

Molly McDonald

—BY—
Randall Parrish

CHAPTER XXXV.

The Indian Trail.

The weather became colder as the day advanced. Scattered pellets of snow in the air lashed the faces of the troopers, who rode steadily forward, the capes of their overcoats thrown over their heads for protection. The snow of the late storm lay in drifts along the banks of the narrow stream, and the horses picked their passage higher up where the wind had swept the brown earth clear, at the same time keeping well below the crest. As they thus toiled slowly forward, Hamlin related his story to the Major in detail, carefully concealing all suspicion of McDonald's connection with the crime. It was growing dusk when the company emerged into the Valley of the Cana-

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Miss Merrill, a teacher in a graded school, had trouble with Johnnie last week. Johnnie had trouble doing his work and the authorities finally discovered that his sight was defective. Miss Merrill took Johnnie and sent him home with a note to his mother. He came at the note in haste, then at the teacher, and burst into tears. The note read:

"Johnnie has a squint; do not let him return to school until he has been attended to."

Miss Merrill understood his grief better when she received a note from his mother. It read:

"I don't know what he had done, but I liked him for it. I can't find it on him, and he says he ain't got it; now you better look him and see if you can find it."

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dian. All about them was desolation and silence, and as they were still miles away from the position assigned for Black Kettle's encampment, the men were permitted to build fires and prepare a warm meal under shelter of the bluffs. Two hours later the main column arrived and also went into camp. It was intensely cold but the men were cheerful as they ate their supper of smoky and half-roasted buffalo meat, bacon, hard-tack, and coffee.

In response to orders the Sergeant went down the line of tiny fires to report in person to Custer. He found that commander ensconced in a small tent, hastily erected in a little grove of cottonwoods, which afforded a slight protection from the piercing wind. Before him on the ground from which the snow had been swept lay a map of the region, while all about, pressed tightly into the narrow quarters, were his troop officers. As Hamlin was announced by the orderly, conversation ceased, and Custer surveyed the newcomer an instant in silence.

"Step forward, Sergeant," he said quietly. "Ah, yes; I had forgotten your name, but remember your face," he smiled about on the group. "We have been so scattered since our organization, gentlemen, that we are all comparative strangers." He stood up, lifting in one hand a tin cup of coffee. "Gentlemen, all of us of the Seventh rejoice in the honor of the service, whether it be upheld by officer or enlisted man. I bid you drink a toast with me to Sergeant Hamlin."

"But, General, I have done nothing to deserve—" "Observe the modesty of a real hero. Yet wait until I am through. With due regard for his achievements as a soldier, I propose this toast in commemoration of a greater deed of gallantry than those of arms—the capture of Miss Molly McDonald!" There was a quick uplifting of cups, a burst of laughter, and a volley of questions, the Sergeant staring about motionless, his face flushed.

"What is it, General?" "Tell us the story!" "Give us the joke!" "But I assure you it is no joke. I have it direct from the fair lips of the lady. Brace yourselves, gentlemen, for the shock. You young West Pointers lose, and yet the honor remains with the regiment. Miss Molly McDonald, the toast of old Fort Dodge, whose bright eyes have won all your hearts, has given hers to Sergeant Hamlin of the Seventh. And now again, boys, to the honor of the regiment!"

Out of the buzz of conversation and the hearty words of congratulation, Hamlin emerged bewildered, finding himself again facing Custer, whose manner had as swiftly changed into the brusque note of command.

"I have met you before, Sergeant," he said slowly, "before your assignment to the Seventh, I think. I am not sure where; were you in the Shenandoah?"

"I was, sir." "At Winchester?" "I saw you first at Cedar Creek, General Custer; I brought a flag." "That's it; I have the incident clearly before me now. You were a lieutenant-colonel?"

"Of the Fourth Texas, sir." "Exactly; I think I heard later—but never mind that now. Sheridan remembers you; he even mentioned your name to me a few weeks ago. No doubt that was what caused me to recognize your face again after all these years. How long have you been in our service?"

"Ever since the war closed." For a moment the two men looked into each others' faces, the commander smiling, the enlisted man at respectful attention.

"I will talk with you at some future time, Sergeant," Custer said at last, resuming his seat on a log. "Now we shall have to consider tomorrow's march. Were you within sight of Black Kettle's camp?"

"No, sir; only of his pony herd out in the valley of the Canadian."

"Where would you suppose the camp situated?" "Above, behind the bluffs, about the mouth of Buffalo Creek." "Custer drew the map toward him, scrutinizing it carefully.

"You may be right, of course," he commented, his glance on the faces of the officers, "but this does not agree with the understanding at Camp Supply, nor the report of our Indian scouts. We supposed Black Kettle to be farther south on the Washita. How large was the pony herd?"

