

**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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"Good; then that is arranged; ah, Miss McDonald, allow me to present Lieutenant Chambers, Lieutenant, detail three men to guard the lady back to the main column. Have her taken to General Custer at once."  
"Very well, sir; and the command!"  
Elliott looked at the Sergeant inquiringly.  
"That is for Sergeant Hamlin to determine; he has just been scouting through that country, and will act as guide."  
The Sergeant stood for a moment motionless beside his horse studying the vista of snow-draped hills. The region beyond the crest of the ridge unrolled before his memory.  
"Then we will keep directly on up this valley, sir," he said at last. "It's Wolf Creek, is it not? We shall be safer to keep out of sight today, and this depression must lead toward the Canadian. May I exchange mounts with one of those men going back, Major? I fear my pony is about done."  
"Certainly."  
There was no opportunity for anything save a simple grasp of the hand, ere Molly rode away with her escort. Then the little column of troopers



"Never Will I Doubt Again."

moved on, and Hamlin, glancing backward as he rode past, took his place in advance beside Major Elliott.

CHAPTER XXXV.

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 Canadian. 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 starting 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 other's 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, or 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 or other, a-driftin' down from the north. I reckon if we ride up their valley we'll hit their trail, an' it'll lead straight down to them Cheyennes."

Custer took time to consider this explanation, spreading the field map out on his knees, and measuring the distance between the streams. No one in the little group spoke, although several leaned forward eagerly. The chief was not a man to ask advice; he preferred to decide for himself. Suddenly 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 pausing 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 benumbed 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



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

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, starting 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 to follow 'em, or else starve to death. He'd a bin back over 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 fixed 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 turning 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 free use of ropes and lariats that the entire command finally succeeded in attaining the southern shore. Silencing 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. They 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 special light. Major Elliott, drinking coffee and munching hard-tack 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 cannot wait here long alone. Have you eaten?"  
"Then sit down here and share what little we have. We can wait formally 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 three 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?"  
"Heap 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 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 trumpet who remained with Custer. Then all were to spur forward as one man.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

The Battle With the Indians.  
Corbin had gone with the detachment circling to the left, and "California Joe" was with the other in the valley, but Hamlin remained with the chief. About them was profound silence, the men standing beside their horses. There was nothing to do but wait, every nerve at high tension. The wintry air grew colder, but the troopers were not allowed to make the slightest noise, not even to swing their arms or stamp their feet. After the last detachment swept silently out into the night, there still remained four hours of daylight. No one knew what had occurred; the various troops had melted away into the dark, and disappeared. No word, no sound, had come back. They could only wait in faith on their comrades. The men were dismounted, each holding his own horse in instant readiness for action. Not a few, wearied with the day's work, while still clinging to their bridles, wrapped the capes of their overcoats over their heads and threw themselves down in the snow, and fell asleep.  
At the first sight of dawn the force was sent down the line to arouse them. Overcoats were taken off and strapped to the saddles, carbines loaded and slung, pistols examined and loosened in their holsters, saddles redressed, and curb chains carefully looked after. This was the work of but a few moments, the half-frozen soldiers moving with an eagerness that sent the hot blood coursing fiercely through

them. To the whispered command to mount, running from lip to lip along the line, the men sprang joyously into their saddles, their quickened ears and eager eyes ready for the signal.  
Slowly, at a walk, Custer led them forward toward the crest of the hill, where the Osage guide watched through the spectral light of dawn the doomed village beneath. To the uplift of a hand the column halted, and Custer and his bugler went forward. A step behind crouched the Sergeant, grasping the reins of three horses, while a little to the right, beyond the sweep of the coming charge, waited the regimental band.  
Peering over the crest, the leader saw through the dim haze, scarcely five hundred yards distant, dotting the north bank of the Washita for more than a quarter of a mile, the Indian village. There was about it scarcely a sign of human life. From the top of two or three of the tallest light wreaths of smoke floated languidly out on the wintry air, and beyond that Even as he gazed, half convinced that the Indians had been warned, the village deserted, the sharp report of a rifle rang out in the distance.  
To be continued.

Latest Move In Thaw Case.  
CONCORD, N.H., Dec. 23.—Certified copies of all records of the Black-tieaw Insane Hospital, relating to Harry Thaw since his commitment to that institution, have been requested of Wm. T. Jerome, special deputy attorney-general of New York, in the legal battle to secure Thaw's return to the New York jurisdiction. The request was made yesterday by the commission appointed by the Federal Court to determine whether Thaw's mental condition would make his release on bail a menace to public safety.

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New Use For Wireless.  
SCRANTON, Pa., Dec. 23.—New use for the wireless equipment of Lackawanna trains had been found yesterday. An ambulance was waiting at the station when the flyer from New York pulled in here, a wireless message sent from the speeding train having informed hospital authorities of the illness of a passenger.

Special Prosecutor Asked.  
MONTREAL, Dec. 23.—Premier Gouin, Attorney-General of the province, has been requested by the Hon. C. J. Doherty, Minister of Justice, to appoint a crown prosecutor to conduct the cases against the six men under arrest at Joliette in connection with the counting of \$10 United States gold certificates.



The Scout Was Off Like a Shot.

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