

KEITH OF THE BORDER

A TALE OF THE PLAINS

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"WHEN WILDERNESS WAS KING," etc.
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The negro ended the affair in his own way, clawing blindly at the combatants in the darkness, and finally, determining which was the enemy, he struck the gambler with the stock of his gun, laying him out unconscious. Keith, grasping the table, hauled himself to his feet, gasping for breath, certain only that Hawley was no longer struggling. For an instant all was blank, a mist of black vapor; then a realization of their situation came back in sudden flood of remembrance. Even yet he could see nothing, but felt the motionless figure at his feet.

"Quick," he urged, the instant he could make himself speak. "The fel-



They Were Fighting for Life Silently, Desperately.

low is only stunned; we must tie and gag him. Is that you, Neb? Where is the girl?"

"I am here, Captain Keith," he heard the soft rustle of her dress across the room. "What is it I may do?"

"A coil of rope, or some straps, with a piece of cloth; anything you can lay hands on."

She was some moments at it, confused by the darkness, and Hawley moved slightly, his labored breathing growing plainly perceptible. Keith heard her groping toward him, and held out his hands. She started as he thus unexpectedly touched her, yet made no effort to break away.

"You—you frightened me a little," she confessed. "This has all happened so quickly I hardly realize yet just what has occurred."

"The action has only really begun," he assured her, still retaining his hold upon her hand. "This was merely a preliminary skirmish, and you must prepare to bear your part in what follows. We have settled Mr. Hawley for the present, and now must deal with his gang."

"Oh, what would I have done if you had not been here?"

"Let us not think about that; we are here, and now have a busy night before us if we get away safely. Give me the rope first. Good! Here, Neb, must know how to use this—not fight, but without leaving any play in the arms; take the knife out of his pocket. Now for the cloth, Miss Maclaire."

"Please do not call me that!"

"But you said it didn't make any difference what I called you."

"I thought it didn't then, but it does now."

"Oh, I see; we are already on a new footing. Yet I must call you something."

She hesitated just long enough for him to notice it. Either she had no substitute ready at hand, or else doubted the advisability of confiding her real name under present circumstances to one so nearly a stranger.

"You may call me Hope."

"A name certainly of good omen," he returned. "From this moment I shall forget Christie MacClair, and remember only Miss Hope. All right, Neb; now turn over a chair, and sit your man up against it. He will rest all the easier in that position until his gang arrives."

He thrust his head out of the door, peering cautiously forth into the night, and listening. A single horse, probably the one Hawley had been riding, was tied to a dwarfed cottonwood near the corner of the cabin. Nothing else living was visible.

"I am going to round up our horses, and learn the condition of Hawley's outfit," he announced in a low voice. "I may be gone for fifteen or twenty minutes, and, meanwhile, Miss Hope, get ready for a long ride. Neb, stand here close beside the door, and if any one tries to come in brain him with your gun-stock. I'll rap three times when I return."

He slipped out into the silent night, and crept cautiously around the end of the dark cabin. The distinct change in the girl's attitude of friendship toward him, her every evident desire that he should think well of her, together with the providential opportunity for escape, had left him full of confidence. The gambler had played blindly into their hands, and Keith

was quick enough to accept the advantage. It was a risk to himself, to be sure, thus turning again to the northward, yet the clear duty he owed the girl left such a choice almost imperative. He certainly could not drag her along with him on his flight into the wild Comanche country extending beyond the Canadian. She must, at the very least, be first returned to the protection of the semi-civilization along the Arkansas. After that had been accomplished, he would consider his own safety. He wondered if Hope really was her name, and whether it was the family cognomen, or her given name. That she was Christie MacClair he had no question, yet that artistic embellishment was probably merely assumed for the work of the concert hall. Both he and Hawley could scarcely be mistaken as to her identity in this respect, and, indeed, she had never openly denied the fact. Yet she did not at all seem to be that kind, and Keith mentally contrasted her with numerous others whom he had somewhat intimately known along the border circuit. It was difficult to associate her with that class; she must have come originally from some excellent family East, and been driven to the life by necessity; she was more to be pitied than blamed. Keith held no puritanical views of life—his own experiences had been too rough and democratic for that—yet he clung tenaciously to an ideal of womanhood which could not be lowered. However interested he might otherwise feel, no Christie MacClair could ever find entrance into the depths of his heart, where dwelt alone the memory of his mother.

