

Molly McDonald

A TALE OF THE FRONTIER

By RANDALL PARRISH

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Illustrations by V. L. BARNES

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"Hurt!" he lifted his head slightly and stared about; then dropped it again with a sigh of content. "Oh, yes, now I know. Hughes shot me from behind." He struggled upright, in spite of her efforts at restraint, feeling beside him for the rifle. "Dupont was there, behind that dead pony. What became of Dupont?"

She dropped her face in her hands, her form trembling.

"He—he got away. He thought you were dead; to—make sure he came over and eked you. Then he took your rifle, and the only pony left, and rode off."

"And left you?"

"Yes—he—he never thought of me; only—only how he should escape with the money. I never moved, never opened my eyes; perhaps he believed me dead also, and—and I prayed he would. I would rather have died than have him touch me again. And—and I thought you were dead too. O God! It was so horrible!"

The man's voice was soft and low, thrilling with the love that refused control.

"I know, dear; I know it all, now," he said tenderly, clasping her hands. "But that is all over and gone." He put up one hand to his wound.

"Heavens, how my head aches! But that pain won't last long. I am a bit groggy yet, but will be on my feet pretty soon. You are a brave little girl. Tell me how you got free?"

She went over the short story slowly, not lifting her eyes to his, and he listened in silence, moving his limbs about, confident of the gradual return of strength.

"But how did it happen?" he asked. "Your capture? Your father's death? It is all a mystery to me after I left you on the hotel balcony."

The tears stood in her eyes suddenly uplifted to his, and impulsively the man encircled her with his arm.

"You know I care, dear," he exclaimed recklessly. "You are not afraid to tell me."

"No, no; you have been so kind, so true. I can tell you everything—only it is so hard to confess the truth about my father."

"You suspect he was implicated?"



"Oh, God!" She sobbed, "What Can I Do?"

he asked in astonishment, "that he actually had a part in the plot?"

She looked at him gravely, down into his very soul.

"Yes, and—and that hurts more than all the rest."

CHAPTER XXXII.

Words of Love.

Hamlin was silent for a moment, not knowing what to say that would comfort or help. He had never suspected this, and yet he could not refrain altogether from experiencing a feeling of relief. Deeply as he sympathized with her in this trouble, still the man could not be conscious of those barriers formerly existing between them which this discovery had instantly swept away. Now they could meet upon a level, as man and woman. No longer could rank intervene; not even the stain of his own court-martial. Possibly she dreamed of what was passing in his mind, for she suddenly lifted her eyes to his.

"Shall I tell you?"

"No; not now; both your explanation and mine can wait," he replied quickly. "I can stand alone now—see," and he regained his feet, swaying slightly with dizziness, yet smiling down at her as he held forth a hand. "Now you try it; take hold of me until you test your limbs—that was an ugly fall you got when I shot your pony."

She straightened slowly, her cheeks flushing in the keen air, her eyes striving to smile back in response to his challenge.

"That was nothing," she protested,

tramping about. "I only went down into the snow, but my arms were bound, and the pony fell on my foot—it feels quite natural now."

"Good. We shall have to tramp a little way. In which direction did Dupont go?"

"Across the ridge there; see, that is his trail."

"Then he never saw our horses out yonder. That is one piece of good luck, at least. The sooner we get to them the better. I have been guilty of enough foolishness today to be careful hereafter." He looked across at Hughes' body. "I wonder if that fellow meant to hit me? I never trusted him much, but I didn't expect that. Did you see him fire?"

"Yes, but it was so sudden I could not even cry out. He was upon one knee, and his revolver waved like this as he tried to aim. Dupont saw it, and jumped just as he pulled the trigger."

"I thought so. The poor devil got the wrong man."

"Why? Were these two enemies?"

"They had been partners, stealing and running cattle. Dupont had cheated Hughes out of his share, and there was bad blood between them. I ran across the fellow up on the Cimarron, waiting for Dupont to come back to his old range. Did you ever hear Dupont called by any other name?"

She shook her head questioningly.

"No; wasn't that his real name? The woman back there—wasn't she his wife?"

"She was his wife, yes; but their name was not Dupont. That was assumed; the correct one was Le Fevre."

"Le Fevre! Why—why, wasn't that the name of the man you told me about once?—the officer who brought you those orders?"

"He is the same. I did not know him at Dodge; not until Hughes told me. He had changed greatly in appearance, and I only saw him at night. But it was because I knew that I failed to kill him here; I wanted him alive, so I could compel him to tell the truth."

She gave a little sob, her hands clasped together. The man's voice softened, and he took a step nearer, bending above her.

"And yet now I do not care quite as much as I did."

She looked up quickly into his face, and as swiftly lowered her lashes.

"You mean you have found other evidence?"

"No, but I have found you, dear. You need not try, for I am not going to let you get away. It is not the officer's daughter and the enlisted man any more. Those barriers are all gone. I do not mean that I am indifferent to the stain on my name, or any less desirous of wringing the truth from Gene Le Fevre's lips, but even the memory of that past can keep me silent no longer. You are alone in the world now, alone and in the shadow of disgrace—you need me."

