

The Call

Archie P. McKishnie

Illustrated by
Charles Hardy

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Call

Date of first publication: 1923

Author: Archie P. McKishnie (1875-1946)

Illustrator: Charles Hardy (1888-1935)

Date first posted: May 27, 2022

Date last updated: May 27, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220559

This eBook was produced by: John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpcanada.net>

THE CALL

By ARCHIE P. McKISHNIE

ILLUSTRATED BY CHARLES HARDY

I.

Cloud-brushed, the mountain peaks seemed striving to thrust their slate-blue faces above the strangling cowl which chained them down; above and beyond them swam the boundless chaotic infinity to which they might never attain.

She too seemed reaching for that unattainable, as, bare feet braced on the drab base of Old Baldy, her wide eyes probed the mauve mists of the mountain dawn, searching the soul of the skies, robin egg blue—and so far, far above her.

Brown hair hung in two massive braids below her waist; from the tattered sleeves of a worn dress brown arms curved upward, fingers as sensitive as the searching notes of music pressing against her slender throat as though to still its throbs.

And in her face the rapt expression of a child who having read and reread a story feels the wings of imagination flutter within its soul, and feeling longs to soar.

For sixteen years she had known only the granite waste which stretched far, peak on peak, beyond the boundary of thought and existence. Up until now she had been content. All the lights of the world she had seen in her home of hills; all the peaceful silences that solitudes hold for the human heart she had experienced; these and the music of waterfall and lispingsong of leaves had been all-sufficient up until now. But unrest, which shatters peace and makes of the human heart an alien, had come to claim her.

The man who watched her knew that the girl had reached the fork in the trail. He had known this time must come sooner or later. She was flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone—and this element which was stirring within her now was the curse of heritage.



Brown hair hung in two massive braids below her waist; from the tattered sleeves of a worn dress brown arms curved upwards.

She turned at last with a fluttering sigh to find his gaze fastened sombrely upon her.

“Oh, Dad!” she whispered.

It was like a child awakening from a dream. She caught her breath and her arms fell rigid at her sides. Her face, chalk-white, lifted frozenly to his.

He reached for one of the clenched hands.

“Come, Jo,” he spoke gruffly.

He led her down the granite steps to the moss-green carpet which sloped to a plunging stream. She spoke no word until the cabin home raised its grey face above the stunted firs of the slope. He felt the tremor of her arm then and braced himself as though for an ordeal.

“I just can’t go back there, Dad,” she said quaveringly. “I can’t,—I can’t.”

He stood still, fingering his stubbled chin. His eyes were on the cabin with its patch of black garden-soil. But he was not seeing it. He was seeing again a maze of trails which had led beyond the mountain-

gates; trails which men and women of his name had taken in the crumbled years which lay behind. But one of these had been back-trekking. His own. He alone had returned to the misty shrouded mountains, in his arms a tiny atom of life salvaged from the wreckage of high hopes.

For sixteen years he had steeled his heart for this moment, but it was a long time before he spoke. Then:

“What you fancy to do then, Jo?” he asked.

“I’ve got to go—” she answered almost pleadingly. “I’ve got to get away from these mountains, Dad. They’re pressing down on me; they’re choking me.”

“They’re your friends, Jo; the best friends you’ll ever have.”

“I know,” she cried wildly. “And I love ’em. But—but—”

He took her in his arms then. Mountain men are not given to demonstration of affection; into their souls has entered the hardness of the granite that sentinels the germ of sentiment as the rocky cliff shelters the limpid lake. But the girl’s words—“I love them”—well, these had been her mother’s very words. He and the mother had gone out through the granite gates together. . . .

“We’ll go, Jo,” he said at last. “We’ll go out. I—I can understand how you feel.”

She kissed his sun-blistered hand and he went on toward the cabin. His step was heavy and his shoulders sagged, but the girl did not notice it. Her eyes were on the ether blue above the peaks of Old Baldy mountain.

II.

When she withdrew her gaze from the mystic beyond, it was with a sigh of relinquishment. All the young life that stirred her yearned for what lay locked behind the slate-blue peaks.

She crouched at the mossy base of a pine and, fingers locked on her knees, looked frowningly across the giant steps to the yellow trail that probed the sombre waste like an imprisoned sunbeam seeking its way to freedom. Men and women of her blood had heard the call and had gone out along that twisting track. And they had stayed. . . .

A tiny lizard, dust-grey as the rock on which it reposed, stirred softly to life at her feet and vanished in a crevice of the stone. Strange how that tiny thing took on the color of the rock or tree to which it clung. Above her on a plume of pine needles—a tree-toad called gratingly for rain. Her quick eyes sought it out. It was green as the quivering verdure on which it reposed.