He found the other horses turned into the corral, and was able, from their restless movements, to decide they numbered eight. A fire, nearly extinguished, glowed dully at the farther corner of the enclosure, and he crawled close enough to distinguish the recumbent forms of men sleeping about it on the ground. Apparently no guard had been set, the fellows being worn out from their long ride, and confident of safety in this isolated spot. Besides, Hawley had probably assumed that duty, and told them to get whatever sleep they could. However, the gate of the corral opened beside their fire, and Keith dare not venture upon roping any of their ponies, or leading them out past where they slept. There might be clippers in the cabin with which he could cut the wires, yet if one of the gang awoke, and discovered the herd absent, it would result in an alarm, and lead to early pursuit. It was far safer to use their own ponies. He would lead Hawley's horse quietly through the water, and they could mount on the other shore. This plan settled, he went at it swiftly, riding the captured animal while rounding up the others, and fastening the three to stunted trees on the opposite bank. Everything within the cabin remained exactly as he had left it, and he briefly explained the situation, examining Hawley's bonds again carefully while doing so.

"He'll remain there all right until his men find him," he declared, positively, "and that ought to give us a good six hours' start. Come, Miss Hope, every minute counts now."

He held her arm, not unconscious of its round shapeliness, as he helped her down the rather steep bank through the dense gloom. Then the two men joined hands, and carrying her between them, waded the shallow stream. The horses, not yet sufficiently rested to be frisky, accepted their burdens meekly enough, and, with scarcely a word spoken, the three rode away silently into the gloom of the night.

CHAPTER XII.

Through the Night Shadows. Keith had very little to guide him, as he could not determine whether this mysterious cabin on the Salt Fork lay to east or west of the usual cattle



The Easy Manner in Which She Rode Relieved Him of Anxiety.

trail leading down to the Canadian. Yet he felt reasonably assured that the general trend of the country lying between the smaller stream and the valley of the Arkansas would be similar to that with which he was already acquainted. It was merely a wild stretch of sandy desolation, across which their horses would leave scarcely any trail, and even that little would be quickly obliterated by the first puff of wind. As they drew in toward the river valley this plain would change into sand dunes, baffling and confusing, but no matter how hard they pressed forward, it must be daylight long before they could hope to reach these, and this would give him opportunity to spy out some familiar landmark which would guide them to the ford. Meanwhile, he must head as directly north as possible, trusting the

horses to find footing.

It was plains instinct, or rather long training in the open, which enabled him to retain any true sense of direction, for beyond the narrow fringe of cottonwoods along the stream, nothing was visible, the eyes scarcely able even to distinguish where earth and sky met. They advanced across a bare level, without elevation or depression, yet the sand appeared sufficiently solid, so that their horses were forced into a swinging lunge, and they seemed to fairly press aside the black curtain, which as instantly swung shut once more, and closed them in. The pounding hoofs made little noise, and they pressed steadily onward, closely bunched together, so as not to lose each other, dim, spectral shadows flitting through the night, a very part of that grim desolation surrounding them. No one of the three felt like speaking; the gloomy, brooding desert oppressed them, their vagrant thoughts assuming the tinge of their surroundings; their hope centered on escape. Keith rode, grasping the rein of the woman's horse in his left hand, and bending low in vain effort at picking a path. He had nothing to aim toward, yet sturdy confidence in his expert plaincraft yielded him sufficient sense of direction. He had noted the bark of the cottonwoods, the direction of the wind, and steered a course accordingly straight northward, alert to avert any variation.

