

Molly McDonald

A TALE OF THE FRONTIER

By RANDALL PARRISH

Author of "Keith of the Border," "My Lady of Doubt," "My Lady of the North," etc., etc.

Illustrations by V. L. BARNES

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"Haversack. I have it. That will be enough to carry, with the canteen. Now there is only one thing more before we leave. We must impress those fellows with the notion that we are wide-awake, and on guard yet. See any movement out there?"

"I—I am not sure," she answered doubtfully. "There is a black smudge beyond that dead pony; lean forward here and you can see what I mean—on the ground. I—I imagined it moved just then." She pointed into the darkness. "It is the merest shadow, but seemed to wiggle along, and then stop; it's still now."

Hamlin focussed his keen eyes on the spot indicated, shading them with one hand.

"Slide back further on the seat," he whispered softly, "and let me in next the window."

There was a moment's silence, the only sound the wind. The girl gripped the back of the seat nervously with both hands, holding her breath; the Sergeant, the outline of his face all hunched against the sky, stared motionless into the night without. Suddenly, not making a sound, he lifted the rifle to his shoulder.

CHAPTER VIII.

A Way to the River.

She waited in agony as he sighted carefully, striving to gauge the distance. It seemed an interminable time before his finger pressed the trigger. Then came the report, a flash of flame, and the powder smoke blown back in her face. Half-blinded by the discharge, she yet saw that black smudge leap upright; again the Henry blazed, and the dim figure went down. There was a cry—a mad yell of rage—in which scattered voices joined; spits of fire cleaving the darkness the barking of guns of different caliber. A bit of flying lead tore through the leather back of the coach with an odd rick; another struck the casing of the door, sending the wooden splinters flying like arrows. Hawk-eyed Hamlin fired twice more, aiming at the sparks, grimly certain that a responding howl from the left evidenced a hit. Then, as quickly, all was still, intensely black once more. The Sergeant drew back from the window, leaning his gun against the casing.

"That will hold them for a while," he said cheerfully. "Two less out there, I reckon, and the others won't get careless again right away. Now is our time; are you ready?"

There was no response, the stillness so profound he could hear the faint ticking of the girl's watch. He reached out, almost alarmed, and touched her dress.

"What is the trouble?" he questioned anxiously. "Didn't you hear me speak?"

He waited breathless, but there was no movement, no sound, and his hand, trembling, in spite of his iron nerve, groped its way upward. She was lying back against the opposite window, her head bent sideways.

"My God," he thought, "did those devils get her?"

She lifted her slight figure up on one arm, all else blotted out, all other memory vanished through this instant dread. His cheek stung where flying splinters had struck him, but that was nothing. She was warm, her flesh was warm; then his searching fingers felt the moist blood trickling down from the edge of her hair. He let out his breath slowly, the sudden relief almost choking him. It was bad enough surely, but not what he had first feared, not death. She had been struck hard—a flying splinter of wood, perhaps, or a deflected bullet—her hair matted with blood, yet it was no more than a flesh wound, although leaving her unconscious. If he hesitated it was but for an instant. The entire situation recurred to him in a flash; he must change his plans, but dare waste no time. If they were to escape it must be accomplished now, shadowed by darkness, while savage watchers were safely beyond sound. His lean jaws set with fierce determination, and he grimly hitched his belt forward, one slinky hand fingering the revolver. He would have to trust to that weapon entirely for defense; he could not carry both the rifle and the girl.

Moving slowly, cautiously, fearful lest some creaking of the old stage might betray his motions to those keen ears below, he backed through the open door. Once feeling the ground firm beneath his feet, and making sure that both canteen and haversack were secure, he reached back into the darkness, grasping the form of the unconscious girl. He stood erect with her held securely in his arms, strands of hair blowing against his cheek, listening intently, striving with keen eyes to penetrate the black curtain. The wind was fortunate,

blowing steadily across the flat from the river, and they were surely invisible against the background of the overhanging bluff. He did not even feel it necessary to crouch low to avoid discovery. He knew that peril would confront them later, when they ventured out into the open. How light she seemed, as though he clasped a child. Bearing her was going to be easier than he had supposed; the excitement yielded him a new measure of strength, yet he went forward very slowly, feeling along, inch by inch, planting his feet with exceeding care. The earth was hard-packed and would leave little trail; there were no leaves, no dead grass to rustle. Beyond the protection afforded by the stage he felt the full sweep of the wind and permitted her head to rest lower on one arm so that he could look about more clearly. She had not even moaned, although he had felt her breath upon his face. Once he stumbled slightly over some fallen earth, and farther along a foot slipped on a treacherous stone, but the slight noise died unnoticed in the night. It was farther to the gully than he had sup-



How Light She Seemed, as Though He Clasped a Child.

posed; his heart was in his throat fearing he had missed it, half-believing the depression failed to extend to the bare of the bluff. Then his foot, exploring blindly, touched the edge of the bank. Carefully he laid his burden down, placing his battered campaign hat beneath her head. He bent over her again, assuring himself that she breathed regularly, and then crept down alone into the shallow ravine.

His nerves were like steel now, his hand steady, his heart beating without an accelerated throb. He knew the work, and rejoiced in it. This was why he was a soldier. Silently, swiftly, he unbuckled his belt, refastening it across the straps so as to hold canteen and haversack noiseless, and then, revolver in hand, began creeping down under cover of the low banks. He must explore the path first before attempting to bear her along in his arms; must be sure the passage was unguarded. After it swerved to the right there would be little danger, but while it ran straight, some cautious savage might have chosen it to skulk in. To deal with such he needed to be alone, and free.

