

CHAPTER I

Dick Byrne got off the sleigh stage at Bison Crossing with eagerness, despite the fact that his return practically announced a failure.

He had been away for months, trying to place his invention, a new type of portable saw, in Musketoon. Times were dull, and he knew now, too late, that he had gone about it the wrong way. He could try again, and put it across; but it would take some capital, and his savings were gone.

A few hundred dollars might have set him on his feet, and now he had exactly fifty cents, after paying his stage fare.

He meant to get his pal, Will MacLeod, to go out again with him on trap line. Will was bookkeeping now for his Uncle Alexander, known as The MacLeod, but Byrne knew he would not have to coax Will very hard to take to the woods. They had done well before, and they were boon companions. There was more than ordinary friendship between them, both Celts, though Byrne was Irish and Will MacLeod Scotch to the backbone.

Then there was Marion, Will's sister. That was not a case of friendship with Dick Byrne. He was in love with Marion, always had been since he met her. Just how she felt toward him he was not certain. He meant to ask her as soon as he was better off financially.

He had hoped great things of the saw. It was a good invention, practicall and novel. But now he was back again, and, even if Will linked up with him, Byrne would have to be staked by Alexander MacLeod for his outfit.

The MacLeod could get another bookkeeper. He would be glad enough to have two more men bringing in pelts. As a team, Byrne and Will had broked records. They would do it again, and then Dick would have another stab at the invention. He would go to a bigger city this trip, exhibit his model in a vacant store, interest the general public in backing it.

He wondered how Marion was, hating to have to achnowledge to her that he had fizzled. She had been great about encouraging him. Now. . .

Singush, the breed, hailed him told him Alexander MacLeod want ed to see him. It was almost as if The MacLeod had known of his coming. Yet Byrne had not written waiting for a break before he let Will—and through Will, Marion—know how he was making out. Will had not written him either, for the past four months, but Will was a poor corcespondent.

But The MacLeod had many and far-reaching connections. He came close to being a ruler in his remote, far-flung dominion. He recognized—and that reluctantly—only one power, one authority higher than his own, occasionally exhibited in the person of a trooper of the Royal Canadian Mounted.

Alexander MacLeod was of the old school. In pioneer days he would have been factor for some big fur company; now he was his own master, shhewd, resourceful, avid for power, impatient of any suggestion of control or competition. An overlord of the wilderness. The MacLeod, supremely jealous of his standing.

Byrne found him in what he called his counting-house, at the back of the great store that held the goods he traded to the Indians and a few white trappers, for the skins they brought him.

Byrne looked for Will and did not see him. There was some one else at the bookkeeper's desk, a stranger.

The trader led Byrne through the covered way that connected the store and MacLeod's house, took him into an austere room with furniture made at St. Joseph's Mission, a room lined with books and with dark paintings on two walls; pictures, brought from Scotland a hundred years ago, portraits of the MacLeods of that ilk; all resembling the trader, with harsh, dour, forceful features showing dimly through ancient varnish.

MacLeod motioned Byrne to a chair, give him a cigar, poured him a drink, took one himself as he sat opposite the younger man.

A big, gray-haired, wide-shouldered man in his vigorous sixties, was Alexander MacLeod. One shoulder a little higher than the other, as with one shaggy eyebrow. Eyes been as new chisels, gray as shadow ice. Byrne felt the force of him though he did not like him. Few did.

This hospitality was unusual. It meant that MacLeod wanted something, wanted it pretty badly, for as close to nothing as he could get it.

"So you're back," he said. "I thought you would be. I'd a notion you'd find them too slick for you in town. Did they take your invention away from you?"

Byrne had once tried to get MacLeod to back it, but the trader had wanted control for a small sum. Now Byrne was temporily licked and MacLeod knew it. He would have to go to work again for the astute trader.