He stopped, amazed at the boldness of his own words, and, in the silence of that hesitation, Molly lifted her eyes to his face.

"I think I have always needed you," she said simply.

He did not touch her, except to clasp the extended hands. The loneliness of the girl, here, helpless, alone with him in that wilderness of snow, bore in upon his consciousness with a suddenness that robbed him of all sense of triumph. He had spoken passionately, recklessly, inspired by her nearness, her dependence upon him. He had faith that she cared; her eyes, her manner had told him this, yet even now he could not realize all that was meant by that quiet confession. The iron discipline of years would not relax instantly; in spite of the boldness of his utterance, he was still the soldier, feeling the chasm of rank. Her very confession, so simply spoken, tended to confuse, to mystify him.

"Do you mean," he asked eagerly, "that you love me?"

"What else should I mean?" she said slowly. "It is not new to me. I have known it for a long while."

"That I loved you?"

"Yes," smiling now. "Love is no mystery to a woman. I do not care because you are in the ranks; that is only a temporary condition. I knew you out there, at the very first, as a gentleman. I have never doubted you. Here, in this wilderness, I am not afraid. It is not because my father is dead, or because he has been guilty of a crime, that I say this. I would have said it before, on the balcony there in Dodge, had you asked me. It is not the uniform I love, but the man. Can you understand?"

"Will you marry me—a sergeant of cavalry?"

She was still smiling, her eyes frankly looking into his own.

"I will marry David Hamlin," she answered firmly, "let him be what he may."

The man let out his suppressed breath in a sob of relief, his eyes brightening with triumph.

"Oh, Molly! Molly!" he cried. "I cannot tell you what this all means to me. There is no past now to my life, but all future."

"Am I that to you?"

"That! Yes, and a thousand times more! I had ambition once, opportunity, even wealth. They were swept away by a man's lie, a woman's perfidy. Out of that wreck, I crawled into the world again a mere thing. I lived simply because I must live, skulking in obscurity, my only inspiration the hope of an honorable death or an opportunity for vengeance. Mine was the life of the ranks in the desert, associating with the lowest scum, in constant contact with savagery. I could not speak to a decent woman, or be a man among men. There was nothing left me but to brood over

wrongs, and plot revenge. I became morose, savage, a mere creature of discipline, food for powder. It was no more when I first met you. But with that meeting the chains snapped, the old ambitions of life returned. You were a mere girl from the East; you did not understand, nor care about the snobbery of army life. No, it was not that—you were above it. You trusted me, treated me as a friend, almost as an equal. I loved you then, when we parted on the trail, but I went back to New Mexico to fight fate. It was such a hopeless dream, yet all summer long I rode with memory tugging at my heart. I grew to hate myself, but could never forget you."

She drew nearer, her hand upon his arm, her face uplifted.

"And you thought I did not care?"

"How could I dream you did?" almost bitterly. "You were gracious, kind—but you were a major's daughter, as far away from me as the stars. I never heard from you; not even a rumor of your whereabouts came to me across the plains. I supposed you had returned East; had passed out of my life forever. Then that night when we rode into Dodge I saw you again—saw you in the yellow lamp light, watching us pass, heard you ask what troops those were, and I knew instantly all my fighting out there in the desert had been vain—that you were forever the one, one woman."

"I remained for that," she confessed softly, her lashes wet.

"At Dodge?"

"Yes, at Dodge. I knew you would come, must come. Some intuition seemed to tell me that we should meet again. Oh, I was so happy the night you came! No one had told me your troop had been ordered in. It was like a dream come true. When I saw you leading your horse across the parade I could hardly refrain from calling out to you before them all. I did not care what they thought—for my soldier had come home from the wars."

"Sweetheart," the deep voice faltered, "may—I may I kiss you?"

"Of course you may."

Their lips met, and she clung to him as his arms held her closely. It was like a dream to him, this sudden, unexpected surrender. Perhaps she read this in his eyes.

"Do not misunderstand me," she urged softly. "I do not come to you because of what has happened, because I am alone and helpless. If you had stepped from the ranks that night at Dodge, I would have answered even as I do now."

"You love me?—love me?" he repeated.

"Yes."

Even as he looked down upon her upturned face, there was borne back upon him a realization of their predicament. His eyes swept over the surrounding desolation, the two dead bodies lying motionless in the snow, the stiffening pony, the drear hillside which shut them in. The slight brought him back to consciousness with a shock. Minutes might mean much now. Dupont had disappeared over that ridge to the right, in the direction of Black Kettle's camp. How far away that might be was altogether guess work, yet what would inevitably occur when the fugitive arrived among his friends, and told his story, could be clearly conceived. Even if the man believed Hamlin killed, he would recall to mind the girl, and would return to assure himself as to her fate. Knowing her helplessness, the practical impossibility of her escape alone, a return expedition might not be hurried yet, beyond doubt, this isolated valley would have Indian visitors within a few hours. And when these discovered the truth they would be hot upon a trail where concealment was impossible. The only hope of escape, and that far from brilliant—as he remembered the long desert ride from the distant cow camp on the Cimarron—lay in immediate departure. Every moment of delay served to increase their peril. Even beyond the danger of Dupont's report to Black Kettle, this snow-bound valley was not so far away from that chief's camp as to be safe from invasion by young warriors in search of game. All this flashed upon Hamlin's consciousness instantly, even as his heart thrilled to her frank avowal.

