

# CALL of the WEST

CHAPTER XVI  
 STANLEY BALL thought he understood how a hunted animal felt. His shelter was a cave under the rim of Folly Peak, the most warlike veteran hunter he had found. The trial to this led through a slash in a green wall and was hidden by spring-blossoms and black birch.

There was a little open shelf for his mare and the cave was fairly comfortable. By using tinder dry resinous wood he was able to have a fire over which to cook the little fare on which he lived. He sat on a bed of glowing embers, taking stock of the situation which he found himself.

Ball admitted, as he stared into the embers, that if he had known the man he now knew he would never have come to Three Rivers to get the low-down on the Delo Timber interests. He was sure to admit that he was in love with Dona Delo, hopelessly in love with her, and that he could not have her.

Love for Dona had made him reckless on Folly Mountain until he had been branded a desperate criminal and a murderer. Now, even though Dona had not married the young man he saw riding in the lower country every day, he would still be unable to kick dirt over her. Ball kicked dirt over the fire and across. One thing was sure, he had to have more supplies. Carrying his food on a horse with a cutting the animal's speed made it necessary for him to forage often. Then, too, there was the trouble attendant in getting the supplies. He had to steal them.

All the way down the mountain he studied these bitter problems. He was half-decided to turn himself in and take the consequences, which he knew would be a first-class flogging. The moon was not yet over the rim of Folly Mountain and Ball could move at a fair pace through the blue gloom. His black mare was as silent as ink and as silent as a path. He rode to the edge of the clearing above the camp and dismounted. Tying the mare in a thicket, he moved swiftly toward the lights of the buildings.

First the commissary was paid a visit. Stan had worked a board down from a back window to gain entry. Within 15 minutes he had secured what he needed while Old Sims sat in the front of the store nursing his bandaged head. Stan smiled to himself grimly as he took a last look at the bandaged figure up in front.

Catching the food, Stan moved along the dark side of the main building. He was looking for a particular room, drawn by a force that he could not resist. He knew the room, but the wall were two lighted windows. Stan edged toward them. The nearest window was open and he was able, by flattening himself along the wall, to look inside.

The scene within the room was a tense one. Dudley was standing in the background. Dona sat on the feet of her father's bed, trying to quiet him. Asper Delo was as angry as that day in his office when Stan had faced him. A guilty feeling crept over Stan. He was the cause of all this. He had done it himself. Asper was fairly fuming. "That outwitted Swergin! He's letting Ball make fools out of all of us. He'll let that dirty gun-toter shoot up the whole camp. I'm going after him myself!"

"Now, Dad, be reasonable! You'd be no match for a healthy man like Ball." Dona was almost in tears.

"I'm sick and tired of being coddled because of a little puncture in the shoulder. I've packed more lead without even lying down than that punk ever saw!" Asper roared.

Dona leaped to her feet. She reached into her dress and pulled out a stiff paper. "Dad, please listen to me."

With a rumble Asper settled back against the pillows. His lips were white and he was shaking.

Dudley aroused himself with a jerk and came forward. He seemed unable to speak. Asper took the paper without a word and unfolded it. He stared at it for a full minute before he spoke.

"Sam Dean married you," he said slowly. His anger seemed to have melted and his hand was shaking. "Why, D, you should have told me! This has been a pretty poor honeymoon!"

"Now you see why I wanted you to give all this up and come back with us?" Dona's eyes were clouded with tears.

Asper's gaze rose to Dudley's face. Dudley blushed and stammered. "I sort of overlooked asking for the bride."

Stan Ball tried to pull himself away from the window but he could not. He was fascinated by the stary, tear-drenched eyes of the girl he loved. He felt an urge to leap through the window and shake Dudley Writers savagely. Why didn't the fool comfort her? Why didn't he take her in his arms and kiss those tears away? Asper Delo's deep voice broke in on his thoughts.

"I guess I'm an old fool but Swergin's blundering made me see red. Of course your happiness is all that really counts with me. Now what do you want to do?"

"We want you to stay in bed for a couple more days and then go back with us and help us get a home fixed up." Dona's soft alto was tremulous.

"Sure, that's just what we want." Dudley seemed suddenly to have come to his senses.

Stan Ball pulled back from the window. Dona had been keeping the marriage from her father. One thing relieved him. That was that Asper Delo would be out of the man hunt. He would have only Swergin and his gang to worry with. Stan's anger against Asper Delo had suddenly last its edge. He determined to get away regardless of whether he was caught making his escape or not.