Byrne was a good trapper. There were not many whites who could compete with the bloods and breeds, but Byrne was one of them. Will MacLeod. The MacLeod's nephew, had been another, especially in conjunction with Dick Byrne. Byrne was wilderness born and bred. He loved the silent and lonely places, but he had imagination and, also, ambition. When he went to Musketoon to try and place his invention, Will MacLeod came off the trail. He did not like it without company, nor with any company except that of Byrne. So he had started to work as bookkeeper in the store.

Byrne wondered how he would be liking that job. However you worked for The MacLeod, if you drew kit or grub or money from him you practically became his serf. Byrne had stood for it because he had saved money to exploit the saw, was willing to do it again. Will was more restive.

Byrne smoked his good cigar and sipped his good drink comfortably. Anything you got free from The MacLeod was a triumph. But he wondered what the old silver dog-fox was up to. He shook his head at the question about the invention.

"I've still got it," he said. "Times were not so good. I'll know how to go about it better next time. Singush told me you wanted to see me."

"I did," answered MacLeod. "It may mean a short cut for your next exploitation of your saw." He deliberately finished his own drink, watching Dick Byrne carefully. Yet there was no time to waste. This was no matter of trading with merchandise and peltry. It was an affair of life and death, one ttah Death had already touched; an affair of honor and of reputation, which, to MacLeod, were not quite the same thing, but equally vital.

"I've some business for you, Byrne. You'll understand it is entirely confidential. What will you take to carry a message to White Rock?"

"To White Rock? When?"

White Rock was a ghost camp that had flared up and smoked out when the ledge proved a freakish fault. "White rock" was the local term for the white quartz that carried the free gold. Byrne had not imagined any one living there. Especially in winter.

"Now. Without delay. Nipegosis visits the place in spring, summer the Conjuror, is there. His tribe and early fall, but Nipegosis stay there all the time. You must start at once. 'Tis important."

It was clear enough that MacLeod so considered the errand. But what would he want with Nipegosis? The old shaman was supposed to be well over a century; he was the spiritual head of his tribe, reputed as a real wizard. MacLeod naturally dealt widely with Indiams. It could not be an uprising. Those days were gone. It might be a mutiny of some sort against MacLeod's methods, enticements held out by some rival who knew the territory, and wanted to invade it.

That did not matter especially to Byrne. He considered the trip, the present weather and the future. He did not like the prospect any too well. A spring thow might come, overtake him halfway there, or back; leave him perilously stranded.

"I have no dogs," he said.

"I do not wish you to take a sled," said MacLeod. "I will furnish you with all equipment, free. You may keep it afterward. But you'll have to use snowshoes. You'll have to travel light and fast. I want none to see you leave. I do not choose to use an Indian. You are the best man available, but the essence of the job is speed and secrecy. How much?"

"I could go tomorrow morning, I suppose," said Byrne, slowly. "If the price was right."

He glanced through the window at the snow, the forest, stained with blue and purple in the gathering dusk.

"You must go tonight," insisted MacLeod.

Byrne saw that he was to glide out from the house in the darkness, be swallowed swiftly in the cover of the deep woods. Those who knew he had come back to Bison Crossing would find him gone, but not know where. They would never learn from MacLeod. The early morning wind would erase the pattern of his snowshoes on the brittle, powdery crust. It would not be so easy to get away quietly with the fuss of getting dogs, packing a sleigh. For the first time Byrne felt a sense of something sinister connected with this secret mission.

"How much?" demanded the trader, his shaggy eyebrows meeting in a scowl of impatience. Byrne still temorized. He could see that MacLeod wanted him and him alone as his messenger. He meant to make the most of the bargain, especially if he was only going to see Will for a few minutes, only get a glimpse of Marion before he left.

Why was MacLeod not sending Will? They might have had a row. The MacLeod ruled his house hold with a heavy and unyielding hand. Will did not take kindly to restraint.

"I'd like to see Will before I go, if I go," said Byrne "Will—and Marion."

