

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.

*Illustration by
T. L. Barnes*

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SYNOPSIS

Major McDonald, commanding an army post near Fort Dodge, sends a man to intercept his daughter, Molly, who is headed for the post. An Indian outbreak is threatened. "Homer" Hamlin, a sergeant who had just arrived with messages to McDonald, volunteers for the mission and starts alone. Molly arrives at Fort Dodge two days ahead of schedule. She decides to push on to Fort Dodge to stay in company with "Sister Bill" Moran. Hamlin, a gambler, is also a passenger. Hamlin meets the stage with a series of deceptions communicated by the Indians. It is deemed as safe to return. The Indians are seen when Indians appear. The Indians are twice repulsed in attack on the stage by Hamlin, Moran and Gossamer. The latter is killed. Moran is killed in next attack. Indians retire, and Hamlin and Molly wait for the next move. They plan to attempt escape in the darkness by way of a guilty. Molly is wounded.

CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

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 to 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 guilty descended 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 to 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 spitting the night sounder, and against 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, snuffed, and disappeared noiselessly. So fast were his nerves strong that the Sergeant sank upon his knees, releasing one hand to grip the revolver, before he realized the cause of alarm—some growling grizzly 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 guilty, 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 aware to every trick of pantherism. The girl's head rested against his shoulder, and he bent his cheek to hers, feeling its warmth. The touch of his unshaven beard pinched 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 celerity, until the depression ended in the other bank, under the protection of the bank. Hamlin put down his burden and stood erect, stretching the strained muscles and starting back into the dark.

"What now?" Which way should they turn? He had accomplished all he had planned for himself back there in the south, 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 under in the east. With the first dawn those wanton Indians, robbing cautiously about, 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 soon the open country between itself and river, and find the trail warmer in the guilty. That would tell the story. To go west, along the edge of the stream, wading in the water, would be useless presenting such a track 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-banks 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 the last uttered a groan. In another moment he had filled her with water from the

bank ridge. Even this, however, was encouragement, proving the shallowness of the stream. He turned about, his face so close he could see her eyes.

"We shall have to try it, Miss McDonald; you must permit me to carry you."

"Yes."

"And whatever happens do not scream—just cling tight to me."

"Yes," a little catch in her throat. "Tell me first, please, just what it is you fear."

Quickly and principally, it is in all those western rivers, and the two of us together on one pair of feet will make it harder to pull out of the suck if I tell you to get down, do so quickly."

"Yes."

"Then there may be holes out there in the bottom. I don't mind those so much, although those cavalry holes are no help in swimming."

"I can swim."

"Hardly in your clothes, but I am glad to know it, nevertheless. You could keep afloat at least, and the holes are never very large. Are you ready now?"

She gave him her hands and stood up. The Sergeant drew in a long breath and transferred the harnessack to her shoulder.

"We'll try and keep that from getting soaked, if we can," he explained. "There is no boat over in those sand-holes. Now hold on tight."

He swung her easily to his broad shoulder, clasping her slender figure closely with one arm.

"That's it! Now get a firm grip. I'll carry you all right."

To the girl that passage was never more than a dim memory. Still partially dazed from the severe blow on her head, she closed her eyes as Hamlin stepped cautiously down into the stream and clung to him desperately, expecting each moment to be flung forward into the water. But the Sergeant's mind was upon his work, and every detail of the struggle left its impress on his memory. He saw the dark sweep of the water, barely visible in the gleam of those few stars obscured by cloud, and felt the sharp pull now against his legs as he moved. The bottom was soft, yet his feet did not sink deeply, although it was rather difficult wading. However, the clay gave him more confidence than sand underneath, and there was less depth of water even than he had anticipated. He was wet only to the thighs when he trudged up on to the low spit of sand, and put the girl down a moment to wash a fresh branch and examine the broader stretch of water ahead. They could see both shores now, that which they had just left, a black, lumping, dim outline. Except for the lapping of the water at their feet, all was deathly still. Even the Indian fire had died out, and it was hard to conceive that savages were hidden behind that black veil, and that they two were actually fleeing for their lives. To the girl it was like some dreadful delirium of sleep, but the man felt the full struggle. There was a star well down in the south he chose to guide by, but beyond that he must trust to good fortune. Without a word he lifted her again to his shoulder, and pushed on.