"We were not near enough to count the animals, sir, but there must have been two hundred head." "A large party then, at least. What do you say, Corbin?"

The scout addressed, conspicuous in his buffalo skin coat, leaned against the tent-pole, his black whiskers moving industriously as he chewed.

"Wal, General," he said slowly, "I know this yere 'Brick' Hamlin, an' he's a right smart plainsman, sojer 'er no sojer. If he says he saw that pony herd, then he sure did. That means a considerable bunch o' Injuns thar, er tharabouts. Now I know Black Kettle's outfit is down on the Washita, so the only conclusion is that this yere band that the Sergeant stirred up is some new tribe er other, a-driftin' down from the north. I reckon if we ride up ther valley we'll hit their trail, an' it'll lead straight down to them Cheyennes."

denly he straightened up and threw back his head to look about.

"In my judgment Corbin is right, gentlemen," he said impetuously. "I had intended crossing here, but instead we will go further up stream. There is doubtless a ford near Buffalo Creek, and if we can strike an Indian trail leading to the Washita, we can follow easily by night, or day, and it is bound to terminate at Black Kettle's camp. Return to your troops, and be ready to march at daybreak. Major Elliott, you will take the advance again, at least three hours ahead of the main column. Move with caution, your flankers well out; both Hamlin and Corbin will go with you. Are there any questions?"

"Full field equipment?" asked a voice.

"Certainly, although in case of going into action the overcoats will be discarded. Look over your ammunition carefully tonight."

They filed out of the tent one by one, some of the older officers pause-



"He Is My Soldier and the Man I Love."

ing a moment to speak with Hamlin, his own captain extending his hand cordially, with a warm word of commendation. The Sergeant and Major Elliott alone remained.

"If I strike a fresh trail, General," asked the latter, "am I to press forward or wait for the main body?" "Send back a courier at once, but advance cautiously, careful not to expose yourselves. There is to be no attack except in surprise, and with full force. This is important, Major, as we are doubtless outnumbered, ten to one. Was there something else, Sergeant?"

"I was going to ask about Miss McDonald, sir?"

"Oh, yes; she is safely on her way to Camp Supply, under ample guard. The convoy was to stop on the Cimarron, and pick up the frozen soldier you left there, and if possible, find the bodies of the two dead men."

Long before daylight Elliott's advance camp was under arms, the chilled and sleepy troopers moving forward through the drifted snow of the north bank; the wintry wind, sweeping down the valley, stung their faces and numbbed their bodies. The night had been cold and blustery, productive of little comfort to either man or beast, but hope of early action animated the troopers and made them oblivious to hardship. There was little grumbling in the ranks, and by daybreak the head of the long column came opposite the opening into the valley wherein Hamlin had overtaken the fugitives. With Corbin beside him, the Sergeant spurred his pony aside, but there was little to see; the bodies of the dead lay as they had fallen, black blotches on the snow, but there were no fresh trails to show that either Dupont, or any Indian ally, had returned to the spot.

"That's evidence enough, 'Brick,'" commented the scout, staring about warily, "that thar was no permanent camp over thar," waving his hand toward the crest of the ridge. "Them redskins was on the march, an' that geezer had ter follow 'em, er else starve to death. He'd a bin back afore this, an' on yer trail with a bunch o' young bucks."

From the top of the ridge they could look down on the tolling column of cavalrymen below in the bluff shadow, and gaze off over the wide expanse of valley, through which ran the half-frozen Canadian. Everywhere stretched the white, wintry desolation.

"What was that pony herd?" Hamlin pointed up the valley to the place where the swerve came in the stream.

"Just below that point; do you see where the wind has swept the ground bare?"

"Sure they weren't buffalo?" "They were ponies all right, and herded."

The two men spurred back across the hills, and made report to Elliott. There was no hesitancy in that officer. The leading squadron was instantly swung into formation as skirmishers, and sent forward. From river-bank to crest of bluff they plowed through the drifts, overcoats strapped behind and carbines slung forward in readiness for action, but as they climbed to that topmost ridge, eager, expectant, it was only to gaze down upon a deserted camp, trampled snow, and blackened embers of numerous fires. Hamlin was the first to scramble down the steep bluff, dismount, and drag his trembling horse sliding after. Behind plunged Corbin and Elliott, anxious to read the signs, to open the pages of this wilderness book. A glance here and there, a testing of the blackened embers, a few steps along the broad trail, and these plainsmen knew the story. The Major straightened up, his hand on his horse's neck, his eyes

sweeping those barren plains to the southward, and then turned to where his troopers were swarming down the bluff.

"Corbin," he said sharply, "ride back to General Custer at top speed. Tell him we have discovered a Cheyenne camp here at the mouth of Buffalo Creek of not less than a hundred and fifty warriors, deserted, and not to exceed twenty-four horses. Their trail leads south toward the Washita. Report that we shall cross the river in pursuit at once, and keep on cautiously until dark. Take a man with you; no, not Sergeant Hamlin, I shall need him here."