A thundercloud seemed to suddenly shadow MacLeod's brows. The veins lifted in it, throbbing.

"That ne'er-do-well has not been in Bison Crossing for four months, he said, with a pound of his fist. "I trust he ne'ed sets foot in it again. As for his sister, the foolish lass has gone with him. They're gone—and I'm well rid of them."

Byrne flushed, started to defind his friend, to champion Marion. But aguing with The MacLeod in wrath was like talking to a thunderstorm. He knew that MacLeod might quarrel with Will, but he was sure Will had done nothing worthy of meriting such an outburst. And The MacLeod loved his niece. Even as he had mentioned her name his rugged face had softened a trifle. He was dour and she was sweet.

(To be continued)



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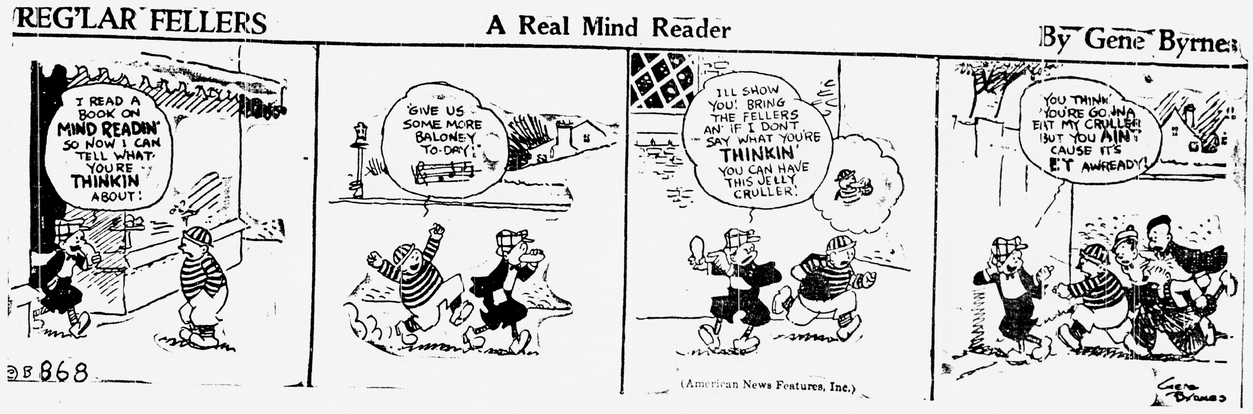
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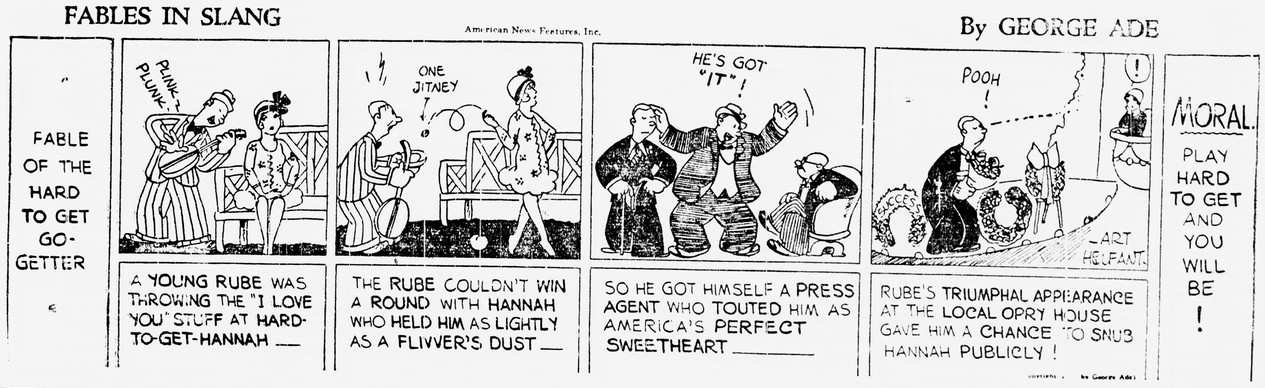
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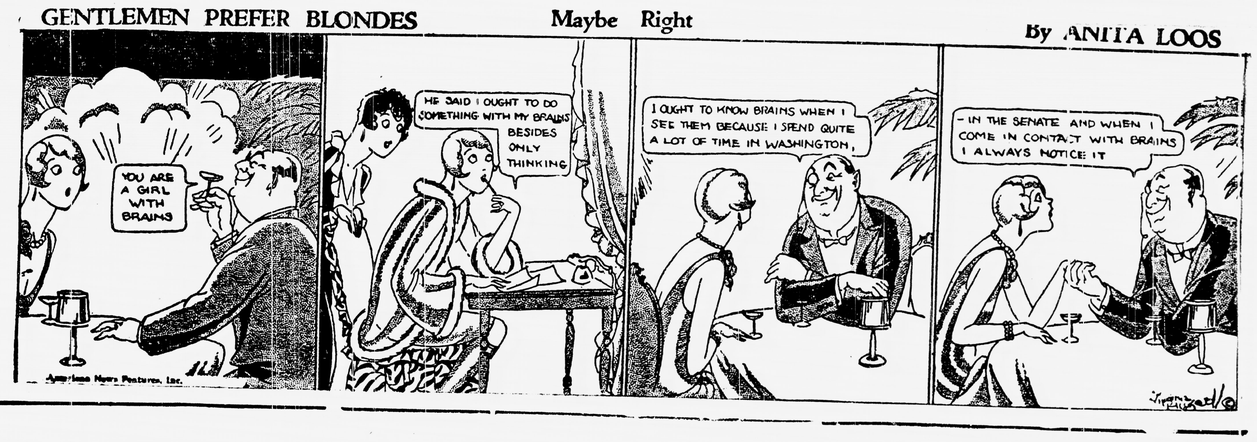
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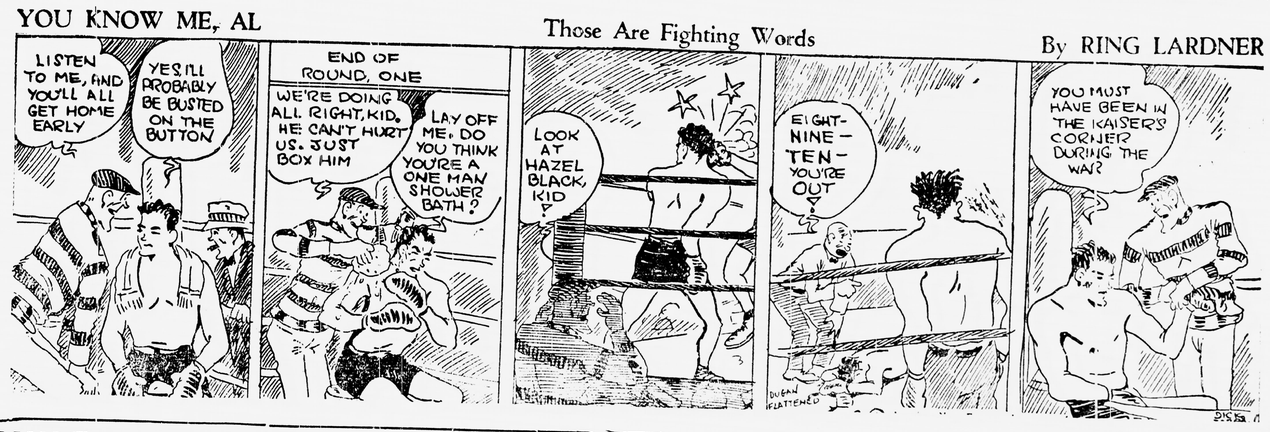
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