The girl rode easily, although in a man's saddle, the stirrups much too long. Keith glanced aside with swift approval at the erectness with which she sat, the loosened rein in her hand, the slight swaying of her form. He could appreciate horsemanship, and the easy manner in which she rode relieved him of one anxiety. It even caused him to break the silence.

"You are evidently accustomed to riding, Miss Hope."

She glanced across at him through the darkness, as though suddenly surprised from thought, her words not coming quickly.

"I cannot remember when I first mounted a horse; in earliest childhood, surely, although I have not ridden much of late. This one is like a rocking chair."

"He belonged to your friend, Mr. Hawley."

She drew a quick breath, her face again turned forward.

"Who—who is that man? Do you know?"

"I possess a passing acquaintance," he answered, uncertain yet how much to tell her, but tempted to reveal all in test of her real character. "Few do not who live along the Kansas border."

"Do you mean he is a notoriously bad character?"

"I have never heard of his being held up as a model to the young, Miss Hope," he returned more soberly, convinced that she truly possessed no real knowledge regarding the man, and was not merely pretending innocence. "I had never heard him called Hawley before, and, therefore, failed to recognize him under that respectable name. But I knew his voice the moment he entered the cabin, and realized that some devilment was afoot. Every town along this frontier has his record, and I've met him maybe a dozen times in the past three years. He is known as 'Black Bart'; is a gambler by profession, a desperado by reputation, and a sur by nature. Just now I suspect him of being even deeper in the mire than this."

He could tell by the quick clasp of her hands on the pommel of the saddle the effect of his words, but waited until the silence compelled her to speak.

"Oh, I didn't know! You do not believe that I ever suspected such a thing? That I ever met him there understanding who he was?"

"No, I do not," he answered. "What I overheard between you convinced me you were the victim of deceit. But your going to that place alone was a most reckless act."

She lifted her hand to her eyes, her head drooping forward.

"Wasn't it what he told me—the out-station of a ranch?"

"No; I have ridden this country for years, and there is no ranch pasturing cattle along the Salt Fork. Miss Hope, I want you to comprehend what it is you have escaped from; what you are now fleeing from. Within the last two years an apparently organized body of outlaws have been operating throughout this entire region. Oftentimes disguised as Indians, they have terrorized the Santa Fe trail for two hundred miles, killing travelers in small parties, and driving off stock. There are few ranches as far west as this, but these have all suffered from raids. These fellows have done more to precipitate the present Indian war than any act of the savages. They have endeavored to make the authorities believe that Indians were guilty of their deeds of murder and robbery. Both troops and volunteers have tried to hold the gang up, but they scatter and disappear, as though swallowed by the desert. I have been out twice, hard on their trail, only to come back baffled. Now, I think accident has given me the clue."

She straightened up; glancing questioningly at him through the darkness.

"This is what I mean, Miss Hope. I suspect that cabin to be the rendezvous of those fellows, and I half believe Hawley to be their leader."

"Then you will report all this to the authorities?"

He smiled grimly, his lips compressed.

"I hardly think so; at least, not for the present. I am not blood-thirsty, or enamored of man-hunting, but I happen to have a personal interest in this particular affair which I should prefer to settle alone." He paused, swiftly reviewing the circumstances of their short acquaintance, and as suddenly determined to trust her dis-

cretion. Deep down in his heart he rather wanted her to know. "The fact of the matter is, that Neb and I here were the ones that particular posse were trailing."

"You!" her voice faltered. "He said those men were under arrest for murder, and had broken jail."

"He also said it was easy to convict men in this country if you only knew how. It is true we broke jail, but only in order to save our lives; it was the only way. Technically, we are outlaws, and now run the risk of immediate re-arrest by returning north of the Arkansas. We came to you fugitives; I was charged with murder, the negro with assault. So, you see, Miss Hope, the desperate class of men you are now associating with."

The slight bitterness in his tone stung the girl into resentment. She was looking straight at him, but in the gloom he could not discern the expression of her eyes.

