

The Big Ballad Hit

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and I only want to win out on his account, so—so—"

She stopped, observing him anxiously.

"I ain't one o' them mushy guys," said he shortly. "An' I'm married myself; but others made trouble between us, an' she's in vaudeville now, though if she wasn't so crazy jealous we'd be together today, an' it's her started me drinkin'. So it's all plain business with me. Come on to the car an' we'll hike for that piano?"

BENNY VON LINDEN sat in his private office, glooming upon the advertising copy he had prepared for vaudeville papers patronized by the firm of Von Linden and Nolan. Sammy Martin disconsolately regarded the sour face of his superior. Charlie Nolan, manager of the professional department, leaned against Benny's piano, staring at the floor.

"We've never let Howe and Hamlin put one over on us before, and here you sit as if it didn't matter, when that story ballad of theirs is takin' like wildfire. Can't you rouse yourself and write an answer to it, Ben?" entreated Sammy. "It's killin' for me to drop in at shows an' cabarets an' hear 'em playin' that thing an' us with no comeback but our 1912 numbers. Ain't I right, Charlie?"

"I could n't stick to a meter if I began anything. I'm sick," said Benny. "And since Charlie's been writing with Alf Lawler he's lost his punch. I don't get any idea from his words."

"Don't the thought of that masked skirt drivin' the zebras East convey nothin' to you, an' lettin' that mob across the street twenty-four sheet the whole country with their anonymous author junk, though she probably can't write a lick, an' the real one's hidin' out an' coppin' the change—an' with your brains, Ben?" demanded Sammy, almost tearfully. Nolan groaned.

If Benny could not write the firm was helpless. Money, money, every hour, so money must come in steadily. He went distastefully to his piano, and struck a few chords, shaking his head woefully. He hummed a little, trying to goad himself into composition. He might take some of his earlier successes, and with a bar from one, and a strain from something else, fake a melody—it was what other writers did, and they stole from the masters, or their best friend's rag, at will. But he would n't. Softly he played *I Was Not Meant For You*, Howe and Hamlin's tragic ballad that was the trail blazer for 1913.

"The music's nothing much, very ordinary, in fact. It's the words that sell this," he thought. "And the public was ready for it. If Charlie could only turn out stuff like it! Who the dickens have they dug up, anyway? It's not Ned Howe under an assumed name, for he'd be mighty glad to father it, and I don't recognize the style at all; but whoever wrote it's got a future. If I could get a look at their masked woman, I'd offer her a contract, by George!"

Howe and Hamlin were displaying more than customary enterprise, and the story of the masked beauty and the zebras sent to her by an Oriental potentate who had seen her picture in a belated London weekly, and then shot himself because she refused to be his queen, was syndicated around the country. Then followed the thrilling rescue at midnight by a "stalwart Harvard football star," who modestly hid his identity, but was supposed to be in hot pursuit of the zebraed lady. When the original tale could get no more notice, Springfield, Ohio, leaped into the glare with a startling yarn. An infatuated aviator had been flying above the lovely traveller. Spurned innumerable times, he desperately flew close to the

carriage, seized the screaming girl, and would have borne her into the skies, but that the football gentleman arrived in a racing auto, fired two shots, and recovered the victim, who although fainting, preserved her incognito by holding her mask tightly against her face.

She was resting in a Springfield hotel, the zebras had kicked a box stall into splinters, and the masker had risen in the middle of the night to pacify them, later paying for all damages and speaking a foreign language that no one understood. She distributed copies of *I Was Not Meant For You*, and as she drove her striped team out of the city, the racing automobile was seen to shoot from a garage and slowly trail the zebras.

"Of course, it's all rot, but it gets the publicity," said Benny, still playing the ballad's chorus. "And Howe, without brains enough to wad a gun, when you come down to plain facts, will reap the benefit. Who is she? That's what I want to know."

THE telephone rang, and a voice said that Sandowlina the Strong Woman was calling, and desired to come up. Sandowlina had been bridesmaid at Benny's wedding. She was fond of Dollie, and since the latter had vanished, Sandowlina came in when passing, and tried to hearten him with hopeful surmises. He rose to meet her, expecting a smiling face, for she was always lively, but Sandowlina cried out as she entered:

"Oh, Ben, I've found out where Walter is, and there's another woman in it! I feel like I can't keep up another second, and I could hardly drag up the stairs, and as to playin' my matinee today, my poor legs would hardly hold me up, but just imagine how a man can be that perfidious when a person's done their whole duty, and willingly tossed cannonballs when many a day her heart's hungered to be settin' in a quiet flat readin' a good book. But did I ever complain, except as to his four sisters bein' foisted on me as my maids, so they could be took travellin' and see the world, and what need has a party, who only uses tights, with even one maid, you know, Ben? Not that I'm stingy, as he claimed; but we fell out, and off he went, and Pa said at the start I was a sucker for marryin'. She's a small brunette, and him claimin' he would n't look at anything but a blonde! Some men are devils, and that's all, I s'pose; but I'm a sick woman!"

