BREAK O'DAY IRON

By Reginald Wright Kauffman — N.W.N.S. RELEASE

CHAPTER III

One train more: Ten miles to Americus. Then a motor bus.

Ironburg wasn't a burg; it was a few scattered frame houses, in need of paint, grouped about a general store. Jerry, suitcase in hand, was the first passenger to descend. He hurried through the doorway.

A blackened counter, with barrels of sugar, coffee and dried fruit in front of it; upon it, smoked hams under wire-net covers; behind it, shelves of canned food. One end a cage surrounded and was labeled:

"POST OFFICE & PUBLIC TELEPHONE."

Nobody here.

"Hello."

He turned. Carrying a mailsack, a girl was entering — and such a girl that he marveled how he could have passed her on the porch without stopping to look at her.

Brown hair and eyes, mighty pretty, but — what was especially astonishing in this rustic and old fashioned frame—entirely modern.

Her hair was nicely dressed, in the latest style. Her skirt was short—but not too short. Her stockings were the correct shade. Evidently, there were radios and movies within reach of Ironburg.

Jerry gasped. Angela Slinn? He hoped not!

"Can I help you with that bag?"

She laughed, "Nope." Not any verbal "Thank you." Easily she flung the sack into the cage, went around the counter and confronted him. Mighty pretty.

"Well?"

"My name's Glidden."

She let the introduction pass without acknowledgement. Nor did she tell him who she was. In fact, she said nothing.

Those little success books didn't cover such emergencies as the present. "I'm here on a sort of vacation," Jerry explained, "and I thought this store would be a good place to get a line on the best hotel."

"The best? There's only one, and it's got exactly six bedrooms without bath." She pointed out of the window to a dejected hostelry across the way. "You couldn't have missed it."

All very fine, but not business. He therefore said: "Thank you—Miss Slinn."

She shot him a quick glance—no more.

"I haven't often heard that name," he persisted.

"No?"

"It doesn't suit you."

"Nothing does. I'm hard to please."

She turned her back abruptly. She went into the cage, emptied the sack of its scanty contents and began to sort letters.

Glidden had no recourse save to go; after all, what you couldn't find out about a village's inhabitants at that village's hotel must scarcely be worth the seeking.

So, though he felt somewhat like a defeated candidate on the day after election, he picked up his suitcase and left. As, however, he climbed the hotel steps, the charm of that store girl pulled him about.

Another person, on the point of entering the store, stood looking at him in turn.

The woman, sunbonnet, mother hubbard, brogans—no urban modernity about her. The sunbonnet shaded her broad face, but among its shadows played two restless greenish flames: her eyes.

The woman knocked out a corncob pipe against a pillar of the store porch. Could she be that girl's mother? Old enough.

"I'm a fool," Jerry concluded. "The 'phonebook gave two names. This older one's the postmistress, of course. It's queer how nobody gets a name that fits in this world. The peach is Angela Slinn for sure. This is her boss, Rose Walker.

He tried to stroll nonchalantly into the darkened hotel office and as nonchalantly hire a room that overlooked the post office — he meant the turnpike.

"And who's your friend Sunbonnet Sun glowering at you from the store steps?" he inquired, merely by way of making talk.

The proprietor craned a cross-hatched neck, pulling a drooped mustache that was white where it wasn't stained by tobacco juice.

"That there's Miss Angela Slinn."

"What! That one?"

It was a relief to find that the pretty girl hadn't the ugly name. Host Hassler of the local hotel smiled knowingly.

"You're wondering about the other. I seen you come out o' her store—Well, everybody likes the looks o' Rosie."

Jerry was wondering about Miss Walker. He knew that his interest ought to center on this Slinn woman, but he was quite content to hear whatever his loquacious landlord would tell of the younger person.

It had to do, more or less, with that ore mine which, at a distant and happier day, gave Ironburg its name. Merrily launched by a firm of Philadelphia promoters, the Break O' Day Iron Company—people around here seemed to like the morning—started with a yield that was plentiful and of high grade. Then the Philadelphians quietly **unloaded, and Phineas Walker, a** rich man for those times, used nearly all his fortune to buy in.

"I can guess the answer," said Jerry. "So your pretty postmistress is Walker's daughter?"

"Granddaughter. An orphan, inheriting a practical head from her mother. When she grew up, there was just enough money to buy the store. Congressman Plasius, down to Doncaster, got her the post office. She's a smart girl; she's doin' fine . . ."

"What about the Slinn woman?"

"Oh, Angie just helped Rosie to 'tend the store now and then. Lived rent free in a Walker shack out around that old ore mine."

"Does Mrs. Slinn—"

"Miss.' Anyways, so she calls herself. And then jes' look at her."

Jerry couldn't, luckily, as Angela Slinn had gone indoors. But he realized she wasn't the sort men marry.

"Lives alone?"

"Yep."

"Any relations?"

"Never heard tell of none. She don't belong here. We don't know where she's from. Hassler consulted the register that Jerry had just signed, the first arrival in two months. "She talks like Rosie, or you, Mr. Glidden—and she kin swear like a motorman.

"When did she come here?"

"Five year' ago—mebbie six."

