SYNOPSIS.

A detachment of the Eighteenth Infantry from Fort Bethune trapped by Indians in a narrow gorge. Among them is a stranger who introduces himself by the name of Hampton, also Gillis the post trader, and his daughter. Gillis and a majority of the soldiers are killed during a three days' siege. Hampton and the girl only escape from the Indians. They fall exhausted on the plains. A company of the Seventh cavalry, Lieut. Brant in command, find them. Hampton and the girl stop at the Miners' Home in Glencaid, Mrs. Duffy, proprietress. Hampton talks the future over with Miss Gillis—the Kid. She shows him her mother's picture and tells him what she can of her parentage and life. They decide she shall live with Mrs. Herndon. Naida the Kid—runs away from Mrs. Herndon's and rejoins Hampton. He induces her to go back, and to have nothing more to do with him. Hampton plays his last game of cards. He announces to Red Slavin that he has quit, and then leaves Glencaid. Miss Phoebe Spencer arrives in Glencaid to teach its first school. Miss Spencer meets Naida, Rev. Wynkoop, etc. She boards at Mrs. Herndon's. Naida and Lieut. Brant again meet without his knowing who she is. She informs him of the coming Bachelor club ball in honor of Miss Spencer. Lieut. Brant meets Silent Murphy, Custer's scout. He reports trouble brewing among the Sioux. Social difficulties arise at the Bachelor club's ball among the admirers of Miss Spencer. Lieut. Brant meets Miss Spencer but she is not his acquaintance of the day before. She tells him of Naida, and he accidentally meets her again as he is returning to the ballroom with a fan for Miss Spencer. Brant accompanies Naida home from the dance. On the way she informs him as to who she is, and that she is to meet Hampton. Brant and Hampton meet. Hampton informs the lieutenant that his attentions to Naida must cease, and proclaims an authority over her that justifies the statement. Brant tells Hampton of the presence of Silent Murphy, and of the fact that Red Slavin receives government messages for him. Miss Spencer called on Bob Hampton. Tells him of a red-faced stranger mistaking her for Naida. Brant interviews Red Slavin. Finds that he is an ex-trooper in the Seventh cavalry. It was Slavin's and Murphy's testimony that more than ten years before had convicted Robert Nolan, then a captain in the Seventh, of the murder of Maj. Brant, Sr. Hampton attempts to force a confession from Slavin. Slavin insists it is Murphy he wants, and Murphy had left. In a scuffle Slavin is killed by a knife thrust. Hampton surrenders to Buck Mason, marshal. Mob attempts to capture him. Mason and his prisoner escape to a hill and defend themselves. Mob lights fire to burn them out. Brant tells Naida that he loves her. She tells him there is an insurmountable barrier between them, but that she does not fully understand it. Brant and his troop rescues Hampton and Mason from the fires set by the mob. Brant carries the unconscious gambler through the lines of fire. Hampton is taken to the hotel and Naida comes to nurse him. Miss Spencer accepts the heart and hand of Rev. Wynkoop. Brant is ordered to take the field. Before he goes Naida tells him she loves him, but cannot become his wife or offer an explanation. He insists he will return to her. Hampton goes on the trail of Silent Murpry, then at Cheyenne, as the one man who can clear Capt. Nolan of the charge of murder of Maj. Brant 15 years before. Hampton arrives at Cheyenne after Murphy had left with dispatches for Custer.

CHAPTER XXVII.—Continued.

The memory of his old plain craft would not permit any neglect of the few necessaries for the trip. He bought without haggling over prices, but insisted on the best. So it was four in the afternoon when he finally struck into the trail leading northward. He rode a mettlesome, half-broken bronco, a wicked-eyed brute, which required to be conquered twice within the first hour of travel; a second and more quiet animal trailed behind at the end of a lariat, bearing the necessary equipment.

He had, by persistent questioning, acquired considerable information, during that busy hour spent in Cheyenne, regarding the untracked regions lying before him, as well as the character and disposition of the man he pursued. Both by instinct and training he was able to comprehend those brief hints that must prove of vast benefit in the pathless wilderness.

