

# Randall Parrish

# **WESTERNS**

## Complete Collection



**Randall Parrish**

# **Randall Parrish Westerns - Complete Collection**

**Tales of Pioneers, Outlaws and Swashbucklers in  
Unforgiving Terrains**

e-artnow, 2022

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# **PART I**

## **FROM OUT THE CANYON**

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# **CHAPTER I**

## **HAMPTON, OF PLACER**

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It was not an uncommon tragedy of the West. If slightest chronicle of it survive, it must be discovered among the musty and nearly forgotten records of the Eighteenth Regiment of Infantry, yet it is extremely probable that even there the details were never written down. Sufficient if, following certain names on that long regimental roll, there should be duly entered those cabalistic symbols signifying to the initiated, "Killed in action." After all, that tells the story. In those old-time Indian days of continuous foray and skirmish such brief returns, concise and unheroic, were commonplace enough.

Yet the tale is worth telling now, when such days are past and gone. There were sixteen of them when, like so many hunted rabbits, they were first securely trapped among the frowning rocks, and forced relentlessly backward from off the narrow trail until the precipitous canyon walls finally halted their disorganized flight, and from sheer necessity compelled a rally in hopeless battle. Sixteen—ten

infantrymen from old Fort Bethune, under command of Syd. Wyman, a gray-headed sergeant of thirty years' continuous service in the regulars, two cow-punchers from the "X L" ranch, a stranger who had joined them uninvited at the ford over the Bear Water, together with old Gillis the post-trader, and his silent chit of a girl.

Sixteen—but that was three days before, and in the meanwhile not a few of those speeding Sioux bullets had found softer billet than the limestone rocks. Six of the soldiers, four already dead, two dying, lay outstretched in ghastly silence where they fell. "Red" Watt, of the "X L," would no more ride the range across the sun-kissed prairie, while the stern old sergeant, still grim of jaw but growing dim of eye, bore his right arm in a rudely improvised sling made from a cartridge-belt, and crept about sorely racked with pain, dragging a shattered limb behind him. Then the taciturn Gillis gave sudden utterance to a sobbing cry, and a burst of red spurted across his white beard as he reeled backward, knocking the girl prostrate when he fell. Eight remained, one helpless, one a mere lass of fifteen. It was the morning of the third day.

The beginning of the affair had burst upon them so suddenly that no two in that stricken company would have told the same tale. None among them had anticipated trouble; there were no rumors of Indian war along the border, while every recognized hostile within the territory had been duly reported as north of the Bear Water; not the vaguest complaint had drifted into military headquarters for a month or more. In all the fancied security of unquestioned peace these chance travellers had slowly toiled along the

steep trail leading toward the foothills, beneath the hot rays of the afternoon sun, their thoughts afar, their steps lagging and careless. Gillis and the girl, as well as the two cattle-herders, were on horseback; the remainder soberly trudged forward on foot, with guns slung to their shoulders. Wyman was somewhat in advance, walking beside the stranger, the latter a man of uncertain age, smoothly shaven, quietly dressed in garments bespeaking an Eastern tailor, a bit grizzled of hair along the temples, and possessing a pair of cool gray eyes. He had introduced himself by the name of Hampton, but had volunteered no further information, nor was it customary in that country to question impertinently. The others of the little party straggled along as best suited themselves, all semblance to the ordinary discipline of the service having been abandoned.

Hampton, through the medium of easy conversation, early discovered in the sergeant an intelligent mind, possessing some knowledge of literature. They had been discussing books with rare enthusiasm, and the former had drawn from the concealment of an inner pocket a diminutive copy of "The Merchant of Venice," from which he was reading aloud a disputed passage, when the faint trail they followed suddenly dipped into the yawning mouth of a black canyon. It was a narrow, gloomy, contracted gorge, a mere gash between those towering hills shadowing its depths on either hand. A swift mountain stream, noisy and clear as crystal, dashed from rock to rock close beside the more northern wall, while the ill-defined pathway, strewn with boulders and guarded by underbrush, clung to the opposite side, where low scrub trees partially obscured the view.