Of course, there was not one chance in a thousand that this creature should turn out to be a near relative of the deceased Joseph. In his application for insurance he had written himself down as an only child, and any discovered lies in that application would invalidate the policy.

Nevertheless, there appeared to be some mystery about her. She was a Slinn; Doncaster, where Joseph had said he was born, lay not too far away, and, finally, she was the sole clue to information obtainable.

Jerry must somehow find out more about the dead man before he took up the beneficiary's trail. For this reason alone had he come to Pennsylvania.

So the store was not long open next day before he entered it. Only its brown-eyed proprietor was in the place.

"Yes?"

"Good morning. I—I was looking for Miss Slinn," stammered Jerry, "and now they tell me she's—she's the other one."

"She's not here."

"Do you know where I can find her?"

"At her place, I guess. She's always there when she isn't here, and she's only here when she feels like it."

"Do you happen to know whether she ever lived in Doncaster?"

The girl behind the counter looked at him sharply. "Is this an unexpected inheritance or just an old bill?"

"It isn't either."

"Then you'd better ask Angie."

Jerry inquired the way and wished it took longer to tell.

"Can't I sell you something?" Miss Walker demanded.

What could he buy? He did want to prolong this interview.

"I got in some first rate peppermint sticks last night."

She was laughing at him. He left her and started out to pay a call on Angela Slinn.

A cloudless day and peaceful. The empty turnpike ran between woodlands where the oaks and button-woods were green, and where the blackbirds sang.

Jerry turned off along a designated bypath. It had been a road, but it was overgrown, and the trees met above it. For an hour he followed it, then came out upon a landscape of an entirely new character.

Desolate. Hassler had used the right word — desolate even under the summer sun.

Between black hills spread a wide tableland. Something over there that looked like long abandoned quarries. Here were the last ruins of a few frame houses, too dilapitated to invite a rat.

No other token of human habitation save one distant hut scarcely better than these.

The other hut stood perhaps half a mile off, beside a thick plantation of pines, the only trees that could take root here.

Angela's house was roofed by tar paper, and its sides were made of laths and clay. How anybody could inhabit it during the winter, Glidden couldn't surmise. It was about thirty feet long by twenty wide, it had no windows and contained, certainly, not more than one room.

As Jerry walked across to it, not a sign of life was visible.

There was a kitchen garden around it—a rather ailing kitchen garden—and a stovepipe issued from one wall and mounted skyward.

But nobody was in the garden, and no smoke rose from that improvised chimney.

There was a door, of sorts, on the farther side. He tried it. It even had some kind of lock, and the lock was in use.

"Now then," said Jerry ironically, "remember what Mr. L. is always preaching: Courtesy counts."

He lifted a fist and knocked as gently as he knew how.

(To Be Continued)

The peach is Angela Slinn for sure.

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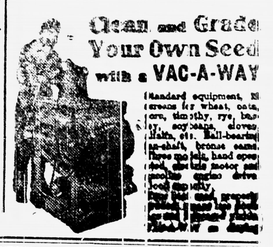

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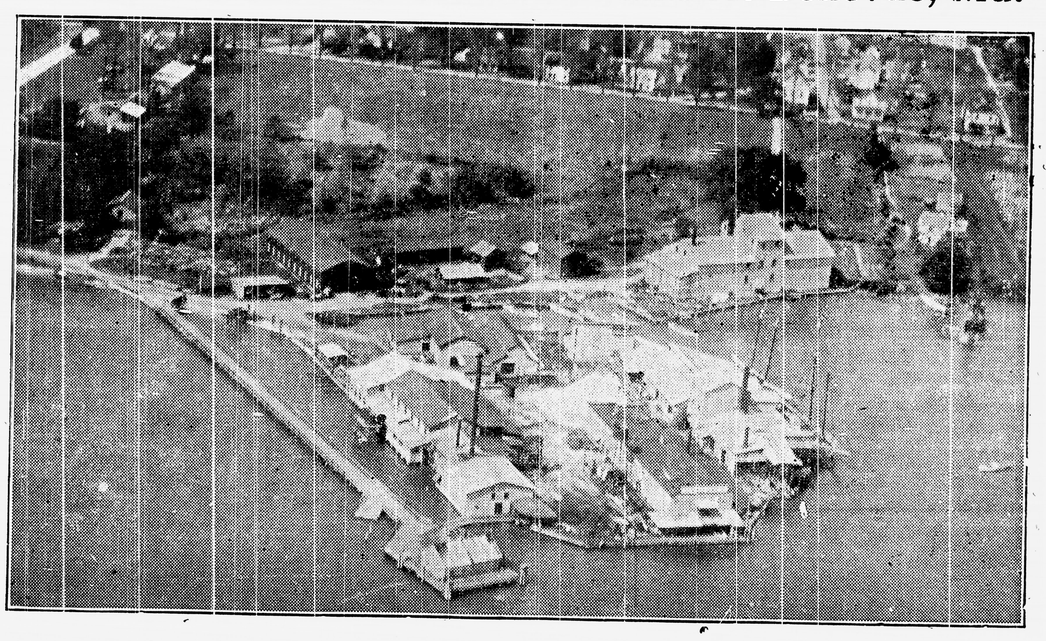

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