

CALL of the WEST

By R. G. MONTGOMERY

CHAPTER XXI

Dona rode down the Blind River trail at a brisk trot. She had undertaken a mad adventure and was enjoying it, knowing that soon enough she would have to return to realities. She would have to spend her time among the whims of Dudley Winthrop and she must see that Asper DeLo would never see back into the old country. She was free for a day and night. One more day. As she rode, she thought of the fragrance of the balsam that had been with her for days. A big rock jutted out almost into the trail and Dona was admiring its red pillars when two men rose from behind it. They were armed with pistols and by their dress she knew them to be timber men. It was evident that they recognized her as they called to her to halt. Dona would not have moved to halt her. Dona would not have moved to halt her. Dona would not have moved to halt her.

She pulled in the reins and called to one of the men. "Do you work for Asper DeLo?" The taller of the two grinned sourly and his reply was short. "We work for Swergin of the Timber Company." Dona touched the reins and moved on. It was evident that Swergin was the DeLo Timber company in the region about Three Rivers. While she was halted talking to the men, a figure moved from behind the far end of the rocky ledge and melted into the forest. Dona did not see this figure nor did the two slow-moving guards.

Dona rode easily and did not push her horse. She was wrapped in the quiet silence and did not want to hurry. A little clearing opened before her. It was carpeted with columbine and lupine, with here and there a patch of orange daisy. Dona pulled the reins to a halt at the edge of the tiny clearing and held her breath.

"A bit of heaven!" drawled a soft voice at her elbow.

Dona started and turned in her saddle. She was looking into the shadowless, gray eyes of Stanley Black. His horse was hidden in the foliage beside the trail but his head and shoulders were in the open. At a glance Dona realized that Black looked leaner and harder than when she had met him in the city.

"Mr. Black!" Dona checked further exclamation. "It is beautiful, isn't it?"

"The bridge rides alone into Paradise Valley. There was a hint of water in his eyes. 'I can see the mountain to reach a friend.'"

"You should receive a royal welcome," Stanley Black's eyes showed the admiration her slender beauty had won.

"Do you think that friend would help me?" Dona put the question with her gaze on the lupine across the clearing.

"Beyond the question of doubt, he would," Stanley bent over the saddle horn and pulled a pine needle from a branch.

"He has a way with him," Dona smiled, "that is not always nice."

"What does he do? I can't imagine any man not being nice," Stanley halted as though suddenly remembering something.

"He runs away after he helps me," Dona met his eyes frankly.

Stanley Black laughed, not too clearly, but rather with a tinge of bitterness. "He is a fool," he said slowly.

"But he would help me again, don't you think?" Dona felt her heart pounding against the soft cloth of her jacket. She was sure he must see it beating.

"The world, I am sure," Dona leaned impulsively toward him. "I am in a peck of trouble!"

"If you'll ride a little off the trail we can sit and talk," Stanley suggested.

The spot Stanley selected was a nook behind a slab of stone. It was shaded by towering Englemann spruce and far down from the trail. As he rode at her side Dona noted that his chaps were worn and scratched, as though from pushing through brush and undergrowth. His big hat was frayed at the edges and he wore no glove on his right hand though the left was encased in buckskin. When he halted in the secluded spot he faced her and smiled.

"Cowboys riding black horses need to be careful in these hills," His bare hand was resting on his hip with his long fingers just touching the butt of a heavy Colt.

Dona returned his smile. "Lumberjacks are dangerous fellows to have loose, aren't they?"

"Mostly a bunch of dumb fools," he replied in all seriousness.

"Now we will see what can be done," He gazed at her in open admiration.

"You know about the trouble over at Three Rivers?"

Stanley nodded.

"We just have to get rid of that man, Ball. The men are hunting him but they never can get him cornered. Do you know him?" Dona watched Stanley's face.

Not a line had changed except the corners of his mouth. His eyes looked into her's for a full second. "I know him well," he said simply.

"He must be a hardened killer," Dona went on. Her troubles were coming back to her and she did not notice the man's eyes cloud and his lips tighten.

"He is a pretty tough hombre. He'll always be an outlaw, I guess," Stanley twisted the wisp of grass and broke it in two.

Do you know him? Dona watched him get him to leave Folly Mountain?"

Dona put the question eagerly. Something in Stanley Black's manner made her sure he could do just that.

He looked at her little boot for a space, then raised his eyes. He knew that he was going to do what she asked though in leaving the mountain he would be deserting a cause that was almost won and he would likely be taken or shot down as soon as he left the fastness of the high country.

"Yes, I can do that," He sat up suddenly.

Dona bent toward him and her firm little arm touched his sun-browned elbow. With an effort he pulled away and got to his feet. Dona stood up, facing him. Something in her eyes sent a seething fire through him and his head whirled. Setting his teeth hard he backed away a step and a twisted smile came to his lips.

