

MOLLY McDONALD

A TALE OF THE FRONTIER



By **RANDALL PARRISH**
Author of "Keith of the Border," "My Lady of Doubt," "My Lady of the South," etc., etc.

Illustrations by **V. L. Barnes**

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SYNOPSIS.

Major McDonald, commanding an army post near Fort Dodge, seeks a man to intercept his daughter, Molly, who is headed for the post. An Indian outbreak is threatened. "Bric" Hamlin, sergeant who has just arrived with messengers to McDonald, volunteers for the mission. Molly arrives at Fort Ripley two days ahead of schedule. She decides to push on to Fort Dodge by stage in company with "Butler Bill" Moyley Gonsales, a gambler, is also a passenger. Hamlin meets the stage with stories of depredations committed by the Indians. The driver flees the stage when Indians appear. The Indians are repulsed in attacks on the stage. Moyley and Gonsales are killed. Hamlin and Molly plan to escape in the darkness by way of a gully. Molly is wounded and Hamlin carries her. They cross a river and go into hiding. The Indians discover their escape and start pursuit, but go in the wrong direction. Hamlin is much excited at finding a haversack marked "S. A. He explains to Molly that he was in the Confederate service and dismissed in disgrace under charges of cowardice. At the close of the war he enlisted in the regular service. He says the haversack was the property of one Capt. LaFevre, who he suspects of being responsible for his discharge and for whom he has been hunting ever since. Troops appear on the scene.

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

"I prefer to rely on my own judgment," he said tartly. "From what this man reports they are in stronger force than we are. Besides my instructions were not to provoke hostilities."

Watson grinned, revealing his yellow teeth.

"See not, they are so damned possible themselves."

"I prefer leaving Captain Maxwell to deal with the situation," Gaskins went on pompously, ignoring the snarl, "as he outranks me, and I am under strict instructions to return at once to the fort. Two of our horses are disabled already and Snidley is too sick to be left alone. I'll not risk it. Well," he broke off suddenly, and addressing a corporal who had just ridden up and saluted, "have you buried the bodies?"

"Yes, sir, found these papers on them."

The lieutenant thrust these into his jacket pocket.

"Very well, Hough. Form the men into column. Miss McDonald, you will retain the horse you have, and I should be very glad to have you ride with me. Oh, corporal, was everything in the coach destroyed? Nothing saved belonging to this lady?"

"Only the ironwork is left, sir."

"So I thought, exceedingly sorry. Miss McDonald. The ladies at Dodge will fit you out when we get in. I am a bachelor, you know," he added, glancing aside into her face, "but can promise every attention."

Her eyes sought Hamlin where he stood straight and motionless, respectfully waiting an opportunity to speak.

"Is this what I ought to do?" she questioned, leaning toward him. "I'm so confused I hardly know what is best."

"Why, of course," broke in the lieutenant hastily. "You may trust me to advise."

But my question was addressed to Sergeant Hamlin," she interposed, never glancing aside. "He understands the situation better than you."

The sergeant held his hat in his hand, his eyes meeting her own frankly, but with a new light in them. She had not forgotten now the danger was over, she meant him to realize her friendship.

"It seems to me the only safe course for you to take, Miss McDonald," he said slowly, endeavoring to keep the note of triumph out of his voice. "Your father is perfectly safe, and will join you within a few days. I would not dare attempt your protection farther west."

"You are not going with us then?" she questioned in surprise.

"Not if Lieutenant Gaskins will furnish me with horse and rifle. I must report at Union, and, on the way, tell your father where you are."

"But the danger! Oh, you mustn't attempt such a ride alone!"

"That is nothing; the valley is swept clean, and I shall do most of my riding at night. Any plainsman could do the trick—hey, Sam?"

Watson nodded, chewing solemnly on the tobacco in his cheek.

"He'll make the trip all right, miss," he drawled lazily. "Wish I was going long. I'm sure tired of this sorter scoutin', I am. Down below the Cimarron is the only place you'll have 'er watch out close, 'Bric,' them Comanches an' Apaches are the worst lot."

"I know—light riders themselves, but I know the trail. Can you outfit me, lieutenant?"

Gaskins smiled grimly, but with no trace of humor. His eyes were upon the girl, still leaning over her pommel.

"I'll outfit you all right," he said brusquely, "and with no great regret, either. And I shall report finding you here in disobedience to orders."

"Very well, sir."

Molly's brown eyes swept to the lieutenant's face, her form straightening in the saddle, her lips pressed tightly together. Gaskins frowned the sergeant, stung into anger by the man's quiet response.

"I shall prefer charges, you understand," almost savagely. "Helm, give this fellow that extra rifle, and ammunition belt. McMasters, you will let him have your horse."