The scout was off like a shot, riding straight down the valley, a trooper pounding along behind him. Major Elliott ran his eyes over the little bunch of cavalrymen.

"Captain Sparling, send two of your men to test the depth of water there where those Indians crossed. As soon as ascertained we will ford the river."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Ready to Attack.

There was a ford but it was rocky and dangerous, and so narrow that horse after horse slipped aside into the swift current, bearing his rider with him into the icy water. Comrades hauled the unfortunate ones forth, and fires were hastily built under shelter of the south bank. Those who reached the landing dry shared their extra clothing with those water-soaked, and hot coffee was hastily served to all alike. Eager as the men were to push forward, more than an hour was lost in passage, for the stream was bank full, the current rapid and littered with quantities of floating ice. Some of these ice cakes started the struggling horses and inflicted painful wounds, and it was only by a tree use of ropes and lariats that the entire command finally succeeded in attaining the southern shore. Shivering with the cold, the troopers again found their saddles and pressed grimly forward on the trail. Hamlin, with five others, led the way along a beaten track which had been trampled by the passing herd of Indian ponies and plainly marked by the trailing poles of numerous wicky-ups.

This led straight away into the south across the valley of the Canadian, on to the plains beyond. The snow here was a foot deep on a level, and in places the going was heavy. As they advanced, the weather moderated somewhat, and the upper crust became soft. Before them stretched the dreary level of the plains, broken by occasional ravines and little isolated patches of trees. No sign of Indians was seen other than the deserted trail, and confident that the band had had fully twenty-four hours' start their pursuers advanced as rapidly as the ground would permit. The very clearness of the trail was evidence that the Indians had no conception that they were being followed. Confident of safety in their winter retreat, they were making no effort to protect their rear, never dreaming there were soldiers within hundreds of miles. Whatever report Dupont had made, it had awakened no alarm. Why should it? So far as he knew there were but two men pursuing him into the wilderness, and both of these he believed lying dead in the snow.

Steadily, mile after mile, they rode, and it was after dark when the little column was finally halted beside a stream, where they could safely hide themselves in a patch of timber. Tiny fires were built under protection of the steep banks of the creek, and the men made coffee, and fed their hungry horses. The silence was profound. It was a dark night, although the surrounding snow plains yielded a spectral light. Major Elliott, drinking coffee and munching hardtack with the troop captain, sent for Sergeant Hamlin. The latter advanced within the glow of the fire, and saluted.

"We have been gaining on those fellows, Sergeant," the Major began, "and must be drawing close to the Washita."

"We are travelling faster than they did, sir," was the reply, "because they had to break trail, and there were some women and children with them. I have no knowledge of this region, but the creek empties into the Washita without doubt."

"That would be my judgment. Sparling and I were just talking it over. I shall wait here until Custer comes up; my force is too small to attack openly, and my orders are not to bring on an engagement. Custer has some Osage scouts with him who will know this country."

"But, Major," ventured Hamlin, "if the General follows our trail it will be hours yet before he can reach here, and then his men will be completely exhausted."

"He will not follow our trail. He has Corbin and 'California Joe' with him. They are plainsmen who know their business. He'll cross the Canadian, and strike out across the plains to intercept us. In that way he will have no farther to travel than we have had. In my judgment we shall not wait here long alone. Have you eaten?"

"No, sir; I have been stationing the guard."

"Then sit down here and share what little we have. We can waive formality tonight."

It was after nine o'clock when the sentries challenged the advance of Custer's column, as it stole silently out of the gloom. Ten minutes later the men were hovering about the fires, absorbing such small comforts as were possible, while the General and Major Elliott discussed the situation and planned to push forward. An hour later the fires were extinguished, the horses quietly saddled, and noiselessly the tired cavalrymen moved out once more and took up the trail. The moon had risen, lighting up the

desert, and the Osage guides, together with the two scouts, led the way. At Custer's request Hamlin rode beside him in the lead of the troopers. Not a word was spoken above a whisper, and strict orders were passed down the line prohibiting the lighting of a match or the smoking of a pipe. Canteens were muffled and swords thrust securely under saddle flaps. Like a body of spectres they moved silently across the snow in the moonlight, cavalry capes drawn over their heads, the only sound the crunching of horses' hoofs breaking through the crust.

The trail was as distinct as a road, and the guides pushed ahead as rapidly as by daylight, yet with ever increasing caution. Suddenly one of the Osages signalled for a halt, averring that he smelled fire. The scouts dismounted and crept forward, discovering a small campfire, deserted but still smouldering, in a strip of timber. Careful examination made it certain that this fire must have been kindled by Indian boys, herding ponies during the day, and probably meant that the village was close at hand. The Osage guides and the two white scouts again picked up the trail, the cavalry advancing slowly some distance behind. Custer, accompanied by Hamlin, rode a yard to the rear and joined the scouts, who were cautiously feeling their way up a slight declivity.

