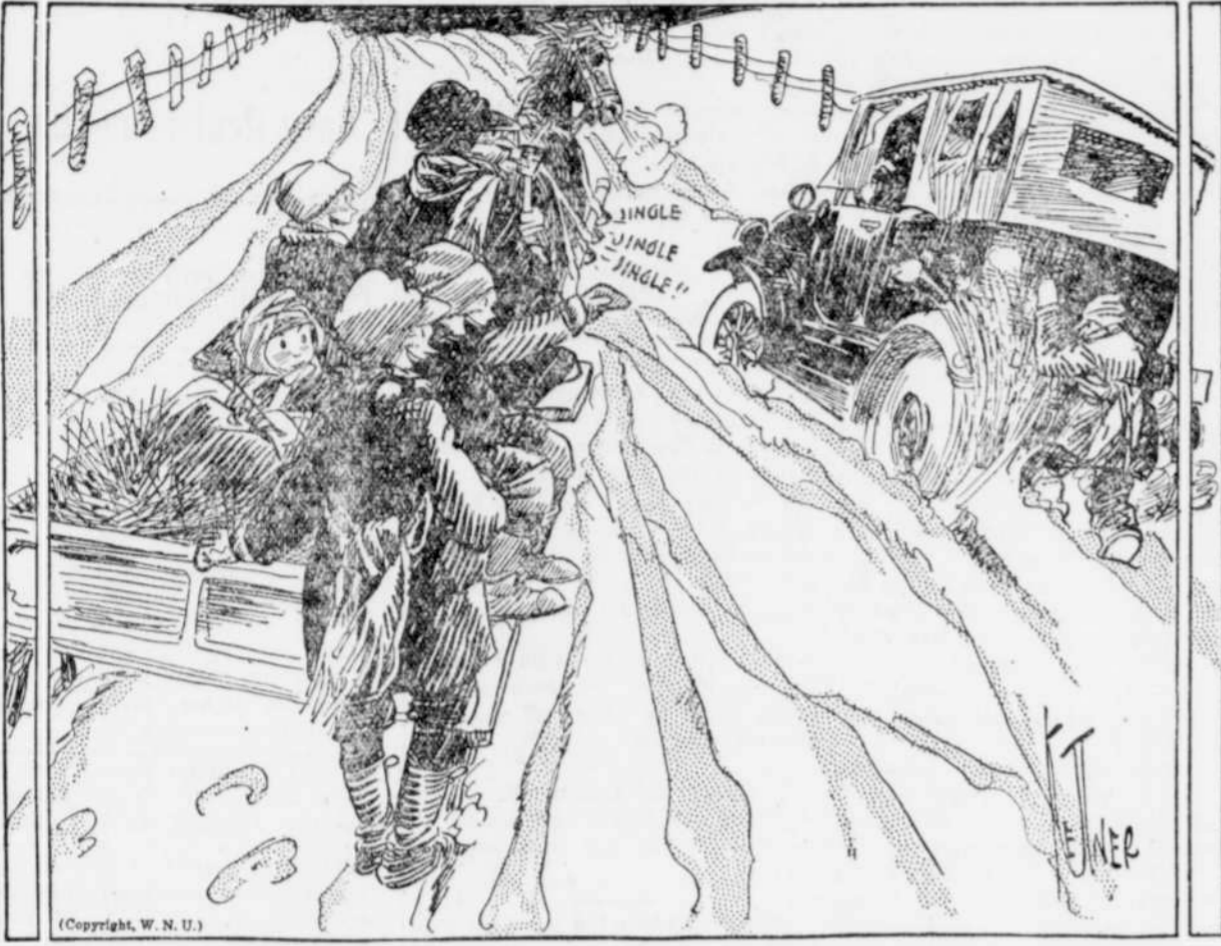


OUR COMIC SECTION

Along the Concrete



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Calamus Tea Was Served

By MARTHA M. WILLIAMS

"WHAT was Joe Babson hulloin' about?" Mrs. Main asked eagerly.

Eve Nelson tried to answer casually: "Oh! Nothin' much! Just askin' if we had a stray red yearlin' in our pasture." But in spite of herself her eyes fell.