Watson rolled out of his saddle, muttering something indistinctly, which might have been an oath.

"I ain't goin' ter stand fer that, lieutenant," he said defiantly. "Bein' as I ain't no enlisted man, an' this yere is my hoss, 'Bric' Hamlin don't start on no such ride on that lame brute o' McMasters. Here, you 'Bric,' take this critter. Oh, shut up! I'll git to Dodge all right. Won't hurt me none to walk."

The eyes of the two men met understandingly, and Hamlin took the rein in his hand. Gaskins started to speak, but thought better of it. A moment he stood, irresolute, and then swung up into saddle, his glance ignoring the sergeant.

"Attention! company," he commanded sharply. "By column four—march!"

The girl spurred her horse forward, and held out her hand.

"Good-by," she said, falteringly. "You—will be careful."

"Of course," and he smiled up into her eyes. "Don't worry about me—I am an old hand."

"And I am to see you again?"

"I shall never run away, surely, and I hope for the best."

"Miss McDonald," broke in Gaskins impatiently, "the men are already moving."

"Yes," her eyes still upon the sergeant's uncovered face, "I am coming. Don't imagine I shall ever forget," she murmured hastily, "or that I will not be glad to meet you anywhere."

"Some time I may put you to the test," he answered soberly. "If any trouble comes, trust Watson—he is a real man."

He stood there, one arm thrown over the neck of the horse, watching them ride away up the trail. The lieutenant and the girl were together at the rear of the short column, and he seemed to be talking earnestly.

"But My Question Was Addressed to Sergeant Hamlin," she interposed.

Hamlin never moved, or took his eyes from her until they disappeared over the ridge. Just as they dipped down out of sight she turned and waved one hand. Then the man's gaze swept over the debris of the burned stage, and the two mounds of earth. Even these mute evidences of tragedy scarcely sufficed to make him realize all that had occurred in this lonely spot. He could not seem to separate his thought from the cavalcade which had just departed, leaving behind the memory of that farewell wave of the hand. To him it marked the end of a dream, the return to a life distasteful and lonely.

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South of the Cimarron all was desolation, and war raged unchecked from the Platte to the Pecos. Sheridan determined upon a winter campaign, although he understood well the sufferings entailed upon the troops by exposure on the open plains at that season. Yet he knew the habits of Indians; that they would expect immunity from attack and would gather in villages, subject to surprise. He, therefore, decided that the result would justify the necessary hardships involved. To this end smaller posts were abandoned, and the widely scattered soldiers ordered to central points in preparation for the contemplated movement. Denver had been deserted earlier, and Major McDonald had marched his men to Dodge, where Molly awaited his coming. Retained there on garrison duty, the two occupied a one-story, yellow stone structure fronting the parade ground. In October, orders to march reached "M" troop, Seventh Cavalry, at Fort Union, and the ragged, bronzed troopers, who all summer long had been scouting the New Mexican plains, turned their horses' heads to the northeast in hopefulness of action. With them up the deserted Santa Fe trail, past burned

stations and wrecks of wagon trains, rode Sergeant Hamlin, silent and efficient, the old Confederate haversack fastened to his saddle, and his mind, in spite of all effort, recurring constantly to the girl who had gone to Dodge early in the summer. Was she still there? If so, how would she greet him now after these months of absence? The little cavalry column, dust-covered and weary, seemed fairly to creep along, as day by day he reviewed every word, every glance, which had passed between them; and at night, under the stars, he lay with head on his saddle, endeavoring to determine his course of action, both as to their possible meeting, and with regard to the following of the clue offered by the haversack. The time he had hoped for was at hand, but he could not decide the best course of action. He could only wait, and permit Fate to interfere.

Certain facts were, however, sufficiently clear, and the Sergeant faced them manfully. Not merely the fact that he was in the ranks, great as that handicap was, could have prevented an attempt at retaining the friendship of Molly McDonald. But he was in the ranks because of disgrace—hiding away from his own people, keeping aloof from his proper station in life, out of bitter shame. If he had felt thus before, he now felt it a thousand times more acutely in memory of the comradeship of her whose words had brought him a new gleam of hope. Never before had loneliness seemed so complete, and never before had he realized how wide was the chasm between the old and the new life. This constantly recurring memory embittered him, and made him restless. Yet out of it all, there grew a firmer determination to win back his old position in the world, to stamp out the lie through which the Confederate court-martial had condemned him. If LeFevre were alive, he meant now to find him, face him, and compel him to speak the truth. The discovery of that haversack gave a point from which to start, and his mind centered there with a fixed purpose which obscured all else.

