

Molly McDonald

A TALE OF THE FRONTIER

By RANDALL PARRISH

Illustrations by V. L. BARNES

See yer hand afore yer face. I've been out yere in them things afore, an' they're sure hell. If we don't get sight o' that outfit mighty soon, 't ain't likely we ever will. I've been expectin' that wind to shift nor'east all day—then we'll get it." He got down on his knees, endeavoring to decipher some faint marks on the sand. "Two of 'em dismounted yere, an' Injun an' a white—a big feller by his hoof prints—an' they went on leadin' their hosses. Goin' into camp, I reckon—sure, here's the spot now. Well, PH be damned!"



"That's Nothin' Goin' to Happen to Her While This Bunch is on the Move."

Both men stood staring—under protection of a sand ridge was a little blackened space where some mesquite chips had been burned, and all about it freshly trampled sand, and slight impressions where men had outstretched themselves. Almost at Wason's feet fluttered a pink ribbon, and beyond the fire circle lay the body of a man, face up to the sky. It was Connors, a ghastly bullet hole between his eyes, one cheek caked black with blood. The Sergeant sprang across, and bent over the motionless form.

"Pockets turned inside out," he said, glancing back. "The poor devil!" "Had quite a row here," returned the scout. "That stain over that is blood, an' it never come from him, fer he died whar he fell. Most likely he shot 'em, or used a knife. The girl's whar er anyhow; I reckon this yere was her ribbon; that footprint is sure."

He stirred up the scattered ashes, and then passed over and looked at the dead man. "What do yer think, Sergeant?" "They stopped here to eat, maybe five hours ago," pushing the ashes about with his toe. "The fire has been out that long. Then they got into a quarrel—Connors and Dupont—for he was shot with a Colt '45; no Indian ever did that. Then they struck out again with two led horses. I should say they were three or four hours ahead, traveling slow."

"Good enough," and Wason patted his arm. "You're a plainsman all right, 'Brick.' You kin sure read signs. That's just 'bout the whole story, as I make it. Nuthin' fer us to do but snatch a bite an' go on. Our hosses 're fresher'n theirs. No sense our stoppin' to bury Connors; he ain't worth it, an' the birds'll take care o' him. The outfit was still a headin' south—see!"

There could be no doubt of this, as the shelter of the sand ridge had preserved a plain trail, although a few yards beyond, the sweeping wind had already almost obliterated every sign of passage. The four men ate heartily of their cold provender, discussing the situation in a few brief sentences. Wason argued that Dupont was heading for some Indian winter encampment, thinking to shift responsibility for the crime upon the savages, thus permitting him to return once more to civilization, but Hamlin clung to his original theory of a hide-out upon Dupont's old cattle-range, and that a purpose other than the mere robbery of McDonald was in view. All alike, however, were convinced that the fugitives were seeking the wild bluffs of the Canadian river for concealment.

sucking their very breath, bewildering them, robbing them of all sense of direction. Within two minutes the men found it impossible to penetrate the wintry shroud except for a few feet ahead of them.

The Sergeant knew what it meant, for he had had experience of these plains storms before. "Halt!" he cried, his voice barely audible in the blast. "Close up, men; come here to me—lively now! That you, Wade? Wasson; oh, all right, Sam. Here, pass that lariar back; now get a grip on it, every one of you, and hold it to for your lives. Let me take the lead, Sam; we'll have to run by compass. Now, then, are you ready?"

The lariar rope, tied to Hamlin's pommel, straightened out and was grasped desperately by the gloved hands of the men behind. The Sergeant, shading his eyes, half smothered in the blast, could see merely ill-defined shadows. "All caught?" "The answers were inaudible. "For the Lord's sake, speak up; answer now—Wasson."

"Here." "Wade." "Here." "Carroll." "Here." "Good; now come on after me." He drove his horse forward, head bent low over the compass, one arm flung up across his mouth to prevent inhaling the icy air. He felt the tug of the line; heard the labored breathing of the next horse behind, but saw nothing except that wall of swirling snow pellets hurled against him by a pitiless wind, fairly lacerating the flesh. It was freezing cold; already he felt numb, exhausted, heavy-eyed. The air seemed to penetrate his clothing, and prick the skin as with a thousand needles. The thought came that if he remained in the saddle he would freeze stiff. Again he turned, and sent the voice of command down the struggling line.

"Dismount; wind the rope around your pommels. Sam. How far is it to the Cimarron?" "More'n twenty miles." "All right! We've got to make it, boys," forcing a note of cheerfulness into his voice. "Hang on to the bit even if you drop. I may drift to the west, but that won't lose us much. Come on, now."

"Hamlin, let me break trail." "We'll take it turn about, Sam. It'll be worse in an hour than it is now. All ready, boys."

CHAPTER XXV.