He must have crawled thus for thirty yards, hands and knees aching horribly, his eyes ever peering over the edge of the bank, his ears tingling to the slightest noise. The tiny glow of the fire far away to the left was alone visible in the intense blackness; the wind brought to him no sound of movement. The stillness was profound, almost uncanny; as he paused and listened he could distinguish the throb of his heart. He was across the trail at last, for he felt and traced the ruts of wheels, and where the banks had been worked down almost to a level with the prairie. He crossed this opening like a snake, and then arose to his knees beyond, where the gully deepened. He remained poised, motionless, scarcely daring to breathe. Surely that was something else—that shapeless blotch of shadow, barely topping the line of bank! Was it ten feet away? Or five? He could not tell. He stared; there was no movement, and yet his eyes began to discern dimly the outlines—the head and shoulders of a man! The Sergeant crept forward—an inch, two inches, a foot. The figure did not stir. Now he was sure the fellow's head was lying flat on the turf, oddly distorted by a feathered war bonnet. The strange posture, the utter lack of movement, seemed proof that the tired warrior had fallen asleep on watch. Like a cat Hamlin crept up slowly toward him, poised for a spring.

Some sense of the wild must have stirred the savage into semi-consciousness. Suddenly he sat up, gripping the gun in his hands. Yet even as his opening eyes saw dimly the Sergeant's menacing shadow, before he could scream his alarm, or spring upright, the revolver butt struck with dull thud, and he went tumbling backward into the ditch, his cry of alarm ending in a hoarse croak. From somewhere, out of the dense darkness in front a voice called, sharp and guttural, as if its owner had been startled by the mysterious sound of the blow. It was the language of the Arapahoes, and out of his vague memory of the tongue, spurred to recollection by the swift emergency, Hamlin growled a hoarse answer, hanging breathlessly above the motionless body until the "ugh!" of the fellow's response proved him without suspicion. He waited, counting the seconds, every muscle strained with expectancy, listening. He had a feeling that some one was

crawling over the short grass, wiggling along like a snake, but the faint sound, if sound it was, grew less distinct. Finally he lifted his head above the edge of the bank, but saw nothing, not even a dim shadow.

"They are closing in, I reckon," he thought soberly, "and it isn't likely there will be any more of these gentry as far back as this; looks as though this gully turned west just beyond. Anyhow I've got to risk it."

He returned more rapidly, knowing the passage, yet with no less caution, finding the unconscious girl lying exactly as he had left her. As he clasped her form in his arms, her lips uttered some incoherent words, but otherwise she gave no sign of life.

"Yes, yes," he whispered close to her ear, hoping thus to hold her silent. "It is all right now; only keep still."

He could feel her breathing, and realized the danger of her return to consciousness. If she should be frightened and cry out, their fate would be sealed. Yet he must accept the chance, now that he knew the way to be clear. He held her tightly in both arms, his revolver thrust back into its holster. Bending as low as he could with his burden, feeling carefully through the darkness before advancing a foot, he moved steadily forward. Where the gully deepened their heads were at the edge of the bank, but much of the way was exposed, except for the dark shadows of the slope. Fortunately there were clouds in the west, already obscuring that half of the sky, but to the east nothing was visible against the faint luminousness of the sky-line.

Once, far over there to the left, a gun was fired, the flame splitting the night asunder, and the distant reflection a black figure rose up between, only to be instantly snuffed out again. Hamlin put down his uplifted foot, and waited, in tense, motionless silence, but nothing happened, except the echo of a far-away voice.

A dozen feet farther, some four-footed animal suddenly leaped to the edge of the bank, sniffed, and disappeared noiselessly. So taut were his nerves strung that the Sergeant sank upon his knees, releasing one hand to grip his revolver, before he realized the cause of alarm—some prowling prairie wolf. Then, with teeth grimly locked, bending lower and lower, he crept across the rutted trail, and past the dead body of the Indian. Not until then did he dare to breathe naturally or to stand upright; but now, the gully, bending to the right, led away from danger, every step gained adding to their safety. He was confident now, full of his old audacity, yet awake to every trick of plaincraft. The girl's head rested against his shoulder, and he bent his cheek to hers, feeling its warmth. The touch of his unshaven beard pricked her into semi-consciousness, and she spoke so loud that it gave him a thrill of apprehension. He dared not run in the darkness for fear of stumbling, yet moved with greater swiftness, until the depression ended at the river. Here, under the protection of the bank, Hamlin put down his burden and stood erect, stretching his strained muscles and staring back into the dark.

What now? Which way should they turn? He had accomplished all he had planned for himself back there in the coach, but now he became aware of other problems awaiting solution. In less than an hour it would be daylight; he almost imagined it was lighter already over yonder in the east. With the first dawn those watchful Indians, creeping cautiously closer, would discover the stage deserted, and would be on their trail. And they had left a trail easily followed. Perhaps the hard, dry ground might confuse those savage trackers, but they would scour the open country between bluff and river, and find the dead warrior in the gully. That would tell the story. To go west, along the edge of the river, wading in the water, would be useless precaution; such a trick would be suspected at once, and there was no possibility of rescue from that direction. They might as well walk open-eyed into a trap. There was but one hope, one opportunity—to cross the stream before dawn came and hide among those shifting sand-dunes of the opposite shore. Hamlin thoroughly understood the risk involved, the treacherous nature of the Arkansas, the possibility that both might be sucked down by engulfing quicksand, yet even such a lonely death was preferable to Indian torture.

The girl at his feet stirred and moaned. In another moment he had filled his hat with water from the river, had lifted her head upon one arm, and using the handkerchief from about his throat, was washing away the blood that matted her hair. Now that his fingers felt the wound, he realized the force of the blow stunning her, although its outward manifestation was slight. Her figure trembled in his arms and her eyes opened, gazing up wonderingly at the black outlines of his shadow. Then she made an effort as though to draw away.

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