Bob Hampton of Placer.

By RANDALL PARCISH, Author of "When Wilderness Was King," "My Lady of the North," "Historic Illinois," Etc.

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(Continued From Last Issue.)

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 up 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 Arikara 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 swerved, their riders struggling madly with their mounts, the column thrown into momentary confusion. But the surprised cavalrymen, 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 cavalryman. And be 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 snipping 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 hands 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.

Brant Was Swinging His Pack-Train Up the Smoke-Wreathed Valley.

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.

"Unsling 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 courtmartial."

"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 courtmartial than to fail those men out there. Going? Of course I'm going. Into line—take intervals—forward!"

"Attention, D troop!" It was Weir's voice, eager and determined now. Like an undammed current his orders rang out above the uproar, and in a moment the gallant troopers of N and D, some on foot, some in saddle, were rushing up the face of the bluff, their officers leading, the precious ammunition packs at the center, all alike scrambling for the summit, in spite of the crackling of Indian rifles from every side. Panting, breathless from the hard climb, their carbines spitting fire while the rapidly massing savages began circling their exposed position, the little band fought their way forward a hundred yards. Then they halted, blocked by the numbers barring their path, glancing back anxiously in hope that their effort would encourage others to join them. They could do it; they could do it if only the rest of the boys would come. They poured in their volleys and waited. But Reno made no move. Weir and Brant, determined to hold every inch thus gained, threw the dismounted men on their faces behind every projection of earth, and encircled the ridge with flame. If they could not advance, they would not be driven back. Messenger after messenger, taking life in hand, was sent skurrying down the bluff, to beg reinforcements to push on for the rescue, swearing it was possible. But it was after five o'clock before Reno moved. Then cautiously he advanced his column toward where N and D troops yet held desperately to the exposed ridge. He came too late. That distant firing had ceased, and all need for further advance had ended. Scarcely had reinforcements attained the summit before the torrent of savagery burst screeching on their front.

From point to point the grim struggle raged, till nightfall wrought partial cessation. The wearied troopers stretched out their lines so as to protect the packs and the field hospital, threw themselves on the ground, digging rifle-pits with knives and tin pans. Not until nine o'clock did the Indian fire slacken, and then the village became a scene of savage revel, the wild yelling plainly audible to the soldiers above.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The Old Regiment.

By the time Hampton swung up the coulee, he had dismissed from his attention everything but the business that had brought him there. He experienced no fear, no premonition of coming disaster, yet the reawakened plainsman in him kept him sufficiently wary and cautious. He possessed a soldier's proud confidence in his regiment—the supposition that the old fighting Seventh could be defeated was impossible; the Indian did not ride those uplands who could do the deed! Then there came to him a nameless dread, that instinctive shrinking which a proud, sensitive man must ever feel at having to face his old companions with the shadow of a crime between. In his memory he saw once more a low-ceilinged room, having a table extending down the center, with grave-faced men, dressed in the full uniform of the service, looking at him amid a silence like unto death; and at the head sat a man with long fair hair and mustache, his proud eyes never to be forgotten. Now, after silent years, he was going to look into those accusing eyes again. He pressed his hand against his forehead, his body trembled; then he braced himself for the interview, and the shuddering coward in him shrank back.

Away to the left something was moving, a dim, shapeless dash of color. It might be Benteen, but of Reno's columns he could perceive nothing, nor anything of Custer's excepting that broad track across the prairies marked by his horses' hoofs. This track Hampton followed, pressing his fresh mount to increased speed, confident that no Indian spies would be loitering so closely in the rear of that body of cavalry, and becoming fearful lest the attack should occur before he could arrive.