The water was deeper, shivering off rapidly, until it rose well above his waist, and with sufficient current so that he was compelled to lean against it to maintain balance, scarcely venturing forward a foot at a time. Once he stumbled over some obstruction, barely averting a fall; he felt the swift clutch of her fingers at his throat, the quick adjustment of her body, but her lips gave no indication of alarm. His groping feet touched the edge of a hole, and he turned, facing the current, tracing his way carefully until he found a passage on solid bottom. A bit of driftwood swished down out of the night, a water-snake limb, striking against him before it was even seen, bruised one arm, and then dredged past like a wild thing, leaving a glimmer of foam behind. The sand-banks grew darker, more distant, the water began to grow shallower, the bottom changing from mud to sand. He slipped and staggered in the uncertain feeling, the break coming in quicker gushes, not with no resistance of effort. Once he felt the dread of such about his ankles, and took in a reckless run, splashing straight forward, falling at the water's edge, yet not before the girl was casting safely on the soft sand.

Strong as Hamlin was, his muscles trained by strenuous outdoor life, he lay there for a moment utterly helpless, more exhausted from the nervous strain, indeed, than the physical exertion. He had realized fully the desperate nature of that passage, expected every step to be engulfed, and the reaction, the knowledge that they had actually attained the shore safely, left him weak as a child, barely able to comprehend the fact. The girl was upon her feet first, shamed and ashamed, bending down to touch him with her hand.

"Sergeant, you are not hurt," she questioned. "Tell me you are not hurt."

"Oh, no," drawing himself up the bank, yet panting as he endeavored to speak cheerfully. "Only that was a rather hard pull, the last of it, and I

am short of breath. I shall be all right in a moment."

There was a sand-dune just beyond, and he seated himself and leaned against it.

"I am beginning to breathe easier already," he explained. "Sit down here, Miss McDonald. We are safe enough now in this darkness."

"You are all wet, soaking wet."

"That is nothing; the sand is warm red from yesterday's sun, and my clothes will dry fast enough. It is beginning to grow light in the east."

The faces of both turned in that direction where appeared the first twilight approach of dawn. Already were visible the dark lines of the opposite shore, across the gleam of water, and beyond appeared the dim outlines of the higher bluffs. The slope between river and hill, however, remained in impenetrable darkness. The minds of both fugitives reverted to the same scene—the wrecked stage with its dead passengers within, its savage watchers without. She lifted her head, and the soft light reflected on her face.

"—I thank God we are not over there now," she said falteringly.

"Yes," he admitted. "They will be creeping in closer; they will not wait much longer. Hard as I have worked, I don't realize yet that we are out of those trails."

"You did not expect to succeed?"

"Not frankly I did not; all I could do was hope—take the one chance left. The slightest accident meant being captured. I am ashamed of being so weak just now, but it was the strain. You see," he explained carefully, "I've been running through hostile Indian country mostly day and night for nearly

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Egotism.

The Man (soror)—The home team always loses when I go to a game. I'm the hoodoo, all right.

The Woman—How can you be so conceited, John?

Such is Life.

"He used to come back two or three times for a kiss."

"And now in the mornings!"

"Never unless he forgets his overcoat or umbrella."—Kansas City Journal.

Correct.

"Hey!" yelled the guest. "You advertise hot and cold water in this damp, and all I have in my room is a pitcher and a wash basin."

"That's right," replied the landlord. "If you stay here long enough you'll find the water is hot in summer and cold in winter."

Fresh Layers.

Customer—I see you have fresh eggs at 35 cents and extra fresh eggs at 40 cents. Is there much difference?

Grocer—Well, makin' the extra fresh ones were laid in the early morning when the hens themselves were fresh.

Room for the Cat.

The doors of a certain new house had shrunk horribly, as is the way of the modern door made of unseasoned wood and left to shrink in use. The builder would not send the joiner to replace them. So the householder tried the ironclad method and wrote:

"Dear Sir: The mice can run under most of our doors, but our cat cannot follow them. Will you please send a man at once to make room under the doors for the cat and much感激."

Next day the joiner came.—Manchester Guardian.

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