

MOLLY McDONALD

A TALE OF THE FRONTIER



By **RANDA PARRISH**
Author of "Keith of the Border," "My Lady of Doubt," "South," etc.
Illustrations by **V. J. Barnes**

"Cowardice, and disobedience of orders," he repeated dully, "after I had been under fire almost night and day for three years; after I had risen from the ranks and commanded the regiment."

"And you had no defence?"
"No; at least, none I could use; this man might have saved me, but he did not, and I never knew why."

"Who was he?"
"My senior captain, detailed on Early's staff; he brought me the orders verbally; I was afterwards accused of disobeying. I was temporarily in command of the regiment that day with rank as major. There was a mistake somewhere, and we were horribly cut up, and a number taken prisoners. It was my word against his, and—and he lied."

"She took the haversack from him, studying the scarcely legible inscription."
"E. L. F. Are those the letters?"
"Yes; they stand for Eugene Le Fevre; he was of French descent, his home in New Orleans."

"You knew him well?"
"I thought so; we were at school together and afterwards in the army."
She looked across at him again, touched by the tender echo of his voice; then leaned forward and placed one hand upon his.

"You have not spoken about this for a long while, have you?"
"No," his eyes lighting up pleasantly, "hardly thought of it, except sometimes alone at night. The memory made me savage, and all my efforts to ascertain the truth have proven useless."

"That is why you enlisted?"
"Largely; there is no better place to hide one's past than in the ranks out here on the plains. I—I could not remain at home with that disgrace hanging over me."

"You must tell me all about it."
Her head lifted suddenly as she gazed out across the river, shading her eyes.
"Why, what are those?" she exclaimed eagerly, "there, moving on the bluffs opposite?"

His glance swept to the northward, and he was as instantly the soldier again. Far away on the upper plateau, clearly outlined against the blue of the distant sky, appeared a number of dark figures. For a moment he believed them buffaloes, but in another instant decided instead they were horsemen riding two by two.

"Get down lower, Miss McDonald," he commanded. "Now we can see, and not be seen. They must be cavalrymen, the way they ride, but we can take no chances."

They watched the black specks pass east to where the bluff circled in toward the river. It was from there those distant riders first observed the dim spiral of smoke still curling up from the burning stage, for they halted, bunching together, and then disappeared slowly down a gash in the side of the hill. Emerging on the lower flat they turned in the direction of the fire, spurring their horses into a swift trot. There was no longer any doubt of their being troopers, and Hamlin stood upright on the sand hummock waving his hat. They were gathered about the fire, a few dismounted beside the dead bodies, before his signal was observed. Then a field glass flashed in the sunlight, and three or four of the party rode down to the bank of the river. One of these, the glasses still held in his hand, his horses, hoofs in the water, shouted across the stream.

"Who are you over there?"
"White people," answered Hamlin, using his hands for a trumpet. "We escaped from the stage last night. I am a sergeant, Seventh Cavalry, and the lady with me is the daughter of Major McDonald at Fort Devere."
"How did you get across?"
"Waded in the dark; there is good bottom. Send a man over with a couple of horses."
The officer turned and spoke to the others grouped beside him; then raised his voice again.
"Are you sure there is no quicksand?"
"None to hurt; come straight over the end of that sand spit, and then wade about a dozen feet to the right to keep out of a hole. The water won't go to a horse's belly. Try it, Wasson, you ought to know me."
"You're 'Brick' Hamlin, ain't you?"
"A good guess, Sam; come on."
Two troopers left their saddles, and the third man, the one answering the last hal, gathered the reins in one hand, and spurred his horse confidently into the brown water. Following the Sergeant's shouted directions, the three animals plunged forward and came dripping up the low sand bank. The rider, a sallow-faced man clad in rough corduroy, patched and colored, leaned over and held out his hand.

advice from me yet, for as I remember. But if yer really want ter know, this time, my notion is them bucks will most likely hide in the bluffs till night, an' then sneak past Maxwell after it gets good an' dark. If this yere was my outfit now, I'd just naturally light on to the trail fast, orders or no orders. I reckon it's injuns we cum out after, an' I don't suppose the war department would find any fault if we found a few."

