

DONNA of the BIG TOP

by BEULAH POYNTER

CHAPTER I

GRADUALLY the circus lot took on the appearance of a nomad city. Banners were flying and tents scattered about. Peanut and lemonade stands were erected. A smaller tent beside the "big top" was converted into dozens of dressing rooms. Nets were unfolded, tight ropes, bars and rings were clamped into place with infinite care. As the paraphernalia for each act was produced the owner gave it minute inspection. A loose screw or a rope missing might mean death or permanent injury. Animals were fed and watered.

Donna, following her unvarying custom, went to the dressing room she shared with Madeline and two others, and laid out her wardrobe. Then she slipped into cotton tights and a sweater and crossed to the big tent. For an hour she "limbered up." Hand springs, "cats backs," and somersaults left her warm and glowing and certain of her strength. Upon her agility depended her own life and Madeline's. Donna was utterly without fear for herself but more than once the other girl's reckless instability had struck terror in her heart, causing her to wonder if she had been wise in her choice of a partner.

Madeline had proven strong, supple and fearless. After a year of minor vaudeville houses she was ready for circus life. She would never be the acrobat Donna was, for Donna's muscles had been trained from babyhood, but Madeline gave satisfaction in all that was required of her. Donna, still crushed with grief and without curiosity, had asked few questions of her partner and it was not until three years ago that Madeline confessed she had run away from her home and that the story she had told of long experience in the theater was untrue.

Five years had passed since the girls' first meeting. As Donna left the tent that morning she was certain that another five years would not see them together. In spite of her warning she saw Madeline standing in the bright sunlight in close conversation with Ned Trafford, the boss canvasman.

"There's no excuse for it," Donna muttered angrily. "She doesn't care anything about him. It just flatters her to have a big brute like Trafford in love with her. She'll cut out the philandering or I'll speak to Renfro."

Already the band was tuning up, the callopes steaming and in position for the parade. Donna hurriedly dressed in the crimson velvet riding habit that was her parade costume, and took her place on a snowy mare in the cavalcade.

AS she bent to pat the sleek coat of the animal Madeline called her name. She handed Donna a slip of paper and said, "Read it when you get a chance."

Donna glanced at the written page. "Dear Madeline," she read in a wavering, uncertain scrawl, "I see by what you have written me that you will be in Lebanon Saturday. Surely the circus does not give performances on Sunday and you will be free on the Lord's day. It's been five years since I've seen you, and my heart aches to hear your voice again. If I send Bill Siddal to town for you won't you come out to visit us? I'm an old man and I'm a lot more feeble than when you left home. Maybe I won't be here another year. I won't say anything about what has happened nor anything to rile you if you'll come, but you're my closest kin and when one is as old as I am he wants to be close to the ones he loves. Your Grandfather."

There was no opportunity to discuss the letter until at luncheon two hours later. Then Donna asked, "What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know. What would you do?"

"Go, of course. I don't see how you can refuse!"

Madeline's eyes narrowed and she studied Donna with a queer little smile on her lips. "Why don't you go?"

"What?"

"I mean it. Five years ago I was a country kid with my hair in pig tails. I don't look much like I did then—not nearly as much as I do like you now. Granddad is half-blind and he'd never know the difference. You might get a kick out of the farm and I'd be bored stiff. There isn't a neighbor that would recognize me and I've never seen this Bill Siddal he mentions. Bill's some sort of a second cousin who works for Granddad. Do it, Donna! Let me write him I'm coming and you go in my place."

"It's a temptation," Donna admitted. "I've never been on a farm—or in a real home, for that matter. But it doesn't seem honest."

"Why not? I won't go. I'd be afraid Granddad might pull some tricks to keep me there. If he tried that with you you could tell him the truth. If you don't do it I'll write him I can't come."

"You mean that?"

"Absolutely."

"His letter is sweet," Donna mused, her eyes soft and luminous. "I can't imagine him doing anything so cold."

"You don't know him. Well—I'll think about it."

That night Madeline wrote the letter of acceptance that was to change the entire course of both girls' lives.

where "barbers" announced the wonders on view inside. A young man, conspicuous because of his height and breadth of shoulder, strode with abashed determination towards the smaller tent adjoining the "big top." Over one arm he carried his coat. In his other hand he carried a straw sailor. In the sunlight his thick dark hair, snubnosed like his lean, strongly rugged face, glistened with strands of gold. Under shaggy black brows his shrewd gray eyes searched for the entrance to the tent.

