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Molly McDonald

CHAPTER XVIII—Hamlin overhears a
conversation between a civilian named
Dupont and a soldier which indicates
that they are hatching up a money-
making plot of some kind with Mrs. Du-
pont, involving Gaskins.

CHAPTER XIX—Molly seeks an inter-
view with Hamlin. The sergeant tells
her that he and Mrs. Dupont were for-
mer sweethearts, but the woman had
played him false.

CHAPTER XX—Molly says her father
seems to be in Mrs. Dupont's power.
The latter claims to be a daughter of
McDonald's sister. McDonald is trying
to force Molly to marry Gaskins.

CHAPTER XXI—McDonald is ordered
to Fort Ripley with \$20,000 paymaster's
money. Molly disappears. Hamlin sets
about to trace her.

CHAPTER XXII—He discovers that a
man in uniform who left on the stage
under the name of McDonald was not
the major.

CHAPTER XXIII—Hamlin discovers
McDonald's murdered body. Footprints
indicate that two white men and three
Indians were involved in the deed. Ham-
lin is given two troopers and a scout
named Wasson to run down the murder-
ers. Dupont is suspected.

That fellow was a damned good
scout, and there were three of them and two
whites in the party—see here; the
prints of five horses ridden, and one
animal led. That will be the one Mc-
Donald had. They went straight up
the opposite bank of the ravine. If
they leave a trail like that we can
ride after them full speed."

Carroll had been bending over the
dead officer and now glanced up.
"There's sand just below, Sergeant,"
he said. "That's why they are so
damned reckless here."

"Of course; they'll hide in the dunes,
and the sooner we're after them the
better. Wade, you remain with the
body; Carroll and I will return to the
fort and report. We'll have to have
more men—Wasson if I can get him—
and equipment for a hard ride. Come
on, Jack."

They waded the river, and ran
through the town, shouting their dis-
covery to the marshal and his posse
as they passed. Twenty minutes later
Hamlin stood before the Colonel, hasti-
ly telling the story. The latter lis-
tened intently, gripping the arms of
his chair.

"Shot from behind, hey?" he ejacu-
lated, "and his clothing stolen. Looks
like a carefully planned affair, Ser-
geant; sending that fellow through to
Ripley was expected to throw us off
the track. That's why they were so
careless covering their trail; expected
to have several days' start. It is my
notion they never intended to kill
him; had a row of some kind, or else
Mac tried to get away. Any trace of
the girl?"

"No; but she must have been there."
"So I think; got mixed up in the af-
fair some way, and they have been
compelled to carry her off to save
themselves. Do you know why they
were after Mac?"

"No, sir."
"Well, I do; he carried thirty thou-
sand dollars."
"What?"

"He was acting paymaster. The
money came in from Wallace last eve-
ning, and he was ordered to take it to
Ripley at once."

Hamlin drew in his breath quickly
in surprise.

"Who knew about that, sir?"
"No one but the Adjutant, and Ma-
jor McDonald—not even the orderly."
The eyes of officer and soldier met.
"Do you suppose he could have told
her?" the former asked in sudden sus-
picion.

"That would be my theory, sir. But
it is useless to speculate. We have no
proof, no means of forcing her to con-
fess. The only thing for us to do is to
trail those fugitives. I need another
man—a scout—Wasson, if he can be
spared—and rations for three days."

The Colonel hesitated an instant,
and then rose, placing a hand on Ham-
lin's arm.

"I'll do it for Miss McDonald, but
not for the money," he said slowly. "I
expect orders every hour for your
troop, and Wasson is detailed for special
service. But damn it, I'll take the
responsibility—go on, and run those
devils down."

Hamlin turned to the door; then
wheeled about.

"You know this man Dupont, Col-
onel?"

"Only by sight."

"Any idea where he used to run cat-
tle?"

"Wait a minute until I think. I
heard McDonald telling about him one
night at the club, something Mrs. Du-
pont had let slip, but I didn't pay
much attention at the time. Seems to
me, though, it was down on the Cana-
dian. No, I have it now—Buffalo
Creek; runs into the Canadian. Know
what a stream?"

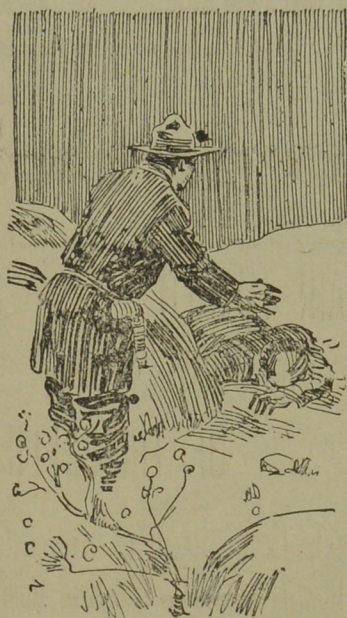
"I've heard of it; in west of the
North Fork somewhere."

