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BOB HAMPTON of PLACER

By RANDALL PARRISH AUTHOR OF "WHEN WILDERNESS MESSING" "MY LADY OF THE NORTH" "HISTORIC ILLINOIS" ETC.

CHAPTER XVIII. A Slight Interruption.

The young officer passed slowly down the dark staircase, his mind still bewildered by the result of the interview. His feelings toward Hampton had been materially changed. He found it impossible to nurse a dislike which seemingly had no real cause for existence.

Yet Brant was far from being satisfied. Hampton had not even advanced a direct claim; he had dodged the real issue, leaving the soldier in the dark regarding his relationship to Naida, and erecting a barrier between the other two. It was a masterpiece of defense, puzzling, irritating, seemingly impassable. From the consideration of it all, Brant emerged with but one thought clearly defined—whoever she might prove to be, whatever was her present connection with Hampton, he loved this dark-eyed, auburn-haired girl. He knew it now, and never again could he doubt it. He paused, half inclined to retrace his steps and have the matter out. He turned just in time to face a dazzling vision of fluffly lace and flossy hair beside him in the dimly lighted hall.

"Oh, Lieutenant Brant!" and the vision clung to his arm tenderly. "It is such a relief to find that you are unhurt. Did—did you kill him?"

Brant stared. "I—I fear I scarcely comprehend, Miss Spencer. I have certainly taken no one's life. What can you mean?"

"Oh, I am so glad; and Naida will be, too. I must go right back and tell the poor girl, for she is nearly distracted. Oh, Lieutenant, isn't it the most romantic situation that ever was? And he is such a mysterious character!"

"To whom do you refer? Really, I am quite in the dark."

"Why, Mr. Hampton, of course. Oh, I know all about it. Naida felt so badly over your meeting this morning that I just compelled her to confide her whole story to me. And didn't you fight at all?"

"Most assuredly not," and Brant's eyes began to exhibit amusement; "indeed, we parted quite friendly."

"I told Naida I thought you would. People don't take such things so seriously nowadays, do they? But Naida is such a child and so full of romantic notions, that she worried terribly about it. Isn't it perfectly delightful what he is going to do for her?"

"I am sure I do not know."

"He wants to send her east to a boarding school and give her a fine education. Do you know, Lieutenant, I am simply dying to see him? he is such a perfectly splendid western character."

"It would afford me pleasure to present you," and the soldier's downcast face brightened with anticipation.

"Do—do you really think it would be proper? But they do things so differently out here, don't they? Oh, I wish you would."

Feeling somewhat doubtful as to what might be the result, Brant knocked upon the door he had just closed, and, in response to the voice within, opened it. Hampton sat upon the chair by the window, but as his eyes caught a glimpse of the returned soldier with a woman standing beside him, he instantly rose to his feet.

"Mr. Hampton," said Brant, "I trust I may be pardoned for again troubling you, but this is Miss Spencer, a great admirer of western life, who is desirous of making your acquaintance."

Miss Spencer swept gracefully forward, her cheeks flushed, her hand extended. "Oh, Mr. Hampton, I have so wished to meet with you ever since I first read your name in Aunt Lydia's letters—Mrs. Herndon is my aunt, you know—and all about that awful time you had with those Indians. You see, I am Naida Gillis's most particular friend, and she tells me so much about you. She is such a dear, sweet girl! She felt so badly this morning over your meeting with Lieut. Brant, fearing you might quarrel! It was such a relief to find him unhurt, but I felt that I must see you also, so as to relieve Naida's mind entirely."

"I most certainly appreciate your frankly expressed interest, Miss Spencer," he said, standing with her hand still retained in his, "and am exceedingly glad there is one residing in this community to whom my peculiar merits are apparent."

Miss Spencer sparkled instantly, her cheeks rosy. "I do wish you would some time tell me about your exploits. Why, Mr. Hampton, perhaps if you were to call upon me, you might see Naida, too. I wish you knew Mr. Moffat, but as you don't, perhaps you might come with Lieut. Brant."

Hampton bowed. "I would hardly venture thus to place myself under the protection of Lieut. Brant, although I must confess the former attractions of the Herndon home are now greatly increased. From my slight knowledge of Mr. Moffat's capabilities, I fear I should be found a rather indifferent entertainer; yet I sincerely hope we shall meet again at a time when I can 'take unfold.'"

"How nice that will be, and I am so

grateful to you for the promise. By-the-by, only this very morning a man stopped me on the street, actually mistaking me for Naida."

"What sort of a looking man, Miss Spencer?"

"Large, and heavily set, with a red beard. He was exceedingly polite when informed of his mistake, and said he merely had a message to deliver to Miss Gillis. But he refused to tell it to me."

The glances of the two men met, but Brant was unable to decipher the meaning hidden within the gray eyes. Neither spoke, and Miss Spencer, never realizing what her chatter meant, rattled merrily on.

