

CALL of the WEST

By R. G. MONTGOMERY

CHAPTER XLVII
CONTRARY to the expectations of the doctor and to all rules of convalescence, Donna did not suffer a setback. Asper brought her news from the room down the hall, news that he made encouraging and bright. He was sitting on the foot of her bed smiling at her in his rough way when Donna suddenly remembered something.

"Where is Dad? I haven't seen him since yesterday afternoon." Asper's wide smile faded and he tried to give her an answer that was casual. "Oh, he's around here."

"Something has happened to Dad," she said simply. "Better tell me all about it, Dad, I won't make any fuss."

Donna's soft lips curved into a sudden smile that bewildered the troubled Asper. She was actually smiling.

"When did he go?" she asked.

Asper grunted with distinct disapproval. Donna was a puzzle to him in a great many ways. Here she was sitting up in bed looking almost happy, in fact radiant, while he told her that her husband had gone.

"He'll come back," Donna gazed dreamily out of the window as she spoke. She was not thinking about Dudley Winters except to be thankful that he had made the way out very easy. "He's chasing some crazy clev," she added.

"He may not come back at all. He left pretty permanently," Asper finished lamely.

Donna replied with a little laugh. She reached out and took her father's hand. With a squeeze, she pulled him around until she could look into his eyes. Asper gave her his attention with sudden interest.

"I hope it is permanent," she whispered.

Asper snorted but not with complete conviction.

"Because he is not your son-in-law," Donna's cheeks colored beautifully, her eyes shone.

Asper gazed at her without speaking. His mind was flashing back over the happenings of the past few weeks and he was checking up many little incidents. Finally he smiled and patted her hand. He was too relieved to be angry. "How and why did you do it?" he asked.

"It was Dad's idea. He got the certificate signed up and we were to use it to get you back to the city," Donna was serious now.

"You would have married Winters to save your old dad?" He asked the question, knowing the answer.

Donna squeezed his hand. Asper got to his feet with a weak attempt at a grunt. "I better get in and see about that crazy backdoor," he said gruffly as he strode to the door.

"Take good care of him," Donna called after him.

The doctor came in and found her curled up with her chin propped in the palms of her hands and her lips parted in a dreamy smile. He stood looking down on her in surprise.

"You will not need any attention from me," he greeted her. "You are the most alive of any patient I ever had."

"I'm getting up pretty soon," Donna announced. "I'm going to help with your new patient."

The doctor looked keenly at her. "You cannot help with him. You tell me more good by acting just as I tell you."

"Tomorrow I will?" Donna made a question of it.

"We'll see," the doctor was suddenly all professional dignity. "With you and your father both around under foot I could do nothing for him and he is a very sick man."

Donna accepted the ruling with reservations, but she did accept it. She had learned to have a great deal of respect for the tall medical man who served as company doctor.

That afternoon Asper carried Donna out on the porch and fixed her in a mass of pillows where she could look out over the valley. He sat down beside her and gazed reflectively out over his timber holdings.

"Tell me what really happened to you while you were riding?" Donna finally asked.

"I rode down into Pass Creek," Asper began.

"And found just what I found," Donna cut in. "I tried to tell you but you would never let me."

Asper nodded. "I wish I had listened."

"And then what?"

"I caught Swergin on the trail and disarmed him. I intended to bring him in but one of his men came up behind us and I was covered. Swergin took me to a cabin and tied me up."

Asper's eyes grew dark as he remembered.

"He threatened you?" Donna asked breathlessly.

"He told me his whole scheme of robbery, then went out and set fire to the cabin," Asper tossed his black cigar away.

"The coward!" Donna gasped.

"Ball came in and saved me. I sent him on down here to head Swergin off and I stayed to fight the fire and keep it out of the timber," Asper stopped as though about to add something.

"Did Stan Ball tell you why he came back?" Donna asked.

Her question was answered by a voice from the steps. Donna and Asper turned to see a dusty cowboy standing grinning at them; it was Malloy. "I went after him," Malloy stated briefly.

"You did?" Asper showed his surprise.

"You knew Stan Ball was not what we thought?" Donna asked slowly.

"Knew it from the start but he would never let me say a word or butt in," Malloy sat down on the top step. He was hot and tired, but he was eager for news about Stan. "Is the kid all right?" he asked.