In the Blizzard. There was no cessation, no abatement. Across a thousand miles of plain the ice-laden wind swept down upon them with the relentless fury of a hurricane, driving the snow crystals into their faces, buffeting them mercilessly, numbing their bodies, and blinding their eyes. In that awful grip they looked upon Death, but struggled on, as real men must until they fall. Breathing was agony; every step became a torture; fingers grasping the horses' bits grew stiff and deadened by frost; they reeled like drunken men, sightless in the mad swirl, deafened by the pounding of the blast against their ears. All consciousness left them! only dumb instinct kept them battling for life, staggering forward, foot by foot, odd phantasies of



"Close Up, Men; Come Here to Me."

Imagination beginning to beckon. In their weakness, delirium gripped their half-mad brains, yielding new strength to fight the snow fiend. Aching in every point, trembling from fatigue, they dare not rest an instant. The wind, veering more to the east, lashed their faces like a whip. They crouched behind the horses to keep out of the sting of it, crunching the snow, now in deep drifts, under their half-frozen feet.

Wade, a young fellow not overly strong, fell twice. They placed him in the center, with Carroll bringing up the rear. Again he went down face buried in the snow, crying like a babe. Desperately the others lashed him into his saddle, binding a blanket about him, and went grimly staggering on, his limp figure rocking above them. Hour succeeded hour in ceaseless struggle; no one knew where they were, only the leader staggered on his eyes upon the compass. Wason and Hamlin took their turns tramping a trail, the snow often to their knees. They had stopped speaking, stopped thinking even. All their movements became automatic, instinctive, the result of iron discipline. They realized

the only hope—attainment of the Cimarron bluffs. There was no shelter (save in the open, to either man or horse); the sole choice left was to struggle on, or lie down and die. The last was likely to be the end of it, but while a drop of blood ran red and warm in their veins they would keep their feet and fight.

Carroll's horse stumbled and rolled, catching the numbed trooper under his weight. The jerk on the lariar head Wade out of the saddle, dangled downward. With stiffened fingers, scarcely comprehending what they were about, the Sergeant and Wason came to the rescue, helped the frightened horse struggle to his feet, and, totally blinded by the fury of the storm which now beat fairly in their eyes, grasped the dangling body, swaying back and forth as the startled animal plunged in terror. It was a corpse they gripped, already stiff with cold, the eyes wideopen and staring, Carroll, bruised and limping, came to their help, groaning with pain, and the three men together managed to lift the dead weight to the horse's back, and to bind it safely with the turn of a rope. Then, breathless from exhaustion, crouching behind the animals, bunched helplessly together, the howl of the wind like the scream of lost souls, the three men looked into each other's faces.

"I reckon Jim died without ever knowin' it," said the scout, breaking again the film of ice over his eyes, and thrashing his arms. "I allers heard tell it was an easy way o' goin'. Looks to me he was better off than we are just now. Hurt much, Carroll?" "Crunched my leg mighty bad; can't bear no weight on it. 'Twas darn near froze stiff before; the's why I couldn't get out of the way quick."

"Sure; well, yer'll have ter ride, then. We'll take the blanket off Jim; he won't need it no more." "Brick" an' kin hoof it yet awhile—'Brick'!" Hamlin lifted his head from the shelter of his horse's mane. "I reckon I can make my feet move," he asserted doubtfully, "but they don't feel as though there was any life left in them." He stamped on the snow. "How long do these blizzards generally last, Sam?" "Blow themselves out in about three days."

"Three days? God! We can never live it out here." His eyes ranged over the dim outline of Wade stretched across the saddle, powdered with snow, rested an instant upon Carroll, who had sunk back upon the ground, nursing his injured limb, and then sought the face of Wason.

"What the hell can we do?" "Go on; that's all of it; go on till we drop, lad. Come, 'Brick,' my boy," and the scout gripped the Sergeant's shoulder, "you're not the kind to lie down. We've been in worse boxes than this and pulled out. It's up to you and me to make good. Let's crunch some hard-tack and go on, afore the whole three of us freeze stiff."

The Sergeant thrust out his hand. "That isn't what's taken the nerve out of me, Sam," he said soberly. "It's the thinking of the girl out in all this with those devils." "Likely as not she ain't," returned the other, tramping the snow under his feet. "I've been thinkin' 'bout that too. That outfit must hev had six hours the start o' us, didn't they?" Hamlin nodded.

"Well, then, they couldn't be far from the Cimarron when the storm come. They'd be safe enough under the bluffs; have wood for a fire, and lay that mighty comfortable. That's whar them bucks are, all right. Why, damn it, man, we've got to get through. 'Tain't just our fool lives that's at stake. Brace up!" "How far have we come?" "A good ten miles, an' the compass has kep' us straight."

