

# CRAGAR'S GIRL

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

He'd given the girl shelter under his roof, and he'd sworn to himself to protect her—even though he knew bucking the Triangle could mean death

**A**SIDE from the heavy woolen clothing the men in the room wore and the winter gear hanging from wall pegs and the pale light from the high windows, there was nothing in Steve McFarland's cabin to indicate that the snow was piled six feet high outside. Nor was there any sign in the room of Ellen Cragar's presence under McFarland's roof. But the three men who sat in McFarland's chairs exchanged sly and knowing glances, betraying with relish their knowledge that the girl was there.

McFarland was not pleased. The snow and the tight, pre-thaw weather were essential to his plans, as was his carefully acquired knowledge of the men with whom he dealt, but he would have been happier if the matter of Ellen's whereabouts had not entered the situation. It put him at a disadvantage and he felt it, although he could not avoid an involuntary warming to the unabashed envy in which these mountain men held him. Ellen Cragar was the most beautiful thing between the Pass and distant Denver, and a man could do no better.

Heat from the clicking sheet-iron stove filled the main room of the cabin, making it comfortable, a little stuffy, and, in combination with the whisky McFarland had poured, conducive to complacency. This, at least, had been McFarland's intent. Dave Manning and Forsythe, both older men, were taking full advantage of McFarland's hospitality, just as they were also making the most of the closed bedroom door. But not Gus Thibault. He toyed with the mug set before him, and it seemed likely that his interest in the door across the room was mere habit. McFarland doubted whether even good whisky or thinking about a woman like Ellen could thaw the essentially cold practicality of Thibault's nature. The man lived to make money; his satisfactions were rooted in this alone.

Thibault lifted his mug and turned it in his hands, not to taste it but to give his fingers something to do. He glanced at Manning, saw that his partner was again watching the door across the room, and shrugged with faint irritation. "A distress sale is a distress sale, McFarland," he said stubbornly. "When a property goes on the block because its owner needs money, the buyer sets the price and the seller takes what he can get. A thousand dollars is the best we can do."

Thibault's voice rose a little, perhaps for emphasis, but certainly audible in the other room of the cabin. McFarland, consciously using a trader's tactic, looked steadily at Thibault without answering, deliberately trying to outwait the man's partners.

Dave Manning stirred first, lowering his mug and brushing his tongue appreciatively along his lips. The whisky was good; McFarland had seen to that. Manning gestured loosely with his free hand. "It ain't only the claim McFarland's offering us, Gus. There's some tools and working gear. A cabin of sorts and a fair start at a development tunnel." Manning paused. His square, ruddy, handsome face broke into a sudden, self-conscious grin. "And there's Cragar's girl," he added. "We got to think about her don't we?"

"You ever make a profit on a woman, Dave?" Thibault asked bluntly. "Leave that to McFarland. Stick to what the claim's worth to us. It ain't our fault Cragar's dead."

"He was on your payroll," McFarland pointed out. "He was working one of your properties."

Thibault shrugged. "He and the girl would have starved without our pay."

"You wouldn't let him shore the tunnel the way he wanted," McFarland persisted. "With good shoring, there shouldn't have been a cave-in."

Old Forsythe stirred. "Mining is a dangerous business," he said sententiously.

Thibault shrugged. "So is a shakedown, McFarland."

McFarland bridled involuntarily at Thibault's tone. "I'm not trying to shake anybody down," he snapped. "I'm just trying to get Ellen Cragar a fair price for her property."

Thibault returned McFarland's earlier tactic of a level look and no answer.

Dave Manning showed his first sign of impatience. "We should rob ourselves to feather your nest!"

"Suppose you name your fair price," Amos Forsythe suggested.

"I promised Ellen five thousand dollars from the three of you, or I'd find her another buyer."

"She's a pretty girl, McFarland," Thibault said, "but you ought to know better than to make rash promises to a woman."

"When I do, I keep them," McFarland growled.

**M**ANNING leaned back, his voice taking on a mockingly gentle, paternal note. "You've made yourself a little stake up here, Steve, brokering ores into our mill and horse-trading undeveloped claims in the district. There's a place in these mountains for a man like you. But you got to face facts and not go mixing pleasure with your business. Nobody's going to overbid us for the Cragar claim."

"We run this district," Amos Forsythe added. He smiled with satisfaction at the statement. "We run it—lock, stock and barrel."

