Molly McDonald

Randall Parrish

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Saga of a Woman Pioneer (Western Novel)

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CHAPTER I

AN UNPLEASANT SITUATION

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When, late in May, 1868, Major Daniel McDonald, Sixth Infantry, was first assigned to command the new three company post established southwest of Fort Dodge, designed to protect the newly discovered Cimarron trail leading to Santa Fé across the desert, and, purely by courtesy, officially termed Fort Devere, he naturally considered it perfectly safe to invite his only daughter to join him there for her summer vacation. Indeed, at that time, there was apparently no valid reason why he should deny himself this pleasure. Except for certain vague rumors regarding uneasiness among the Sioux warriors north of the Platte, the various tribes of the Plains were causing no unusual trouble to military authorities, although, of course, there was no time in the history of that country utterly devoid of peril from young raiders, usually aided and abetted by outcast whites. However, the Santa Fé route, by this date, had become a well-travelled trail, protected by scattered posts along its entire route, frequently patrolled by troops, and merely considered dangerous for small parties, south of the Cimarron, where roving Comanches in bad humor might be encountered.

Fully assured as to this by officers met at Fort Ripley, McDonald, who had never before served west of the Mississippi, wrote his daughter a long letter, describing in

careful detail the route, set an exact date for her departure, and then, satisfied all was well arranged, set forth with his small command on the long march overland. He had not seen his daughter for over two years, as during her vacation time (she was attending Sunnycrest School, on the Hudson), she made her home with an aunt in Connecticut. This year the aunt was in Europe, not expecting to return until fall, and the father had hopefully counted on having the girl with him once again in Kentucky. Then came his sudden, unexpected transfer west, and the final decision to have her join him there. Why not? If she remained the same high-spirited army girl, she would thoroughly enjoy the unusual experience of a few months of real frontier life, and the only hardship involved would be the long stage ride from Ripley. This, however, was altogether prairie travel, monotonous enough surely, but without special danger, and he could doubtless arrange to meet her himself at Kansas City, or send one of his officers for that purpose.

This was the situation in May, but by the middle of June conditions had greatly changed throughout all the broad Plains country. The spirit of savage war had spread rapidly from the Platte to the Rio Pecos, and scarcely a wild tribe remained disaffected. Arapahoe, Cheyenne, Pawnee, Comanche, and Apache alike espoused the cause of the Sioux, and their young warriors, breaking away from the control of older chiefs, became ugly and warlike. Devere, isolated as it was from the main route of travel (the Santa Fé stages still following the more northern trail), heard merely rumors of the prevailing condition through tarrying hunters, and possibly an occasional army courier, yet soon

realized the gravity of the situation because of the almost total cessation of travel by way of the Cimarron and the growing insolence of the surrounding Comanches. Details from the small garrison were, under urgent orders from headquarters at Fort Wallace, kept constantly scouting as far south as the fork of the Red River, and then west to the mountains. Squads from the single cavalry company guarded the few caravans venturing still to cross the Cimarron Desert, or bore despatches to Fort Dodge. Thus the few soldiers remaining on duty at the home station became slowly aware that this outburst of savagery was no longer a mere tribal affair. Outrages were reported from the Solomon, the Republican, the Arkansas valleys. A settlement was raided on Smoky Fork; stages were attacked near the Caches, and one burned; a wagon train was ambushed in the Raton Pass, and only escaped after desperate fighting. Altogether the situation appeared extremely serious and the summer promised war in earnest.

McDonald was rather slow to appreciate the real facts. His knowledge of Indian tactics was exceedingly small, and the utter isolation of his post kept him ignorant. At first he was convinced that it was merely a local disturbance and would end as suddenly as begun. Then, when realization finally came, was already too late to stop the girl. She would be already on her long journey. What could he do? What immediate steps could he hope to take for her protection? Ordinarily he would not have hesitated, but now a decision was not so easily made. Of his command scarcely thirty men remained at Devere, a mere infantry guard, together with a small squad of cavalrymen, retained for courier

service. His only remaining commissioned officer at the post was the partially disabled cavalry captain, acting temporarily as adjutant, because incapacitated for taking the field. He had waited until the last possible moment, trusting that a shift in conditions might bring back some available officer. Now he had to choose between his duty as commander and as father. Further delay was impossible.