All was silent as death when they entered. Not so much as the flap of a wing or the stir of a leaf roused suspicion, yet they had barely advanced a short hundred paces when those apparently bare rocks in front flamed red, the narrow defile echoed to wild screeches and became instantly crowded with weird, leaping figures. It was like a plunge from heaven into hell. Blaine and Endicott sank at the first fire; Watt, his face picturing startled surprise, reeled from his saddle, clutching at the air, his horse dashing madly forward and dragging him, head downward, among the sharp rocks; while Wyman's stricken arm dripped blood. Indeed, under that sudden shock, he fell, and was barely rescued by the prompt action of the man beside him. Dropping the opened book, and firing madly to left and right with a revolver which appeared to spring into his hand as by magic, the latter coolly dragged the fainting soldier across the more exposed space, until the two found partial security among a mass of loosened rocks littering the base of the precipice. The others who survived that first scorching discharge also raced toward this same shelter, impelled thereto by the unerring instinct of border fighting, and flinging themselves flat behind protecting boulders, began responding to the hot fire rained upon them.

Scattered and hurried as these first volleys were, they proved sufficient to check the howling demons in the open. It has never been Indian nature to face unprotected the aim of the white men, and those dark figures, which only a moment before thronged the narrow gorge, leaping crazily in the riot of apparent victory, suddenly melted from sight, slinking down into leafy coverts beside the stream or into

holes among the rocks, like so many vanishing prairie-dogs. The fierce yelpings died faintly away in distant echoes, while the hideous roar of conflict diminished to the occasional sharp crackling of single rifles. Now and then a sinewy brown arm might incautiously project across the gleaming surface of a rock, or a mop of coarse black hair appear above the edge of a gully, either incident resulting in a quick interchange of fire. That was all; yet the experienced frontiersmen knew that eyes as keen as those of any wild animal of the jungle were watching murderously their slightest movement.

Wyman, now reclining in agony against the base of the overhanging cliff, directed the movements of his little command calmly and with sober military judgment. Little by little, under protection of the rifles of the three civilians, the uninjured infantrymen crept cautiously about, rolling loosened boulders forward into position, until they finally succeeded in thus erecting a rude barricade between them and the enemy. The wounded who could be reached were laboriously drawn back within this improvised shelter, and when the black shadows of the night finally shut down, all remaining alive were once more clustered together, the injured lying moaning and ghastly beneath the overhanging shelf of rock, and the girl, who possessed all the patient stoicism of frontier training, resting in silence, her widely opened eyes on those far-off stars peeping above the brink of the chasm, her head pillowed on old Gillis's knee.

Few details of those long hours of waiting ever came forth from that black canyon of death. Many of the men sorely wounded, all wearied, powder-stained, faint with

hunger, and parched with thirst, they simply fought out to the bitter ending their desperate struggle against despair. The towering, overhanging wall at their back assured protection from above, but upon the opposite cliff summit, and easily within rifle range, the cunning foe early discovered lodgment, and from that safe vantage-point poured down a merciless fire, causing each man to crouch lower behind his protecting boulder. No motion could be ventured without its checking bullet, yet hour after hour the besieged held their ground, and with ever-ready rifles left more than one reckless brave dead among the rocks. The longed-for night came dark and early at the bottom of that narrow cleft, while hardly so much as a faint star twinkled in the little slit of sky overhead. The cunning besiegers crept closer through the enshrouding gloom, and taunted their entrapped victims with savage cries and threats of coming torture, but no warrior among them proved sufficiently bold to rush in and slay. Why should they? Easier, safer far, to rest secure behind their shelters, and wait in patience until the little band had fired its last shot. Now they skulked timorously, but then they might walk upright and glut their fiendish lust for blood.

