

BOB HAMPTON of PLACER

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



carry dispatches, you say? Well, there are plenty of good men in my troop who will volunteer to take them on. You need rest."

"Not much," said Hampton. "I'm fit enough, or shall be as soon as I get food. Good Lord, boy, I am not done up yet, by a long way! It's the cursed loneliness out yonder," he swept his hand toward the horizon, "and the having to care for him that has broken my heart. He went that way clear back on the Powder, and it's been a fight between us ever since. I'll be all right now if you lads will only look after him. This is going to reach Custer, and I'll take it!" He flung back his ragged coat, his hand on the dispatch-bag. "I've earned the right."

Brant reached forth his hand cordially. "That's true; you have. What's more, if you're able to make the trip, there is no one here who will attempt to stop you. But now tell me how this thing happened. I want to know the story before we get in."

For a moment Hampton remained silent, his thoughtful gaze on the nearby videttes, his hands leaning heavily upon the saddle pommel. Perhaps he did not remember clearly, possibly he could not instantly decide just how much of that story to tell. Brant suspected this last to be his difficulty, and he spoke impulsively.

"Hampton, there has been trouble and misunderstanding between us, but that's all past and gone now. I sincerely believe in your purpose of right, and I ask you to trust me. Either of us would give his life if need were, to be of real service to a little girl back yonder in the hills. I don't know what you are to her; I don't ask. I know she has every confidence in you, and that is enough. Now, I want to do what is right with both of you, and if you have a word to say to me regarding this matter, I'll treat it confidentially. This trip with Murphy has some bearing upon Naida Gillis, has it not?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me the story?"

The thoughtful gray eyes looked at him long and searchingly. "Brant, do you love that girl?"

Just as unwaveringly the blue eyes returned the look. "I do. I have asked her to become my wife."

"And her answer?"

"She said no; that a dead man was between us."

"Is that all you know?"

The younger man bent his head, his face grave and perplexed. "Practically all."

Hampton wet his dry lips with his tongue, his breath quickening.

"And in that she was right," he said at last, his eyes lowered to the ground. "I will tell you why. It was the father of Naida Gillis who was convicted of the murder of Maj. Brant."

"Oh, my father? Is she Capt. Nolan's daughter? But you say 'convicted.' Was there ever any doubt? Do you question his being guilty?"

Hampton pointed in silence to the hideous creature behind them. "That man could tell, but he has gone mad."

Brant endeavored to speak, but the words would not come; his brain seemed paralyzed. Hampton held himself under better control.

"I have confidence, Lieut. Brant, in your honesty," he began, gravely, "and I believe you will strive to do whatever is best for her, if anything should happen to me out yonder. But for the possibility of my being knocked out, I wouldn't talk about this, not even to you. The affair is a long way from being straightened out so as to make a pleasant story, but I'll give you all you actually require to know in order to make it clear to her, provided I shouldn't come back. You see, she doesn't know very much more than you do—only what I was obliged to tell to keep her from getting too closely entangled with you. Maybe I ought to have given her the full story before I started on this trip. I've since wished I had, but you see, I never dreamed it was going to end here, on the Big Horn; besides, I didn't have the nerve."

"You see, Brant, I feel that I simply have to carry these dispatches through. I have a pride in giving them to Custer myself, because of the trouble I've had in getting them here. But perhaps I may not come back, and in that case there wouldn't be anyone living to tell her the truth. It seems to me that there is going to be a big fight somewhere in these hills before long. So I want to leave these private papers with you until I come back. It will relieve my mind to know they are safe; if I don't come, then I want you to open them and do whatever you decide is best for the little girl. You will do that, won't you?"

He handed over a long manila envelope securely sealed, and the younger man accepted it, noticing that it was unaddressed before depositing it safely in an inner pocket of his fatigue jacket.

"Certainly, Hampton," he said. "Is that all?"