Devere was a fort merely by courtesy. In reality it consisted only of a small stockade hastily built of cottonwood timber, surrounding in partial protection a half dozen shacks, and one fairly decent log house. The situation was upon a slight elevation overlooking the ford, some low bluffs, bare of timber but green with June grass to the northward, while in every other direction extended an interminable sand-desert, ever shifting beneath wind blasts, presenting as desolate a scene as eye could witness. The yellow flood of the river, still swollen by melting mountain snow, was a hundred feet from the stockade gate, and on its bank stood the log cavalry stables. Below, a scant half mile away, were the only trees visible, a scraggly grove of cottonwoods, while down the face of the bluff and across the flat ran the slender ribbon of trail. Monotonous, unchanging, it was a desolate picture to watch day after day in the hot summer.

In the gloom following an early supper the two officers sat together in the single room of the cabin, a candle sputtering on the table behind them, smoking silently or moodily discussing the situation. McDonald was florid and heavily built, his gray mustache hanging heavily over a firm mouth, while the Captain was of another type, tall, with dark

eyes and hair. The latter by chance opened the important topic.

"By the way, Major," he said carelessly, "I guess it is just as well you stopped your daughter from coming out to this hole. Lord, but it would be an awful place for a woman."

"But I did n't," returned the other moodily. "I put it off too long."

"Put it off! Good heavens, man, did n't you write when you spoke about doing so? Do you actually mean the girl is coming—here?"

McDonald groaned.

"That is exactly what I mean, Travers. Damme, I have n't thought of anything else for a week. Oh, I know now I was an old fool even to conceive of such a trip, but when I first wrote her I had no conception of what it was going to be like out here. There was not a rumor of Indian trouble a month ago, and when the tribes did break out it was too late for me to get word back East. The fact is, I am in the devil of a fix—without even an officer whom I can send to meet her, or turn her back. If I should go myself it would mean a court-martial."

Travers stared into the darkness through the open door, sucking at his pipe.

"By George, you are in a pickle," he acknowledged slowly. "I supposed she had been headed off long ago. Have n't heard you mention the matter since we first got here. Where do you suppose the lass is by now?"

"Near as I can tell she would leave Ripley the 18th."

"Humph! Then starting to-night, a good rider might intercept her at Fort Dodge. She would be in no danger

travelling alone for that distance. The regular stages are running yet, I suppose?"

"Yes; so far as I know."

"Under guard?"

"Only from the Caches to Fort Union; there has been no trouble along the lower Arkansas yet. The troops from Dodge are scouting the country north, and we are supposed to keep things clear of hostiles down this way."

"Supposed to—yes; but we can't patrol five hundred miles of desert with a hundred men, most of them dough-boys. The devils can break through any time they get ready—you know that. At this minute there is n't a mile of safe country between Dodge and Union. If she was my daughter—"

"You 'd do what?" broke in McDonald, jumping to his feet. "I 'd give my life to know what to do!"

"Why, I'd send somebody to meet her—to turn her back if that was possible. Peyton would look after her there at Ripley until you could arrange."

"That's easy enough to say, Travers, but tell me who is there to send? Do you chance to know an enlisted man out yonder who would do—whom you would trust to take care of a young girl alone?"

The Captain bent his head on one hand, silent for some minutes.

"They are a tough lot, Major; that's a fact, when you stop to call the roll. Those recruits we got at Leavenworth were mostly rough-necks—seven of them in the guard-house to-night. Our best men are all out," with a wave of his hand to the south. "It's only the riff-raff we 've got left, at Devere."

"You can't go?"

The Captain rubbed his lame leg regretfully.

"No; I 'd risk it if I could only ride, but I could n't sit a saddle."

"And my duty is here; it would cost me my commission."