A tiny man in green tights, a huge black cigar in his mouth, was leaning against a stake beside an opening that served as a door. The young man hesitated, coughed and then asked, "Can you—er—do you know where I can find Miss Madeline Siddal?"

The midget looked up at the newcomer and shook his head. "Never heard the name," he piped in a childish treble.

"But—gosh, I am stupid. I mean Madeline Gabriel."

"Oh, one of the Gabriel Sisters! Yeah. She's inside."

"I want to see her. I've come from her Grandfather. Could I—er, will you take me to her?"

"No str. I can't do that. No visitors allowed."

"Well, can you tell her I'm here? Bill Siddal. She's expecting me. I won't keep her but a minute."

"O. K."

The tiny man disappeared into the cavern of darkness. Bill waited five minutes, ten. He heard the blatan strains of a brass band coming from the larger tent, and the clatter of horses' hoofs as they crossed the runway. The show must have begun.

"She's fooling the old man," he muttered angrily. "I told him she wouldn't come with me." He thrust his hat on the back of his head, jammed hands in his pockets and started away. A voice stayed him. "Mr. Siddal!"

TURNING, he saw her, framed by the dingy folds of canvas that only served to accentuate her loveliness. The bronze hair formed a gleaming aureole about her small, oval face, and the brown eyes were wide and frightened and beautiful. His granduncle had told him that Madeline was a pretty girl, but the years had turned mere prettiness into breath-taking beauty. No wonder she had rebelled at burying herself on the farm. She was glorious!

"You are Bill Siddal?" Donna asked. Her voice was low-pitched and throaty.

"Yes. And you're Madeline?"

Under the coat of grease paint and rouge Donna felt the flush stain her cheeks. "Yes. I had to take part in the grand march or I'd have come sooner. I can't stay but a minute. Our act is third, you see."

"Will you be free after that?"

"Oh, no. I do an equestrian turn, bareback. And I work in the living pictures, too."

"I thought you were a trapeze performer?"

"I am, but we all double. We have to in a small circus. And there's another ensemble at the finish."

"Could you—er—will you have supper with me tonight?"

"Why, yes—I suppose so. I'll tell M—Donna. She's the other half of the act. My sister. You know I'm supposed to have a sister, don't you?"

"Your grandfather told me something about it."

"I'll have to run now. You're seeing the show, aren't you? All right. Meet me here when it's over. If anyone gets fresh just tell him you're my cousin. You are a sort of a cousin, aren't you?"

He drew a deep breath. "Yes, a sort of a cousin. Second, I think."

(To Be Continued)

Former Premier Ill in England

CHURT, Surrey, Eng., June 13. (AP)—David Lloyd George, 71-year-old World war premier of Great Britain, was ill, with a chill at his home here today and his physician ordered him confined to his room for a few days.

LIQUOR ARRESTS MADE. PENDLETON, June 13. (AP)—Harry Johnson, 77, and Chester Crimmins, 39, were arrested yesterday for the second time in a week on charges of possessing illegal liquor. City and federal officers made the arrest.

COMING — GILMORE CIRCUS

Flapper Fanny Says

"It's a temptation," Donna admitted. "I've never been on a farm—or in a real home, for that matter. But it doesn't seem honest."

"Why not? I won't go. I'd be afraid Granddad might pull some tricks to keep me there. If he tried that with you you could tell him the truth. If you don't do it I'll write him I can't come."

"You mean that?"

"Absolutely."

"His letter is sweet," Donna mused, her eyes soft and luminous. "I can't imagine him doing anything so cold."

"You don't know him. Well—I'll think about it."

That night Madeline wrote the letter of acceptance that was to change the entire course of both girls' lives.

