Darling Fool

By MABEL McELLIOTT

BEGIN HERE TODAY

MONNIE O'DARE, young and beautiful, sails for Europe as the companion of MISS ANSTICE COREY, an old friend. Monnie is trying to forget DAN CARDIGAN, believing he has jilted her for SANDRA LAWRENCE. Sandra, who pretends to be a friend of Monnie's, has been trying to win Dan from her. Dan's parents look down upon Monnie because the O'Dares are poor and favor the match with Sandra.

In London ARTHUR MACKENZIE, rich middle-aged New Yorker, asks Monnie to marry him. Before she has given him her answer she receives a delayed letter from Dan, explaining his neglect and begging her to forgive him. Monnie decides to return home immediately. Mackenzie, called back to New York on business, takes the same boat.

Monnie reaches Belvedere, her home town. In the midst of the excitement of seeing her mother and sister again she learns Dan is in a hospital, seriously injured in an automobile accident. She also learns that just before the accident Dan and Sandra were married.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

CHAPTER XLI

THERE was no room in Monnie's heart just then for anything but the terrible, aching fear. Dan hurt—perhaps dying! Why, it wasn't possible! Only last week—seven days ago—she had received his letter. He had written that he loved her. He had said that and Monnie, believing him, had rushed half across the world to prove it. Now this! What was she to do? Where to turn?

Mrs. O'Dare and Kay stared at her with stricken faces. The younger girl, usually so nonchalant, so cool, was shaken.

"You won't go to him, Monnie?" Kay half-whispered. "You couldn't—now that—"

Monnie passed her hand across her eyes. What had someone said a minute ago? The world still rocked around her. Ah, yes, she knew. "Sandra and Dan were married by a justice of the peace last night," a voice had said. Was it true—could it have been? Nonsense! Ridiculous!

She wouldn't faint, she told herself resolutely. You didn't do things like that—frighten people when there was no need. You were strong and brave as long as you could bear things. But she was in a sort of fog now. Things, voices, came to her only dimly. Kind eyes looked at her sorrowfully, compassionately. There was a new face in the room. Who was that? Oh, Charles. How good he was—how strong! She went to him slowly across the room. She clung to him. Somehow it seemed so right!

"Charles," she said faintly. "He's—he's—"

"I know," he soothed. "I know." Then, in the tone one might use to an ailing child, "It's all right." He repeated it quietly. "It's all right."

She answered Kay's last words, Charles holding her hand.

"No, I won't go to him," Monnie said brokenly. "Don't be afraid." Of a sudden her voice took on a note of harshness, strange to her. "Don't be afraid I'll do anything to get talked about. We're all so terribly afraid of that, aren't we? As if it mattered when someone's dying. But I won't. My place isn't there. Hers is."

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THERE was a blackness in her mind now. It was, she imagined, what you felt when you were drowning.

"Don't talk like that," Kay said, eyes wide with fright. "You know that isn't what we feel. We're just so worried about you—how you're taking it."

Monnie laughed, and the sound wasn't pleasant. "Sandra will be there," she said without stirring. "Sandra will hold his hand and smooth his pillow. Won't she?"

Kay shook her head. "She can't," she said faintly. "She's badly hurt, too."

"Oh, is she? Is she, indeed?" Monnie turned a white, sleepwalker's face to all of them. Her mother, looking small and old, began to whimper, a frightening sound. Monnie felt a dreadful calmness.

"Don't do that, Mums," she said in a more natural tone than she had used since first she heard the news. "I'm all right. Really I am. I'm sorry to worry you all so. It was the shock—!"

She was grateful to Charles. His presence seemed to give the scene some reality, some substance. "Good girl," he said gently. "You're a real soldier. I'm proud of you."

The telephone's ring split the silence of the little hall and Kay flew to answer it. Monnie listened apathetically, almost dreamily to the one-sided conversation.

"Yes," Kay said and again "Yes" and "Yes" and "Yes". Mrs. O'Dare's frayed nerves could bear the suspense no longer. She went up to her daughter and plucked nervously at her sleeve. "What is it?" she asked tensely. "What?"

Kay hung up the receiver and faced the group, head erect. "He's calling for Monnie. His father heard she'd got back. That was Mr. Cardigan on the wire. He wants to know if Monnie'll come."