There was a long thoughtful silence, both men moodily staring out through the door. Away in the darkness unseen sentinels called the hour. Then Travers dropped one hand on the other's knee.

"Dan," he said swiftly, "how about that fellow who came in with despatches from Union just before dark? He looked like a real man."

"I did n't see him. I was down river with the wood-cutters all day."

Travers got up and paced the floor.

"I remember now. What do you say? Let's have him in, anyhow. They never would have trusted him for that ride if he had n't been the right sort." He strode over to the door, without waiting an answer. "Here, Carter," he called, "do you know where that cavalryman is who rode in from Fort Union this afternoon?"

A face appeared in the glow of light, and a gloved hand rose to salute.

"He's asleep in 'B's' shack, sir," the orderly replied. "Said he 'd been on the trail two nights and a day."

"Reckon he had, and some riding at that. Rout him out, will you; tell him the Major wants to see him here at once."

The man wheeled as if on a pivot, and disappeared.

"If Carter could only ride," began McDonald, but Travers interrupted impatiently.

"If! But we all know he can't. Worst I ever saw, must have originally been a sailor." He slowly refilled his pipe. "Now, see here, Dan, it's your daughter that's to be looked after, and therefore I want you to size this man up for yourself. I don't pretend to know anything about him, only he looks like a soldier, and they must think well of him at Union."

McDonald nodded, but without enthusiasm; then dropped his head into his hands. In the silence a coyote howled mournfully not far away; then a shadow appeared on the log step, the light of the candle flashing on a row of buttons.

"This is the man, sir," said the orderly, and stood aside to permit the other to enter.

CHAPTER II

"BRICK" HAMLIN

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The two officers looked up with some eagerness, McDonald straightening in his chair, and returning the cavalryman's salute instinctively, his eyes expressing surprise. He was a straight-limbed fellow, slenderly built, and appearing taller than he really was by reason of his erect, soldierly carriage; thin of waist, broad of chest, dressed in rough service uniform, without jacket, just as he had rolled out of the saddle, rough shirt open at the throat, patched, discolored trousers, with broad yellow stripe down the seam, stuck into service riding boots, a revolver dangling at his left hip, and a soft hat, faded sadly, crushed in one hand.

The Major saw all this, yet it was at the man's uncovered face he gazed most intently. He looked upon a countenance browned by sun and alkali, intelligent, sober, heavily browed, with eyes of dark gray rather deeply set; firm lips, a chin somewhat prominent, and a broad forehead, the light colored hair above closely trimmed; the cheeks were darkened by two days' growth of beard. McDonald unclosed, then clenched his hand.

"You are from Fort Union, Captain Travers tells me?"

"Yes, sir," the reply slow, deliberate, as though the speaker had no desire to waste words. "I brought despatches; they were delivered to Captain Travers."

"Yes, I know; but I may require you for other service. What were your orders?"

"To return at convenience."

"Good. I know Hawley, and do not think he would object. What is your regiment?"

"Seventh Cavalry."

"Oh, yes, just organized; before that?"

"The Third."

"I see you are a non-com—corporal?"

"Sergeant, sir, since my transfer."

"Second enlistment?"

"No, first in the regulars—the Seventh was picked from other commands."

"I understand. You say first in the regulars. Does that mean you saw volunteer service?"

"Three years, sir."

"Ah!" his eyes brightening instantly. "Then how does it happen you failed to try for a commission after the war? You appear to be intelligent, educated?"

The Sergeant smiled.

"Unfortunately my previous service had been performed in the wrong uniform, sir," he said quietly. "I was in a Texas regiment."

There was a moment's silence, during which Travers smoked, and the Major seemed to hesitate. Finally the latter asked:

"What is your name, Sergeant?"

"Hamlin, sir."

The pipe came out of Travers' mouth, and he half arose to his feet.

"By all the gods!" he exclaimed. "That's it! Now I 've got you placed—you 're—you 're 'Brick' Hamlin!"

The man unconsciously put one hand to his hair, his eyes laughing.

"Some of the boys call me that—yes," he confessed apologetically.

