

DONNA of the BIG TOP

by BEULAH POYNTER

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ONE of the baby lambs was sick and this delayed him. It was dusk and the baby was apprehensive of the weather. A yellow gleam of light from the living room window threw a welcome glow on the path. He paused in the woods long enough to use a comb to brush snow from his shoes and clothing. Then he entered the house by way of the kitchen. By rights Donna should now be helping Minnie with the evening meal.

But Donna was not in the kitchen. Donna looked up from a pan of potatoes she was peeling and grinned at him. On the table beside her was a picture magazine.

"Where's my wife?" Bill asked. "Donna?"

Calling, "Madeline!" he passed through the pantry and corridor. There was no reply he ran up the stairs. Their bedroom was empty and both her hat and coat were gone. His watch informed him that it was after five o'clock. "She's staying long time," Bill muttered. "Too long."

In Grandfather's room he tried to be casual when he inquired if Madeline had telephoned, but there was note of anxiety in his voice that could not be disguised.

"Perhaps she tried to," Miss Perkins suggested, "and the storm prevented her from getting the message through."

"That's right. I'll see whether I get Madeline on the phone."

After some little difficulty Bill succeeded in getting the operator on the telephone. He discovered, as spoke, that he was shaking and meanness that had hung over him the afternoon had developed into definite fear.

Mrs. Adams' voice came over the line. "Is my wife still there?" Bill asked. "Who is this?"

"Bill Sidal. Is Mrs. Sidal still there?"

"Why, no."

"But she's been at your house today?"

"No. I didn't expect her."

Like a man ravaged by a long illness, Bill moved automatically away from the telephone. Miss Perkins, who followed him into the hall, gave little cry at the sight of his stricken face.

"Something's happened," he mumbled thickly. "An accident. She hasn't been there at all."

"Oh, but just half a mile—"

"Don't let us to the old man. I'm going to get the bobbed and go after her."

It occurred to him that his forehead was oiling the sled and getting in shape was a grim coincidence. At once, as he hitched the harness, putting them with blankets and putting Miss Perkins over their eyes, did he heed Madeline's word. She had said she was going to the Adamses and she had not arrived there. The only explanation was that there must have been an accident. Perhaps at this moment she was lying in a gutter at the side of the road, dead or dying. A groan tore at Bill's throat. Why did he let her go? He had seen a storm coming. She had already been when she left. She wasn't a good driver. If she was dead—

Beads of perspiration formed on his temples and upper lip and froze in the icy air. His hands trembled so that he had difficulty in grasping the reins.

He ought to have Miss Perkins get in touch with Doc Freeman so that he could be on his way out to the farm when Bill reached home with Madeline. No, he wouldn't take the time to stop and tell Miss Perkins. Every moment was precious.

At the Adams farm he turned around, bewildered added to his anxiety. A woman, walking, might have wandered off the path, gotten into the woods and become lost there, but an automobile could not disappear completely.

Either Madeline had gone beyond the Adams place or the car had been wrecked and towed away. In the latter case it did not seem plausible that she would not have been taken to the Adams house or that he would not have been notified. Although few of the neighbors knew his wife personally, everyone knew her by sight.

At the crossroads he stopped again. It would be impossible to drive the horses and sled through the growth of underbrush but if by chance Madeline had had trouble with the engine and started on foot for help she might have missed the way and gone in that direction.

A search with the aid of a pocket flashlight, however, yielded no results. Bill climbed back into the seat of the sled and started for home. There he would telephone to town and ask someone to send out a searching party.

"I wouldn't worry," Miss Perkins said, in an effort to comfort him. "Maybe she decided to go to town and something held her up. She'll be home in a few minutes or she'll telephone—you'll see."

"I hope so." Scarcely knowing what he was doing, Bill lifted a pile of mail that lay on the dining room table.

"That came while you were out in the barn," the nurse hastened to explain. "I forgot to say anything about it."

There were catalogs, circulars, a newspaper and a letter. The address on the letter was in unfamiliar handwriting. Bill shoved the circular to one side and picked up the letter.

"Wonder who's writing me from Lebanon?" he said.

Then he opened it. The nurse, watching his face, saw it turn the color of death. His nostrils quivered and his mouth grew taut—a mere, vivid line in his ashen face.

"Mr. Sidal, what is it? What's happened?"

"Nothing. Nothing. I'm going to town."

He jammed Mrs. Planter's anonymous message into his coat pocket. "I'm going back to town," he repeated. "If Madeline should come tell her."

The chug-chug of a motor engine killed the rest of the sentence. The car came into the driveway and stopped in front of the house. Bill stood watching, as though holding his breath.

The nurse, instinctively realizing that some sort of scene was imminent, slipped out of the room as Donna opened the front door.

(To Be Continued)

In Swedish peat bogs have been found a woolen mitten from 100 B. C. and a woolen cloak still more ancient.

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