"All except what I am going to tell you now regarding Murphy. There is no use my attempting to explain ex-

actly how I chanced to find out all these things, for they came to me little by little during several years. I knew Nolan, and I knew your father, and I had reason to doubt the guilt of the captain, in spite of the verdict of the jury that condemned him. In fact, I knew at the time, although it was not in my power to prove it, that the two principal witnesses against Nolan lied. I thought I could guess why, but we drifted apart, and finally I lost all track of every one connected with the affair. Then I happened to pick up that girl down in the canyon beyond the Bear Water, and pulled her out alive just because she chanced to be of that sex, and I couldn't stand to see her fall into Indian clutches. I didn't feel any special interest in her at the time, supposing she belonged to Old Gillis, but she somehow grew on me—she's that kind, you know; and when I discovered, purely by accident, that she was Capt. Nolan's girl, but that it all had been kept from her, I just naturally made up my mind I'd dig out the truth if I possibly could, for her sake. The fact is, I began to think a lot about her—not the way you do, you understand; I'm getting too old for that, and have known too much about women,—but maybe somewhat as a father might feel. Anyhow, I wanted to give her a chance, a square deal, so that she wouldn't be ashamed of her own name if ever she found out what it was."

"About that time I fell foul of Murphy and Slavin there in Glencald. I never got my eyes on Murphy, you know, and Slavin was so changed by that big red beard that I failed to recognize him. But their actions aroused my suspicions, and I went after them good and hard. I wanted to find out what they knew, and why those lies were told on Nolan at the trial. I had an idea they could tell me. So, for a starter I tackled Slavin, supposing we were alone, and I was pumping the facts out of him successfully by holding a gun under his nose, and occasionally joggling his memory, when this fellow Murphy got excited, and chanced into the game, but happened to nip his partner instead of me. In the course of our little scuffle I chanced to catch a glimpse of the fellow's right hand, and it had a scar on the back of it that looked mighty familiar. I had seen it before, and I wanted to see it again. So, when I got out of that scrape, and the doctor had dug a stray bullet out of my anatomy, there didn't seem to be any one left for me to chase excepting Murphy, for Slavin was dead. I wasn't exactly sure he was the owner of that scar, but I had my suspicions and wanted to verify them. Having struck his trail, I reached Cheyenne just about four hours after he left there with these dispatches for the Big Horn. I caught up with the fellow on the south bank of the Belle Fourche, and being well aware that no threat or gun play would ever force him to confess the truth, I undertook to frighten him by trickery. I brought along some drawing-paper and drew your father's picture in phosphorus and gave him the benefit in the dark. That caught Murphy all right, and everything was coming my way. He threw up his hands and even agreed to come in here with me and tell the whole story, but the poor fellow's brain couldn't stand the strain of the scare I had given him. He went raving mad on the Powder; he jumped on me while I was asleep, and since then every mile has been a little hell. That's the whole of it to date."

They were up with the pack-train by now, and the cavalymen gazed with interest at the new arrivals. Several among them seemed to recognize Murphy, and crowded about his horse with rough expressions of sympathy. Brant scarcely glanced at them, his grave eyes on Hampton's stern face.

"And what is it you wish me to do?"

"Take care of Murphy. Don't let him remain alone for a minute. If he has any return of reason, compel him to talk. He knows you, and will be as greatly frightened at your presence and knowledge as at mine. Besides, you have fully as much at stake as anyone, for in no other way can the existing barrier between Naida and yourself be broken down."

Insisting that now he felt perfectly fit for any service, the impatient Hampton was quickly supplied with the necessary food and clothing, while Murphy, grown violently abusive, was strapped on a litter between two mules, a guard on either side. Brant rode with the civilian on a sharp trot as far as the head of the pack-train, endeavoring to the very last to persuade the wearied man to relinquish this work to another.

"Foster," he said to the sergeant in command of the advance, "did you chance to notice just what coulee Custer turned into when his column swung to the right?"

"I think it must have been the second coulee, sir; where you see that bunch of trees. We was a long ways back, but I could see the boys plain enough as they come out on the bluff up there. Some of 'em waved their

hats back at us. Is this man goin' after them, sir?"

"Yes, he has dispatches from Cheyenne."

"Well he ought to have no trouble findin' the trail. It ought to be 'bout plain as a road back in God's country, sir, for there were more than 200 horses, and they'd leave a good mark even on hard ground."