The night was already dark, but stars were gleaming brilliantly overhead, and the trail remained easily traceable. It became terribly lonely on that wilderness stretching away for unknown leagues in every direction, yet Hampton scarcely noted this, so watchful was he lest he miss the trail. To his judgment, Murphy would not be likely to ride during the night until after he had crossed the Fourche. There was no reason to suspect that there were any hostile Indians south of that stream, and probably therefore the old scout would endeavor to conserve his own strength and that of his horses, for the more perilous travel beyond.

About midnight, the trail becoming obscure, the rider made camp, confident he must have already gained heavily on the man he pursued. He lariated his horses and flinging himself down on some soft turf, almost immediately dropped asleep. He was up again before daylight, and, after a hasty meal, pressed on. The nature of the country had changed considerably, becoming more broken, the view circumscribed by towering cliffs and deep ravines.

Late in the afternoon he reined up his horse and gazed forward into a broad valley, bounded with precipitous bluffs. The trail led directly down toward where a considerable stream of water shone silvery in the sun, half concealed behind a fringe of willows. And yonder, close in against those distant willows, some black dots were moving. Hampton glued his anxious eyes to the glass. The leveled tubes clearly revealed a man on horseback, leading another horse. The animals were walking. There could be little doubt that this was Silent Murphy.

Hampton lariated his tired horses behind the bluff and returned to the summit, lying flat upon the ground, with the field-glass at his eyes. The distant figures passed slowly forward into the midst of the willows, and for half an hour the patient watcher scanned the surface of the stream beyond, but there was no sign of attempted passage. The sun sank lower and finally disappeared behind those desolate ridges to the westward. Hampton's knowledge of plainscraft rendered Murphy's actions sufficiently clear. This was the Fourche; beyond those waters lay the terrible peril of Indian raiders. Further advance must be made by swift, secret night riding, and never-ceasing vigilance. This was what Murphy had been saving himself and his horses for. Beyond conjecture, he was resting now within the shadows of those willows, studying the opposite shore and making ready for the dash northward. Hampton believed he would linger thus for some time after dark, to see if Indian fires would afford any guidance. Confident of this, he passed back to his horses, rubbed them down with grass, and then ate his lonely supper, not venturing to light a fire, certain that Murphy's eyes were scanning every inch of skyline.

Darkness came rapidly, while Hampton sat planning again the details of his night's work. Then, with the two animals trailing cautiously behind, he felt his slow way on foot down the steep bluff, into the denser blackness of the valley.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The Haunting of a Crime.

Murphy rested on his back in the midst of a thicket of willows, wide awake, yet not quite ready to ford the Fourche and plunge into the dense shadows shrouding the northern shore. Crouched behind a log, he had so far yielded unto temptation as to light his pipe.

"Hampton Glued His Anxious Eyes to the Glass."

Murphy had been amid just such unpleasant environments many times before, and the experience had grown somewhat prosaic. Even Indian-scouting degenerates into a commonplace at last. So Murphy puffed contentedly at his old pipe.

But suddenly there was the faint crackle of a branch to his left, and one hand instantly closed over his pipe bowl, the other grasping the heavy revolver at his hip. There came a plain, undisguised rustling in the grass,—some prowling coyote, probably; then his tense muscles immediately relaxed, and he cursed himself for being so startled, yet he continued to grasp the "45" in his right hand, his eyes alert.

"Murphy!"

That single word, hurled thus unexpectedly out of the black night, startled him more than would a volley of rifles. He sprang half erect, then as swiftly crouched behind a willow, utterly unable to articulate. For the instant his very blood ran cold; he appeared to shrivel up.

"Oh, come, Murphy; speak up, man, I know you're in here."

That terror of the unknown instantly vanished. This was the familiar language of the world, and, however the fellow came to be there, it was assuredly a man who spoke.