Kay's eyes flashed. At last the haughty Cardigans had to come to the O'Dares for something. They had never been generous. Would the O'Dares follow their example?

Monnie came to life. "Of course I'll go," she said with curious calm. It didn't matter in the least that Sandra was already Dan's wife, that she bore his name in the eyes of the law. Monnie brushed all that aside. It didn't signify. If Dan called her name she would go to him across oceans, through fire if need be.

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IT was all part of the dim dream that the day became later in her mind. The trip with Charles to the hospital through the familiar streets. Charles driving silently and expertly, not saying a word.

The low building of white stone. "The Judith Lawrence Memorial" that had been erected after Sandra's mother had died. Ironical, wasn't it, that it should now be housing Judith Lawrence's daughter?

"How badly is Sandra hurt?" Monnie didn't really want to know but she had to talk, had to keep herself from thinking.

"I don't know." Charles' face was turned away from her. "Not seriously, I think. Her face—cut—flying glass."

The doors opened to them as though someone, waiting, had observed their arrival. A tall, gray-haired woman in crackling white, her cap banded narrowly in black velvet ribbon, received them.

"Miss O'Dare? Yes. Will you come in here?"

This was the waiting room, bright, cold, impersonal. The whole place, the corridor, everything reeked of disinfectants. A cart moved by on rubber tires. Monnie shivered.

Dan's father, aged 10 years in a single night, shuffled towards them. Why, thought Monnie with surprise, he was really an old man! The great Mr. Cardigan! And she had been afraid of him always. Why? He seemed strangely humble, strangely small.

"Monica?" When had he ever called her Monica? It was odd to hear it. "It was good of you to come. Yes. My boy—he is bad—they're afraid—"

His voice broke on the words. He could go no further. Monnie saw him not as Dan's father, a barrier always to their happiness, but as a shattered human being, bowed down by a weight too great to carry.

She said something to him in a low tone and he looked at her gratefully. "You can come right along with me," he told her, glancing at Charles. "Both of you. How do, Eustace." Charles nodded. Monnie's mind registered, subconsciously, the fact that Charles looked remote, cold. It was as if he were being drawn into a situation for which he felt extreme distaste, the utmost shrinking.

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ANOTHER door swung silently open before them. They were in a narrow white room. A hospital bed, high, narrow, stark, with a figure beneath the blankets. Monnie didn't see the middle-aged woman in the big chair, the young nurse beside her. She didn't recognize Geraldine, dark under a blue hat. She saw only Dan.

His eyes were closed and his breath came slowly and painfully, almost in sighs. At the nurse's nod, Monnie moved closer. Was this Dan? It couldn't be. Dan was strong and invincible, brown and alive. This was the wreck of a man. Her heart felt as though an icy vise had clamped itself upon it. She had not felt like weeping before this but now she was conscious of floods of tears welling up within her, tears she dared not shed.

Suddenly the long lashes flickered and Dan's eyes were open, staring at her. Recognition dawned in them.

"Come closer," the young nurse said softly. "It's all right."

She advanced until she stood beside him. "Why, Monnie," Dan said in a perfectly natural voice, albeit a weak one. "They told me you'd gone away. I was looking for you—everywhere—"

He coughed and the mother, leaning forward with a damp handkerchief pressed to her lips, threw the nurse a warning glance.

"Don't bother to talk," Monnie said softly. "I'm here now. It doesn't matter, does it?" She had dropped to her knees by his side, was cradling one of his big hands, so strangely limp, in her own two slim ones.

"I'm glad you've come," Dan whispered. "I missed you so—" The nurse leaned over, her fingers on his pulse. Her glance, bright, calm, impersonal, took them all in.

"He mustn't get excited," she said, wordlessly, over Mrs. Cardigan's shoulder. Monnie nodded. Dan's eyes flew open again.

"Don't go away," he said, suddenly strong, suddenly clear-voiced. "I want you here beside me—"

"I promise, Dan," Monnie said in a voice she had difficulty in keeping steady. "I promise you I will."

(To Be Continued)

LIBRARY INITIATED

CHICAGO, Ill. (U.P.)—The department of education of the Methodist Episcopal church recently initiated a circulating library, which will supply Methodist churches in all parts of the country with modern texts on missions. The library is composed of volumes dealing with biography, history and fiction.

