

The BIG BALLAD HIT

A Romance of Tin Pan Alley

by HELEN VAN CAMPEN

Illustrations by C.F. MILLER

DOLLIE VON LINDEN was on the road, starring in a musical comedy advertised as "the New York success." It had run a week on Broadway, by the efforts of the Von Linden and Nolan Music Company's whole staff of pluggers and boosters, three specially engaged press agents, all of Benny Von Linden's newspaper friends, and a large amount of his money. There were well known Broadway favorites in the cast, the songs were bright and new; Benny had gamely put one of his own numbers into the show, although fearful that it would never achieve the fame possible from its use by the clamorous vaudevillians whom he had disappointed for Dollie's sake.

Every night, after counting up, the show's treasurer sent Benny a night-letter giving the deficit, and every morning, Benny, at breakfast in the handsome Riverside Drive apartment that he had fitted for Dollie, read the news and swore.

Then he rode down to "The House of Sure-Fire Hits," and smiled coldly at the jestful ones who asked how it felt to be an angel? He had not expected to make much out of the show, but leaving out the fact that Dollie herself, while winsome enough as a small single act, had not the voice or dash needed for her role, there were others whose names ought to fill seats, and the booking was all in live cities.

He walked sourly into his office on a Monday morning, inquiring if there were any telegrams? Nothing had been received at his home.

"Not a thing here," replied Miss Murphy, his stenographer.

"Queer," said he, scowling. "Get Detroit on the wire, and call the Hotel Henley. I want to speak to my wife."

Miss Murphy reported with a grave face that Mrs. Von Linden was not at the Henley, nor any of the other hotels which Miss Murphy's wisdom had bidden her try. She had next spoken to the theater where the piece was to open that night, and been told that *The Merry Bachelors* had cancelled the week by wire, no one knew why, and Sunday's paper declared the show had closed. Benny telegraphed Cleveland where presumably the company had disbanded, and got no satisfaction. By afternoon, he was obviously disturbed, and remarked that the seven pianos, all in action in as many piano-rooms where eager vaudeville performers were trying songs from the firm's catalog, were driving him crazy.

"She's on her way back home, a' course," suggested Sammy Martin, the head plugger.

"S'pose she ain't, though?" demanded Benny excitedly. "S'pose she's done some daffy thing—you know how little sense women have, Sam—like jumping off a dock or taking poison, because the rotten old show's lost me a piece of change—I'll be a bug if I don't hear from that kid by night!"

"If you think I better go hunt her, say so," said Sammy. "I realize your feelin's, 'cause before me an' Clarice split, an' she went into the movies, when she was playin' out of town, I could hardly keep my mind on my pluggin', wonderin' what she was havin' for dinner, an' if any fresh mugs was a' hangin' around the showshop—eh?"

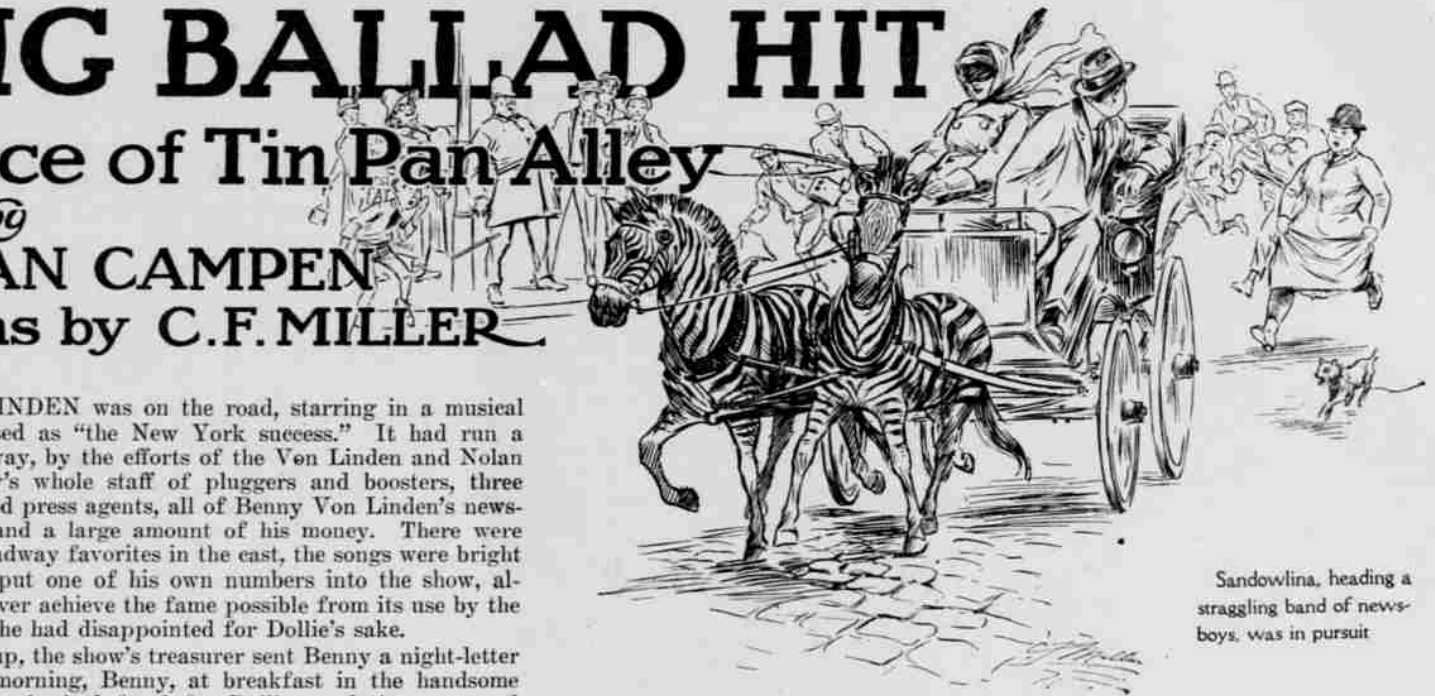
"I'll brain the guy I catch monkeying after my wife," said Benny agitatedly. "She's so cussed good-looking that they're always rubbering at her, too."