They drew in closer together, and munched a hard cracker apiece, occasionally exchanging a muttered word or two, thrashing their limbs about to keep up circulation, and dampening their lips with snow. They were but dim, spectral shapes in the darkness, the air filled with crystal pellets, swept about by a merciless wind, the horses standing tails to the storm and heads drooping. In spite of the light refraction of the snow the eyes could scarcely see two yards away through the smother. Above, about, the ceaseless wind howled, its icy breath chilling to the bone. Carroll clambered stiffly into his saddle, crying and swearing from weakness and pain. The others, stumbling about in the deep snow, which had drifted around them during the brief halt, stripped the blanket from Wade's dead body, and tucked it in about Carroll as best they could.

"Now keep kickin' and thrashing about, George," ordered the Sergeant sternly. "For God's sake, don't go to sleep, or you'll be whar Jim is. We'll haul you out of this, old man. Sam, you take the rear, and hit Carroll a whack every few minutes; I'll break trail. Forward! now."

They plunged into it, plowing a way through the drifts, the reluctant horses dragging back at first, and drifting before the fierce sweep of the wind, in spite of every effort at guidance. It was an awful journey, every step torture, but Hamlin bent to it, clinging firmly to the bit of his animal, his other arm protecting his eyes from the sting of the wind. Behind, Wason wielded a quirt, careless whether its lash struck the horse's flank or Carroll. And across a thousand miles of snow-covered plain, the storm howled down upon them in redoubled fury, blinding their eyes, making them stagger helplessly before its blasts.

shans, when the pale sickly dawn came, revealing inch by inch the dread desolation, stretching white and ghastly in a slowly widening circle. The exhausted, struggling men, more nearly dead than alive from their ceaseless toil, had to break the film of ice from their eyes to perceive their surroundings. Even then they saw nothing but the bare, snow-draped plain, the air full of swirling flakes. There was nothing to guide them, no mark of identification; merely lorn barrenness in the midst of which they wandered, dragging their half-frozen horses. The dead body of Wade had stiffened into grotesque shape, head and feet dangling, shrouded in clinging snow. Carroll had fallen forward across his saddle pommel, too weak



They Were Still Moving, Now Like Snails.

to sit erect, but held by the taut blanket, and gripping his horse's ice-covered mane. Wason was ahead now, doggedly crunching a path with his feet, and Hamlin staggered along behind.

Suddenly some awakened instinct in the numbed brain of the scout told him of a change in their surroundings. He felt rather than saw the difference. They had crossed the sand belt, and the contour of the prairie was rising. Then the Cimarron was near! Ever as the conviction took shape, the ghostly outline of a small elevation loomed through the murk. He started at it scarce believing, imagining a delusion, and then sent his cracked voice back in a shout on the wind.

"We're thar, 'Brick!' My God, lad, here's the Cimarron!" He wheeled about, shading his mouth, so as to make the words carry through the storm.

"Do you hear? We're within a half-mile o' the river. Stir Carroll up! Beat the life inter him! There's shelter and fire comin'!"

As though startled by some electric shock, Hamlin sprang forward, his limbs strengthening in response to fresh hope, plowed through the snow to Carroll's side, and shook and slapped the fellow into semi-consciousness.

"We're at the river, George!" he cried, jerking up the dangling head. "Wake up, man! Wake up! Do you hear? We'll have a fire in ten minutes!"

The man made a desperate effort, bracing his hands on the horse's neck and staring at his tormentor with dull unseeing eyes.

They were still moving, now like snails.

to be continued.

"Oh, go to hell!" he muttered, and went down again. Hamlin struck him twice, his chilled hand tingling to the blow, but the inert figure never moved. "No use, Sam. We've got to get on, and thaw him out. Get up there, you pony!"

The ghostly shape of the hill was to their right, and they circled its base almost waist-deep in drift. This brought the wind directly into their faces, and the horses balked, dragging back and compelling both men to beat them into submission. Wason was jerking at the bit, his back turned so that he could see nothing ahead, but Hamlin, lashing the rear animal with his quirt, still faced the mound, a mere dim shadow through the mists of snow. He saw the flash of yellow flame that leaped from its summit, heard the sharp report of a gun, and saw Wason crumple up, and go down, still clinging to his horse's rein. It came so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that the single living man left scarcely realized what had happened. Yet dazed as he was, some swift impulse flung him, headlong into the snow behind his pony, and even as he fell, his numbed fingers gripped for the revolver at his hip. The hidden marksman shot twice, evidently discerning only dim outlines at which to aim; the red discharge cut the gloom like a knife. One ball hurled past Hamlin's head; the other found billet in Wade's horse, and the stricken creature toppled over, bearing its dead burden with him. The Sergeant ripped off his glove, found the trigger with his half-frozen fingers, and fired twice. Then, with an oath, he leaped madly to his feet, and dashed straight at the silent hill.

to be continued.

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to be continued.

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