Flapper Fanny Says

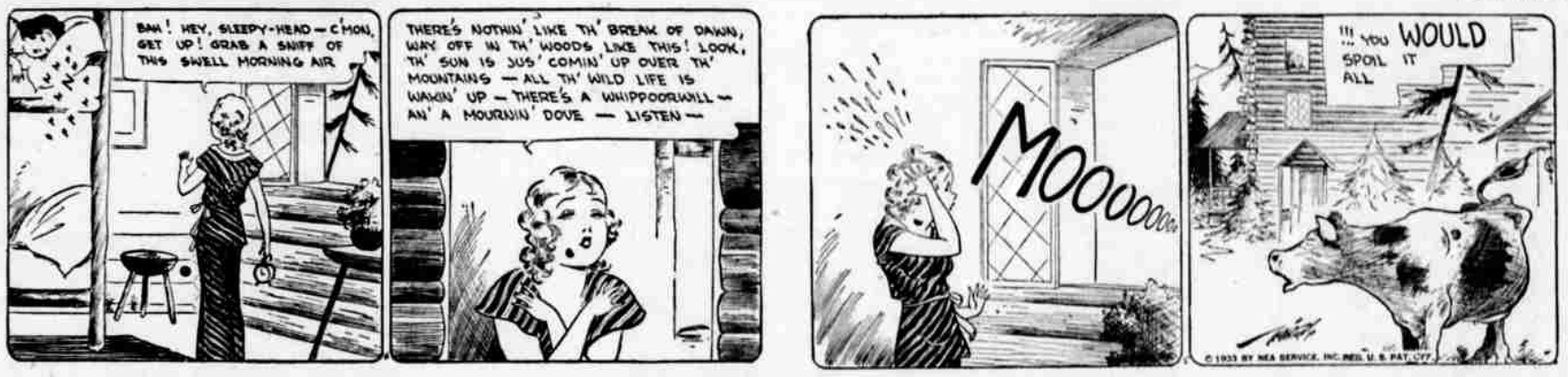
Singers should be made to practice what they screech.

OUT OUR WAY — By J. R. Williams

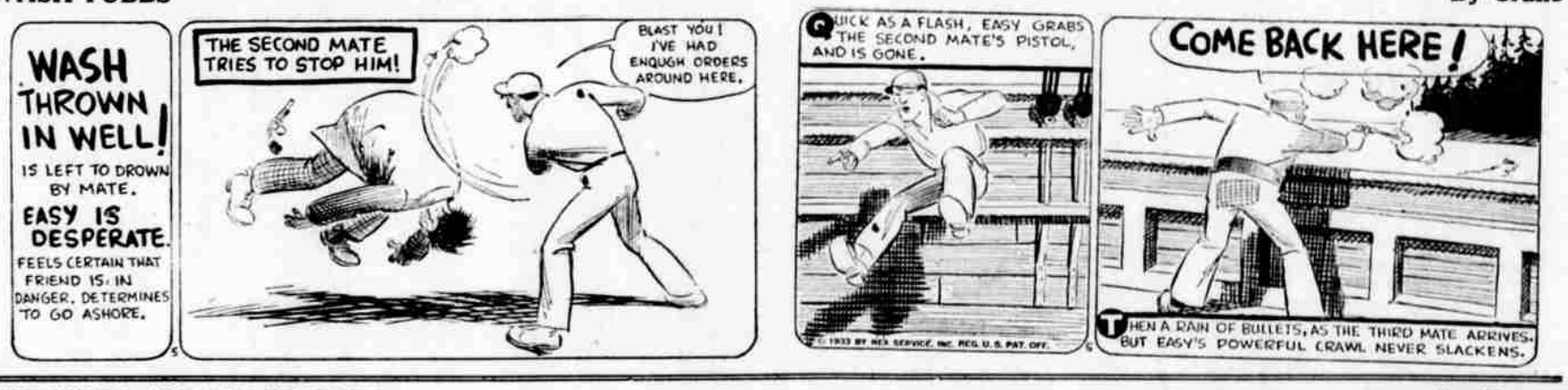
OUR BOARDING HOUSE — By Ahern

SALESMAN SAM — By Small

BOOTS AND HER BUDDIES — By Martin



WASH TUBBS — By Crane



FRECKLES AND HIS FRIENDS — By Blosser

THE NEWFANGLES—MOM'N POP — By Cowan