

CALL of the WEST

R. G. MONTGOMERY

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SERIES 10

CHAPTER XXVI

DONA faced her captor with flash-

ing eyes. Stan Ball returned the

glance with a grim smile.

"My quarters are passable though

possibly a trifle primitive for one ac-

customed to luxury," Stan motioned

toward the mouth of a cave. "Will

you enter or must I carry you?"

"I hate you and loathe you! I

wouldn't ask anything from you for

myself but this will kill my father."

Ball stood with his feet planted

wide apart. For a full minute he

looked at her. "I'll see that you're

kept safe at camp in the morning. To

be safe at night would mean that

you would be lost in this high coun-

try. To take you down tonight would

be suicide. Your father has not earned

that at my hands."

"I suppose you want me to grant

you immunity?" Dona's eyes blazed.

"You certainly will have to swear

not to reveal this hiding place. I may

have to use it several days. My in-

ter is to make a get-away." Stan's

voice was level and hard.

"And I won't promise you anything

except that I will escape at the first

chance and that I will stop at noth-

ing to have you taken." Dona's cheeks

flushed as she gave him her answer.

"That's settled then! You stay

here as my guest." Stan motioned to-

ward the entrance of the cave.

"Be seated while I get supper." He

motioned toward a stone slab covered

with blankets to serve as a bunk.

Dona sat down on the pile of blan-

kets and crossed her legs. She was

careful and ready to take any

chance. Her eyes took stock of the

interior of the room in a vain search

for a rifle or other weapon. There

was no gun in the room except the

heavy revolver that swung at Ball's

hip. Her eyes returned to her land-

lady.

Stan bent over an open fireplace

shaped of rock slabs with a smoke

funnel to send the fumes out

through a crevice in the ceiling. He

set the wood on end. Indian fashion

and applied a match. Beside the fire-

place was a little collection of cook-

ing utensils. Stan produced a piece

of bacon and sliced it. He showed a

bit of water near the flames to heat.

Stan he uncovered four speckled

mountain trout. Soon a savory odor

began to permeate the air of the cave.

Dona sniffed disbelievingly. She was

sure she would eat.

Stan Ball sat back on his heels and

watched the trout sizzling in the pan

with the bacon. When the water be-

gan to simmer and boil he pulled it

back from the flames and sifted the

bacon. After turning the trout sev-

eral times he arose and pulled a wide

slab of stone over beside the cot. Pro-

ducing two tin plates, he laid out a

trout, a fork and spoon, his entire

stock of silver. Two tin cups were

added to the table and a tin can of

beer.

The trout were done brown by this

time and he dumped two of them on

the plate before Dona. Three slices

of crisp bacon were added. He showed

the plate toward her and reached for

the tin of beer.

"Humble but wholesome," he re-

marked. "I have no bread. It's too

bulky to carry." He added this by

way of an apology.

The first mouthful convinced her

that Stan Ball was an expert at fry-

ing trout. She realized, too, that she

was very hungry. In silence they ate

and drank. Stan sat close to her on

the stone bed. The handle of his re-

volver was a scant 10 inches from her

hand as she laid down the spoon, but

she did not attempt to jerk the gun

toward her. Dona knew the cat-like speed

of the man she had to deal with. His

gun hand would move like lightning.

Stan washed the dishes and put

them away carefully. Then he sat

back on the slab of stone that had

served as a table. With deliberate

care he sifted a little tobacco into a

cigaret paper and rolled a smoke.

Dona moved slightly. A picture fast-

ened up on the bare stone wall caught

her eye. It was a photograph of her-

self, taken when she was at finish-

ing school. Her eyes flashed but she

did not say anything. Ball saw that she

was looking at the picture and a thin

smile parted his lips.

"My most prized possession!" He

spoke slowly and the smile faded from

his lips.

"You take what you want, don't

you, Mr. Ball?" There was a cutting

edge to the girl's voice and a sar-

castic note in it. "Even though it can

do you no good."