Twice during that long night volunteers sought vainly to pierce those lines of savage watchers. A long wailing cry of agony from out the thick darkness told the fate of their first messenger, while Casey, of the "X L," crept slowly, painfully back, with an Indian bullet embedded deep in his shoulder. Just before the coming of dawn, Hampton, without uttering a word, calmly turned up the collar of his tightly buttoned coat, so as better to conceal the white collar he wore,

gripped his revolver between his teeth, and crept like some wriggling snake among the black rocks and through the dense underbrush in search after water. By some miracle of divine mercy he was permitted to pass unscathed, and came crawling back, a dozen hastily filled canteens dangling across his shoulders. It was like nectar to those parched, feverish throats; but of food barely a mouthful apiece remained in the haversacks.

The second day dragged onward, its hours bringing no change for the better, no relief, no slightest ray of hope. The hot sun scorched them pitilessly, and two of the wounded died delirious. From dawn to dark there came no slackening of the savage watchfulness which held the survivors helpless behind their coverts. The merest uplifting of a head, the slightest movement of a hand, was sufficient to demonstrate how sharp were those savage eyes. No white man in the short half-circle dared to waste a single shot now; all realized that their stock of ammunition was becoming fearfully scant, yet those scheming devils continually baited them to draw their fire.

Another long black night followed, during which, for an hour or so in turn, the weary defenders slept, tossing uneasily, and disturbed by fearful dreams. Then gray and solemn, amid the lingering shadows of darkness, dawned the third dread day of unequal conflict. All understood that it was destined to be their last on this earth unless help came. It seemed utterly hopeless to protract the struggle, yet they held on grimly, patiently, half-delirious from hunger and thirst, gazing into each other's haggard faces, almost without recognition, every man at his post. Then it was that

old Gillis received his death-wound, and the solemn, fateful whisper ran from lip to lip along the scattered line that only five cartridges remained.

For two days Wyman had scarcely stirred from where he lay bolstered against the rock. Sometimes he became delirious from fever, uttering incoherent phrases, or swearing in pitiful weakness. Again he would partially arouse to his old sense of soldierly duty, and assume intelligent command. Now he twisted painfully about upon his side, and, with clouded eyes, sought to discern what man was lying next him. The face was hidden so that all he could clearly distinguish was the fact that this man was not clothed as a soldier.

"Is that you, Hampton?" he questioned, his voice barely audible.

The person thus addressed, who was lying flat upon his back, gazing silently upward at the rocky front of the cliff, turned cautiously over upon his elbow before venturing reply.

"Yes; what is it, sergeant? It looks to be a beauty of a morning way up yonder."

There was a hearty, cheery ring to his clear voice which left the pain-racked old soldier envious.

"My God!" he growled savagely. "'T is likely to be the last any of us will ever see. Was n't it you I heard whistling just now? One might imagine this was to be a wedding, rather than a funeral."

"And why not, Wyman? Did n't you know they employed music at both functions nowadays? Besides, it is not every man who is permitted to assist at his own obsequies—the

very uniqueness of such a situation rather appeals to my sense of humor. Pretty tune, that one I was whistling, don't you think? Picked it up on 'The Pike' in Cincinnati fifteen years ago. Sorry I don't recall the words, or I'd sing them for you."

The sergeant, his teeth clinched tightly to repress the pain racking him, stifled his resentment with an evident effort. "You may be less light-hearted when you learn that the last of our ammunition is already in the guns," he remarked, stiffly.

"I suspected as much." And the speaker lifted himself on one elbow to peer down the line of recumbent figures. "To be perfectly frank with you, sergeant, the stuff has held out considerably longer than I believed it would, judging from the way those 'dough boys' of yours kept popping at every shadow in front of them. It 's a marvel to me, the mutton-heads they take into the army. Oh, now, you need n't scowl at me like that, Wyman; I 've worn the blue, and seen some service where a fellow needed to be a man to sport the uniform. Besides, I 'm not indifferent, old chap, and just so long as there remained any work worth attending to in this skirmishing affair, I did it, did n't I? But I tell you, man, there is mighty little good trying to buck against Fate, and when Luck once finally lets go of a victim, he's bound to drop straight to the bottom before he stops. That's the sum and substance of all my philosophy, old fellow, consequently I never kick simply because things happen to go wrong. What's the use? They 'll go wrong just the same. Then again, my life has never been so sweet as to cause any excessive grief over the prospect of losing it. Possibly I

might prefer to pass out from this world in some other manner, but that's merely a matter of individual taste, and just now there does n't seem to be very much choice left me. Consequently, upheld by my acquired philosophy, and encouraged by the rectitude of my past conduct, I 'm merely holding back one shot for myself, as a sort of grand finale to this fandango, and another for that little girl out yonder."

