

MOLLY McDONALD

A TALE OF THE FRONTIER



By
RANDALL PARRISH
Author of "Keith of the
Border," "My Lady of
Doubt," "My Lady of the
South," etc., etc.

Illustrations by
V. L. Barnes

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SYNOPSIS.

Major McDonald, commanding an army post near Fort Dodge, seeks a man to intercept his daughter, Molly, who is headed for the post. An Indian outbreak is threatened. "Brick" Hamlin, a sly gambler, had been sent with messages to McDonald, volunteers for the mission and starts alone. Molly arrives at Fort Ripley two days ahead of schedule.

CHAPTER III.—Continued.

"Good Lord, miss," he exclaimed swiftly. "Do yer mean to say ye're goin' to make that trip alone?"

"Oh, not to Santa Fe; only as far as the stage station at the Arkansas crossing," she exclaimed hastily. "I am going to join my father; he—he commands a post on the Cimarron—Major McDonald."

"Well, I'll be damned," said the man slowly, so surprised that he forgot himself. "Babes in the wilderness; what, in Heaven's name, ever induced yer dad to let yer come on such a fool trip? Isn't that no one to meet yer here, or at Dodge?"

"—I don't know," she confessed. "Father was going to come, or else send one of his officers, but I have seen no one. I am here two days earlier than was expected, and—*and* I haven't heard from my father since last month. See, this is his last letter; won't you read it, please, and tell me what I ought to do?"

The man took the letter, and read the three pages carefully, and then turned back to note the date, before handing the sheets across the table.

"The Major sure made his instructions plain enough," he said slowly. "And yer haven't heard from him since, or seen any one he sent to meet yer?"

The girl shook her head slowly.

"Well, that ain't to be wondered at, either," he went on. "Things has changed some out yere since that letter was wrote. I reckon yer know we're havin' a bit o' Injun trouble, an' yer dad is shore to be pretty busy out on the Cimarron."

"—I do not think I do. I have seen no papers since leaving St. Louis. Is the situation really serious? Is it unsafe for me to go farther?"

The man rubbed his chin, as though undecided what was best to say. But the girl's face was full of character, and he answered frankly.

"It's serious 'ough, I reckon, an' I certainly wish I was safe through to Fort Marcy, but I don't know no reason now why you couldn't finish up your trip all right. I was out to the fort last evenin' gettin' the latest news, an' that hasn't been no trouble to speak of east of old Bent's Fort. Between that and Union, that's a bunch o' Mescal Apaches raisin' thunder. One lot got as far as the Caches, an' burned a wagon train, but were run back into the mount'n's. Troops are out along both sides the Valley, an' that ain't been no stage held up, nor station attacked along the Arkansas. I reckon yer pa'll have an escort waitin' at the crossin'?"

"Of course he will; what I am most afraid of is that I might miss him or his messenger on the route."

"Not likely; there's only two stages a week each way, an' they have regular meeting points."

She sat quiet, eyes lowered to the table, thinking. She liked the man, and trusted him; he seemed kindly deferential. Finally she looked up.

"When do you go?"

"Today. I was goin' to wait 'bout yere a week longer, but am gittin' skeered they might quit runnin' their coaches. To tell the truth, miss, it looks some to me like that was a big Injun war comin', and I'd like ter git home whar I belong afore it breaks loose."

"Will—will you take me with you?" He moistened his lips, his hands clasping and unclasping on the table.

"Sure, if yer bound ter go. I'll do the best I kin fer yer, an' I reckon ther sooner yer start the better chance ye'll have o' gettin' through safe." He hesitated. "If we should git bad news at Dodge, is there anybody thar, at the fort, you could stop with?"

"Colonel Carver."

"He's not thar now; been transferred to Wallace, but, I reckon, any o' those army people would look after yer. Ye've really made up yer mind to try it, then?"

"Yes, yes; I positively cannot stay here. I shall go as far as Dodge at least. If—if we are going to travel together, I ought to know your name."

"Sure yer had," with a laugh. "I forgot all 'bout that—it's Moylan, miss; William Moylan; 'Sutler' Bill."

They were some six miles to the

west of Deer Creek, the horses still moving with spirit, the driver's foot on the brake, when the stage took a sudden plunge down a sloping bank where the valley perceptibly narrowed. To the left, beyond a flat expanse of brown, sun-scorched grass, flowed the widely-spreading waters of the Arkansas, barely covering the treacherous sandy bottom, and from the other side came the more distant gleam of alkali plains; to the right arose the bluffs, here both steep and rugged, completely shutting off the view, barren of vegetation except for a few scattered patches of grass. Suddenly a man rode out of a rift in the bank, directly in front, and held up his hand. Surprised, startled, the driver instantaneously clamped on his brake, and brought his horses to a quick stop; the conductor, nearly flung from his seat, yanked his gun forward.

"None of that now," called out the man in saddle quickly, both hands uplifted to show their emptiness. "This is not all afraid now. If you will wait until I get my hat, I'll be down in a minute."

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CHAPTER IV.

The Attack.

Slightly more than sixty miles, as the route ran, stretched between old Fort Dodge and the ford crossing the Arkansas leading down to the Cimarron; another sixty miles distant, across a desert of alkali and sand, lay Devere. The main Santa Fe trail, broad and deeply rutted by the innumerable wheels of early spring caravans, followed the general course of the river, occasionally touching the higher level plains, but mostly keeping close beneath the protection of the northern bluffs, or else skirting the edge of the water. Night or day the route was easily followed, and, in other years, the traveler was seldom for long out of sight of toiling wagons. Now scarcely a wheel turned in all that lonely distance.

The west-bound stage left the station at Deer Creek at four o'clock in the afternoon with no intimation of danger ahead. Its occupants had eaten dinner in company with those of the east-bound coach, eighteen miles down the river at Canon Bluff, and the in-coming driver had reported an open road, and no unusual trouble. No Indian signs had been observed, not even signal fires during the night, and the conductor, who had come straight from Santa Fe, reported that troops from Fort Union had driven the only known bunch of raiders back from the neighborhood of the trail, and had them already safely corralled in the mountains. This report, seemingly authentic and official, served to relax the nerves, and the west-bound driver sang to himself as he guided the four horses forward, while the conductor, a sawed-off gun planted between his knees, nodded drowsily. Inside there were but three passengers, jerking back and forth, as the wheels struck the deep ruts of the trail, occasionally exchanging a word or two, but usually staring gloomily forth at the monotonous scene. Miss McDonald and Moylan occupied the back seat, some baggage wedged tightly between to keep them more secure on the slippery cushion, while facing them, and clinging to his support with both hands, was a pock-marked Mexican, with rather villainous face and ornate



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dress, and excessively polite manners. He had joined the little party at Dodge, smiling happily at sight of Miss Molly's face when she unveiled, although his small knowledge of English prevented any extended effort at conversation. Moylan, however, after careful scrutiny, engaged him shortly in Spanish, and later explained to the girl, in low tones, that the man was a Santa Fe gambler known as Gonzales, with a reputation to be hinted at but not openly discussed.

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