for her reading. She is such a strange girl!"

"Indeed? She appeared to me to be extremely unconventional, with a decided tendency for mischief. Is that your meaning?"

"Partially. She manages to do everything in a different way from other people. Her mind seems peculiarly independent, and she is so unreservedly western in her ways and language. But I was referring rather to her taste in books—she devours everything."

"You mean as a student?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so; at least she appears to possess the faculty of absorbing every bit of information, like a sponge. Sometimes she actually startles me with her odd questions. I really believe Mr. Wynkoop seeks to avoid meeting her, she has shocked him so frequently in religious matters."

"Does she make light of his faith?"

"Oh, no, not that exactly, at least it is not her intention. But she wants to know everything—why we believe this and why we believe that, doctrines which no one else ever dreams of questioning, and he cannot seem to make them clear to her mind. Some of her questions are so irrelevant as to be positively shocking to a spiritually minded person."

They lapsed into silence, swinging easily to the guidance of the music. His face was grave and thoughtful. This picture just drawn of the perverse Naida had not greatly lowered her in his estimation, although he felt instinctively that Miss Spencer was not altogether pleased with his evident interest in another.

"It is very interesting to know that you two met in so unconventional a way," she ventured, softly, "and so shy of her not even to mention it to me. We are room-mates, you know, and consequently quite intimate, although she possesses many peculiar characteristics which I cannot in the least approve. I shall certainly do my best to guide her aright. Would you mind giving me some details of your meeting?"

For a moment he hesitated, feeling that if the girl had not seen fit to confide her adventure to this particular friend, it was hardly his place to do so. Then, remembering that he had already said enough to arouse curiosity, which might easily be developed into suspicion, he determined his course. In a few words the brief story was frankly told, and apparently proved quite amusing to Miss Spencer.

"Oh, that was Naida, beyond a doubt," she exclaimed, with a laugh of satisfaction. "It is all so characteristic of her. I only wonder how she chanced to guess your name; but really the girl appears to possess some peculiar gift in thus discerning facts hidden from others."

The music coming to a pause, they slowly traversed the room.

"I presume, then, she is not present?" he said, quietly.

Miss Spencer glanced into his face, the grave tone making her apprehensive that she might have gone too far.

"She was here earlier in the evening, but now that you remind me of it, I do not recall having noticed her of late. But, really, lieutenant, it is no part of my duty to chaperon the young girl. Mrs. Herndon could probably inform you of her present whereabouts."

Miss Spencer was conscious of the sting of failure, and her face flushed with vexation. "It is extremely close in here, don't you think?" she complained. "And I was so careless as to mislay my fan. I feel almost suffocated."

"Did you leave it at home?" he questioned. "Possibly I might discover a substitute somewhere in the room."

"Oh, no; I would never think of troubling you to such an extent. No doubt this feeling of lassitude will pass away shortly. It was very foolish of me, but I left the fan with my wraps at the hotel. It can be recovered when we go across to supper."

"It will be no more than a pleasure to recover it for you," he protested, gallantly.

The stairs leading down from the hall entrance were shrouded in darkness, the street below nearly deserted of loiterers, although lights streamed forth resplendently from the undraped windows of the Occidental and the hotel opposite. Assisted in his search by Mrs. Guffy, the officer succeeded in recovering the lost fan, and started to return. Just without the hotel door, under the confusing shadows of the wide porch, he came suddenly face to face with a young woman, the unexpected encounter a mutual and embarrassing surprise.

CHAPTER XV.
An Unusual Girl.

The girl was without wraps, her dress of some light, fleecy material fitting her slender figure exquisitely, her head uncovered; within her eyes Brant imagined he could detect the glint of tears. She spoke first, her voice faltering slightly.

"Will you kindly permit me to pass?"

He stepped instantly to one side, bowing as he did so.

"I beg your pardon for such seeming rudeness," he said, gravely. "I have been seeking you all the evening, yet this unexpected meeting caught me quite unawares."

"You have been seeking me? That is strange. For what reason, pray?"

"To achieve what you were once kind enough to suggest as possible—the formality of an introduction. It would seem, however, that fate makes our meetings informal."

"That is your fault, not mine."

"I gladly assume all responsibility, if you will only waive the formality and accept my friendship."

Her face seemed to lighten, while her lips twitched as if suppressing a smile. "You are very forgetful. Did I not tell you that we Presbyterians are never guilty of such indiscretions?"

"I believe you did, but I doubt your complete surrender to the creed."

"Doubt! Only our second time of meeting and you already venture to doubt! This can scarcely be construed into a compliment, I fear."

"Yet to my mind it may prove the very highest type of compliment," he returned, reassured by her manner. "For a certain degree of independence in both thought and action is highly commendable. Indeed, I am going to be bold enough to add that it was these very attributes that awakened my interest in you."

"Oh, indeed; you cause me to blush already. My frankness, I fear, bids fair to cost me all my friends, and I may even go beyond your pardon, if the perverse spirit of my nature so move me."

"The risk of such a catastrophe is mine, and I would gladly dare that much to get away from conventional commonplace. One advantage of such meetings as ours is an immediate insight into each other's deeper nature. For one I shall sincerely rejoice if you will permit the good fortune of our chance meeting to be alone sponsor for our future friendship. Will you not say yes?"

She looked at him with greater earnestness, her young face sobered by the words spoken. Whatever else she may have seen revealed there, the countenance bending slightly toward her was a serious, manly one, inspiring respect, awakening confidence.

"And I do agree," she said, extending her hand in a girlish impulse. "It will, at least, be a new experience and therefore worth the trial. I will even

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