These words were uttered slowly, the least touch of a lazy drawl apparent in the low voice, yet there was an earnest simplicity pervading the speech which somehow gave it impressiveness. The man meant exactly what he said, beyond the possibility of a doubt. The old soldier, accustomed to every form of border eccentricity, gazed at him with disapproval.

"Either you 're the coolest devil I 've met during thirty years of soldiering," he commented, doubtfully, "or else the craziest. Who are you, anyhow? I half believe you might be Bob Hampton, of Placer."

The other smiled grimly. "You have the name tolerably correct, old fellow; likewise that delightful spot so lately honored by my residence. In brief, you have succeeded in calling the turn perfectly, so far as your limited information extends. In strict confidence I propose now to impart to you what has hitherto remained a profound secret. Upon special request of a number of influential citizens of Placer, including the city marshal and other officials, expressed in mass-meeting, I have decided upon deserting that sagebrush metropolis to its just fate, and plan to add the influence of my presence to the future development of Glencaid. I learn that the climate there is more salubrious,

more conducive to long living, the citizens of Placer being peculiarly excitable and careless with their fire-arms."

The sergeant had been listening with open mouth. "The hell you say!" he finally ejaculated.

"The undented truth, every word of it. No wonder you are shocked. A fine state of affairs, isn't it, when a plain-spoken, pleasant-mannered gentleman, such as I surely am—a university graduate, by all the gods, the nephew of a United States Senator, and acknowledged to be the greatest exponent of scientific poker in this territory—should be obliged to hastily change his chosen place of abode because of the threat of an ignorant and depraved mob. Ever have a rope dangled in front of your eyes, sergeant, and a gun-barrel biting into your cheek at the same time? Accept my word for it, the experience is trying on the nerves. Ran a perfectly square game too, and those ducks knew it; but there 's no true sporting spirit left in this territory any more. However, spilled milk is never worth sobbing over, and Fate always contrives to play the final hand in any game, and stocks the cards to win. Quite probably you are familiar with Bobbie Burns, sergeant, and will recall easily these words, 'The best-laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft agley'? Well, instead of proceeding, as originally intended, to the delightful environs of Glencaid, for a sort of a Summer vacation, I have, on the impulse of the moment, decided upon crossing the Styx. Our somewhat impulsive red friends out yonder are kindly preparing to assist me in making a successful passage, and the citizens of Glencaid, when they learn the sorrowful news of my translation, ought to come nobly forward with some suitable memorial to my virtues. If,



by any miracle of chance, you should pull through, Wyman, I would hold it a friendly act if you suggest the matter. A neat monument, for instance, might suitably voice their grief; it would cost them far less than I should in the flesh, and would prove highly gratifying to me, as well as those mourners left behind in Placer."

"A breath of good honest prayer would serve better than all your fun," groaned the sergeant, soberly.

The gray eyes resting thoughtfully on the old soldier's haggard face became instantly grave and earnest.

"Sincerely I wish I might aid you with one," the man admitted, "but I fear, old fellow, any prayer coming from my lips would never ascend very far. However, I might try the comfort of a hymn, and you will remember this one, which, no doubt, you have helped to sing back in God's country."

There was a moment's hushed pause, during which a rifle cracked sharply out in the ravine; then the reckless fellow, his head partially supported against the protecting boulder, lifted up a full, rich barytone in rendition of that hymn of Christian faith—

"Nearer, my God, to Thee!  
Nearer to Thee!  
E'en though it be a cross  
That raiseth me,  
Still all my song shall be,  
Nearer, my God, to Thee!  
Nearer to Thee."