The blood surged into the lieutenant's face, but opposition only served to increase his obstinacy.
"I prefer to rely on my own judgment," he said tartly. "From what this man reports they are in stronger force than we are. Besides my instructions were not to provoke hostilities."

Wasson grinned, revealing his yellow teeth.
"Sure not; they are so damned peaceable themselves."
"I prefer leaving Captain Maxwell to deal with the situation," Gaskins went on pompously, ignoring the sneer, "as he outranks me, and I am under strict instructions to return at once to the fort. Two of our horses are disabled already, and Smiley is too sick to be left alone. I'll not risk it. Well," he broke off suddenly, and addressing a corporal who had just ridden up and saluted, "have you buried the bodies?"

"Yes, sir; found these papers on them."
"What the Hell (Begging Your Pardon, Ma'am) Has Happened Here?"
The lieutenant thrust these into his jacket pocket.

"Very well, Hough. Form the men into column. Miss McDonald, you will retain the horse you have, and I should be very glad to have you ride with me. Oh, corporal, was everything in the coach destroyed? Nothing saved belonging to this lady?"

"Only the ironwork is left, sir."
"So I thought; exceedingly sorry, Miss McDonald. The ladies at Dodge will fit you out when we get in. I am a bachelor, you know," he added, glancing aside into her face, "but can promise every attention."

Her eyes sought Hamlin where he stood straight and motionless, respectfully waiting an opportunity to speak.
"Is—is this what I ought to do?" she questioned, leaning toward him. "I am so confused I hardly know what is best."

"Why, of course," broke in the lieutenant hastily. "You may trust me to advise."
"But my question was addressed to Sergeant Hamlin," she interposed, never glancing aside. "He understands the situation better than you."

The sergeant held his hat in his hand, his eyes meeting her own frankly, but with a new light in them. She had not forgotten now the danger was over; she meant him to realize her friendship.

"It seems to me the only safe course for you to take, Miss McDonald," he said slowly, endeavoring to keep the note of triumph out of his voice. "Your father is perfectly safe, and will join you within a few days. I would not dare attempt your protection farther west."
"You are not going with us then?" she questioned in surprise.

"Not if Lieutenant Gaskins will furnish me with horse and rifle. I must report at Union, and, on the way, tell your father where you are." "But the danger! Oh, you mustn't attempt such a ride alone!"

"That is nothing; the valley is swept clean, and I shall do most of my riding at night. Any plainsman could do the trick—hey, Sam?"
Wasson nodded, chewing solemnly on the tobacco in his cheek.
"He'll make the trip all right, miss," he drawled lazily. "Wish I was goin' long. I'm sure tired o' this sorter scoutin', I am. Down below the Cimarron is the only place y'll have ter watch out close, 'Brick.' Them Comanches an' Apaches are the worst lot."

"I know—night riders themselves, but I know the trail. Can you outfit me, Lieutenant?"
Gaskins smiled grimly, but with no trace of humor. His eyes were upon the girl, still leaning over her pomel.

"I'll outfit you all right," he said brusquely, "and with no great regret, either. And I shall report finding you here in disobedience to orders."
"Very well, sir."
Molly's brown eyes swept to the lieutenant's face, her form straightening in the saddle, her lips pressed tightly together. Gaskins frowned the sergeant, stung into anger by the man's quiet response.

provisioned only by wagon trains sent through under strong guard; the fringe of settlement along the water ways was deserted, men and women fleeing to the nearest government posts for protection and food. The troops, few in number and widely scattered in small detachments, many being utilized as scouts and guards, were unequal to the gigantic task of protecting so wide a frontier. Skirmishes were frequent, but the Indians were wary and resourceful, and only once during the entire summer were they brought into real decisive battle. The last of August, Major Forsythe, temporarily commanding a company of volunteer scouts, was suddenly attacked by over a thousand warriors under command of Roman Nose. A four days' fight resulted, with heavy loss on both sides, the Indians being driven from the field by the opportunistic arrival of fresh troops.