The Osage in advance crept through the snow to the crest of the ridge and looked carefully down into the valley below. Instantly his hand went up in a gesture of caution and he hurriedly made his cautious way back to where Custer sat his horse waiting.

"What is it? What did you see?" "Leap Injuns down there!"

The General swung down from his saddle, motioned the Sergeant to follow, and the two men crept to the crest and looked over. The dim moonlight was confusing, while the shadow of timber rendered everything indistinct. Yet they were able to make out a herd of ponies, distinguished the distant bark of a dog and the tinkle of a bell. Without question this was the Indians' winter camp, and they had reached it undiscovered. Custer glanced at his watch—the hour was past midnight. He pressed Hamlin's sleeve, his lips close to the Sergeant's ear.

"Creep back and bring my officers up here," he whispered. "Have them take off their sabres." As they crept, one after the other, to where he lay in the snow, the General, whose eyes had become accustomed to the moon-gleam, pointed out the location of the village and such natural surroundings as could be vaguely distinguished. The situation thus outlined in their minds, they drew silently back from the crest, leaving there a single Osage guide on guard, and returned to the waiting regiment, standing to horse less than a mile distant. Custer's orders for immediate attack came swiftly, and Hamlin, acting as his orderly, bore them to the several commands. The entire force was slightly in excess of eight hundred men, and there was every probability that the Indians outnumbered them five to one. Scouts had reported to Sheridan that this camp of Black Kettle's was the winter rendezvous not only of the Cheyennes, but also of bands of fighting Arapahoes, Kiowas, Comanches, and even some Apaches, the most daring and desperate warriors of the plains. Yet this was no time to hesitate, to debate; it was a moment for decisive action. The blow must be struck at once, before daylight, with all the power of surprise.

The little body of cavalrymen was divided into four detachments. Two of these were at once marched to the left, circling the village silently in the darkness, and taking up a position at the farther extremity. A third detachment moved to the right and found their way down into the valley, where they lay concealed in a strip of timber. Custer, with the fourth detachment under his own command, remained in position on the trail. The

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SNOW ALL OVER THE SOUTH.

The White Blanket of Last Wednesday Night Was Spread Out Generally.

Atlanta, Ga., Feb. 25.—The South and Southeast tonight shivered in the grip of a general snowstorm which blanketed the Atlantic seaboard as far south as Southern Georgia and reached to the Gulf States. Weather Bureau records for from eight to twenty years were broken. Falling temperatures accompanied the storm in many sections, the snow turning to sleet.

While no serious interruptions of traffic were reported early tonight many trains were behind their schedules in localities where the snowstorm was heaviest. Wire service was demoralized between Georgia and Florida points early in the evening and it was impossible at that time to establish communication with Jacksonville and Tampa, Fla.

The heaviest snowfall was reported in Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi, and North Carolina and South Carolina. At Macon, Ga., the precipitation reached a depth of six inches while an almost equal amount was reported at Augusta and Savannah. In Louisiana and Mississippi the snow began falling about noon and at nightfall it had been recorded from a trace in the extreme South to six inches in the Northern section. Thermometers at New Orleans, Mobile and other Gulf points hovered about the freezing point and the snow melted as it fell.

In addition to a heavy snowfall in South Carolina, the country around Charleston was covered with a coating of ice and sleet. Snow changed to sleet late in the day causing progress in the city to be difficult for both pedestrians and traffic.

Birmingham, Montgomery and other Alabama cities were affected by the snowstorm. More than four inches fell in the former city.

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Since I wasn't dar ter make suggestions whist de wurl' wuz in de makin' I takes it ez I finds it, an' I never takes mo'n I kin tote.

De man who kin sidestep Trouble sojer' day in de week an' go ter church an' show a halleluia on Sunday is so close ter heaven dat it's a wonder dat he don't say "Good-by, all," an' step in.

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During a concert tour of the late Theodore Thomas and his celebrated orchestra, one of the musicians died and the following telegram was immediately dispatched to the parents of the deceased:

"John Blank died suddenly today. Advise by wire as to disposition." In a few hours the answer was received, reading as follows: "We are heartbroken; his disposition was a roving one."

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The Scout Was Off Like a Shot.

sleeping village was thus completely surrounded, and the orders were for those in command of the different forces to approach as closely as possible without running risk of discovery, and then to remain absolutely quiet until daybreak. Not a match was to be lighted nor a shot fired until the charge was sounded by the trumpeter who remained with Custer. Then all were to spur forward as one man.

(To be continued.)

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