Travers was on his feet now, gesticulating with his pipe.

"Damn! I knew I'd seen your face somewhere. It was two years ago at Washita. Say, Dan, this is the right man for you; better than any fledgling West Pointer. Why, he is the same lad who brought in Dugan—you heard about that!"

The Major shook his head.

"No! Oh, of course not. Nothing that goes on out here ever drifts east of the Missouri. Lord! We might as well be serving in a foreign country. Well, listen: I was at Washita then, and had the story first-hand. Dugan was a Lieutenant in 'D' Troop, out with his first independent command scouting along the Canadian. He knew as much about Indians as a cow does of music. One morning the young idiot left camp with only one trooper along—Hamlin here—and he was a 'rookie,' to follow up what looked like a fresh trail. Two hours later they rode slap into a war party, and the fracas was on. Dugan got a ball through the body at the first fire that paralyzed him. He was conscious, but could n't move. The rest was up to Hamlin. You ought to have heard Dugan tell it when he got so he could speak. Hamlin dragged the boy down into a buffalo wallow, shot both horses, and got behind them. It was all done in the jerk of a lamb's tall. They had two Henry rifles, and the 'rookie' kept them both hot. He got some of the bucks, too, but of course,

we never knew how many. There were twenty in the party, and they charged twice, riding their ponies almost to the edge of the wallow, but Hamlin had fourteen shots without reloading, and they could n't quite make it. Dugan said there were nine dead ponies within a radius of thirty feet. Anyhow it was five hours before 'D' troop came up, and that's what they found when they got there—Dugan laid out, as good as dead, and Hamlin shot twice, and only ten cartridges left. Hell," he added disgustedly, "and you never even heard of it east of the Missouri."

There was a flush of color on the Sergeant's cheeks, but he never moved.

"There was nothing else to do but what I did," he explained simply. "Any of the fellows would have done the same if they had been up against it the way I was. May I ask," his eyes first upon one and then the other inquiringly, "what it was you wanted of me?"

McDonald drew a long breath.

"Certainly, Sergeant, sit down—yes, take that chair."

He described the situation in a few words, and the trooper listened quietly until he was done. Travers interrupted once, his voice emerging from a cloud of smoke. As the Major concluded, Hamlin asked a question or two gravely.

"How old is your daughter, sir?"

"In her twentieth year."

"Have you a picture of the young lady?"

The Major crossed over to his fatigue coat hanging on the wall, and extracted a small photograph from an inside pocket.

"This was taken a year ago," he explained, "and was considered a good likeness then."

Hamlin took the card in his hands, studied the face a moment, and then placed it upon the table.

"You figure she ought to leave Ripley on the 18th," he said slowly. "Then I shall need to start at once to make Dodge in time."

"You mean to go then? Of course, you realize I have no authority to order you on such private service."

"That's true. I 'm a volunteer, but I 'll ask you for a written order just the same in case my Troop commander should ever object, and I 'll need a fresh horse; I rode mine pretty hard coming up here."

"You shall have the pick of the stables, Sergeant," interjected the cavalry captain, knocking the ashes from his pipe. "Anything else? Have you had rest enough?"

"Four hours," and the Sergeant stood up again. "All I require will be two days' rations, and a few more revolver cartridges. The sooner I 'm off the better."

If he heard Travers' attempt at conversation as the two stumbled together down the dark hill, he paid small attention. At the stables, aided by a smoky lantern, he picked out a tough-looking buckskin mustang, with an evil eye; and, using his own saddle and bridle, he finally led the half-broken animal outside.

"That buckskin's the devil's own," protested Travers, careful to keep well to one side.

"I 'll take it out of him before morning," was the reply. "Come on, boy! easy now—easy! How about the rations, Captain?"

"Carter will have them for you at the gate of the stockade. Do you know the trail?"

"Well enough to follow—yes."

McDonald was waiting with Carter, and the dim gleam of the lantern revealed his face.