Glazed and wearied eyes glanced cautiously toward the singer around the edges of protecting rocks; fingers

loosened their grasp upon the rifle barrels; smoke-begrimed cheeks became moist; while lips, a moment before profaned by oaths, grew silent and trembling. Out in front a revengeful brave sent his bullet swirling just above the singer's head, the sharp fragments of rock dislodged falling in a shower upon his upturned face; but the fearless rascal sang serenely on to the end, without a quaver.

"Mistake it for a death song likely," he remarked dryly, while the last clear, lingering note, reechoed by the cliff, died reluctantly away in softened cadence. "Beautiful old song, sergeant, and I trust hearing it again has done you good. Sang it once in a church way back in New England. But what is the trouble? Did you call me for some special reason?"

"Yes," came the almost gruff response; for Wyman, the fever stealing back upon him, felt half ashamed of his unshed tears. "That is, provided you retain sufficient sense to listen. Old Gillis was shot over an hour ago, yonder behind that big boulder, and his girl sits there still holding his head in her lap. She'll get hit also unless somebody pulls her out of there, and she's doing no good to Gillis—he's dead."

Hampton's clear-cut, expressive face became graver, all trace of recklessness gone from it. He lifted his head cautiously, peering over his rock cover toward where he remembered earlier in the fight Gillis had sought refuge.

# **CHAPTER II**

## **OLD GILLIS'S GIRL**

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Excepting for a vague knowledge that Gillis had had a girl with him, together with the half-formed determination that if worse came to worst she must never be permitted to fall alive into the hands of the lustful Sioux, Mr. Hampton had scarcely so much as noted her presence. Of late years he had not felt greatly interested in the sex, and his inclination, since uniting his shattered fortunes with this little company, had been to avoid coming into personal contact with this particular specimen. Practically, therefore, he now observed her for the first time. Previously she had passed within range of his vision simply as the merest shadow; now she began to appeal faintly to him as a personality, uninteresting enough, of course, yet a living human being, whom it had oddly become his manifest duty to succor and protect. The never wholly eradicated instincts of one born and bred a gentleman, although heavily overlaid by the habits acquired in many a rough year passed along the border, brought vividly before him the requirements of the situation. Undoubtedly death was destined to be the early portion of them all; nevertheless she deserved every opportunity for life that remained, and with the ending of hope—well, there are worse fates upon the frontier than the unexpected plunge of a bullet through a benumbed brain.

Guided by the unerring instinct of an old Indian fighter, Gillis, during that first mad retreat, had discovered temporary shelter behind one of the largest boulders. It was a trifle in advance of those later rolled into position by the soldiers, but was of a size and shape which should have afforded ample protection for two, and doubtless would have done so had it not been for the firing from the cliff opposite. Even then it was a deflected bullet, glancing from off the polished surface of the rock, which found lodgment in the sturdy old fighter's brain. The girl had caught him as he fell, had wasted all her treasured store of water in a vain effort to cleanse the blood from his features, and now sat there, pillowing his head upon her knee, although the old man was stone dead with the first touch of the ball. That had occurred fully an hour before, but she continued in the same posture, a grave, pathetic figure, her face sobered and careworn beyond her years, her eyes dry and staring, one brown hand grasping unconsciously the old man's useless rifle. She would scarcely have been esteemed attractive even under much happier circumstances and assisted by dress, yet there was something in the independent poise of her head, the steady fixedness of her posture, which served to interest Hampton as he now watched her curiously.

"Fighting blood," he muttered admiringly to himself. "Might fail to develop into very much of a society belle, but likely to prove valuable out here."

She was rather a slender slip of a thing, a trifle too tall for her years, perhaps, yet with no lack of development apparent in the slim, rounded figure. Her coarse home-made dress of dark calico fitted her sadly, while her rumpled hair,

from which the broad-brimmed hat had fallen, possessed a reddish copper tinge where it was touched by the sun. Mr. Hampton's survey did not increase his desire for more intimate acquaintanceship, yet he recognized anew her undoubted claim upon him.