Brant held out his hand. "I'll certainly do all in my power, Hampton, to bring this out right. You can rely on that, and I will be faithful to the little girl."

The two men clasped hands, their eyes filled with mutual confidence. Then Hampton touched spurs to his horse and galloped swiftly forward.

CHAPTER XXXII. The Fight in the Valley.

Far below, in the heart of the sunny depression bordering the left bank of the Little Big Horn, the stalwart troopers under Reno's command gazed upon the steep bluff to wave farewell to their comrades disappearing to the right. Last of all, Custer halted his horse an instant, silhouetted against the blue sky, and swung his hat before spurring out of sight.

The plan of battle was most simple and direct. It involved a nearly simultaneous attack upon the vast Indian village from below and above, success depending altogether upon the prompt co-operation of the separate detachments. Scarcely had Custer's slender column of horsemen vanished across the summit before Reno's command advanced, trotting down the valley, the Arkika scouts in the lead. They had been chosen to strike the first blow, to force their way into the lower village, and thus to draw the defending warriors to their front, while Custer's men were to charge upon the rear.

A half-mile, a mile, Reno's troops rode, with no sound breaking the silence but the pounding of hoofs, the tinkle of accoutrements. Then, rounding a sharp projection of earth and rock, the scattered lodges of the Indian village already partially revealed to those in advance, the riders were brought to sudden halt by a fierce crackling of rifles from rock and ravine. Men fell cursing, and the frightened horses swerving, their riders struggling madly with their mounts, the column thrown into momentary confusion. But the surprised cavalymen, quailing beneath the hot fire poured into them, rallied to the shouts of their officers, and swung into a slender battle front, stretching out their thin line from the bank of the river to the sharp uplift of the western bluffs. Scarcely 150 white troopers waited to stem as best they might that fierce onrush of 1,200 battle-crazed braves.

For an almost breathless space those mingled hordes of Sioux and Cheyennes hesitated to drive straight home their death-blow. They knew those silent men in the blue shirts, knew they died hard. Upon that slight pause pivoted the fate of the day; upon it hung the lives of those other men riding boldly and trustfully across the sunlit ridges above. "Audacity, always audacity," that is the accepted motto for a cavalymen. And he the cause what it may, it was here that Maj. Reno failed. In that supreme instant he was guilty of hesitancy, doubt, delay. He chose defense in preference to attack, dallied where he should have acted. The observing savages, gathering courage from his apparent weakness, burst forth in resistless torrent against the slender, unsupported line, turned his flank by one fierce charge, and hurled the struggling troopers back with a rush into the narrow strip of timber bordering the river.

The whole narrow valley seemed to swarm with braves; they poured forth from sheltering coulees and shadowed ravines; they dashed down in countless numbers from the distant village. Custer, now far away behind the bluffs, and almost beyond sound of the firing, was utterly ignored. Every savage chief knew exactly where that column was, but it could wait its turn.

In leaderless effort to break away from that swift-gathering cordon, before the red, remorseless folds should close tighter and crush them to death, the troopers, half of them already dismounted, burst from cover in an endeavor to attain the shelter of the bluffs. The deadly Indian rifles flamed in their faces, and they were hurled back, a mere fleeing mob, searching for nothing in that moment of terror but a possible passageway across the stream. Through some rare providence of God, they chanced to strike the banks at a spot where the river proved fordable. They plunged headlong in, officers and men commingled, the Indian bullets churning up the water on every side. The loss in that wild retreat (which Reno later called a "charge") was heavy, the effect demoralizing; but those who escaped found a spot well suited for defense. Even as they swung down from off their wounded, panting horses and flung themselves flat upon their faces to sweep with hastily leveled carbines the river banks below, Benteen came trotting gallantly down the valley to their aid, his troopers fresh and eager to be thrown forward on the firing-line. The worst was over, and like maddened lions, the rallied soldiers of the Seventh, cursing their folly, turned to strike and slay.