"Remember, Sergeant, you are to make her turn back if you can. Tell her I wish her to do so—yes, this letter will explain everything, but she is a pretty high-spirited girl, and may take the bit in her teeth—imagine she 'd rather be here with me, and all that. If she does I suppose you 'll have to let her have her own way—the Lord knows her mother always did. Anyhow you 'll stay with her till she 's safe."

"I sure will," returned the Sergeant, gathering up his reins. "Good-bye to you."

"Good-bye and good luck," and McDonald put out his hand, which the other took hesitatingly. The next instant he was in the saddle, and with a wild leap the startled mustang rounded the edge of the bluff, flying into the night.

All had occurred so quickly that Hamlin's mind had not yet fully adjusted itself to all the details. He was naturally a man of few words, deciding on a course of action quietly, yet not apt to deviate from any conclusion finally reached. But he had been hurried, pressed into this adventure, and now welcomed an opportunity to think it all out coolly. At first, for a half mile or more, the plunging buckskin kept him busy, bucking viciously, rearing, leaping madly from side to side, practising every known equine trick to dislodge the grim rider in the saddle. The man fought out the battle silently, immovable as a rock, and apparently as indifferent. Twice his spurs brought blood, and once he struck the

rearing head with clenched fist. The light of the stars revealed the faint lines of the trail, and he was content to permit the maddened brute to race forward, until, finally mastered, the animal settled down into a swift gallop, but with ears laid back in ugly defiance. The rider's gray eyes smiled pleasantly as he settled more comfortably into the saddle, peering out from beneath the stiff brim of his scouting hat; then they hardened, and the man swore softly under his breath.

The peculiar nature of this mission which he had taken upon himself had been recalled. He was always doing something like that—permitting himself to become involved in the affairs of others. Now why should he be here, riding alone through the dark to prevent this unknown girl from reaching Devere? She was nothing to him—even that glimpse of her pictured face had not impressed him greatly; rather interesting, to be sure, but nothing extraordinary; besides he was not a woman's man, and, through years of isolation, had grown to avoid contact with the sex—and he was under no possible obligation to either McDonald or Travers. Yet here he was, fully committed, drawn into the vortex, by a hasty ill-considered decision. He was tired still from his swift journey across the desert from Fort Union, and now faced another three days' ride. Then what? A headstrong girl to be convinced of danger, and controlled. The longer he thought about it all, the more intensely disagreeable the task appeared, yet the clearer did he appreciate its necessity. He chafed at the knowledge that it had become his work—that he had permitted himself to be

ensnared—yet he dug his spurs into the mustang and rode steadily, grimly, forward.

The real truth was that Hamlin comprehended much more fully than did the men at Devere the danger menacing travellers along the main trail to Santa Fé. News reached Fort Union much quicker than it did that isolated post up on the Cimarron. He knew of the fight in Raton Pass, and that two stages within ten days had been attacked, one several miles east of Bent's Fort. This must mean that a desperate party of raiders had succeeded in slipping past those scattered army details scouting into the Northwest. Whether or not these warriors were in any considerable force he could not determine—the reports of their depredations were but rumors at Union when he left—yet, whether in large body or small, they would have a clear run in the Arkansas Valley before any troops could be gathered together to drive them out. Perhaps even now, the stages had been withdrawn, communication with Santa Fé abandoned. This had been spoken of as possible at Union the night he left, for it was well known there that there was no cavalry force left at Dodge which could be utilized as guards. The wide map of the surrounding region spread out before him in memory; he felt its brooding desolation, its awful loneliness. Nevertheless he must go on—perhaps at the stage station near the ford of the Arkansas he could learn the truth. So he bent lower over the buckskin's neck and rode straight through the black, silent night.

It was a waterless desert stretching between the Cimarron and the Arkansas, consisting of almost a dead level of alkali and sand, although toward the northern

extremity the sand had been driven by the ceaseless wind into grotesque hummocks. The trail, cut deep by traders' wagons earlier in the spring, was still easily traceable for a greater part of the distance, and Hamlin as yet felt no need of caution—this was a country the Indians would avoid, the only danger being from some raiding party from the south. At early dawn he came trotting down into the Arkansas Valley, and gazed across at the greenness of the opposite bank. There, plainly in view, were the deep ruts of the main trail running close in against the bluff. His tired eyes caught no symbol of life either up or down the stream, except a thin spiral of blue smoke that slowly wound its way upward. An instant he stared, believing it to be the fire of some emigrant's camp; then realized that he looked upon the smouldering débris of the stage station.