"I don't believe it," she exclaimed decisively, "you—you do not look like that!"

"My appearance may be sufficient to convince you," he returned, rather dryly, "but would weigh little before a Western court. Unfortunately, the evidence was strong against me; or would have been had the case ever come to a trial. The strange thing about it was that both warrants were sworn out by the same complainant, and apparently for a similar purpose—'Black Bart' Hawley."

"What purpose?"

"To keep us from telling what we knew regarding a certain crime, in which either he, or some of his intimate friends, were deeply interested."

"But it would all come out at the trial, wouldn't it?"

"There was to be no trial; Judge Lynch settles the majority of such cases out here at present. It is extremely simple. Listen, and I will tell you the story."

He reviewed briefly those occurrences leading directly up to his arrest, saying little regarding the horrors of that scene witnessed near the Cimmaron Crossing, but making sufficiently clear his very slight connection with it, and the reason those who were guilty of the crime were so anxious to get him out of the way. She listened intently, asking few questions, until he ended. Then they both looked up, conscious that dawn was becoming gray in the east. Keith's first thought was one of relief—the bright sky showed him they were riding straight north.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Ford of the Arkansas.

They were still in the midst of the yellow featureless plain, but the weary horses had slowed down to a walk, the heavy sand retarding progress. It was a gloomy, depressing scene in the spectral gray light, a wide circle of intense loneliness, unbroken by either dwarfed shrub or bunch of grass, a barren expanse stretching to the sky. Vague cloud shadows seemed to fit across the level surface, assuming fantastic shapes, but all of the same dull coloring, imperfect and unfinished. Nothing seemed tangible or real, but rather some grotesque picture of delirium, ever merging into another yet more hideous. The very silence of those surrounding wastes seemed burdensome, adding immeasurably to the horror. They were but specks crawling underneath the sky—the only living, moving objects in all that immense circle of desolation and death.

Keith turned in his saddle, looking back past Neb—who swayed in his seat, with head lolting on his breast as though asleep, his horse plodding after the others—along the slight trail they had made across the desert. So far as eye could reach nothing moved, nothing apparently existed. Fronting again to the north he looked upon the same grim barrenness, only that far off, against the lighter background of distant sky, there was visible a faint blur, a bluish haze, which he believed to be the distant sand dunes bordering the Arkansas. The intense dreariness of it all left a feeling of depression. His eyes turned and regarded the girl riding silently beside him. The same look of depression was visible upon her face, and she was gazing off into the dull distance with lack-luster eyes, her slender form leaning forward, her hands clasped across the pommel.

The long weariness of the night had left traces on her young face, robbing it of some of its freshness, yet Keith found it more attractive in the growing daylight than amid the lamp shadows of the evening before. He had not previously realized the peculiar clearness of her complexion, the rose tint showing through the olive skin, or the soft and silky fineness of her hair, which, disarranged, was strangely becoming under the broad brim of the hat she wore, drawn low until it shadowed her eyes. It was not a face to be easily associated with frontier concert halls, or any surrender to evil; the chin round and firm, the lips full, yet sufficiently compressed; the whole expression that of pure and dignified womanhood. She puzzled him, and he scarcely knew what to believe, or exactly how to act toward her.

"Our friends back yonder should be turning out from the corral by now," he said finally, anxious to break the silence, for she had not spoken since he ended his tale. "It will not be long until they discover Hawley's predicament, and perhaps the welkin already rings with profanity. That may even account for the blue haze out yonder."

She turned her eyes toward him, and the slightest trace of a smile appeared from out of the depths of their weariness.

"If they would only remain satisfied with that. Will they follow us, do you think? And are we far enough

away by this time to be safe?"

"It is hardly likely they will let us escape without a chase," he answered slowly. "We possess too much information now that we have their rendezvous located, and 'Black Bart' will have a private grudge to revenge. I wonder if he suspects who attacked him! But don't worry, Miss Hope; we have miles the start, and the wind has been strong enough to cover our trail. Do you see that dark irregularity ahead?"