"You can see him tomorrow," Asper promised.

"Did that rat, Swergin, get in a shot?" Malloy was plainly surprised.

It was Donna who answered. "I thought he was getting away with another killing and I shot him."

Malloy looked at her unbelievably for a full minute, then his grin spread widely. "You ran a mean gun," he said and started to get up.

"Don't run off. I want to ask you a lot of questions," Donna said smilingly.

Malloy grinned and dropped back on the porch step.

Asper got up. "I better see about my patient," with a wink at Malloy, he strode inside.

"I want you to tell me all about Stan Ball," Donna said simply.

Malloy dodged a reply.

"How about this fellow, Winters?" Malloy asked bluntly.

"We were not married. We tried to fool father and make him leave this country with us," Donna spoke frankly, too.

"That's why he felt free to skip out with that little senorita from over the ridge," Malloy spoke deliberately. "I figured he was about half all right."

Donna started, then got a grip on herself. Malloy had said more than he might have, had he known that she only knew half of the story. "That accounts for all his riding," she said with a smile that hinted she had known all the time.

Malloy nodded and got up again. "I'll be back if you want me," he said as he clanked down the steps.

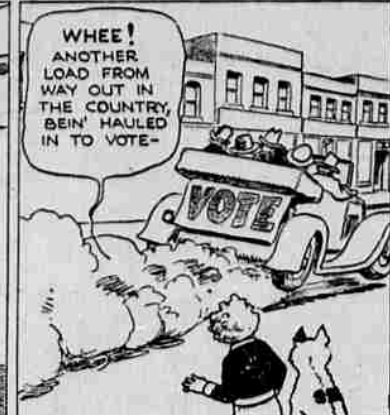
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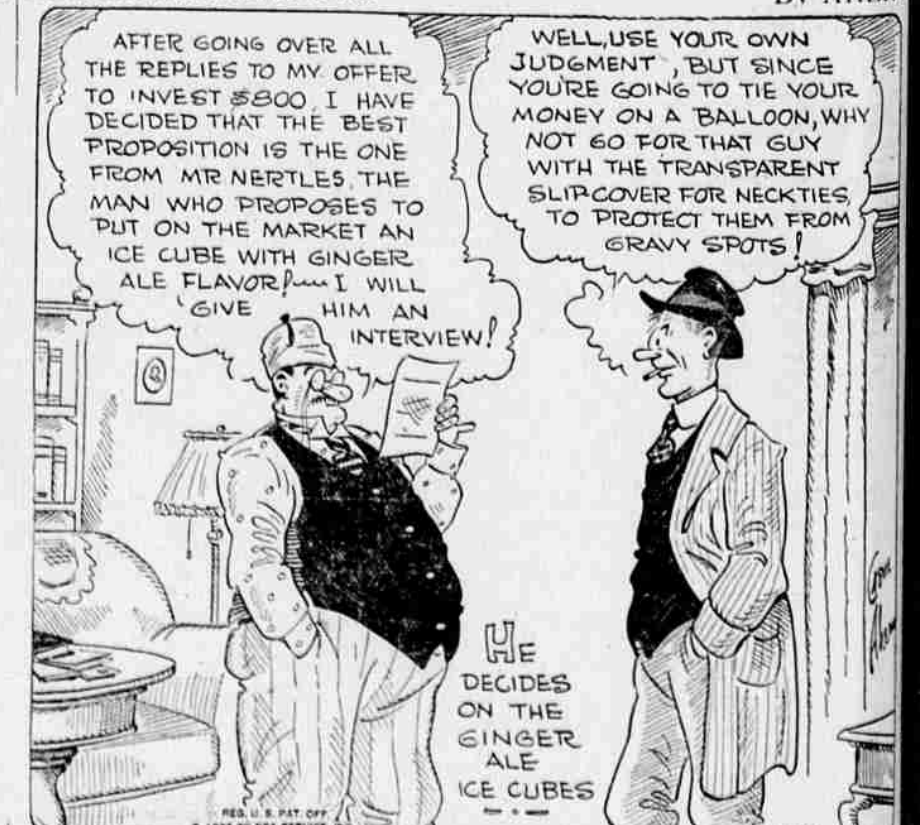
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