"You think it was Dupont, then?"

"I haven't a doubt that he is in the
affair, and that the outfit is headed for
that section. I don't know, sir, where
those Indians came from, or how they
happened to be up here, but I believe
they belong to Black Kettle's band of
Cheyennes. His bunch is down below
the Canadian, is it not, sir?"

"Yes."
"Dupont must be friendly with them,
and this coup has been planned for
some time. Last night was the chance
they have been waiting for. The only
mistake in their plans has been the
early discovery because of Miss Mol-
ly's disappearance. They have gone
away careless, expecting two or three
days' start, and they will only have a
few hours. We'll run them down, with
good luck, before they cross the Cana-
dian. You have no further instruc-
tions, sir?"

"No, nothing, Sergeant. You're an
old hand, and know your business, and



The Man Roughly Dressed Lay on His
Face.

there is no better scout on the plains
than Sam Wasson. Good-bye, and good
luck."

CHAPTER XXIV.

In Pursuit.

The four men, heavily armed, and
equipped for winter service, rode up
the bank of the ravine to the irregu-
larity of plain beyond. The trail, lead-
ing directly south into the solitudes,
was easily followed, and Wasson,
slightly in advance of the others, made
no attempt to check his horse, content
to lean forward, his keen eyes mark-
ing every sign. Scarcely a word was
exchanged, since Hamlin had explained
what had occurred as they crossed the
river. Hardly less interested than the
Sergeant, the sober-faced scout con-
centrated every energy on the pursuit,
both men realizing the necessity of
haste. Not only would the trail be dif-
ficult after they attained the sand belt,
but, if snow fell, would be utterly bor-
ed out. And the dull, murky sky
threatened snow, the sharp wind hav-
ing already veered to the northwest.
All about stretched a dull, dead picture
of isolation, a dun-colored plain,
unrelieved by vegetation, matching
the skies above, extending in every di-
rection through weary leagues of di-
mal loneliness. The searching eye
caught no relief from desolate sameness,
drear monotony. Nowhere was
there movement, or any semblance of
life. Behind, the land was broken by
ravines, but in every other direction
it stretched level to the horizon, ex-
cept that far off southward arose ir-
regular ridges of sand, barren, ugly
blotches, colorless, and forever chang-
ing formation under the beating of a
ceaseless wind. It was desert, across
which not even a snake crawled, and
no winged or creeping bird beat the
leaden sky above.

The march of their horses' hoofs
cutting sharply into the soil, told ac-
curately the "lives" rate of progress,
and the pursuers kept forward with
caution, anxious to spare their mounts
and to keep out of vision themselves
until night. Their success depend-
ed largely on surprise, and the confi-
dence of those ahead that they were
unpursued. Wasson expressed the situ-
ation exactly, as the four halted a
moment at an unexpectedly discovered
water-hole.

"I'd think this yere plain trail was
some injun trick, boys, if I didn't know
the reason for it. 'T ain't injun na-
ture, an' it's cocksure that nobody's
chasin' him yet. He's figurin' on two
or three days' get-a-way, and so don't
care a feller's cam'bout these yere
marks. Once in the sand, an' thar
won't be no trail anyhow. It's some
kintry out thar, an' it would be like
huntin' a needle in a haystack to try
an' find them fellars after ter-nite.
This is my idea—we'll just mosey
along slow, servin' the hosses an keep-
ing back out o' sight till dark. Them
fellars ain't many hours ahead, an' are
likely to camp first part of their
night anyhow. They'll feel safe once
hid in them sand-hills, an' if they don't
git no sign of us, most likely they
won't even post no guard. Thet's when
we want to be in the snare. Ain't
that about the right program, Ser-
geant?"

Burnin' with impatience as Hamlin
was, though, the every additional
moment of delay might increase the girl's
danger, he was yet soldier and old-time
man enough to realize the wisdom of
the old scout. There were at least
four men in the party pursued, two of
them Indian warriors, the two whites
desperate characters. Without doubt
they would put up a fierce fight, or, if
warned in time, could easily scatter
and disappear.

"Of course you are right, Sam," he
replied promptly. "Only I am so afraid
of what may happen to Miss Molly."

"Forget it. Thar's nuthin' goin' ter
happen to her while the bunch is on
the move. If that outfit was all injun,
or all white, maybe thar might. But
the way it is they'll never agree on
nuthin', an' how to git away. 'T
ain't likely they ever meant ter kill
the Major, or take the girl along.
Them thar fellars naturally happened,
an' now the best chance is. It'll take
a day or two for 'em to make up their
minds what to do."

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