"Yes; is it a cloud?"

"No; the Arkansas sand dunes. I am going to try to keep the horses moving until we arrive there. Then we will hat and eat whatever Neb has packed behind him, and rest for an hour or so. You look very tired, but I hope you can keep up for that distance. We shall be safely out of sight then."

"Indeed, I am tired; the strain of waiting alone in that cabin, and all that happened last night, have tried me severely. But—but I can go through."

Her voice proved her weakness, although it was determined enough, and Keith, yielding to sudden impulse, put out his hand, and permitted it to rest upon hers, clasped across the pommel. Her eyes drooped, but there was no change of posture.

"Your nerve is all right," he said, admiringly, "you have shown yourself a brave girl!"

"I could not be a coward, and be my father's daughter," she replied, with an odd accent of pride in her choking voice, "but I have been afraid, and—and I am still."

"Of what? Surely, not that those fellows will ever catch up with us?"

"No, I hardly know what, only there is a dread I cannot seem to shake off, as if some evil impended, the coming of which I can feel, but not see. Have you ever experienced any such premonition?"

He laughed, withdrawing his hand. "I think not. I am far too prosaic a mortal to allow dreams to worry me. So far I have discovered sufficient trouble in real life to keep my brain active. Even now I cannot forget how hungry I am."

She did not answer, comprehending how useless it would be to explain, and a little ashamed of her own ill-defined fears, and thus they rode on in silence. He did not notice that she glanced aside at him shyly, marking the outline of his clear-cut features. It was a manly face, strong, alive, full of character, the well-shaped head firmly poised, the broad shoulders squared in spite of the long night of weary exertion. The depths of her eyes brightened with appreciation.

"I believe your story, Mr. Keith," she said at last softly.

"My story?" questioningly, and turning instantly toward her.

"Yes; all that you have told me about what happened."

"Oh; I had almost forgotten having told it, but I never felt any doubt but what you would believe. I don't think I could lie to you."

It was no compliment, but spoken with such evident honesty that her eyes met his with frankness.

"There could be no necessity; only I wanted you to know that I trust you, and am grateful."

She extended her hand this time, and he took it within his own, holding it firmly, yet without knowing what to answer. There was strong impulse within him to question her, to learn then and there her own life story. Yet, somehow, the reticence of the girl restrained him; he could not deliberately probe beneath the veil she kept lowered between them. Until she chose to lift it herself voluntarily, he possessed no right to intrude. The gentlemanly instincts of younger years held him silent, realizing clearly that whatever secret might dominate her life, it was hers to conceal just so long as she pleased. Out of this swift struggle of repression he managed to say:

"I appreciate your confidence, and mean to prove worthy. Perhaps some day I can bring you the proofs."

"I need none other than your own word."

"Oh, but possibly you are too easily convinced; you believed in Hawley."

She looked at him searchingly, her eyes glowing, her cheeks flushed.

"Yes," she said slowly, convincingly. "I know I did; I—I was so anxious to be helped, but—but this is different."

It was noon, the sun pitiless and hot above them, before they straggled within the partial shelter of the sand dunes, and sank wearily down to their meager lunch. Their supply of water was limited, and the exhausted ponies must wait until they reached the river to quench their thirst. Yet this was very far off now, and Keith had seen enough of their surroundings to locate the position of the ford. Slow as they must proceed, three hours more would surely bring them to the bank of the stream. They discussed their plans briefly as the three sat together on the warm sand, revived both by the food and the brief rest. There was not a great deal to be determined, only where the girl should be left, and how the two men had better proceed to escape observation.