"This is so strange I can hardly realize the truth," he said gravely. "But, dear one, we must talk elsewhere, and not here. Life was never before worth so much as it is now, and every instant we waste here may mean capture and death. Come, there are two ponies at the mouth of the valley."

He snatched up the blanket from the ground, and wrapped it about her in such manner as to enable her to walk; stooped over Hughes, loosened the revolver from his stiffened fingers, and then came back to where she waited.

"You can walk? It is not far."

"Yes, the numbness is all gone."

He was all seriousness now, alert and watchful, the plainsman and the soldier.

"Then come; I'll break trail."

"Where is the Indian village?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

"Beyond those bluffs; at least Hughes thought so. We saw their pony herd in the valley below, mere dots against the snow."

Ten minutes later, plowing through the intervening drifts, they came forth to the broad vista of the valley and the two patient ponies standing motionless.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Molly's Story.

The two rode steadily, following the trail left by Hamlin and Hughes earlier in the morning. As there had been no wind, and the cold had crusted the snow, the tracks left by the two ponies were easily followed. As they

skirted the ridge the Indian pony



"And You Thought I Did Not Care?"

herd could be distinguished, sufficiently close by this time to leave no doubt as to what they were. Hamlin cautiously kept back out of sight in the breaks of the ridge, although his keen eyes, searching the upper valley, discovered no sign of pursuit. Tired as Dupont's horse undoubtedly was, he might not yet have attained the Indian encampment, which, in truth, might be much farther away than Hughes had supposed. The fact that no spirals of smoke were visible puzzled the Sergeant, for in that frosty air they should naturally be perceived for a considerable distance. Possibly, however, the bluffs were higher and more abrupt, farther up stream, affording better chances of concealment. Indeed it was quite probable that the Indians would seek the most sheltered spot available for their winter camp, irrespective of any possible fear of attack. Reasonably safe from a winter campaign, the atrocities of the past summer would naturally tend to make them unusually cautious and watchful.

Molly, muffled to the eyes in her thick blanket, permitted her pony to follow the other without guidance, until they both dipped down into the hollow, safe from any possible observation. In some mysterious way the overpowering feeling of terror which had controlled her for days past had departed. The mere presence of Hamlin was an assurance of safety. As she watched him, erect in saddle, his blue overcoat tightly buttoned, his revolver belt strapped outside, she no longer felt any consciousness of the surrounding desolation or the nearness of savage foes. Her heart beat fast and her cheeks flushed in memory of what had so swiftly occurred between them. Without thought, or struggle, she gave herself unreservedly to his guidance, serenely confident in his power to succeed. He was a man so strong, so resourceful, so fitted to the environment, that her trust in him was unquestioned. She needed to ask nothing; was content to follow in silence. Even as she realized the completeness of her surrender, the Sergeant, relaxing none of his watchfulness, checked his pony so that they could ride onward side by side.

"We will follow the trail back," he explained, glancing aside at her face. "It is easier to follow than to strike out for ourselves across the open."

"Where does it lead?"

"To an old cow-camp on the Cimarron. There is a trooper there waiting. Shall I tell you the story?"

"I wish you would."

"And then I am to have yours in return—everything?"

"Yes," she said, and their eyes met.

"There is nothing to conceal—from you."

He told his tale simply, and in few words; how he had missed, and sought after her in Dodge; how that searching had led directly to the discovery of crime, and finally the revelation of Major McDonald's body. He told of his efforts at organizing a party to follow the fugitives, inspired by a belief that she was a prisoner, of the trip through the blizzard, and of how he had succeeded in outstripping Dupont in the race.

The girl listened silently, able from her own experience to fill in the details of that relentless pursuit, which could not be halted either by storm or bullets. The strength, the determination of the man, appealed to her with new force, and tears welled into her eyes.

"Why, you are crying!" he exclaimed in surprise.

"That is nothing," her lips smiling, as she loosened one hand from the blanket and reached across to clasp his. "You must know, dear, how happy I am to have found you. No one else could have done this."

"Oh, yes, little girl," soberly. "Wasson would have gone on, if I had been the one to go down. The hardest part of it all was waiting for the storm to cease, not knowing where you were hidden—that nearly drove me insane."

"I understand; uncertainty is harder to bear than anything else. Shall I tell you now what happened to me?"

"Yes," tenderly, "as much, or as little as you please."

"Then it shall be everything dear," her hand-clasp tightening. A moment she hesitated, looking out across the snow plains, and then back into his eyes. From their expression she gained courage to proceed, her voice low, yet clear enough to make every syllable distinctly audible.

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