KEITH OF THE BORDER

A TALE OF THE PLAINS

By RANDALL PARRISH

Author of "Heritage of the South," "When Wilderness Was King," Etc.

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SYNOPSIS.

Jack Keith, a Virginian, now a border plainsman, is looking for the lovely sparkle of swamp. He sees a wagon team in full gallop pursued by men on ponies. When Keith reaches the wagon the occupant, a young woman, tells him her father. He secures the wagon and finds papers and a locket with a woman's portrait. Keith is arrested by Sheriff Hawley, charged with the murder, his accuser being Fred Willoughby, who claims the impersonation in his cell named Keith tells him that he knew the Keiths in Virginia. Meanwhile the prisoner escapes with Willoughby's horses, the Hitts, forty-niners, who have come to the plains and Rich secures and hides the fugitives come upon a cabin and find its occupant to be a young girl, whom Keith thinks he saw at Carson City. The girl explains that her father has gone to the mines. Hitt, coming from the corral, says that a Mr. Hawley induced her to come to the cabin while he sought her brother. Hawley appears, and Keith is hiding recognizes in the Sheriff the man he saw at Carson City. Hawley tells a story of Keith's crime. Horses are appropriated, and the girl, who says she is Miss Hope, joins in the escape. Keith explains to her his situation and the fugitives reach Fort Laramie where the Hitts are left behind. Hawley and Hope tells that she is the daughter of General Waite. Keith and Meb drift into Sheridan, where Keith meets an old friend, H. Fairbain. Keith meets the brother of Hope, Willie, who is a gambler, and who is in trouble, and becomes convinced that Black Bart has some spat involving the two. Hope learns that Gen. Waite, who was thought murdered, is at Sheridan. Keith recognizes in a gambler named Chrisie Maclaire the Charles City stranger. Keith meets the real Chrisie Maclaire and finds that Fred Willoughby may hold the key to the situation.

CHAPTER XXIV.—(Continued.)

A group was gathered about the body in the rain, a single lantern glimmering. Two or three men had started down the passageway; and Keith met them, revolvers drawn and suspicious.

"Who are you?" snapped one sharply. "Were you doing all that shooting yonder?"

Keith recognized the voice, thankful he did so.

"I fired at the fellow, but he got away onto the prairie. I reckon you couldn't have done any better, Bill."

"Jack Keith!" and Hickock's voice had a new tone, his hand dropping on the other's shoulder. "Never was gladder to meet a fellow in my life. Boys, this is as did deputy of mine down in Dodge. When he gives up chasin' a murderer there isn't much use our trytin'. Let's go back, and find out how bad the fellow is hurt. While we're feelin' our way, Jack, you might tell us what you know about this affair."

"It was just the flash of a gun, and the man dropped," Keith explained, briefly. "I was ten or a dozen feet behind, and the fellow fired from under the wagon there. He must have been laying for some one—I reckon, maybe, it was me."

"You? Then it's likely you have some notion who he was?"

"Well, if I have, Bill," and Keith's lips were set tight, "I'm not liable to tell you. If it's the lad I think likely, I'll attend to the case myself. You understand—this is my personal affair."

Hickock nodded, his hand again pressing the other's shoulder.

"Sure, Jack. If you feel that way. There's enough doing here in Sheridan to keep a marshal reasonably busy, without diggin' into private matters. I rather reckon you can take care of yourself, but if you need me, old boy, I'm always right here on the job. You know that."

"I do, Bill, and appreciate it."

The group about the motionless body fell away, and made room for the marshal, the last man to rise saying soberly:

"He's dead all right, Hickock. I guess he never knew what hit him. Good shooth', too, dark as it is here."

"Had the range fixed, likely," returned the marshal. "That's what makes it look like it was arranged for."

He bent down, striving to distinguish the dead man's features turned up to the drizzle, but the night revealed only the faintest outline.

"Anybody know him?" There was no response, only a shuffling of feet in the mud. "Here, you man with the lantern, hold it over where I can see. There, that is better. Now, you fellows take a look, and see if some of you can't name the poor devil."

They glanced down, one after the other, over Bill's shoulder, shading their eyes from the rain so as to see clearer. The light of the flickering lantern streamed full on the ghastly face, but each man shook his head, and passed on. Keith, bent back, leaning some one would identify the body, and not make it necessary for him to take part in the gruesome task. It was not likely to be any one he knew, and besides, he felt the rain had tired in his stand, and he dreaded to look upon the stricken face. When the last of the group had drifted back out of the radius of light, Hickock looked up and saw him.

"Here, Jack," he said, gravely, "you better trypen mighty hard now this."

Keith beat over and looked down. As he did so he felt sensed to stay choking into his throat, and his eyes obscured his sight. He swept a hand over his eyes and dropped on his knees into the mud beside the body, staring speechless into the white face, the sightless eyes. Hickock watching him closely and gripped his arm.

"What is it? Do you know him?"

"My God, yes; Fred Willoughby!"

"Som'thing 'Bout a Gal, Massa Jack—an' a Law Suit.

CHAPTER XXV.

A Reappearance of the General.

Keith did not inform Hope of her brother's death until the following morning, but had the body properly prepared for burial, and devoted the remainder of the night to searching for General Waite, and, incidentally, for both Hawley and Scott. Both Hickock and Fairbain assisted in this effort to learn the whereabouts of the dead boy's father, but without the slightest result, nor did Keith's investigations reveal the gambler at any of his accustomed resorts, while Scott had apparently made a complete getaway. These disappearances merely served to convince him as to the truth of his first suspicions; Scott might have departed for good, but Hawley would certainly reappear just as soon as assured his name had not been mentioned in connection with the tragedy. To Neb alone did the plainsman candidly confide his belief in the guilt of these two, and when other duties called him elsewhere, he left the negro scouring the town for any possible reappearance of either.

Heavy-eyed from lack of sleep, heavy-hearted with his message, yet fully decided as to what advice he should offer, Keith returned to the hotel, and requested an interview with Hope. Although still comparatively early, some premonition of evil had awakened the girl, and in a very few moments she was prepared to receive her visitor. A questioning glance into his face was sufficient to assure her of unpleasant news, but, with one quick breath, she grasped his arm as though his very presence afforded her strength.

"How tired you look! Something has occurred to keep you out all night—and—and I know you have brought me bad news. Don't be afraid to tell me; I can bear anything better than suspense. Is it about father?"

"No, Hope," and he took her hand, and led her to a chair. Bending above her he gave her the whole story of the night, and she scarcely interrupted with a question, sitting there dry-eyed, with only an occasional quick shading her slender form. As he ended, she looked up into his face, and now he could see a mist of washed tears in her eyes.

"What shall I do, Captain Keith? I am all alone with this, except for you."

"I have considered that, Hope," he answered, gravely, "and it seems to me your present duty is not to stay longer than the dead. You should remain here until we learn something more