Fort Larned was the nearest and safest place for their charge, none of the party expressing any desire to adventure the selves within the immediate neighborhood of Carson City. What her future plans might be were not revealed, and Keith forebore any direct questioning. His duty plainly ended with placing her in a safe environment, and he felt convinced that Mrs. Murphy of the Occidental Hotel, would furnish room, and, if necessary, companionship. The sole problem remaining—after she had rather listlessly agreed to such an arrangement—was to so plan the details as to permit the negro and himself to slip through the small town clustered about the post without attracting undue attention. No doubt, the story of their es-

cape had already reached there, embellished by telling, and serious trouble might result from discovery. Keith was surprised at the slight interest she exhibited in these arrangements, merely signifying her acquiescence by a word, but he charged it to physical weariness, and the reaction from her night of peril; yet he took pains to explain fully his plan, and to gain her consent.

This finally settled, they mounted again and rode on through the lanes traversing the sand dunes, keeping headed as straight as possible toward the river. The ford sought was some miles down stream, but with the horses' thirst mitigated, they made excellent progress, and arrived at the spot early in the evening. Not in all the day had they encountered a living object, or seen a moving thing amid the surrounding desolation. Now, looking across to the north, a few gleaming lights told of Fort Larned perched upon the opposite bluffs.

CHAPTER XIV.

The Landlady of the Occidental.

Keith had crossed at this point so frequently with cattle that, once having his bearings, the blackness of the night made very little difference. Nevertheless, in fear lest her pony might stumble over some irregularity, he gave his own rein to Neb, and went forward on foot, grasping firmly the tired animal's bit. It was a long stretch of sand and water extending from bank to bank, but the water was shallow, the only danger being that of straying off from the more solid bottom into quicksand. With a towering cottonwood as guide, oddly misshapen and standing out gauntly against the slightly lighter sky, the plainsman led on unhesitatingly, until they began to climb the rather sharp uplift of the north bank. Here there was a plain trail, pounded into smoothness by the hoofs of cavalry horses ridden down to water, and at the summit they emerged within fifty yards of the stables.

The few lights visible, some stationary, with others dancing about like will-o'-the-wisps, revealed imperfectly the contour of various buildings, but Keith turned sharply to the right, anxious to slip past without being challenged by a sentry. Beyond the brow of the bluff other lights now became visible, flickering here and there, marking where a straggling town had sprung up under the protection of the post—a town garish enough in the daylight, composed mostly of shacks and tents, but now with its deficiencies mercifully concealed by the enveloping darkness. The trail, easily followed, led directly along its single street, but Keith circled the outskirts through a wilderness of tin-cans and heaps of other debris, until he halted his charges beside the black shadow of the only two-story edifice in the place. This was the Occidental, the hospitality of which he had frequently tested.

A light streamed from out the front windows, but, uncertain who might be harbored within, Keith tapped gently at the back door. It was not opened immediately, and when it was finally shoved aside the merest crack, no glow of light revealed the darkened interior. The voice which spoke, however, was amply sufficient to identify its owner.

"Is that ye agin, Murphy, a playin' av yer dirty tricks?"

"No, Mrs. Murphy," he hastened to explain, "this is Keith—Jack Keith, of the 'Bar X'."



"Shure It's Safe It Is Yer Goin' Ter Be Here."

"The Lord deliver us!" was the instant exclamation, the door opening wide. "They do be after tellin' me to-night av the trouble ye was in over at Carson, an' O! fough maybe ye moight turn up this way. It was a nate trick ye played on the folks av 'em, Jack, but this is a dom poor place fer ye ter hide in. Bedad, there's a half-dozen in the parly now talkin' about it, wid a couple av officers from the fort. Is the nager wid ye?"

"Yes, but we have no intention of hiding here. I'd rather take my chance in the open. The fact is, Kate, we started off for the 'Bar X'."

"Av course, ye did; O! was shure av it."

"But down on the Salt Fork we ran across a young girl whom Black Bart had inveigled down that way on a lie. We had a bit of a fight, and got her away from him. This is what brought us back here—to put the girl where she will be safe out of his clutches."

The door was wide open now, and Mrs. Murphy outside, her interest at fever heat.

"Ye had a foight wid Black Bart! Oh, ye divil! An' ye licked the dirty spalpane, an' got away wid his gurl! Glory be! And would O! take her?"

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