Whereat Mrs. Main said: "Humph! You're a sneaky liar. He brung you a somethin' of some sort. What was it? Answer me straight!"

"Nothin' but a bunch of calamus-root," Eve stammered.

"Calamus!" Words cannot express Mrs. Main's scorn. "Are ye goin' ter learn ter chaw it? I'll warn Sam Birdsong he better look sharp. With this calamus-dope a-workin', you might say yes ter the wrong feller."

Eve stiffened. "You'll please let me and my concerns be," she said. "Remember, I'm your boarder—and the best part of your livin'. Also, I don't have to stay on here any longer than suits me. I can marry if I choose, and I don't have to take Sam Birdsong."

"Ye can, eh! Of all the ongratitude ever I heard tell of, you're the best," Mrs. Main flung back. "When you'd a-died in yer cradle, after yer mamma went hadn't a-been I taken and raised ye up ter real human size."

"Sure you did," Eve scoffed. "Paid your rent that way. The place is mine. You agreed to raise me right, feed, cloth and school me, if I was let stay until I married. And I didn't know a month about it until a month back—thought you paid money rent and got it back and more for keepin' me."

"How come you ter git so wise, missy?" Mrs. Main demanded angrily.

Eve tossed her head. "I went to Judge Johnson," she said. "Told him how you nagged and complained of my appetite, and how I wore out shoes, and asked him to find me another guardian. Then he told me about the bargain—says he can't go back on it—but the minute I show him a husband worth havin' he'll put me in possession. How'd you like that?"

In answer came a volcanic eruption—reproaches, appeals to high heaven, torrents of abuse, at last violent hysterics. Then Mrs. Main collapsed—fell to the floor in a dead faint. Eve tried dashing cold water in the unconscious face. Desperately she ran to the kitchen adjoining, and to her joy found a teakettle boiling. Suddenly she struck something hard in the pocket of her house frock—the despised calamus. In a wink she had a potful brewing. Three minutes later she was pouring thny spoonfuls of it through her patient's lips. But an angel couldn't have been welcomer than Billy Bellamy, who came in without ceremony after a glance through the window. Billy was reading medicine with old Doctor Ware. He was also fathoms deep in love with Eve, but had never until now had the ghost of a chance to say so.

"The Lord sent you, I do believe," she said fervently to Billy. "I was scared poor Mammy Main would die—with only me to help her."

"You're doin' just the right thing," Billy assured her. "Now we'll lift her to the lounge."

"Wait. I must do somethin' before she comes to," Eve said with half a giggle.

She nodded. "It's only this: Propose to you—in dead earnest—while I have the chance."

Billy all but staggered. Perhaps that was why he had to prop himself with both arms around Eve. Warned by a groan, they sprang apart—and spent the next half hour trying breathlessly to do all the things Mammy Main insisted must be done at once.

The first was to bring forth black-berry cordial. Such a mission required two for fulfillment. Even at that it was tedious. At last Billy found the right jug. Eve, peering beyond him, reached for something odd—a canvas-wrapped parcel so heavy she could not move it with one hand. Billy drew it to the light. Both scanned it narrowly, then laid it back and hurried to Mrs. Main, trying hard to look as though they had not seen it.

They found her shaky, but she sniffed the pungent odor gratefully, saying in a weak voice: "Eve I got my come-uppance fer—fer talkin' mean ter you. I do believe I'd a-died hadn't of been fer that calamus tea."

"I won't forget," Billy said gaily. "When I want to bring the dead to life—try calamus tea. But here's somethin' even better, handin' her a glass of the thick spicy peach brandy, at least twenty years old."

"It does put heart in ye," Mrs. Main said almost dreaming, after a swig and several sips. Suddenly she looked hard at both the young folk—something in their faces stirred her strangely. "Did—did—you find—anything else?" she asked brokenly through quivering pallid lips. Eve took her hand, patted it and said: "Never mind if we did—we left things as we found them."

"They can't stay so," Mrs. Main cried, sitting up. "I got to tell the truth. In that leather bag, inside the canvas, is money—my rent for nineteen years. I cheated you—pinchin' so to save it—but I couldn't endure to go bare and empty-handed when I had to leave."