"Suppose I might just as well drop out that way as any other," he reflected, thoughtfully. "It's all in the game."

Lying flat upon his stomach, both arms extended, he slowly forced himself beyond his boulder into the open. There was no great distance to be traversed, and a considerable portion of the way was somewhat protected by low bushes. Hampton took few chances of those spying eyes above, never uplifting his head the smallest fraction of an inch, but reaching forward with blindly groping hands, caught hold upon any projecting root or stone which enabled him to drag his body an inch farther. Twice they fired directly down at him from the opposite summit, and once a fleck of sharp rock, chipped by a glancing bullet, embedded itself in his cheek, dyeing the whole side of his face crimson. But not once did he pause or glance aside; nor did the girl look up from the imploring face of her dead. As he crept silently in, sheltering himself next to the body of the dead man, she perceived his presence for the first time, and shrank back as if in dread.

"What are you doing? Why—why did you come here?" she questioned, a falter in her voice; and he noticed that her eyes were dark and large, yielding a marked impress of beauty to her face.

"I was unwilling to leave you here alone," he answered, quietly, "and hope to discover some means for getting you

safely back beside the others."

"But I didn't want you," and there was a look of positive dislike in her widely opened eyes.

"Did n't want me?" He echoed these unexpected words in a tone of complete surprise. "Surely you could not desire to be left here alone? Why didn't you want me?"

"Because I know who you are!" Her voice seemed to catch in her throat. "He told me. You're the man who shot Jim Eberly."

Mr. Hampton was never of a pronounced emotional nature, nor was he a person easily disconcerted, yet he flushed at the sound of these impulsive words, and the confident smile deserted his lips. For a moment they sat thus, the dead body lying between, and looked at each other. When the man finally broke the constrained silence a deeper intonation had crept into his voice.

"My girl," he said gravely, and not without a suspicion of pleading, "this is no place for me to attempt any defence of a shooting affray in a gambling-house, although I might plead with some justice that Eberly enjoyed the honor of shooting first. I was not aware of your personal feeling in the matter, or I might have permitted some one else to come here in my stead. Now it is too late. I have never spoken to you before, and do so at this time merely from a sincere desire to be of some assistance."

There was that in his manner of grave courtesy which served to steady the girl. Probably never before in all her rough frontier experience had she been addressed thus formally. Her closely compressed lips twitched nervously, but her questioning eyes remained unlowered.

"You may stay," she asserted, soberly. "Only don't touch me."

No one could ever realize how much those words hurt him. He had been disciplined in far too severe a school ever to permit his face to index the feelings of his heart, yet the unconcealed shrinking of this uncouth child from slightest personal contact with him cut through his acquired reserve as perhaps nothing else could ever have done. Not until he had completely conquered his first unwise impulse to retort angrily, did he venture again to speak.

"I hope to aid you in getting back beside the others, where you will be less exposed."

"Will you take him?"

"He is dead," Hampton said, soberly, "and I can do nothing to aid him. But there remains a chance for you to escape."

"Then I won't go," she declared, positively.

Hampton's gray eyes looked for a long moment fixedly into her darker ones, while the two took mental stock of each other. He realized the utter futility of any further argument, while she felt instinctively the cool, dominating strength of the man. Neither was composed of that poor fibre which bends.

"Very well, my young lady," he said, easily, stretching himself out more comfortably in the rock shadow. "Then I will remain here with you; it makes small odds."

Excepting for one hasty, puzzled glance, she did not deign to look again toward him, and the man rested motionless upon his back, staring up at the sky. Finally, curiosity overmastered the actor in him, and he turned

partially upon one side, so as to bring her profile within his range of vision. The untamed, rebellious nature of the girl had touched a responsive chord; unseeking any such result she had directly appealed to his better judgment, and enabled him to perceive her from an entirely fresh viewpoint. Her clearly expressed disdain, her sturdy independence both of word and action, coupled with her frankly voiced dislike, awoke within him an earnest desire to stand higher in her regard. Her dark, glowing eyes were lowered upon the white face of the dead man, yet Hampton noted how clear, in spite of sun-tan, were those tints of health upon the rounded cheek, and how soft and glossy shone her wealth of ruffled hair. Even the tinge of color, so distasteful in the full glare of the sun, appeared to have darkened under the shadow, its shade framing the downcast face into a pensive fairness. Then he observed how dry and parched her lips were.