He dipped over a sharp ridge and came suddenly upon the rear guard. They were a little squad of dusty, brown-faced troopers, who instantly wheeled into line at sound of approaching hoofs, the barrels of their lowered carbines glistening in the sun. With a swing of the hand and a hoarse shout of "Dispatches!" he was beyond them, bending low over his saddle pommel, his eyes on the dust cloud of the moving column. The extended line of horsemen, riding in columns of four, came to a sudden halt, and he raced on. A little squad of officers, several of their number dismounted, were out in front, standing grouped just beyond the summit of a slight elevation, apparently looking off into the valley through some cleft in the bluff beyond. Standing among these, Hampton perceived the long fair hair, and the erect figure clad in the well-known frontier costume, of the man he sought—the proud, dashing leader of light cavalry, that beau ideal of the sabreur, the one he dreaded most, the one he loved best—Custer. The commander stood, field-glasses in hand, pointing down into the valley, and the dispatch bearer, reigning in his horse, his lips white but resolute, trotted straight up the slope toward him. Custer wheeled, annoyed at the interruption, and Hampton swung down from the saddle, his rein flung across his arm, took a single step forward, lifting his hand in salute, and held forth the sealed packet.

"Dispatches, sir," he said, simply, standing motionless as a statue.

The commander, barely glancing toward him, instantly tore open the long official envelope and ran his eyes over the dispatch amid a hush in the conversation.

"Gentlemen," he commented to the little group gathered about him, yet without glancing up from the paper in his hand, "Crook was defeated over on the Rosebud the 17th, and forced to retire. That will account for the unexpected number of hostiles fronting us up here, Cook; but the greater the task, the greater the glory. Ah, I thought as much. I am advised by the department to keep in close touch with Terry and Gibbons, and to hold off from making a direct attack until infantry can arrive in support. Rather late in the day, I take it, when we are already within easy rifle-shot. I see nothing in these orders to interfere with our present plans, nor any military necessity for playing hide and seek all summer in these hills. That looks like a big village down yonder, but I have led the dandy Seventh into others just as large."

He stopped speaking, and glanced up inquiringly into the face of the silent messenger, apparently mistaking him for one of his own men.

"Where did you get this?"

"Cheyenne, sir."

"What! Do you mean to say you brought it through from there?"

"Silent Murphy carried it as far as the Powder river. He went crazy there, and I was compelled to strap him. I brought it the rest of the way."

"Where is Murphy?"

"Back with the pack train, sir. I got him through alive, but entirely gone in the head."

"Run across many hostiles in that region?"

"They were thick this side the Rosebud; all bucks and traveling north."

"Sioux?"

"Mostly, sir; but I saw one band wearing Cheyenne war bonnets."

A puzzled look slowly crept into the strong face of the abrupt questioner, his stern, commanding eyes studying the man standing motionless before him, with freshly awakened interest. The gaze of the other faltered, then came back courageously.

"I recognize you now," Custer said, quietly. "Am I to understand you are again in the service?"

"My presence here is purely accidental, Gen. Custer." The opportunity came to me to do this work, and I very gladly accepted the privilege."

The commander hesitated, scarcely knowing what he might be justified in saying to this man.

"It's a brave deed, well performed," he said at last, with soldierly cordiality, "although I can hardly offer you a fitting reward."

"There is little I desire," he replied, slowly, "and that is to be permitted to ride once more into action in the ranks of the Seventh."

The true-hearted, impulsive, manly soldier fronting him reddened to the roots of his fair hair, his proud eyes softening.

"Spoken like a true soldier," he exclaimed, a new warmth in his voice. "You shall have your wish. Take position in Calhoun's troop yonder."

Hampton turned quietly away, leading his horse, yet had scarcely advanced three yards before Custer halted him.

"I shall be pleased to talk with you again after the fight," he said, briefly, as though half doubting the propriety of such words.

The other bowed, his face instantly brightening. "I thank you sincerely."

The perplexed commander stood motionless, gazing after the receding figure, his face grown grave and thoughtful. Then he turned to the wondering adjutant beside him.

"You never knew him, did you, Cook?"

"I think not, sir; who is he?"

"Capt Nolan—you have heard the story."

"Is that so?" he exclaimed, in evident surprise. "He has a manly face."

"Ay, and he was as fine a soldier as ever fought under a flag," declared Custer, frankly. "Poor devil. The hardest service I was ever called upon to perform was the day we broke him. I wonder if Calhoun will recognize the face; they were good friends once."

(Continued in Next Issue.)

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