Something disquieting awoke in the girl. She sprang to her feet and passed across the boulders to the stream. A twig on the right of her path snapped. She stopped in her tracks and gazed steadily into the grove of trees from which the sound had come. By and by she was able to make out the form of a fawn.

Not until she had reached the smooth shore of the stream did she voice her disturbing thoughts. Then she spoke aloud.

“They belong. That’s it; *they belong*. I wonder if I’m like they are?”

“Like what, Jo?”

She turned quickly, the glow of scarlet flushing her cheeks, her eyes lighting eagerly.

“Rolph Hope!” she exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

A brown shape stirred from the brown slate. A brown face lit by clear-reading eyes smiled down into hers.

“I’ve been watching those chick partridge, Jo.”

He pointed to a thicket of baby spruce ten yards away.

“See ’em?”

She shook her head.

“Look close and you’ll see the little beggars move. They’re hiding up.”

She raised her hands to her throat. The old choking feeling returned and almost stifled her.

“God didn’t intend them to be seen, I guess,” she spoke strainedly. “They—they *belong*.”

“Why,” he exclaimed wonderingly, “of course they belong, Jo. So do you, and all of us mountain people.”

“I don’t!”

She stamped her bare foot on the rock. "I don't," she repeated wildly, "I don't, I don't, *I don't*. And I'm going out."

She threw herself down on her face, sobbing.

Into his bronzed face crept a bewildered look.

"Jo."

He stooped above her and laid a hand gently on her quivering shoulders, "What is it, Jo?"

"Go away," she moaned.

III.

Without a word he left her. Straight to the cabin on the slope he strode and kneeling open the door, entered.

He saw a pack of clothing on the floor; a man seated at a crude table, his face hidden in out-thrown arms. The lean hands were clenched on a bit of crumpled, time-yellowed cloth.

The man at the table stirred erect at sound of the door, sweeping the tiny garment he clutched from view. And so for a long moment they looked into each other's eyes.

It was the younger man who broke the tense silence.

"She said she was going out, Jim. You—you don't mean to let her, do you?"

The other nodded.

"You mustn't." It was an entreaty and a command in one. "For," he continued as the girl's father made no response, "if she goes, you'll be bound to follow. You know what'll happen then."

"I'm goin' with her." The tones were lifeless. "She's all I own. I've got to go with her."

"And how about you? They'll take you, sure. They've been waiting for you to come out."

"I've got to go, Rolph."

"After hiding up for sixteen years—you're going to do a fool act. You, last of the Minger gang—"

“For God’s sake—”

The man leaped from his stool and stood staring toward the door. “I’ve kept all that from her, Rolph.”

He mopped his brow with a hand that shook.

“And they won’t take me, Rolph. The law has no hold on a man who is dead.”

“*Supposed* to be dead,” corrected the other.

He strode to the door and gazed down the path to the river.

He came back slowly and stood with folded arms before the father.

“Rolph,” said the older man huskily, “don’t look at me like that. You can’t just understand. I’ve paid for what I’ve done a million times over. God, He won’t be askin’ me to pay more.”

“We’ll leave God out of the argument,” returned the other harshly. “He’s big enough to stand for you being traitor to Him, I guess. It’s Jo I’m thinking of—and yourself. Now you listen to me. You’re hell-bent on going out. You’re leaving what has been your protection, your strong-hold—for what? Just because Jo has a fool fancy she wants to see the world.”

“It was bound to come,” the man replied doggedly. “They’ve all gone—”

“You’re forgetting me, Jim.”

“That’s so, Rolph. You haven’t been given the call yet. But it’ll come to you some day and then you’ll go through the gates too.”

“Not me.”

“Your dad went, Rolph; and your brother. Jake Carson, Timbers and Dalton. Blood kin of yours and mine. They got the call and they couldn’t stay. You know.”

“And they’re dead. All. And now you’re going to let little Jo go out there into that she’ll never fit—or understand.”

“How can I help it? You know Jo. And it’s her right to go if she so pleases; and it’s my right to stand by her.”

The clenched hand unclosed. He held out the crumpled bit of flannel.

“Her mammy—she says to me when she was making this wee thing: ‘You, Jim, never forget to stand by our baby. If it’s a boy it’ll need your arm, Jim, and if it’s a gal it’ll need ’em both.’”

“I’ve sort of stayed alive so’s to keep my promise, Rolph. I’m going out with Jo.”

“Knowing there’s a price on your head; that if you’re arrested it’ll mean jail for life, perhaps worse?”

“I’ve considered all that, Rolph. It won’t stop me from doing what it’s clear I’ve got to do.”