It was Saturday afternoon. A brazen sun beat with furious intensity upon the milling throngs, pushing and shoving through lanes of gray canvas, peanut stands, flying banners and wooden platforms

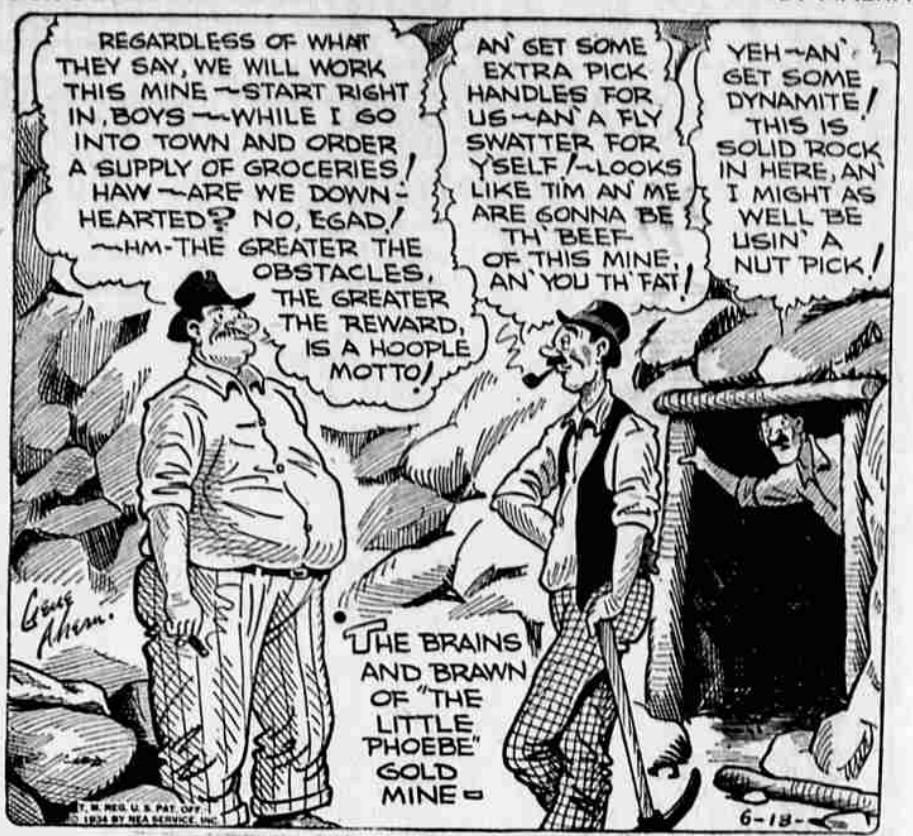
White caps often make the head light.

OUT OUR WAY



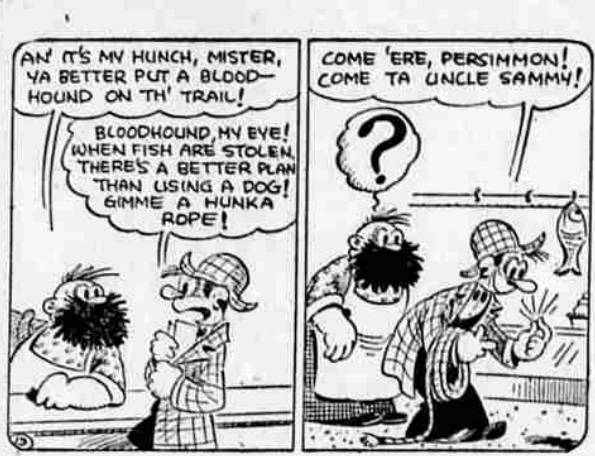
WHY MOTHERS GET GRAY.

OUR BOARDING HOUSE



THE BRAINS AND BRAWN OF 'THE LITTLE PHOEBE' GOLD MINE

SALESMAN SAM



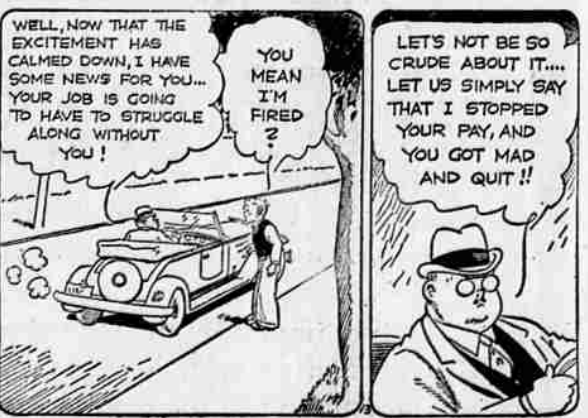
BOOTS AND HER BUDDIES



WASH TUBS



FRECKLES AND HIS FRIENDS



THE NEWFANGLES — MOM'N POP