A line of skirmishers was hastily thrown forward along the edge of the bluff, while volunteers, urged by the agonized cries of the wounded, endeavored vainly to procure a supply of water from the river. Again and again they made the effort, only to be driven back by the deadly Indian rifle fire. By three o'clock, although the majority of the savages had departed down the river, enough remained to keep up a galling fire, and hold Reno

strictly on the defensive.

As the men lay exposed to the continuous sniping fire, above the surrounding din were borne to their ears the reports of distant guns. It came distinctly from the northward, growing heavier and more continuous. None among them doubted its ominous meaning. Custer was already engaged in hot action at the right of the Indian village. Why were they kept lying there in idleness? Why were they not pushed forward to do their part? They looked into each other's faces. God! They were 300 now; they could sweep aside like chaff that fringe of red skirmishers if only they got the word! Officer after officer, unable to restrain his impatience, strode back across the bluff summit, amid whistling bullets, and personally begged the major to speak the one word which should hurl them to the rescue. They cried like women, they swore through clinched teeth, they openly exhibited their contempt for such a commander, yet the discipline of army service made active disobedience impossible. They went reluctantly back, as helpless as children.

It was four o'clock, the shadows of the western bluffs already darkening the river bank. Suddenly a faint cheer ran along the lines, and the men lifted themselves to gaze up the river. Urging the tired animals to a trot, the strong hand of a trooper grasping every halter-strap, Brant was swinging his long pack-train up the smoke-wreathed valley. The outriding flankers exchanged constant shots with the skulking savages hiding in every ravine and coulee. Pausing only to protect their wounded, fighting their way step by step, N troop ran the gantlet and came charging into the cheering lines with every pound of their treasure safe. Weir of D, whose dismounted troopers held that portion of the line, strode a pace forward to greet the leader, and as the extended heads of the officers met, there echoed down to them from the north the reports of two heavy volleys, fired in rapid succession. The sounds were clear, distinctly audible even above the uproar of the valley. The heavy eyes of the two soldiers met, their dust-streaked faces flushed.

"That was a signal, Custer's signal for help!" the younger man cried, impulsively, his voice full of agony. "For God's sake, Weir, what are you fellows waiting here for?"

The other uttered a groan, his hand flung in contempt back toward the bluff summit. "The cowardly fool won't move; he's whipped to death now."

"Reno, you mean? Whipped? You haven't lost 20 men. Is this the Seventh?—skulking here under cover while Custer begs help? Doesn't the man know? Doesn't he understand? By heaven, I'll face him myself! I'll make him act, even if I have to damn him to his face."

He swung his horse with a jerk to the left, but even as the spurs touched, Weir grasped the taut rein firmly.

"It's no use, Brant. It's been done; we've all been at him. He's simply lost his head. Know? Of course he knows. Martini struck us just below here, as we were coming in, with a message from Custer. It would have stirred the blood of anyone but him—Oh, God! it's terrible."

"A message? What was it?"

"Cook wrote it, and addressed it to Benteen. It read: 'Come on. Big village. Be quick. Bring packs.' And then, 'P. S.—Bring packs.' That means they want ammunition badly; they're fighting to the death out yonder, and they need powder. Oh, the coward!"

Brant's eyes ran down the waiting line of his own men, sitting their saddles beside the halted pack animals.

He leaned over and dropped one hand heavily on Weir's shoulder. "The rest of you can do as you please, but N troop is going to take those ammunition packs to Custer if there's any possible way to get through, orders or no orders." He straightened up in the saddle, and his voice sounded down the wearied line like the blast of a trumpet.

"Attention! N troop! Right face; dress. Number four bring forward the ammunition packs. No, leave the others where they are; move lively, men!"

He watched them swing like magic into formation, their dust-begrimed faces lighting up with animation. They knew their officer, and this meant business.

"Unslung carbines—load!"

Weir, the veteran soldier, glanced down that steady line of ready troopers, and then back to Brant's face. "Do you mean it? Are you going up those bluffs? Good Heavens, man, it will mean a court-martial."

"Custer commands the Seventh. I command the pack-train," said Brant. "His orders are to bring up the packs. Perhaps I can't get through alone, but I'll try. Better a court-martial than to fall those men out there. Going? Of course I'm going. Into line—take intervals—forward!"

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