“Then,” said the younger man, “I guess it’s up to me to show my hand. You’ve forced it, Jim. Now you listen. I’m going to tell you something that’s going to surprise you. I’m an officer of the law; sworn in at Jasper two years ago last June. I see you don’t believe me. Well, how about this?”

He turned back the lapel of his jacket, disclosing a small metal badge.

“I guess maybe they thought it was something of a joke when they tacked this little badge of office onto me, thinking as they did I was the only white human in this range. But you see they didn’t know. They didn’t dream that Jim Little of the basin hold-up gang was still alive up here—”

He stepped back before the maniacal fury that suddenly blazed in the drawn face of the man before him.

“You damned wolf,” snarled Little. “To think of you bein’ one of them—all this time and me not know it.”

The man was transformed. The weary droop was gone. He stood erect, sure-poised, his lean face the cast of grey marble; muscles of neck and arm tensed for what his hot heart bade him do.

“You’re my prisoner, Jim,” spoke Hope calmly. “If you’re bound to have it come, I might as well be the one to earn the thousand dollars reward offered for you.”

In answer Little’s arm swept backward to the butt of a heavy revolver protruding from a holster hung on the wall.

“Go for your gun, Rolph,” he spoke sibilantly, “for as God’s above us, you won’t take me without a fight.”

“I’m not armed, Jim.”

“Then get out of my way, damn you.”

“No.”

“Then I’ll shoot you down in cold blood. I mean that, Rolph.”

“Shoot then.”

Silence as they stood eyeing each other narrowly. Then the revolver crashed to the floor.

“The odds are even now. Come and take me.”

“I’m coming.”

They closed. The table upturned with a crash. A wooden stool spun about and was shattered to kindling beneath the iron caulks of their boots.

They were mountain men both; strong as only mountain men can be; evenly matched in spite of the difference of years in age.

They went crashing to the floor. They were up again instantly. Little leaped for the younger man only to go down from a straight blow to the chin; again they met; this time it was Hope who went down.

And so they fought, evenly, fiercely, giving and taking punishment until both were too weak and weary to strike another blow.

They both leaned against opposite walls, panting. Then gradually into the eyes of the older man reason and sanity gleamed once again. He raised his bruised and bleeding knuckles and gazed at them wonderingly. He stared at Rolph Hope who was smiling across at him.

“Rolph,” the voice was pleading. “What have we been a-doing, Rolph?”

The younger man laughed.

“Why, Jim, I arrested you. You showed fight. That’s all.”

“Well, I’m sorry. I apologize. I’m ready to go with you, Rolph.”

He sat weakly down on a stool.

“Great God,” he said wonderingly, “to think of us two—to think of me striking you—I must have been mad.”

“You was wantin’ to go out, Jim, remember?”

“Hey?” He stirred erect. “Wanting to go out? *Me*?”

“You told me,” persisted Rolph, “that Jo had got the call. She must go, and you was going with her.”

Jim Little sat silent.

Rolph Hope crossed over and stood before him.

“Jim,” he said, “it wasn’t so much on Jo’s account you was going out as it was on your own. You’ll find that hard to believe, I know, but it’s a fact. For sixteen years you’ve nursed a hatred against the law that made the mistake of finding you guilty of a crime you never committed. It reached a point when you couldn’t stand it any longer. You were going out and have a fight with somebody who represented that law. And then what would have happened to you and Jo?”

Little nodded. “I guess you’re right,” he admitted. “I tried to think it was Jo—but I reckon you’ve doped it straight, son. I know now I was simply busting for a run in with the law.”

He stroked his blood-caked, stubbled cheek ruefully.

“Well, it looks as though I’ve had it, doesn’t it?”

Hope shook his head.

“Wrong, Jim. I’m no officer. I simply had to let on I was to give you a chance to get a feed of what you were craving for.”

Little swallowed hard and got slowly to his feet.

“Then—then what’s that badge you’re wearin’, Rolph?”

“Fire-ranger’s,” Hope answered proudly. “Nine hundred a year in the job, Jim, with a cabin down in Jasper Park. And now, Jim, I want Jo.”

Little held out his hand. They gripped, grinning lovingly at each other through the red crust of recent battle.

“She sort of fancies she wants to go out,” said the father lamely, “but it’s just a passing fancy, I guess. You’ll have to try and persuade her to stay where she rightly belongs, Rolph.”

“Don’t need to,” returned the other. “She found that out this morning. All I can hope to do, Jim, is make her glad she found out in time.”

He went out, leaving Jim Little tenderly fumbling a tattered morsel of yellowed flannel.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Call* by Archie P. McKishnie]