CHAPTER III

THE NEWS AT RIPLEY

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Miss Molly McDonald had departed for the West—carefully treasuring her father's detailed letter of instruction—filled with interest and enthusiasm. She was an army girl, full of confidence in herself and delighted at the prospect of an unusual summer. Moreover, her natural spirit of adventure had been considerably stimulated by the envious comments of her schoolmates, who apparently believed her wondrously daring to venture such a trip, the apprehensive advice of her teachers, and much reading, not very judiciously chosen, relative to pioneer life on the plains. The possible hardships of the long journey alone did not appall her in the least. She had made similar trips before and had always found pleasant and attentive companionship. Being a wholesome, pleasant-faced girl, with eyes decidedly beautiful, and an attractive personality, the making or new friendships was never difficult. Of course the stage ride would be an entirely fresh and precarious experience, but then her father would doubtless meet her before that, or send some officer to act as escort. Altogether the prospect appeared most delightful and alluring.

The illness of the principal of Sunnycrest had resulted in the closing of the school some few days earlier than had been anticipated, and it was so lonely there after the others had departed that Miss Molly hastened her packing and

promptly joined the exodus. Why not? She could wait the proper date at Kansas City or Fort Ripley just as well, enjoying herself meanwhile amid a new environment, and no doubt she would encounter some of her father's army friends who would help entertain her pleasantly. Miss McDonald was somewhat impulsive, and, her interest once aroused, impatient of restraint.

As a result of this earlier departure she reached Ripley some two days in advance of the prearranged schedule, and in spite of her young strength and enthusiasm, most thoroughly tired out by the strain of continuous travel. Her one remaining desire upon arrival was for a bed, and actuated by this necessity, when she learned that the army post was fully two miles from the town, she accepted proffered guidance to the famous Gilsey House and promptly fell asleep. The light of a new day gave her a first real glimpse of the surrounding dreariness as she stood looking out through the grimy glass of her single window, depressed and heartsick. The low, rolling hills, bare and desolate, stretched to the horizon, the grass already burned brown by the sun. The town itself consisted of but one short, crooked street, flanked by rough, ramshackle frame structures, two-thirds of these apparently saloons, with dirty, flapping tents sandwiched between, and huge piles of tin cans and other rubbish stored away behind. The street was rutted and dusty, and the ceaseless wind swirled the dirt about in continuous, suffocating clouds. The hotel itself, a little, squatty, two-storied affair, groaned to the blast, threatening to collapse. Nothing moved except a wagon down the long ribbon of road, and a dog digging for a bone

behind a near-by tent. It was so squalid and ugly she turned away in speechless disgust.

The interior, however, offered even smaller comfort. A rude bedstead, one leg considerably short and propped up by a half brick, stood against the board wall; a single wooden chair was opposite, and a fly-specked mirror hung over a tin basin and pitcher. The floor sagged fearfully and the side walls lacked several inches of reaching the ceiling. Even in the dim candle light of the evening before, the bed coverings had looked so forbidding that Molly had compromised, lying down, half-dressed on the outside; now, in the garish glare of returning day they appeared positively filthy. And this was the best to be had; she realized that, her courage failing at the thought of remaining alone amid such surroundings. As she washed, using a towel of her own after a single glance at the hotel article, and did up her rebellious hair, she came to a prompt decision. She would go directly on—would take the first stage. Perhaps her father, or whomever he sent, would be met with along the route. The coaches had regular meeting stations, so there was small danger of their missing each other. Even if she was compelled to wait over at Fort Dodge, the environment there could certainly be no more disagreeable than this.