"And we'll own it before a spring rush starts in here with the thaws," Thibault said. "I tell you what, McFarland, you just go ahead and sell Cragar's claim for five thousand dollars—to another buyer."

McFarland shrugged, careful to show reluctance and not satisfaction. "Don't hold it against me."

"We had our chance," Manning agreed, making no attempt to conceal his amusement.

"That brings us to something else, then," McFarland said casually. "My records show I've got a couple of hundred dollars over five thousand in brokerages and commissions accumulated to my account at your mill. I'd like to draw it down."

Amos Forsythe straightened up, his tired, sagging features taking on a sudden sharpness. When the Triangle Milling Company dealt in cash, Forsythe superseded his partners, for he had a banker's loving care with currency. "That money's earning you good interest where it is!"

"Sure—interest. But I trade and I'm interested in profit, not a slim six per cent. I've got a better place to put it."

"Cragar's claim?" Thibault asked.

"I told you I keep my promises."

Thibault let his eyes go pointedly to the bedroom door. "Only a fool would put out good money to buy something he already has!"

"Then I guess I'm a fool. I hope you've got enough cash on you to pay off my credit now. I

don't want to cross the Pass to town in this weather unless I have to."

The partners of the Triangle exchanged glances. Men who worked long and shrewdly together did not need to do more than this to understand one another.

Thibault stood up. "We want Cragar's claim, or we wouldn't be here. With the new strike uncovered last fall, there's going to be a big rush as soon as the thaws open up the trails. Good claims are going to be valuable, but only as valuable as their owners' relationship with our mill. The best ore on the mountain is worthless without concentration. We've offered you a thousand dollars for the Cragar claim, McFarland. Will you take it?"

"No."

Thibault shrugged and turned to Forsythe with no apparent regret. "Pay him his credits, Amos."

Forsythe heaved himself to his feet and pulled a huge wad of money from his pocket. He peeled off bills with the casual air of a gambler dealing cards. McFarland picked the money up without a recount. He had found out what he wanted to know. The Triangle partners had come prepared, as a last resort, to pay his asking price for the Cragar claim. Otherwise not even Amos Forsythe would have so much cash in his pockets. The fact that they hadn't overridden his bid or increased their own was proof that they saw a way of acquiring the property cheaper. He knew the odds against him now, but he had anticipated this and he was pleased at the vindication of his judgment as a trader.

There would be danger now, danger to himself and perhaps to Ellen. But danger was a familiar thing in the mountains. "Thanks," he said, sincerely enough. "This is real obliging. Saves me a cold climb tomorrow."

Dave Manning, who had drunk more of McFarland's whisky than the others, shrugged into his thick mackinaw and crossed to the door without any pretense at leave-taking. Thibault paused to put a finger against McFarland's chest.

"Since that new ore body was discovered, we've known that somebody was going to get an idea they could buck us. Too bad it had to be you, McFarland."

**A**MOS FORSYTHE pulled a fur cap down over his ears and shook his head sadly. "It is better to be friends," he said.

McFarland stood in the doorway and watched the partners cross the partially cleared dooryard. Their horses stood waiting, shag-coated with winter hair, their heads down and their rumps to the strong, chill wind coming down from the Pass, beyond which lay the Triangle mill and the beginnings of a town. McFarland shivered in the wind and closed the door. He did not envy his guests their return ride. And pretty soon he would have to face the weather himself—because of them.

Crossing to the table, he poured himself a little of the whisky he hadn't touched all afternoon. As he set down the mug, Ellen Cragar came out of the bedroom. Her manner was perfectly natural, as though this were her house as well as his. In the long winter weeks since her father's death, this had been the most disturbing element in Ellen's presence here. She had laughed at and ignored McFarland's division of the cabin into two sections, and though she (Continued on page 54)

ILLUSTRATED BY WARREN BAUMGARTNER



McFarland pulled the mittens off both his hands. With a nod to them to follow, he took half a dozen swift strides and kicked in the door of the lean-to

# Truly a TROUPEUR

By RICHARD G. HUBLER

A performer for more than 25 of his 26 years, Donald O'Connor is a "sweet guy" to the trade and a throwback to the great song-and-dance men of vaudeville days

I AM five feet eight and one half inches tall," says Donald O'Connor. "I weigh 138 1/4 pounds and I lose 16 of them when I work. I am twenty-six years old and I have blue eyes and golden-brown hair which stands up on end. I wear eight-and-one-half-size shoes and I have to warm up my ankles before I dance."