"Take a drink of this," he insisted heartily, holding out toward her as he spoke his partially filled canteen.

She started at the unexpected sound of his voice, yet uplifted the welcome water to her mouth, while Hampton, observing it all closely, could but remark the delicate shapeliness other hand.

"If that old fellow was her father," he reflected soberly, "I should like to have seen her mother."

"Thank you," she said simply, handing back the canteen, but without lifting her eyes again to his face. "I was so thirsty." Her low tone, endeavoring to be polite enough, contained no note of encouragement.



"Was Gillis your father?" the man questioned, determined to make her recognize his presence.

"I suppose so; I don't know."

"You don't know? Am I to understand you are actually uncertain whether this man was your father or not?"

"That is about what I said, was n't it? Not that it is any of your business, so far as I know, Mr. Bob Hampton, but I answered you all right. He brought me up, and I called him 'dad' about as far back as I can remember, but I don't reckon as he ever told me he was my father. So you can understand just what you please."

"His name was Gillis, was n't it?"

The girl nodded wearily.

"Post-trader at Fort Bethune?"

Again the rumpled head silently acquiesced.

"What is your name?"

"He always called me 'kid,'" she admitted unwillingly, "but I reckon if you have any further occasion for addressing me, you'd better say, 'Miss Gillis.'"

Hampton laughed lightly, his reckless humor instantly restored by her perverse manner.

"Heaven preserve me!" he exclaimed good naturedly, "but you are certainly laying it on thick, young lady! However, I believe we might become good friends if we ever have sufficient luck to get out from this hole alive. Darn if I don't sort of cotton to you, little girl—you've got some sand."

For a brief space her truthful, angry eyes rested scornfully upon his face, her lips parted as though trembling

with a sharp retort. Then she deliberately turned her back upon him without uttering a word.

For what may have been the first and only occasion in Mr. Hampton's audacious career, he realized his utter helplessness. This mere slip of a red-headed girl, this little nameless waif of the frontier, condemned him so completely, and without waste of words, as to leave him weaponless. Not that he greatly cared; oh, no! still, it was an entirely new experience; the arrow went deeper than he would have willingly admitted. Men of middle age, gray hairs already commencing to shade their temples, are not apt to enjoy being openly despised by young women, not even by ordinary freckle-faced girls, clad in coarse short frocks. Yet he could think of no fitting retort worth the speaking, and consequently he simply lay back, seeking to treat this disagreeable creature with that silent contempt which is the last resort of the vanquished.

He was little inclined to admit, even to himself, that he had been fairly hit, yet the truth remained that this girl was beginning to interest him oddly. He admired her sturdy independence, her audacity of speech, her unqualified frankness. Mr. Hampton was a thoroughgoing sport, and no quality was quite so apt to appeal to him as dead gameness. He glanced surreptitiously aside at her once more, but there was no sign of relenting in the averted face. He rested lower against the rock, his face upturned toward the sky, and thought. He was becoming vaguely aware that something entirely new, and rather unwelcome, had crept into his life during that last fateful half-hour. It could not be analyzed, nor even expressed definitely in words, but he

comprehended this much—he would really enjoy rescuing this girl, and he should like to live long enough to discover into what sort of woman she would develop.

It was no spirit of bravado that gave rise to his reckless speech of an hour previous. It was simply a spontaneous outpouring of his real nature, an unpremeditated expression of that supreme carelessness with which he regarded the future, the small value he set on life. He truly felt as utterly indifferent toward fate as his words signified. Deeply conscious of a life long ago irretrievably wrecked, everything behind a chaos, everything before worthless—for years he had been actually seeking death; a hundred times he had gladly marked its apparent approach, a smile of welcome upon his lips. Yet it had never quite succeeded in reaching him, and nothing had been gained beyond a reputation for cool, reckless daring, which he did not in the least covet. But now, miracle of all miracles, just as the end seemed actually attained, seemed beyond any possibility of being turned aside, he began to experience a desire to live—he wanted to save this girl.