"You see there are so many who speak to me now, because of my public position here. So I thought nothing strange at first, until I discovered his mistake, and then it seemed so absurd that I nearly laughed outright. Isn't it odd what such a man could possibly want with her? But really, gentlemen, I must return with my news; Naida will be so anxious. I am glad to have met you both."

Hampton bowed politely, and Brant conducted her silently down the staircase. "I greatly regret not being able to accompany you home," he explained, "but I came down on horseback, and my duty requires that I return at once to the camp."

"Oh, indeed! how very unfortunate for me!" Even as she said so, some unexpected vision beyond flushed her cheeks prettily. "Why, Mr. Wynkoop," she exclaimed, "I am so glad you happened along, and going my way, too, I am sure. Good morning, Lieutenant; I shall feel perfectly safe with Mr. Wynkoop."

CHAPTER XIX. The Door Opens, and Closes Again.

In one sense Hampton had greatly enjoyed Miss Spencer's call. Her bright, fresh face, her impulsive speech, her unquestioned beauty, had had their effect upon him, changing for the time being the gloomy trend of his thoughts.

But gradually the slight smile of amusement faded from his eyes. Something, which he had supposed lay securely hidden behind years and distance, had all at once come back to haunt him—the unhappy ghost of an expiated crime, to do evil to this girl Naida. Two men, at least, knew sufficient of the past to cause serious trouble. This effort by Slavin to hold personal communication with the girl was evidently made for some definite purpose. Hampton decided to have a face-to-face interview with the man himself; he was accustomed to fight his battles in the open, and to a finish.

A faint hope, which had been growing dimmer and dimmer with every passing year, began to flicker once again within his heart. He desired to see this man Murphy, and to learn exactly what he knew.

He entered the almost deserted saloon opposite the hotel, across the threshold of which he had not stepped for two years, and the man behind the bar glanced up apprehensively.

"Red Slavin?" he said. "Well, now, see here, Hampton, we don't want no trouble in this shebang."

"I'm not here seeking a fight, Jim," returned the inquirer, genially. "I merely wish to ask 'Red' an unimportant question or two."

"He's there in the back room, I reckon, but he's damn liable to take a pot shot at you when you go in."

Hampton's genial smile only broadened, as he carelessly rolled an unlight cigar between his lips.

He walked to the door, flung it swiftly and silently open, and stepping within, closed it behind him with his left hand. In the other glittered the steel-blue barrel of a drawn revolver.

"Slavin, sit down!"

The terse, imperative words seemed fairly to cut the air, and the red-bearded gambler, who had half risen to his feet, an oath upon his lips, sank back into his seat, staring at the apparition confronting him as if fascinated.

"Put your hands on the table, and keep them there!" he said. "Now, my dear friend, I have come here in peace, not war, and take these slight precautions merely because I have heard a rumor that you have indulged in a threat or two since we last parted, and I know something of your impetuous disposition. I regret the necessity, but trust you are resting comfortably."

"Oh, go to Hell!"

"We will consider that proposition somewhat later," Hampton laid his hat with calm deliberation on the table. "No doubt, Mr. Slavin,—if you move that hand again I'll fill your system with lead—you experience some very natural curiosity regarding the object of my unanticipated, yet I hope no less welcome visit."

Slavin's only reply was a curse, his bloodshot eyes roaming the room furiously.

"I suspected as much," Hampton went on coolly. "Indeed, I should

have felt hurt had you been inanner-ent upon such an occasion. It does



"Where is Silent Murphy?"

credit to your heart, Slavin. Come now, keep your eyes on me! I was about to gratify your curiosity, and, in the first place, I came to inquire solicitously regarding the state of your health during my absence, and incidentally to ask why you are exhibiting so great an interest in Miss Naida Gillis."

Slavin straightened up, his great hands clinching nervously, drops of perspiration appearing on his red forehead. "I don't understand your damned fun."

Hampton's lips smiled unpleasantly. "Slavin, you greatly discourage me. The last time I was here you exhibited so fine a sense of humor that I was really quite proud of you. Yet, truly, I think you do understand this joke. Your memory can scarcely be failing at your age.—Make another motion like that and you die right there! You know me.—However, as you seem to shy over my first question, I'll honor you with a second—Where's Silent Murphy?"

"You devil!" Slavin roared, "what do you mean?"

With revolver hand resting on the table, the muzzle pointing at the giant's heart, Hampton leaned forward, utterly remorseless now, and keen as an Indian on the trail.

"Do you know who I am?"

The horror in Slavin's eyes had changed to sullenness, but he nodded silently.

"How do you know?"

There was no reply, although the thick lips appeared to move.

"Answer me, you red sneak! Do you think I am here to be played with? Answer!"

Slavin gulped down something which seemed threatening to choke him, but he durst not lift a hand to wipe the sweat from his face. "If—I if I didn't have this beard on you might guess. I thought you knew me all the time."

Hampton stared at him, still puzzled. "I have certainly seen you somewhere. I thought that from the first. Where was it?"

"I was in D Troop, Seventh cavalry."

