

DONNA of the BIG TOP

by BEULAH POYNTER

CHAPTER XLIV

DONNA awakened with a feeling of impending disaster. For a few minutes she lay on the couch, conscious only of a crushing sensation and a bewilderment that she should not be in her own bed. It was dark and deathly quiet. The wind had ceased to moan through the trees and the snow to flutter against the windows. In the stillness she missed something—the audible breathing of her husband.

That frightened her and she slid from the couch and went into the bedroom. Bill was gone but the bed had been slept in and Bill's work clothes were missing. She looked at the clock and saw that it was almost six. He must be outside, attending to the cattle.

While she was dressing there was a knock at the door. "It's Miss Perkins. Are you awake, Mr. Siddle?" Donna opened the door. "My husband has gone out," she said. "What is it?"

"Your grandfather is breathing awfully. I can't rouse him. I think he had better send for the doctor."

"Telephone him," Donna said with a catch in her throat. "I'll dress as quickly as I can. Mr. Siddle must be out in the stables. I'll see if I can find him."

She left the door open and she heard the nurse going down the stairs, heard her voice as she called for Dr. Freeman. If Grandfather was dying and the will wasn't changed, if he left everything to Grandma, she would be rich. She thought of what was rightfully his and the man who had no right to all these acres would be heir to them. More than that, Donna herself would be dragged into court, to be proven a cheat and a fraud.

"Oh, God, don't let Grandfather die!" she prayed. "Not yet any way! No matter what happens to me, don't let Bill be cheated!"

She bent over the old man long enough to whisper his name and to realize that it was useless to try to get him to speak. Then she wrapped a heavy shawl about herself and ran out of the house towards the barn. She called Bill's name several times but received no answer. The path, cut through the drifts, and the cows, munched peacefully in their stalls, informed her that Bill had completed his chores though he was no place to be seen.

Reverend, anxious, she returned to the house. In the kitchen Minnie was getting breakfast. "Miss Perkins asked I should make her some coffee. Grandfather is worse," she said.

"Yes. Has my husband come in?"

"No. And there's no milk. He must be milking the cows."

"No he isn't. Give me some coffee, Minnie. I'm going after Dr. Freeman. My husband must be somewhere on the farm but we can't wait for him."

She swallowed the coffee so hot it burned her throat but she did not feel the pain. Her thoughts were leaping from one tragic event to another. It was ominous that Bill was not to be found. Grandfather was unquestionably sinking. He had never been like this. If he died before she could get assistance, and in Bill's absence, she would feel like a murderer.

When she discovered that the hobble was gone she was stunned. Bill must have gone to town before 6 o'clock. That could mean but

one thing—he had learned of her meeting with Con David! Somehow Mrs. Planter had gotten in touch with him, and the word of a malicious gossip had borne bitter fruit. That accounted for Bill's attitude the night before. That was why he had tricked her into a lie, and that he had been her ruin! He would see Con and Con would tell him the truth! Now Grandfather was dying and Bill was her enemy!

Standing there in the snow, she wrung her hands and sobbed bitterly. But it was only a short time before she regained control of herself. Dr. Freeman must be telephoned again.

Donna wiped her wet cheeks with a fold of the shawl and ran back to the house. "Mr. Siddle has gone to town," she said breathlessly. "All we can do is ask the doctor to come in his car. How is Grandfather?"

Miss Perkins shook her head. "No better."

Donna knelt beside the bed, resting her cold cheek against the withered one. "Grandpa, can you hear me? You mustn't leave us now when we are in so much trouble. I need you! You'll never know how much I need you. You know, don't you, that I love you? Bill will never forgive me, but you will. You'll understand. You said intentions—and my intentions weren't wicked. I was just a coward—afraid of hurting you and Bill and losing the only love I have ever known! Oh, Grandfather, you mustn't die! Not until you do the right thing by Bill and until I know you forgive me!"

She thought she saw his eyelids flutter, and continued murmuring words of love and contrition. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. Again and again she pressed her trembling lips against the shaven ones, unconscious that the nurse had returned.

"Mrs. Siddle!" The nurse shook her gently. "Mrs. Siddle!"

Donna raised her swimming eyes. "Please get up. He can't hear you. He's dead."

"Dead?" Donna dropped back and let her hands fall in her lap. "Dead? He can't be! Without Bill to say goodbye—without knowing me or—"

"He's dead, my dear. Come!" The nurse bent over and lifted her to her feet.

"He was dying when you went out to get the sleigh. He died while you were sitting there. Poor child, don't grieve so. You knew it was only a matter of weeks. He was so old—"

Donna moved from her embrace, walked unsteadily to the window and pressed her face against it. Grief over losing the kindest, dearest friend she had ever known banished thoughts of self and future. Her sense of loss obliterated everything else.

Then Bill turned. There was hatred in his eyes—a bitter, scathing scorn that seemed to penetrate through her clothing and sear her very vitals. She shrank back, covering her face with her hands. But her hands could not blind her to the expression on his face.

"Leave us alone," he said crisply to the others.

Then he crossed to the sofa. "I know the truth," he said slowly. "I know all about Con David."

"Yes," she could not look at him.

"You know it's the end between us?"

"Yes, I know it."

"After the funeral I'll be getting out."

(To Be Continued)

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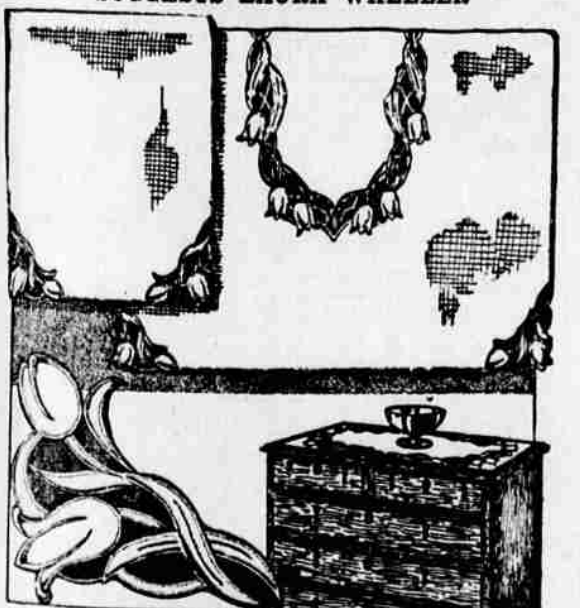
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