His keenly observant eyes, trained by the exigencies of his trade to take note of small things, and rendered eager by this newly awakened ambition, scanned the cliff towering above them. He perceived the extreme irregularity of its front, and numerous peculiarities of formation which had escaped him hitherto. Suddenly his puzzled face brightened to the birth of an idea. By heavens! it might be done! Surely it might be done! Inch by inch he traced the obscure passage, seeking to impress each faint detail upon his memory—that narrow ledge within easy reach of an

upstretched arm, the sharp outcropping of rock-edges here and there, the deep gash as though some giant axe had cleaved the stone, those sturdy cedars growing straight out over the chasm like the bowsprits of ships, while all along the way, irregular and ragged, varied rifts not entirely unlike the steps of a crazy staircase.

The very conception of such an exploit caused his flesh to creep. But he was not of that class of men who fall back dazed before the face of danger. Again and again, led by an impulse he was unable to resist, he studied that precipitous rock, every nerve tingling to the newborn hope. God helping them, even so desperate a deed might be accomplished, although it would test the foot and nerve of a Swiss mountaineer. He glanced again uneasily toward his companion, and saw the same motionless figure, the same sober face turned deliberately away. Hampton did not smile, but his square jaw set, and he clinched his hands. He had no fear that she might fall him, but for the first time in all his life he questioned his own courage.

# CHAPTER III

## BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

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The remainder of that day, as well as much of the gloomy night following, composed a silent, lingering horror. The fierce pangs of hunger no longer gnawed, but a dull apathy now held the helpless defenders. One of the wounded died, a mere lad, sobbing pitifully for his mother; an infantryman, peering forth from his covert, had been shot in the face, and his scream echoed among the rocks in multiplied accents of agony; while Wyman lay tossing and moaning, mercifully unconscious. The others rested in their places, scarcely venturing to stir a limb, their roving, wolfish eyes the only visible evidence of remaining life, every hope vanished, yet each man clinging to his assigned post of duty in desperation. There was but little firing—the defenders nursing their slender stock, the savages biding their time. When night shut down the latter became bolder, and taunted cruelly those destined to become so soon their hapless victims. Twice the maddened men fired recklessly at those dancing devils, and one pitched forward, emitting a howl of pain that caused his comrades to cower once again behind their covers. One and all these frontiersmen recognized the inevitable—before dawn the end must come. No useless words were spoken; the men merely clinched their teeth and waited.

Hampton crept closer in beside the girl while the shadows deepened, and ventured to touch her hand. Perhaps the severe strain of their situation, the intense loneliness of that Indian-haunted twilight, had somewhat softened her resentment, for she made no effort now to repulse him.

"Kid," he said at last, "are you game for a try at getting out of this?"

She appeared to hesitate over her answer, and he could feel her tumultuous breathing. Some portion of her aversion had vanished. His face was certainly not an unpleasant one to look upon, and there were others other sex who had discovered in it a covering for a multitude of sins. Hampton smiled slightly while he waited; he possessed some knowledge of the nature feminine.

"Come, Kid," he ventured finally, yet with new assurance vibrating in his low voice; "this is surely a poor time and place for any indulgence in tantrums, and you 've got more sense. I 'm going to try to climb up the face of that cliff yonder—it's the only possible way out from here—and I propose to take you along with me."

She snatched her hand roughly away, yet remained facing him. "Who gave you any right to decide what I should do?"

The man clasped his fingers tightly about her slender arm, advancing his face until he could look squarely into hers. She read in the lines of that determined countenance an inflexible resolve which overmastered her.

"The right given by Almighty God to protect any one of your sex in peril," he replied. "Before dawn those savage