"I am pleased to be at your service, Mrs. —"

Dona flushed until she was irresistibly beautiful. His words brought her back to her present status with a jerk. "Winters," she finished lamely. She held out her hand impulsively. "You have done so much for me!" Her voice choked up and her eyes grew moist.

Stanley cleared his throat. The situation was becoming dangerous and he knew it. "I must go now," he said and turned to the black mare.

Dona mounted slowly and followed him back to the trail. He remained under cover while she rode away. The road had carried her to the top of the ridge before she was able to place together all she had felt. If he had only made a move to take her! But he was not that kind. He thought her another man's wife. She glanced at her watch. It was 3:30 and she would be back in Three Rivers in time to go down to Sam Dean's with Dudley. Dona felt suddenly as though the world had ceased to be a sunny place. The pines looked cold and dark.

(To Be Continued)

LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE

The Perfect Alibi

By HAROLD GRAY



TIM TYLER'S FLYING LUCK

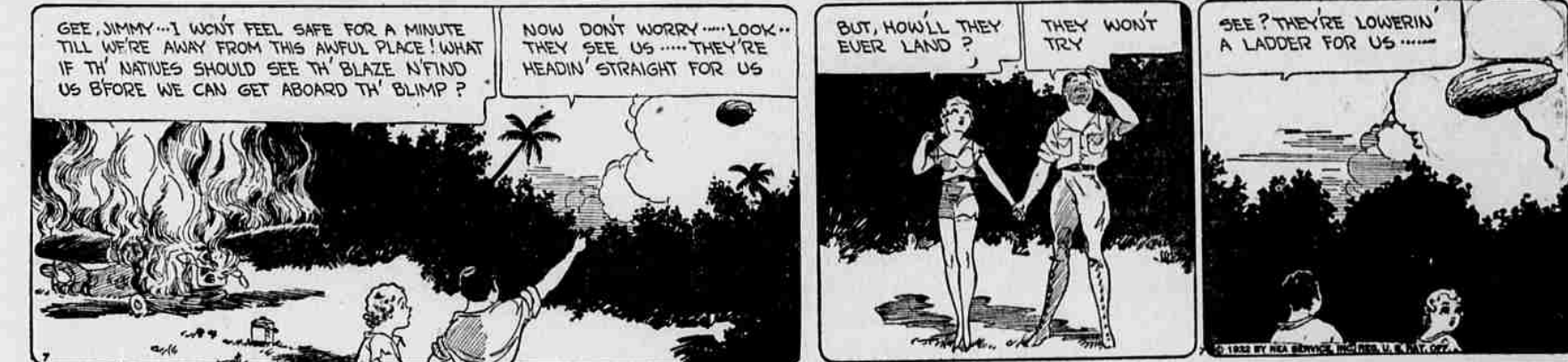
By LYMAN YOUNG



BOOTS AND HER BUDDIES

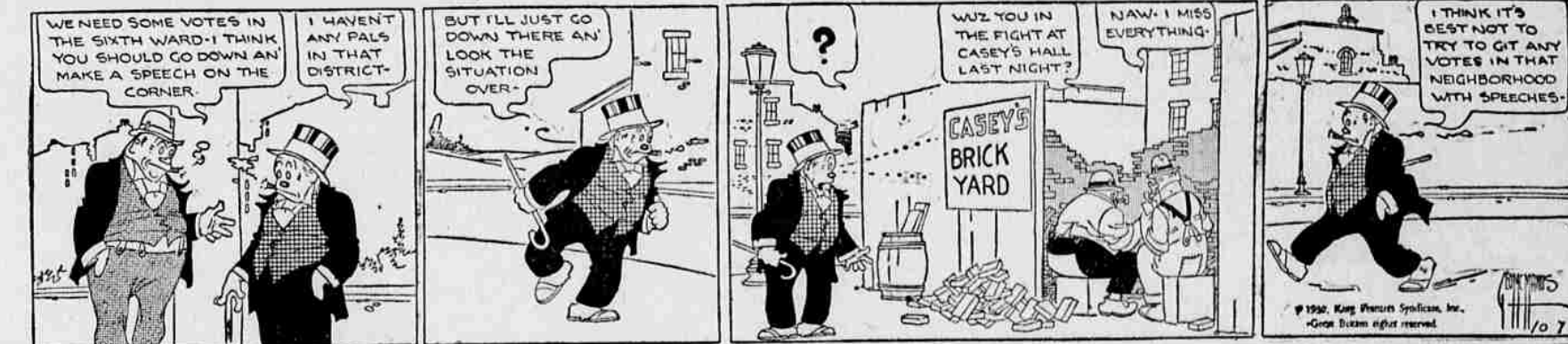
It Won't Be Long Now!

By MARTIN



BRINGING UP FATHER

By GEORGE McMANUS



THIMBLE THEATRE Starring POPEYE

NOW SHOWING-"SUNKEN TREASURE."

TOMORROW-"A HOLE IN ONE."

By E. C. Segar



OUT OUR WAY

By WILLIAMS OUR BOARDING HOUSE

By AHERN



THIS CURIOUS WORLD