"You are not going to leave," Eve said viv. And Billy nodded assent.

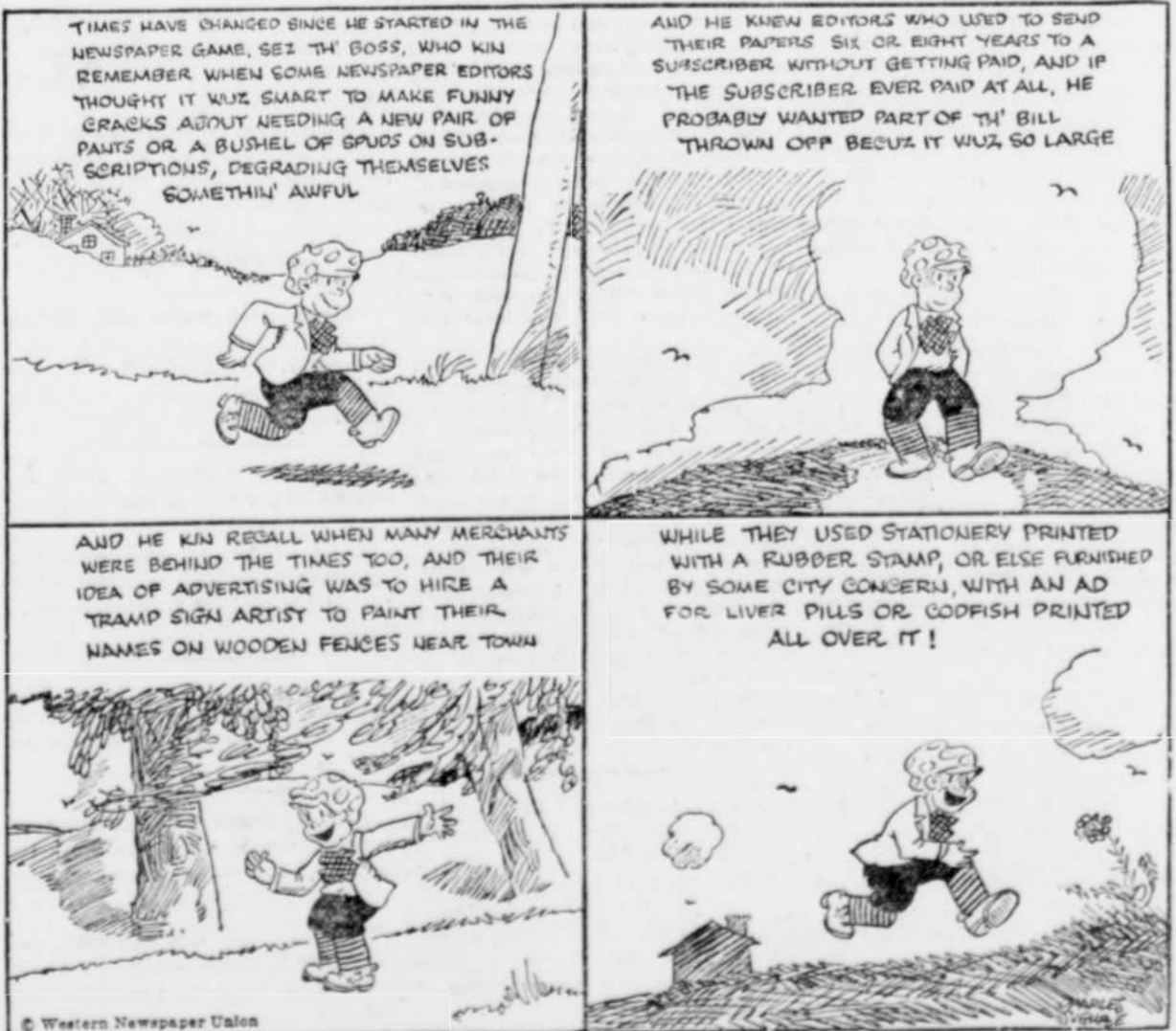
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