The general condition of affairs is well shown by the reports reaching Fort Wallace in September. Governor Hunt wrote from Denver: "Just returned. Fearful condition of things here. Nine persons murdered by Indians yesterday, within radius of nine miles." A few days later, acting Governor Hall reported: "The Indians have again attacked our settlements in strong force, obtaining possession of the country to within twelve miles of Denver. They are more bold, fierce, and desperate in their assaults than ever before. It is impossible to drive them out and protect the families at the same time, for they are better armed, mounted, disciplined, and better officered than our men. Each hour brings intelligence of fresh barbarities, and more extensive robberies." This same month Governor Crawford, of Kansas, telegraphed: "Have just received a dispatch from Hays, stating that Indians attacked, captured, and burned a train at Pawnee Fork; killed, scalped, and burned sixteen men; also attacked another train at Cimarron Crossing, which was defended until ammunition was exhausted, when the men abandoned the train, saving what stock they could. Similar attacks are of almost daily occurrence."

South of the Cimarron all was desolation, and war raged unchecked from the Platte to the Peccos. Sheridan determined upon a winter campaign, although he understood well the sufferings entailed upon the troops by exposure on the open plains at that season. Yet he knew the habits of Indians; that they would expect immunity from attack and would gather in villages, subject to surprise. He, therefore, decided that the result would justify the necessary hardships involved. To this end smaller posts were abandoned, and the widely scattered soldiers ordered to central points in preparation for the contemplated movement. Devere had been deserted earlier, and Major McDonald had marched his men to Dodge, where Molly awaited his coming. Retained there on garrison duty, the two occupied a one-story, yellow stone structure fronting the parade ground. In October, orders to march reached "M" troop, Seventh Cavalry, at Fort Union, and the ragged, bronzed troopers, who all summer long had been scouting the New Mexican plains, turned their horses' heads to the northeast in hopefulness of action. With them up the deserted Santa Fe trail, past burned stations and wrecks of wagon trains, rode Sergeant Hamlin, silent and efficient, the old Confederate haversack fastened to his saddle, and his mind, in spite of all effort, recurring constantly to the girl who had gone to Dodge early in the summer. Was she still there? If so, how would she greet him now after these months of absence? The little cavalry column, dust-covered and weary, seemed faintly to creep along, as day by day he reviewed every word, every glance, which had passed between them; and at night, under the stars, he lay with head on his saddle, endeavoring to determine his course of action, both as to their possible meeting, and with regard to the following of the clue offered by the haversack. The time he had hoped for was at hand, but he could not decide the best course of action. He could only wait, and permit Fate to interfere.

Certain facts were, however, sufficiently clear, and the Sergeant faced them manfully. Not merely the fact that he was in the ranks, great as that handicap was, could have prevented an attempt at retaining the friendship of Molly McDonald. But he was in the ranks because of disgrace—hiding away from his own people, keeping aloof from his proper station in life, out of bitter shame. If he had felt thus before, he now felt it a thousand times more acutely in memory of the comradeship of her whose words had brought him a new gleam of hope. Never before had loneliness seemed so complete, and never before had he realized how wide was the chasm between the old and the new life. This constantly recurring memory embittered him, and made him restless. Yet out of it all, there grew a firmer determination to win back his old position in the world, to stamp out the lie through which the Confederate court-martial had condemned him. If Le Fevre were alive, he meant now to find him, face him, and compel him to speak the truth. The discovery of that haversack gave a point from which to start, and his mind centered there with a fixed purpose which obscured all else.