"Who—the hell—are ye?" he blurted out.

The visitor laughed, the bushes rustling as he pushed toward the sound of the voice. "It's all right, old boy. Gave ye quite a scare, I reckon."

Murphy could now dimly perceive the other advancing through the intervening willows, and his Colt shot up to the level. "Stop!—ye take another—step an' I'll—let drive. Ye tell me—first—who ye be."

The invader paused, but he realized the nervous finger pressing the trigger and made haste to answer. "It's all right, I tell ye. I'm one o' Terry's scouts."

"Ye are? Jist the same—I've heard—yer voice—afore."

"Likely 'nough. I saw service in the Seventh."

Murphy was still a trifle suspicious. "How'd ye git yere? How'd ye come ter know—whar I wus?"

The man laughed again. "Sorter hurts yer perfessional feelins, don't it, old feller, to be dropped in on in this unceremonious way? But it was dead easy, old man. Ye see I happened thro' Cheyenne only a couple o' hours behind ye, with a bunch o' papers fer the Yellowstone. The trail's plain enough out this far, and I loped 'long at a pretty fair hickory, so thet I was up on the bluff yonder, and saw ye go into camp yere just afore dark. You wus a-keepin' yer eyes skinned across the Fourche, and naturally didn't expect no callers from them hills behind. The rest wus nuthin', an' here I am. It's a darn sight pleasanter ter hev company travelin', ter my notion. Now kin I cum on?"

Murphy reluctantly lowered his Colt, every movement betraying annoyance. "I reckon. But I'd—a damn sight—rather risk it—alone."

The stranger came forward without further hesitation. The night was far too dark to reveal features, but to Murphy's strained vision the newcomer appeared somewhat slender in build, and of good height.

"Whar'd—ye say ye—wus bound?"

"Mouth o' the Powder. We kin ride tergether fer a night or two."

"Ye kin—do as ye—please, but—I ain't a huntin'—no company,—an' I'm a'—goin' 'cross now."

He advanced a few strides toward his horses. Then suddenly he gave vent to a smothered cry, so startling as to cause the stranger to spring hastily after him.

"Oh! My God! Oh! Look there!"

"What is it, man?"

"There! there! The picture! Don't you see?"

"Naw; I don't see nuthin'. Ye ain't gone cracked, hev ye? Whose picture?"

"It's there!—O Lord!—it's there! My God! can't ye see?—An' it's his face—all a-gleamin' with green flames—Holy Mary—an' I ain't seen it—afore in—15 year!"

He seemed suddenly to collapse, and the stranger permitted him to drop limp to the earth.

"Darn if I kin see anythin', old man, but I'll scout 'round thar a bit, jest ter ease yer mind, an' see what I kin skeer up."

He had hardly taken a half dozen steps before Murphy called after him: "Don't—don't go an' leave me—it's not there now—thet's queer!"

The other returned and stood gazing down upon his huddled figure. "You're a fine scout! afeard o' spooks. Do ye take these yere turns often? Fer if ye do, I reckon as how I'd sooner be ridin' alone."

Murphy struggled to his feet and gripped the other's arm. "Never hed nuthin' like it—afore. But—but it was thar—all creepy—an' green—ain't seen thet face—in 15 year."

"What face?"

"A—a fellow I knew—once. He—he's dead."

The other grunted disdainfully. "Bad luck ter see them sort," he volunteered, solemnly. "Blame glad it warn't me es see it, an' I don't know as I keer much right now 'bout keepin' company with ye fer very long. However, I reckon if either of us calculates on doin' much ridin' ternight, we better stop foolin' with ghosts, an' go ter saddlin' up."

They made rapid work of it, the newcomer proving somewhat loquacious, yet holding his voice to a suspicious whisper. It was he who led the way down the bank, the four horses slowly splashing through the shallow water to the northern shore. Before them stretched a broad plain, the surface rocky and uneven, the northern stars obscured by ridges of higher land. Murphy promptly gave his horse the spur, never once glancing behind, while the other imitated his example, holding his animal well in check, being apparently the better mounted.