Asper Delo's voice rolled out into the night. It was softer now and held a hint of yellowness. The old timber king was completely taken back by the new twist of events. He cared more for Dona than for all his timber workings. He completely lost his wrath as the two young folks stood before him, flushed and happy.

"You tell Swergin to take care of this hunt and to stay with it until he gets his man. He need not report to me any more. Now you youngsters run along and let an old man hink a bit." Asper lay back among the pillows and smiled.

"I'm sorry it came about like this," Dudley stepped to Asper's side as he spoke. "But I'll take care of Dona and make her happy."

Asper raised on an elbow. "You'd better, young man. You'd better!" He sank back and half-closed his eyes as a sign of dismissal.

Dudley caught Dona's arm and pushed her gently from the room. Ball remained flattened against the wall. A wave of loneliness swept over him, a bitter wave carrying with it a vivid reminder of what he had become. He could not even see Dona again or be near her. He would have to strike for the Mexican border and live by his gun. That is the law of the man who is branded killer. He can never turn back. His guns must always swing ready at his hip for he is outside of society.

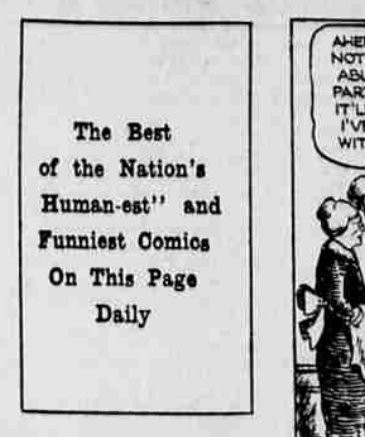
Stan took a deep breath and edged back along the wall. He did not halt at Dona's window, but slid past it. A light shone out from under the blinds and he could hear a voice inside but he did not wish to eavesdrop.

He had reached the corner of the building and was about to turn and retrace his steps to the place where he had left the cache of food when he felt a hard, fingerlike object jab him in the back. A gruff voice commanded, "Put 'em up, Ball, and keep 'em up!"

Twisting his head as he raised his arms Stan could make out the bulky figure of Swergin behind him. In the dim light he could see a fiendish grin on the thick lips of the timber boss.

(To Be Continued)

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## TIM TYLER'S FLYING LUCK



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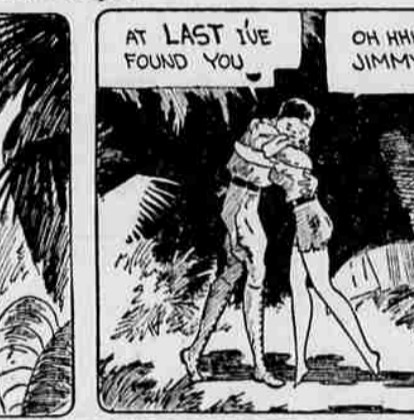
## BOOTS AND HER BUDDIES



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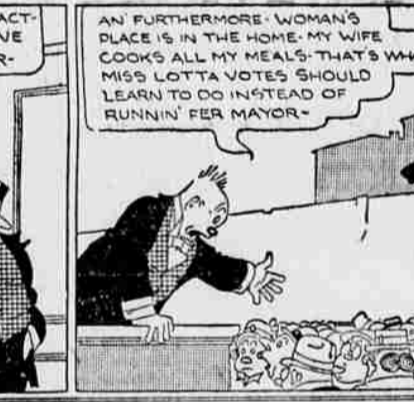
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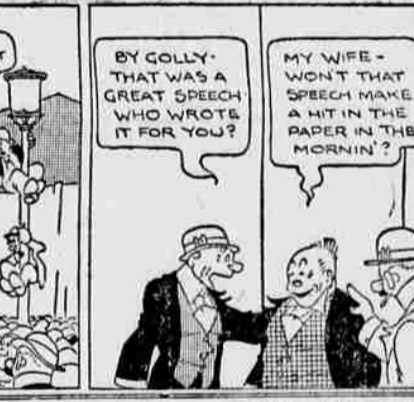
## BRINGING UP FATHER



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## BRINGING UP FATHER



## THIS CURIOUS WORLD



## OUT OUR WAY



## OUT OUR WAY



## OUR BOARDING HOUSE



## OUR BOARDING HOUSE



## OUR BOARDING HOUSE