It was after dark when "M" troop, wearied by their long day's march across the brown grass, rode slowly up the face of the bluff, and into the parade ground at Fort Dodge. The lights of the guard-house revealed the troopers' faces, while all about them gleamed the yellow lamps, as the garrison came forth to welcome their arrival. Guided by a corporal of the guard the men led their horses to the stables, and, as they passed the row of officers' houses Hamlin caught a furtive glimpse in a radius of light that gave his pulses a sudden throb. She was here then—here! He had hardly dared hope for this. They would meet again; that could scarcely be avoided in such narrow quarters. But how? On what terms? He ventured the one swift glimpse at her—a slender, white-robed figure, one among a group of both men and women before an open door, through which the light streamed—heard her ask: "Who are they? What cavalry troop is that?" caught the response in a man's voice: "M' of the Seventh, from Fort Union," and then passed by, his eyes looking straight ahead, his hand gripping his horse's bit.

Thirty minutes later in the great barn-like barracks, he hung his accoutrements over the bed assigned him in the far corner, and, revolver belt still buckled about his waist, stood at the open window, striving to determine which of those winking lights shone from the house where he had seen her. There had been something in the eagerness of her voice which he could not forget, nor escape from. She had seemed to care, to feel an interest deeper than mere curiosity. The Sergeant's heart beat rapidly, even while he sternly told himself he was a fool. A hand touched his shoulder, and he wheeled about to grip Wasson's hand.

"Well, 'Brick,' old boy," said the scout genially, although his thin face was as solemn as ever: "so you fellows have come back to be in the shindy?"
"We've been in it all summer, Sam," was the reply. "It's been lively enough south of the Cimarron, the Lord knows. I've been riding patrol for months now. But what's up? No one seems to know why we were ordered in."

"It's all guess-work here," and Wasson sat down on the narrow bed and lit his pipe. "But the 'old man' is getting something under way, consolidating troops. Your regiment is going to be used, that's certain. I've been carrying orders between here an' I've heard Sheridan explode once or twice. He's tired of this guerrilla business, an' wants to have one good fight."

"That's the way he figures it out, according to my notion. We've always let those fellows alone during the bad weather, an' they've got so they expect it. The 'old man' figures he'll give 'em a surprise."
"A winter campaign?"
"Why not? We can stand it if they can. O' course, I'm just guessin'; there's no leak at headquarters. But Custer's up there, with a wave of the hand to the north, 'and they've got the maps out.'"

"I only got a glimpse of them out of the tail of my eye, but I reckon they was of the kintry south of the Arkansas, along the Canadian."
Hamlin sat down beside him, staring across the big room.
"Then it's the Black Kettle; his band is down on the Washita," he announced. "I hope it's true."
"They're arrangin' supply depots, anyhow; six companies of infantry are on Monument Creek, and five troops of cavalry on the North Canadian already. Wagon trains have been haulin' supplies. There's some stiff work ahead when the snow flies, or I miss my guess."

Hamlin sat silent, thinking, and the scout smoked quietly, occasionally glancing toward his companion. Finally he spoke again, his voice barely audible.
"That little girl you sent in with us is here yet."
The Sergeant was conscious that his cheeks flamed, but he never looked up.

"Yes, I saw her as we came in."
"She's asked me about you once or twice; don't seem to forget what you did for her."
"Sorry to hear that."
"No, yer not; couldn't no man be sorry to have a girl like that take an interest in him. 'Tain't in human nature. What did yer tell her about me?"
"Tell her?" surprised. "Why, I only advised her to hang close to you if anything happened. I didn't exactly like the style of the Lieutenant."

"That's wat I thought. Well, she's done it, though that hasn't pried her loose from Gaskins. He's hauntin' her like a shadow. It's garrison talk—they're engaged, but I ain't so sure."



War Raged Unchecked From the Platte to the Peccos.



What the Hell (Begging Your Pardon, Ma'am) Has Happened Here?



But My Question Was Addressed to Sergeant Hamlin, She Interposed.

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