The question of possible danger was dismissed almost without serious thought. She had seen no papers since leaving St. Louis, and the news before that contained nothing more definite than rumors of uneasiness among the Plains Indians. Army officers interviewed rather made light of the affair, as being merely the regular outbreak of young warriors, easily suppressed. On the train she had met with

no one who treated the situation as really serious, and, if it was, then surely her father would send some message of restraint. Satisfied upon this point, and fully determined upon departing at the earliest opportunity, she ventured down the narrow, creaking stairs in search of breakfast.

The dining-room was discovered at the foot of the steps, a square box of a place, the two narrow windows looking forth on the desolate prairie. There were three long tables, but only one was in use, and, with no waiter to guide her, the girl advanced hesitatingly and took a seat opposite the two men already present. They glanced up, curiously interested, staring at her a moment, and then resumed their interrupted meal. Miss McDonald's critical eyes surveyed the unsavory-looking food, her lips slightly curving, and then glanced inquiringly toward the men. The one directly opposite was large and burly, with iron-gray hair and beard, about sixty years of age, but with red cheeks and bright eyes, and a face expressive of hearty good nature. His clothing was roughly serviceable, but he looked clean and wholesome. The other was an army lieutenant, but Molly promptly quelched her first inclination to address him, as she noted his red, inflamed face and dissipated appearance. As she nibbled, half-heartedly, at the miserable food brought by a slovenly waiter, the two men exchanged barely a dozen words, the lieutenant growling out monosyllabic answers, finally pushing back his chair, and striding out. Again the girl glanced across at the older man, mustering courage to address him. At the same moment he looked up, with eyes full of good humor and kindly interest.

"Looks rather tough, I reckon, miss," waving a big hand over the table. "But you 'll have ter git used to it in this kentry."

"Oh, I do not believe I ever could," disconsolately. "I can scarcely choke down a mouthful."

"So I was noticin'; from the East, I reckon?"

"Yes; I—I came last night, and—and really I am afraid I am actually homesick already. It—it is even more—more primitive than I supposed. Do—do you live here—at Ripley?"

"Good Lord, no!" heartily, "though I reckon yer might not think my home wuz much better. I 'm the post-trader down at Fort Marcy, jist out o' Santa Fé. I 'll be blame glad ter git back thar too, I 'm a tellin' yer."

"That—that is what I wished to ask you about," she stammered. "The Santa Fé stage; when does it leave here? and—and where do I arrange for passage?"

He dropped knife and fork, staring at her across the table.

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

"Oh, not to Santa Fé; 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? Is n't thar no one to meet yer here, or at Dodge?"

"I—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 have n'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 thar on the Cimarron."

"I—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 'nough, I reckon, an' I certainly wish I wus safe through to Fort Marcy, but I don't know no reason now why you could n't finish up your trip all right. I wus out to the fort last evenin' gettin' the latest news, an' thar hasn't been no trouble to speak of east of old Bent's Fort. Between thar and Union, thar's a bunch o' Mescalo Apaches raisin'

thunder. One lot got as far as the Caches, an' burned a wagon train, but were run back into the mount'ns. Troops are out along both sides the Valley, an' thar 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?"

"To-day. I was goin' to wait 'bout yere a week longer, but am gitting skeered they might quit runnin' their coaches. To tell the truth, miss, it looks some to me like thar wus 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' gittin' 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 fergot all 'bout that—it's Moylan, miss; William Moylan; 'Sutler Bill' they call me mostly, west o' the river. Let's go out an' see 'bout thet stage."

As he rounded the table, Molly rose to her feet, and held out her hand.

"I am so glad I spoke to you, Mr. Moylan," she said simply. "I am not at all afraid now. If you will wait until I get my hat, I 'll be down in a minute."

"Sutler Bill" stood in the narrow hall watching her run swiftly upstairs, twirling his hat in his hands, his good-natured face flushed. Once he glanced in the direction of the bar-room, wiping his lips with his cuff, and his feet shuffled. But he resisted the temptation, and was still there when Miss McDonald came down.

CHAPTER IV

THE ATTACK

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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 Fé 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 traveller 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 Cañon 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 Fé, 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,