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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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CHAPTER XXXVIII.

At Camp Supply. There are yet living in that great Southwest those who will retell the story of Hamlin's ride from the banks of the Washita to Camp Supply. It remains one of the epics of the plains, one of the proud traditions of the army. To the man himself those hours of danger, struggle and weariness, were more a dream than a reality. He passed through them almost unconsciously, a soldier performing his duty in utter forgetfulness of self, nerved by the discipline of years of service, by the importance of his mission, and by memory of Molly McDonald. Love and duty held him reeling in the saddle, brought him safely to the journey's end.

Let the details pass unwritten. Beneath the darkening skies of early evening, the Sergeant and the Osage guide rode forth into the peril and mystery of the shrouded desert. Beyond the outpost picket, moving as silently as two specters, they found at last a coulee leading upward from the valley to the plains above. To their left the Indian fires swept in half circles, and between were the dark outlines of savage foes. From rock to rock echoed guttural voices, but, foot by foot, unnoted by the keen eyes, the two crept steadily on through the midnight of that sheltering ravine, dismounted, hands clasping the nostrils of their ponies, feeling through the darkness for each step, halting breathless at every crackle of a twig, every crunch of snow under foot. Again and again they paused, silent, motionless, as some apparition of savagery outlined itself between them and the sky, yet slowly, steadily, every instinct of the plains exercised, they passed unseen.

In the earliest gray of dawn the two wearied men crept out upon the upper plateau, dragging their horses. Behind, the mists of the night still hung heavy and dark over the valley, yet with a new sense of freedom they swung into their saddles, faced sternly the chill wind of the north and rode forward across the desolate snow fields. It was no boys' play! The tough, half-broken Indian ponies kept steady stride, leaping the drifts, skimming rapidly along the bare hillsides. From dawn to dark scarcely a word was uttered. By turns they slept in the saddle, the one awake gripping the other's rein. Once, in a strip of cottonwood beside a frozen creek, they paused to light a fire and make a hasty meal. Then they were off again, facing the frosty air, riding straight into the north. Before them stretched the barren snow-clad steppes, forlorn and shelterless, with scarcely a mark of guidance anywhere, a dismal wilderness, intersected by gloomy ravines and frozen creeks. Here and there a river, the



They Paused to Light a Fire.

water icy cold and covered with floating ice, barred their passage; down in the valleys the drifted snow turned them aside. Again and again the struggling ponies floundered to their ears, or slid headlong down some steep declivity. Twice Hamlin was thrown, and once the Osage was crushed between floating cakes and submerged in the icy stream. Across the open barrens swept the wind into their faces, a ceaseless buffeting, chilling to the marrow; their eyes burned in the snow-glare. Yet they rode on and on, voiceless, suffering in the grim silence of despair, fit gentlemen of that scene of utter desolation.

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At the Cimarron the half-frozen Indian collapsed, falling from his saddle into the snow utterly exhausted. Staggering himself like a drunken man, the Sergeant dragged the nerveless body into a crevice of the bluff out of the wild sweep of the wind, trampled aside the snow into a wall of shelter, built a hasty fire, and poured hot coffee between the shivering lips. With the earliest gray of another dawn, the white man caught the strongest pony, and rode on alone. He never knew the story of those hours—only that his trail led straight into the north. He rode erect at first, then leaning forward clinging to the mane; now and then he staggered along on foot dragging his pony by the rein. Once he stopped to eat, breaking the ice in a creek for water. It began to snow, the thick fall of flakes blotting out the horizon, leaving him to stumble blindly through the murk. Then darkness came, wrapping him in a cloak of silence in the midst of that unpeopled desert. His limbs stiffened, his brain reeled from intense fatigue. He dragged himself back into the saddle, pressing the pony into a slow trot. Suddenly out of the wall of gloom sprang the yellow lights of Camp Supply. Beneath these winking eyes of guidance there burst the red glare of a fire. Even as he saw it the pony fell, but the exhausted man had forgotten now everything but duty. The knowledge that he had won the long struggle brought him new strength. He wrenched his feet free from the stirrups, and ran forward, calling to the guard. They met him, and he stood straight before them, every nerve taut—a soldier.

"I bring dispatches from Custer," he said slowly, holding himself firm. "Take me to General Sheridan." The corporal walked beside him, down the trampled road, questioning eagerly as they passed the line of shacks toward the double log house where the commander was quartered. Hamlin heard, and answered briefly, yet was conscious only of an effort to retain his strength. Once within, he saw only the short, sturdy figure sitting behind a table, the shaggy gray beard, the stern, questioning eyes which surveyed him. He stood there straight, motionless, his uniform powdered with snow, his teeth clenched so as not to betray weakness, his face roughened by exposure, grimy with dirt, and disfigured by a week's growth of beard. Sheridan stared at him, shading his eyes from the glow of the lamp.

"You are from Custer?" "Yes, sir." He drew the papers from within his overcoat, stepped forward and laid them on the table. Sheridan placed one hand upon them, but did not remove his gaze from Hamlin's face. "When did you leave?" "The evening of the 27th, sir. I was sent back with an Osage guide to bring you this report." "And the guide?" "He gave out on the Cimarron and I came on alone." "And Custer? Did he strike Black Kettle?"