"It has done me much good," Stan

started simply.

His answer angered her more than

a bantering reply would have done.

She sat very straight and her little

chin came up stiffly.

"And these?" Stan waved to a pile

of magazines and several books. "are

very helpful to a fellow who has to

stay cooped up all day."

Dona's eyes flickered ever so lit-

tle as she noticed that he had helped

himself to magazines and books from

the shelves of the office building at

Three Rivers. The books were all

good literature and the magazines of

the better class.

"You approve of my reading?"

There was a light of amusement in

his gray eyes.

"You probably haven't opened any

of them," she answered coldly.

"But they make nice decorations,"

he insisted.

Dona shrugged her slender shoulders

and refused to reply.

"You hate me and that is all right,

but you are my guest and I want you

to be comfortable and to be enter-

tained." Ball cast an amused eye over

the stiffly erect figure on the cot.

"I would suggest that you make your-

self easy."

"I am as easy as any girl could be

with a man of your kind about," Dona

snapped. "I would consider it a great

favor if you would go outside where

you could watch the entrance and

leave me alone."

Stan nodded and got up. "Make

yourself at home. I will take care of

my lady outside." He bent low to

keep from bumping his head on the

ceiling of the cave and disappeared.

Dona sat for a long time without

moving. She could hear her captor

outside talking to the black mare.

Cool air began to creep into the cave,

indicating that evening was at hand.

Dona stretched her legs and tried to

see out into the clearing but a curve

in the entryway made it impossible.

She sat back and gave herself up to

bitter contemplation of her fate.

She was a prisoner but she did

not worry her. That she was in the

power of Stan Ball, a killer, did not

worry her either. What did make her

uneasy was the thought of her father.

She remembered with an angry twist

of memory that Stan Ball had shot

her father and that Ball was responsi-

ble for her present plight. From the

first he had been the cause of all her

trouble. She made a vow that she

would exact the last drop of revenge

against him when the chance came.

Stan emerged into the yellow light

of the cave. He had taken care of his

horse and was back to see how she

was getting along.

"Time to turn in," he said shortly.

"We'll have a heavy day tomorrow

if things break right."

Dona met his eyes with a level gaze.

"I happen to be sitting up tonight,"

she said flatly.

"I happen to be deciding these

things for you," he stated and began

to untie the scarf that was knotted

loosely about his throat.

(To Be Continued)

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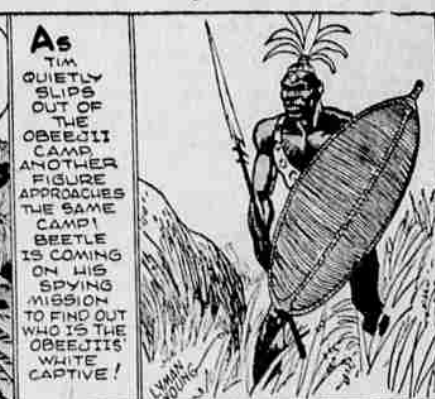