She fell upon the piano stool, and Benny viewed her with concern. He had been unaware of her domestic sorrows. Trouble everywhere!

"I'm mighty sorry, Sandy. Can't I look for him and persuade him to come back and have some sense?"

"She's fascinated him. He's awful easy led," said Sandowlina. "A musician always is. My sister Lulu's married to a tuba player and he makes their home dreadful, bringin' pictures of 'em, and askin' her if this or that one ain't a pippin. No one realizes what that girl goes through. Then later he's all over it and can't remember their names, and calls Lu his baby doll; but do you think she can forget?"

Benny was shocked, and he gratified Sandowlina by showing it.

They sat in silence, reflecting upon their wrongs.

"Take off your coat and be comfortable," invited Benny, as Sandowlina got up and paced the room.

"Guess I had better shed my overcoat," said she. When her topcoat was removed, Sandowlina was revealed in a severely tailored coat, waistcoat and skirt of dull blue. She wore a starched wing collar and a well tied scarf, starched cuffs, low-heeled gentlemanly coltskin shoes, heavy gloves and a derby hat, with-out a softening band or feather,

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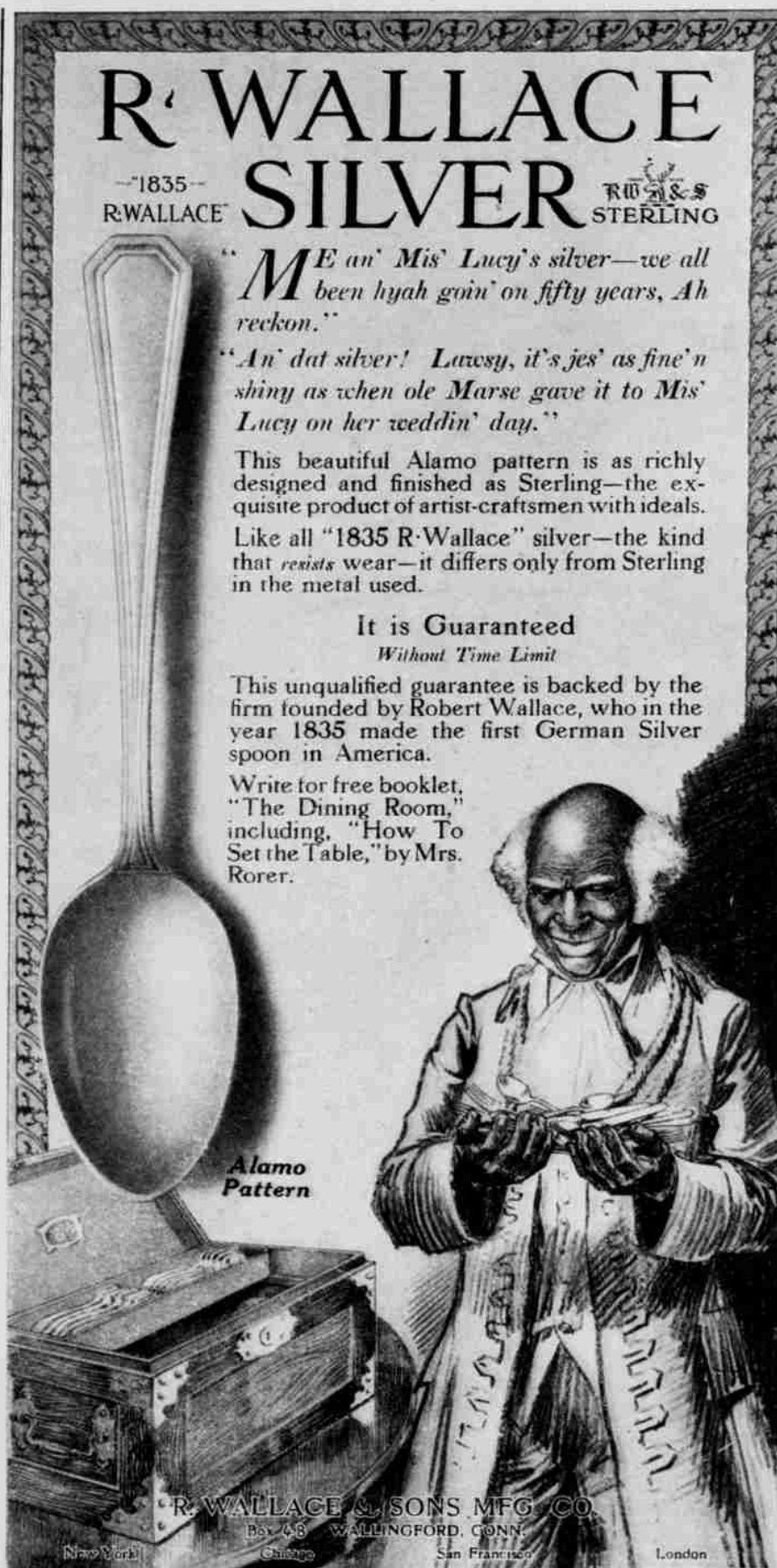
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