It was after dark when "M" troop, wearied by their long day's march across the brown grass, rode slowly up the face of the bluff, and into the parade ground at Fort Dodge. The lights of the guard-house revealed the troopers' faces, while all about them gleamed the yellow lamps, as the garrison came forth to welcome their arrival. Guided by a corporal of the guard the men led their horses to the stables, and, as they passed the row of officers' houses Hamlin caught a furtive glimpse in a radius of light that gave his pulses a sudden throb. She was here then—here! He had hardly dared hope for this. They would meet again; that could scarcely be avoided in such narrow quarters. But how? On what terms? He ventured the one swift glimpse at her—a slender, white-robed figure, one among a group of both men and women before an open door, through which the light streamed—heard her ask: "Who are they? What cavalry troop is that?" caught the response in a man's voice: "M" of the Seventh, from Fort Union," and then passed by, his eyes looking straight ahead, his hand gripping his horse's bit.

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Like the Greek Philosopher's Fate

The matter of newspaper subscriptions reminds a Kansas editor of the Greek philosopher whose poverty began to pinch him. One of his friends sent word to the men of the city that each should take a certain kind of wine and on a certain day go to the philosopher's house and pour the wine into an empty vat. And so they did, but each thought that one bottle of water would not be noticed in so much wine, and the vat was filled with water. Thus the philosopher received no aid. It is somewhat that way with subscriptions. One fellow thinks he owes only a small amount and so neglects to pay it. The other fellow thinks the same and the editor fares almost as well as the philosopher.

Every Jar Breaks Her Bones.

The victim of a rare disease of the bones, Margaret Williams, 12-year-old daughter of a wealthy farmer living near Medora, Kan., has suffered 70

fractures of the legs and more than a dozen of the arms. Ever since she has been old enough to walk the bones of her legs and arms have snapped at the slightest jar or quick movement. Physicians say her bones lack some element. They are soft and spongy. Fortunately, the girl doesn't suffer as much pain from these fractures as do others under normal conditions, but it is necessary to treat the fractures the same as in other cases and the child has spent fully half her time lying with her legs in splints.

Relieve Tedium of Sailing With Harmless Jest at the Expense of Keeper of Lighthouse.

A few miles north of Vladivostok there is a lighthouse perched on a cliff 300 feet above the sea. And this lighthouse, or rather its solitary keeper, is the butt of an international joke.

Fog came funny ways at sea, as you know and just at this spot the

lighthouse keeper keeps on banging away at his bells, firing his guns, and blowing his foghorn. And on the deck of the ships below weather-worn seamen grin and wink to one another as they clang their ship's bells in clear daylight, for jokes are none too common at sea.—Exchange.

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Mechanically the sergeant loaded his rifle, and strapped the old Confederate haversack to his saddle pommel, staring again, half unbelieving, at the faded inscription underneath the flap. Yet the sight of those letters awoke him, bringing to his bronzed face a new look of determination. He swung into the saddle, and, rifle across his knees, his eyes studying the desolate distance, rode westward along the deserted trail.

CHAPTER XIII.

Back at Fort Dodge.

The swiftly speeding weeks of that war-summer on the plains had brought many changes to the hard-worked troops engaged in the campaign of garrisoning the widely scattered posts south of the Platte. Scout details, although constantly in the saddle, failed to prevent continued Indian depredations on exposed settlements. Stage routes were deserted, and the tolling wagons of the freighters vanished from the trails. Reports of outrages were continuous, and it became more and more evident that the various tribes were at length united in a desperate effort to halt the white advance. War parties broke through the wide-strung lines of guard, and got safely away again, leaving behind death and destruction. Only occasionally did these Indian raiders and the pursuing troops come into actual contact. The former came and went in swift forays, now appearing on the Pawnee, again on the Saline, followed by a wild ride down the valley of the Arkansas. Scattered in small bands, well mounted and armed, no one could guess where the next attack might occur. Every day brought its fresh report of horror.

From north and south, east and west, news of outrages came into Sheridan's headquarters at Fort Wallace.

Denver, at the base of the mountains, was practically in state of siege, provisioned only by wagon trains sent through under strong guard; the fringe of settlement along the water ways was deserted, men and women fleeing to the nearest government posts for protection and food. The troops, few in number and widely scattered in small detachments, many being utilized as scouts and guards, were unequal to the gigantic task of protecting so wide a frontier. Skirmishes were frequent, but the Indians were wary and resourceful, and only once during the entire summer were they brought into real decisive battle.

The last of August, Major Forsyth, temporarily commanding a company of volunteer scouts, was suddenly attacked by over a thousand warriors under command of Roman Nose. A four days' fight resulted, with heavy loss on both sides, the Indians being driven from the field by the opportune arrival of fresh troops.

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