They rode silently. The way became more broken and rough as they advanced, causing them to exercise greater caution. Flying clouds obscured the stars, yet through the rifts they caught fleeting glimpses sufficient to hold them to their course. And the encroaching hills swept in closer upon either hand, leaving them groping their way between as in a pocket, yet ever advancing north.

Finally they attained to the steep bank of a considerable stream, found the water of sufficient depth to compel swimming, and crept up the opposite shore dripping and miserable, yet with ammunition dry. Murphy stood swearing disjointedly, wiping the blood from a wound in his forehead where the jagged edge of a rock had broken the skin, but suddenly stopped with a quick intake of breath that left him panting. The other man crept toward him, leading his horse.

"What is it now?" he asked, gruffly. "Hev' ye got 'em agin?"

The dazed old scout stared, pointing directly across the other's shoulder, his arm shaking desperately.

"It's thar!—an' it's his face! Oh, God!—I know it—15 year."

The man glanced backward into the pitch darkness, but without moving his body.

"There's nuthin' out there, 'less it's a firefly," he insisted, in a tone of contempt. "You're plum crazy, Murphy; the night's got on yer nerves. Whar is it ye think ye see?"

"His face, I tell ye! Don't I know! It's all green and ghastly, with snaky flames playin' about it! But I know; 15 years, an' I ain't fergot."

He sank down feebly—sank until he was on his knees, his head craned forward. The man watching touched the miserable, hunched-up figure compassionately, and it shook beneath his hand, endeavoring to shrink away.

"My God! was thet you? I thought it was him a-reachin' fer me. Here, let me take yer hand. Oh, Lord! An' can't ye see? It's just there beyond them horses—all green, crawlin', devilish—but it's him."

"Who?"

"Brant! Brant—15 year!"

"Brant? Fifteen years? Do you mean Maj. Brant, the one Nolan killed over at Bethune?"

"He—he didn't—"

The old man heaved forward, his head rocking from side to side; then suddenly he toppled over on his face, gasping for breath. His companion caught him and ripped open the heavy flannel shirt. Then he strode savagely across in front of his shrinking horse, tore down the flaring picture, and hastily thrust it into his pocket, the light of the phosphorous with which it had been rubbed being reflected for a moment on his features.

"A dirty, miserable, low-down trick," he muttered. "Poor old devil! Yet I've got to do it for the little girl."

He stumbled back through the darkness, his hat filled with water, and dashed it into Murphy's face. "Come on, Murphy! There's one good thing 'bout spooks; they don't hang 'round fer long at a time. Likely es not this 'un is gone by now. Brace up, man, for you an' I have got ter get out o' here afore mornin'."

Then Murphy grasped his arm and drew himself slowly to his feet.

"Don't see nuthin' now, do ye?"

"No. Where's my—horse?"

The other silently reached him the loose rein, marking as he did so the quick, nervous peering this way and that, the starting at the slightest sound.

"Did ye say, Murphy, as how it wasn't Nolan after all who plugged the major?"

"I'm damned—if I did. Who—else was it?"

"Why, I dunno. Sorter blamed odd though, thet ghost should be a-hauntin' ye. Darn if it ain't creepy 'nough ter make a feller believe most anythin'."

Murphy drew himself up heavily into his saddle. Then all at once he shoved the muzzle of a "45" into the other's face. "Ye say nuther word—'bout thet, an' I'll make—a ghost outer ye—blame lively. Now, ye shet up—if ye ride with me."

They moved forward at a walk and reached a higher level, across which the night wind swept, bearing a touch of cold in its breath as though coming from the snow-capped mountains to the west. There was renewed life in this invigorating air and Murphy spurred forward, his companion pressing steadily after.

When the first signs of returning day appeared in the east, the two left their horses in a narrow canyon, and crept to the summit of a ridge. Below lay the broad valley of the Powder. Then Murphy turned his head and looked back into the other's face.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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