Sammy consoled his employer by observing that the men would not pursue unless the women encouraged them.

"Meanin' nothin' personal, a' course," he explained.

Two days wore away, and Benny was still without a message from Dollie. Sammy suddenly bought two tickets for Cleveland, and employees of The House of Sure-Fire Hits informed visitors that Benny had gone West on a business trip, and the date of his return was indefinite.

THE pawning of all in her jewel box except the great solitaire that was her engagement ring, had sufficed to pay each member of the company two weeks' salary instead of the usual two weeks' notice, and Dollie had smilingly paid, then said farewell and disappeared. She told herself, "I will never, never go back and face Benny until I'm a suc-



Sandowlina, heading a straggling band of newsboys, was in pursuit

cess—at something!"

She sat in a 50-cent room in a Chicago hotel, after a frugal dinner in a 15-cent restaurant. She was still hungry, the room had no heat, and the gas jet was just large enough to show what a desolate refuge was hers. She had not unpacked the trunk that occupied a corner, because she shrank from the contrast of her pretty frocks against that dismal background, and only a small toilet bag was opened.

"I'm a dub," said Dollie to the ineffectual gas jet. "He put me out in a swell musical show, and he advertised me like a grand opera tour, and he said on the jump that he did wish I could get the idea that I had to go back to the foots out of my mind, so we could have some peace, and I kept nagging—I made a joke of Benny before his friends in New York, I was so punk—and to think of us in town after town, papering the house, and even at that we could n't fill 'em, and me to be told by a light comedian that he would n't risk his personality with a frost like my show any longer—but they're all paid, that's some comfort, and until I can get it with money I've made myself, the jewelry will stay where it is, for there's been enough of Benny's wasted. Poor boy, it'll be a relief to him not to have any more wires about how much we need for salaries!"

What would Benny think when he received the incoherent letter she had posted an hour ago? Would he set the Pinkertons after her, or realize that her life would be unbearable until she had shown a palpitant world, and Benny, that Dollie Von Linden was not a theatrical nonentity? She had concluded her letter with:

"Everybody in the business thinks you married a dead one, but they will find out you did n't. I am all right, so do not worry, darling Benny; but when they see me on top they won't be able to give you the laugh any more, and when I think of the money I feel like ending it all. I am perfectly calm as you see, dearest boy, so have no fear at all, as I have a plan—oh, Benny, what a terrible world this is where people must suffer so, anyway, good-bye, and remember I am your loving, miserable Dollie. I leave for the Coast at once, D."

That lie about leaving would fool him. She must not give way to sentiment, or useless repinings, but center her faculties on succeeding, somewhere and somehow. It would be dangerous to seek an engagement in any Chicago cabaret, for Benny's

A fat flabby young man confronted her

firm had a Western branch office there, and his pluggers certainly visited theaters and restaurants where his songs were used. There was no chance of booking on the "big time" without a spectacular act, and it required time, money and a live press agent, if she had the ability to arrange one.

"**W**HAT'D I tell him I had a plan for?" she wailed. "Oh, just think of the perfect rummies that find a good manager, and he makes the agents believe they're great, when they're really awful! And I feel that no matter what anyone says I've got talent—I know I have! The trouble is Benny don't understand me—no one does, and if they don't how can a person get ahead? I bet if I could have one plain talk with Mr. Belasco, he'd put me in a production, for the truth is that I ought to have gone into drama, but of course when your folks are all dancers they train you for that—so really my own parents are to blame. Maybe it'd be better to just go down to the Lake front and let the chill waters close over me—I could leave letters for the Coroner and Benny, and put the big ring in the Parcel Post, so he'd have it back. The papers would play a story like that up swell."

She sat in gloomy meditation. The room was so cold that her fingers



She drearily gazed into his pictured face