"D Troop? Brant's troop?"

The big gambler nodded. "That's how I knew you, Captain," he said, speaking with greater ease, "but I never had no reason to say anything about it round here. You was allers decent 'nough ter me."

"Possibly"—and it was plainly evident from his quiet tone Hampton had steeled from his first surprise,—"the boot was on the other leg, and you had some good reason not to say anything."

Slavin did not answer, but he wet his lips with his tongue, his eyes on the window.

"Who is the fellow Murphy?"

"He was corporal in that same troop, sir." The ex-cavalryman dropped insensibly into his old form of speech. "He knew you too, and we talked it over, and decided to keep still, because it was none of our affair anyhow."

"Where is he now?"

"He left last night with army dispatches for Cheyenne."

Hampton's eyes hardened perceptibly, and his fingers closed more tightly about the butt of his revolver. "You lie, Slavin! The last message did not reach here until this morning. That fellow is hiding somewhere in this camp, and the two of you have been trying to get at the girl. Now, damn you, what is your little game?"

The big gambler was thinking harder then, perhaps, than he had ever thought in his life before. He knew Hampton would kill him if he needed to do so, but he likewise realized that he was not likely to fire until he had gained the information he was seeking. If he only knew how much information the other possessed it would be easy enough. As he did not, he must wield his weapon blindly.

"You're makin' a devil of a fuss over little or nothin'," he growled, simulating a tone of disgust. "I ain't never had no quarrel with ye, except in fer the way ye managed ter skin me at the table 'bout two years ago. I don't give two screeches in hell for who you are; an' besides, I reckon you ain't the only ex-convict a-rangin' Dakota either fer the matter o' that. No more does Murphy. We ain't no 'bloomin' detectives, an' we ain't buckin' in no 'business o' yours; ye kin just bet your sweet life on that."

"Where is Murphy, then? I wish to see the fellow."

"I told you he'd gone. Maybe he didn't git away till this mornin', but he's gone now all right. What in thunder do ye want o' him? I reckon I kin tell ye all that Murphy knows."

For a breathless moment neither spoke, Hampton fingering his gun nervously, his eyes lingering on that brutal face.

"Slavin," he said at last, his voice hard, metallic. "I've figured it out, and I do know you now, you lying brute. You are the fellow who swore you saw me throw away the gun that you picked it up."

There was the spirit of murder in his eyes, and the gambler covered back before them, trembling like a child.

"I—I only swore to the last part, Captain," he muttered, his voice scarcely audible. "I—I never said I saw you throw—"

"And I swore," went on Hampton, "that I would kill you on sight. You lying whelp, are you ready to die?" Slavin's face was drawn and gray, the perspiration standing in beads upon his forehead, but he could neither speak nor think, fascinated by those remorseless eyes, which seemed to burn their way down into his very soul.

"No? Well, then, I will give you, today, just one chance to live—one, you dog—one. Don't move an eyelash! Tell me honestly why you have been trying to get word with the girl, and you shall go out from here living. Lie to me about it, and I am going to kill you where you sit, as I would a mad dog. You know me, Slavin—now speak!"

So intensely still was it, Hampton could distinguish the faint tickling of the watch in his pocket, the hiss of the breath between the giant's clinched teeth. No wretch dragged shrieking to the scaffold could have formed a more pitiful sight, but there was no mercy in the eyes of the man watching him.

"Speak, you cringing hound!"

Slavin gripped his great hands together convulsively, his throat swelling beneath its read beard. He knew there was no way of escape. "I—I had to do it! My God, Captain, I had to do it!"

"Why?"

"I had to, I tell you. Oh, you devil, you fiend! I'm not the one you're after—it's Murphy!"

For a single moment Hampton stared at the cringing figure. Then suddenly he rose to his feet in decision. "Stand up! Lift up your hands first, you fool. Now unbuckle your gumbelt with your left hand—your left, I said! Drop it on the floor."

There was an unusual sound behind, such as a rat might have made, and Hampton glanced aside apprehensively. In that single second Slavin was upon him, grasping his pistol-arm at the wrist, and striving with hairy hand to get a death-grip about his throat. Twice Hampton's left drove straight out into that red, glowing face, and then the giant's crushing weight bore him backward. He fought savagely, silently, his slender figure like steel, but Slavin got his grip at last, and with giant strength began to crunch his victim within his vise-like arms. There was a moment of superhuman strain, their breathing mere sobs of exhaustion. Then Slavin slipped, and Hampton succeeded in wriggling partially free from his death grip. It was scarcely an instant, yet it served; for as he bent aside, swinging his burly opponent with him, someone struck a vicious blow at his back; but the descending knife, missing his mark, sunk instead deep into Slavin's breast.

Hampton saw the flash of a blade, a portion of an arm, and then the clutching fingers of Slavin swept him down. He reached out blindly as he fell, his hand closing about the deserted knife-hilt. The two crashed down together upon the floor, the force of the fall driving the blade home to the gambler's heart.

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