He meditates. "I do not think I am as good," he adds thoughtfully, "as some people think I am."

Four major motion-picture studios have taken the liberty of contradicting him. In the next seven years, young O'Connor, in his quadruple role of dancer-singer-comedian-mime, can look forward to starring roles in nine movies, about all a mortal man can stand. For this he will get a yearly take of between \$100,000 and \$250,000, for a grand total, over the seven-year period, of a little more than a million dollars.

In addition, Donald has just completed a season on one of the biggest comedy shows in television, for NBC. It paid him between 10 and 15 per cent of a weekly \$100,000 budget. In monthly competition with such experienced punchinellos as Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Danny Thomas, and Eddie Cantor, Donald "more than held his own," to quote the mildest review.

As one competitor puts it, "the kid is so hot his hair tonic goes up in steam." Take his latest motion picture, Singin' in the Rain, for M-G-M. O'Connor does a spot solo dance, called Make 'Em Laugh. It is, perhaps, one of the most hilarious hits of slapstick choreography since the early Chaplin. In sheer dancing virtuosity, Donald is in a class with Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire.

Donald's character forte as an actor is that of the well-meaning fellow who is doing his darnedest and never quite makes the grade. The audience both sympathizes with and laughs at the essential

good nature of the portrayal, thus proving again the virtue of a comedy technique used with notable success by Harold Lloyd.

O'Connor's dancing gives the impression of having been made up on the spot. His comedy seems to surprise the kid himself. His acting has an earnest diffidence which steals scenes at the most unexpected moments. Yet, despite this evidence of the offhand approach, O'Connor works as hard and long at his routines as any other trouper in the business. And he has completed nearly 50 pictures.

For his casual, informal air conceals a vigor which the Atomic Energy Commission would do well to look into. When Donald is not rehearsing, he is boxing, doing splits, fiddling with props, moving furniture, or standing on his head to invigorate his scalp. But even in the midst of the chaos of TV or in shooting a motion picture, Donald is mild and equable. He usually has his mind on something else; he forgets times and dates and is always worrying quietly about something he had done or might do.

He does not have to. His future is glittering. He is going to appear in I Love Melvin for M-G-M, and Look Ma, I'm Dancin' for Paramount, as well as with Ethel Merman in 20th Century-Fox's Call Me Madam. He will probably play one bouncing bewildered role after another in pictures similar to these.

Furthermore, his success on television this season bodes well for the seasons to come. He plans to go right on clowning over the kilocycles next fall, and there's no reason why it should end there, judging by the critical acclaim he has received thus far.

Donald's TV shows, like everything else he does, reflect his own character: easygoing and informal on the surface, but actually the product of intensive

rehearsal. It's straight revue. "I'm going to do situation comedy eventually," he says, "but right now vaudeville is what I know best."

Four days after one show goes off, Donald starts putting another together. His writers, Sid Miller, an old vaudeville friend, and Sid Kuller, an Army friend, begin muttering about skits; meanwhile O'Connor and his dance arranger for that show (either Louis Darron or Hal Belfer and Willetta Smith) work out a few steps. Four entirely new songs, words and music, are written for each program. Two weeks before the show, everything is rehearsed in rough; a week before the big day, the whole cast—usually including a trio of guest stars—gets down to sweat and blood in a rehearsal hall.

The humor is fast, breezy and fairly standard. Sample: "Mr. Mammoth, I've been trying to see you for a week." Mammoth: "I'm a busy man; I can't give you a week." But it has Donald's guilelessness, as open-faced as a cheese sandwich; it has Donald in a change of hats, coats, dialects and props.

The one old reliable skit which is always used is the Frustrated Song Writers, in which Sid Miller appears with Donald. The gags in this occasionally rise somewhat above the vaudeville level, as when O'Connor suggested, "How about a title like When We Eat Chicken, We Always Save the Bones for Mother?" and Miller turned it down: "Too sincere."

"All new stuff," said Donald after his last show. "I used up every old bit I knew two shows ago." In fact, enough material is cut out of each finished program to supply a whole new one.

Donald likes TV better than any other medium. "I like coming into an entertainment field when it's young—and I like the people I work with," he says. This is important to him. (Continued on page 75)

O'Connor the dancer demonstrates hoofing skill with Debbie Reynolds, Gene Kelly in scene from his latest movie, M-G-M's Singin' in the Rain



O'Connor the comedian whips up a meal for his talking mule co-star in Francis Covers the Big Town, produced by Universal-International