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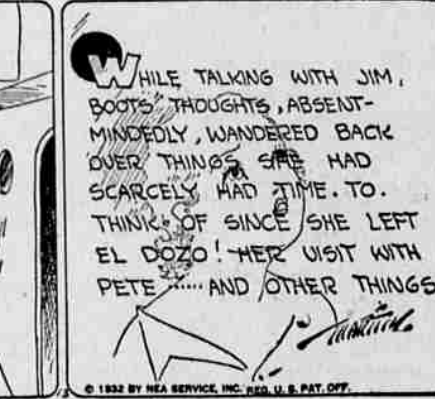
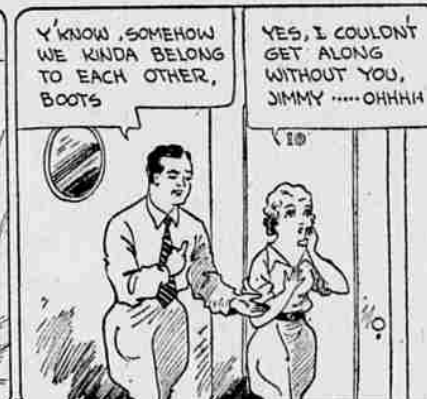
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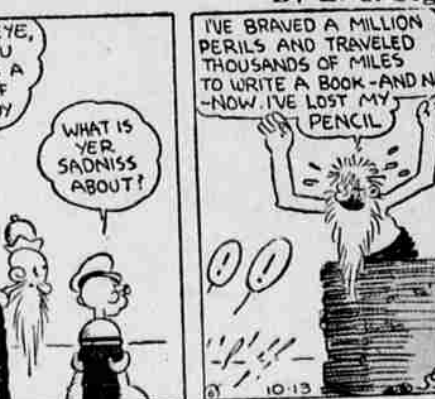
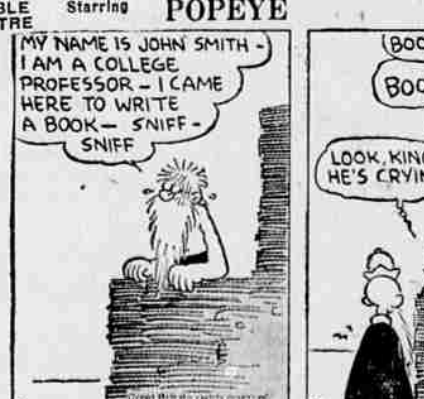
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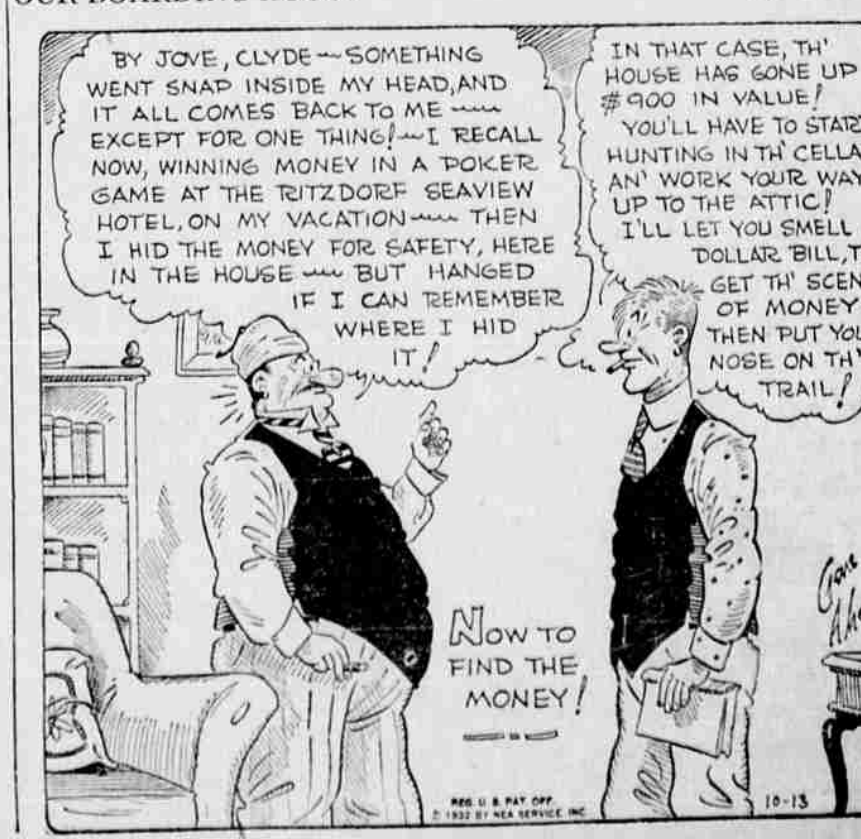
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