"We found his camp on the evening of the 26th, and attacked at daybreak the next morning. There were more Indians with him than we expected to find—between two and three thousand, warriors from all the southern tribes. Their tepees were set up for ten miles along the Washita. We captured Black Kettle's village, and destroyed it; took his pony herd, and released a number of white prisoners, including some women and children. There was a sharp fight, and we lost quite a few men; I left too early to learn how many." "And the command—is it in any danger?"

"I think not, sir. General Custer was confident he could retire safely. The Indians were thoroughly whipped, and apparently had no chief under whom they could rally." The General opened the single sheet of paper, and ran his eyes slowly down the lines of writing. Hamlin, feeling his head reel giddily, reached out silently and grasped the back of a chair in support. Sheridan glanced up.

"General Custer reports Major Elliott as missing and several officers badly wounded." "Yes, sir."

"What Indians were engaged, and under what chiefs?" "Mostly Cheyennes, although there were bands of Arapahoes, Kiowas, Comanches, and a few Apaches. Little Rock was in command after Black Kettle was killed—that is of the Cheyennes. Little Raven, and Santanta led the others."

"A fend, that last. But, Sergeant, you are exhausted. I will talk with you tomorrow. The officer of the day will assign you quarters." Hamlin, still clinging to the chair with one hand, lifted the other in salute.

"General Sheridan," he said, striving to control his voice, "General Custer's last words to me were that I was to tell you who I am. I do not know what he meant, but he said you would have news for me." "Indeed!" in surprise, stiffening in his chair. "Yes, sir—my name is Hamlin." "Hamlin! Hamlin!" the General repeated the word. "I have no recollection—why, yes, by Gad! You were a Confederate colonel." "Fourth Texas Infantry." "That's it! I have it now; you were court-martialed after the affair at Fisher's Hill, and dismissed from the service—disobedience of orders, or something like that. Wait a minute." He rapped sharply on the table, and the door behind, leading into the other room, instantly opened to admit the orderly. In the dim light of the single lamp Hamlin saw the short,

stocky figure of a soldier, bearded, and immaculately clean. Even as the fellow's gloved hand came sharply up to his cap visor, Sheridan snapped out:

"Orderly, see if you recognize this man."

Erect, the very impersonation of military discipline, the soldier crossed the room, and stared into the unshaven face of the Sergeant. Suddenly his eyes brightened, and he wheeled about as if on a pivot, again bringing his gloved hand up in salute.

"'Eet vas Colonel Hamlin, I tink ya," he said in strong German accent. "I know heem."

The Sergeant gripped his arm, bringing his face about once more. "You are Shultz—Sergeant-Major Shultz!" he cried. "What ever became of you? What is it you know?" "Wait a minute, Hamlin," said Sheridan quickly, rising to his feet. "I can explain this much better than that Dutchman. He means well enough, but his tongue twists. It seems Custer met you once in the Shenandoah, and later heard of your dismissal from the service. One night



"He is My Soldier."

he spoke about the affair in my quarters. Shultz was present on duty and overheard. He spoke up like a little man; said he was there when you got your orders, that they were delivered verbally by the staff officer, and he repeated them for us word for word. He was taken prisoner an hour later, and never heard of your court-martial. Is that it, Shultz?"

"Mine Gott, ya; I sa dot alretty," fervently. "He tell you not reconnaissance—charge! I heard eet twice. Gott in Himmel, vat a hell in der pines!"

"Hamlin," continued Sheridan quietly, "there is little enough we can do to right this wrong. There is no way in which that Confederate court-martial can be reconvened. But I shall have Shultz's deposition taken and scattered broadcast. We will clear your name of stain. What became of that cowardly cur who lied?"

Hamlin pressed one hand against his throbbing temples, struggling against the faintness which threatened mastery.

"He—he paid for it, sir," he managed to say. "He—he died three days ago in Black Kettle's camp."

"You got him!" "Yes—I got him."

"I have forgotten—what was the coward's name?"

"Eugene Le Fevre, but in Kansas they called him Dupont."

"Dupont! Dupont!" Sheridan struck the table with closed fist. "Good Lord, man! Not the husband of that woman who ran off with Lieutenant Gaskins, from Dodge?"

"I—I never heard—"

The room whirled before him in mist, the faces vanished; he heard an exclamation from Shultz, a sharp command from Sheridan, and then seemed to crumble up on the floor. There was the sharp rustle of a woman's skirt, a quick, light step, the pressure of an arm beneath his head.

"Quick, orderly, he's fainted," it was the General's voice, sounding afar off. "Get some brandy, Shultz. Here, Miss McDonald, let me hold the man's head."

She turned slightly, her soft hand pressing back the hair from Hamlin's forehead.

"No," she protested firmly, "he is my soldier."

And the Sergeant, looking past the face of the girl he loved saw tears dimming the stern eyes of his commander.

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