

Hawk in the Wind

BY HELEN TOPPING MILLER

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CHAPTER IX—Continued

Repeatedly she had called them into conferences, during the black years of the depression, laying the facts before them, speaking their language. She had made sacrifices to keep the mill in operation when there was no profit for her, no possible way to show a profit. If the mill closed there was no other employment for them—and yet here was suspicion, sabotage and ugly doubt that rested, till she had proof and certain knowledge, upon every man in the mill.

Virgie hated the thought with the frightened hate of the innately kind and candid woman. She hated looking at Jerry and Hobe and the Spain boys, with speculation in her eyes. She loathed the feeling that hostile looks might be following her. Every man in the mill owed something to her—and yet people were funny!

She went home at night, lost in a heavy, ruminative gloom.

She changed her clothes and went down to her big chair that faced David Morgan's picture and still had the print of David Morgan's head in the leather of the back. David looked tired, too, she thought. David was out of it all. He was lucky.

Marian sat, moodily, in front of the fire staring into the blaze.

"You," sighed Virgie, sinking into the cushions with a groan, "are a cheerful sight for tired eyes! If a merry laugh or a song ever sounded in this room I suppose I'd drop dead from shock. What were you doing over at the jail?"

"I went over to bring Tom back. He wouldn't come."

"Being locked up on a criminal charge, that is kind of odd."

"You were going to arrange bail for him. Lon Hicks said so. But Tom wouldn't come."

"I suppose you had to take young Wills along in case you needed somebody to carry Tom's baggage—his other bandana! Did Wills mention that he's working for me? Not that it matters, but now and then we do run off a batch of pulp when we can get a little co-operation from the gentlemen I employ."

"Mother, don't be so prickly! I took Mr. Wills over there because Lossie said the people in town were saying you had fired Tom and given Wills Tom's job. I thought perhaps Tom might have heard it. I hope you don't think I took him because I enjoyed his company?"

Virgie looked at her daughter levelly. Her heart gave a little jerk. Like every other mother she had postponed stubbornly admitting to herself her child's maturity; she had put off the inevitable hour of change when some man should desire her child for his own. For days she had been seeing through Branford Wills clearly and she had not been displeased. She liked his straightforwardness, the trace of iron in him, the strong and gentle way he had with women. But there was no seeing through Marian. Virgie admitted to herself that her child was a dark-eyed enigma to her mother. And in her present state of mind, nerve-taut and weary, puzzles were irritating.

"Do you mean to tell me that you don't know that that chap is in love with you?" she demanded. "Have I raised up a daughter with no more feminine intuition than a ground turtle? Why—Lossie knows more than that! Or am I supposed to be just a nice stupid old mother, blind as a bat?"

Marian's eyes darkened and her face changed queerly. There was a little convulsion of her lips that was a tremor of pain, but Virgie was too spent and too exasperated to see.

"So that," Marian's voice crackled like ice, "is the cute little plot. He's in love with me so you give him a job in the mill. It's a Rollo book—the nice young man works his way up from sweeping the store and the mill owner's daughter is supposed to be all of a twitter because she gets a kind look. Unfortunately, Mother dear, you've been reading Dorothy Dix or seeing too many movies. Mr. Branford Wills happens not to be in love with me—as any observer can see with half an eye. Either half. And I happen not to be in love with him."

"That," Virgie mumbled aloud,

when Marian had gone, "is what you could call a dramatic exit. Very satisfying—to the actor."

CHAPTER X

Branford Wills went to his work at the mill in the morning like a young man riding to a crusade. There was about him, as he entered the gate, a feeling of going into battle. No tangible opposition presented itself, no definite hostility. The men were not friendly, but they were heavily polite and reserved, as he knew all mountain men to be until they were won over. Daniels was curt and indifferent but their work did not coincide and Wills, following the milling of the product through the plant, from the first removal of the bark to the warm brown rolls of wood-pulp rolled into storage, saw the chemist but seldom.

But on the snowy morning following his visit to the jail, Daniels emerged from his laboratory, his hands in the pockets of a stained jacket, and came to stand beside Wills who was watching a new couch blanket being spread on one of the big presses.

Daniels spoke without preamble. "You were down at the other end of the mill yesterday, Wills. Did you see anyone fooling around the big vats—the digesters? We lost a batch of pulp through some funny business or other."

"I don't know all the men in the mill as yet," Wills said. "And I was out for two or three hours. The vats have padlocks, don't they?"

"That's it," Daniels frowned. "It's an inside job, evidently—without even a motive that we can discover. You haven't made any of these fellows sore, have you?"

Wills looked puzzled. "How could I? I've only been watching and listening. And if I made a man sore he'd be more likely to give me a poke in the jaw, wouldn't he, than to ruin a run of pulp?"

"It sounds reasonable. It's a mystery—and not so good for me because I carry the keys. Well, much obliged."

At shouted instructions from a lank man in overalls, Wills went to help smooth the thick blanket into place on the bed of the machine. But the odd unease of being pressed upon by strange and unfriendly forces persisted. He hated the feeling of defensiveness, of needing to justify himself in his own mind. He liked this job, and he had been swept up into admiration for the intrepid spirit of Virgie Morgan.

And now, as the mill clamor beat around him, he was certain that it was the remoteness, the indifference in her eyes that made this feeling of being on trial without a friend in court. He had to show her. He had to show her that he was something other than a lost and rather pathetic young man whom a big-hearted elderly woman had befriended.

A sudden sharp nausea caught him as his mind raced. Young men had been befriended by middle-aged women before—if she thought he was that sort, an opportunist, a heel! He gave an involuntary jerk and Bud Spain yelled, "Hey!" But the yell was lost in other yells, rough and sudden and startling.

Frank Emmet banged the gears of the Jordan machine back, jumped and ran. Wills ran, too, and because the others were yelling, he yelled, too. Hobe Anderson was dragging a flat hose off a reel. Another man struggled with a fire extinguisher.

The smoke was pouring from a little oil house, built against the north wall of the mill. They kicked the door in, there were yells and men running into each other, and much coughing and hissing of chemicals. The smoke grew blacker, then turned white and sank to the ground. Wills' eyes were running scalding water but it was he who kicked the smoldering barrel into the open, where Hobe Anderson knocked it over and sent it rolling with a stream from the hose.

"Take it easy!" Wills shouted at Hobe. "Cut that water off. Let's have a look at this."

A dozen hands jerked the charred, smoking staves of the barrel apart. A label, still intact, on its side, indicated that it had held bisulphide. In the bottom an oily mass still

smoked acridly. Dragged out, it flared into flame briefly—a soaked, dangerous bundle of cotton rags and paper. Men stamped out the flame, looked at each other somberly.

"Somebody," announced Frank Emmet, "was fixing to burn the mill."

"Wind's wrong," Hobe said, kicking a smoking heap into a pool of water, "or she'd have went sure. Looks like if anybody wanted to burn her they'd have figured on the wind."

Wills was aware of Lucy Fields' white face near to his elbow.

"It was set, wasn't it?" she said. "Obviously. Though, even if the barrel had been damaged, that little building is more or less airtight. The fire would have smoldered and then set fire to the mill. The town would be ruined if it was destroyed."

"Why," Daniels cut in, "would anyone want to spoil the pulp? Something's wrong somewhere. Where is Mrs. Morgan?"

"She went to Asheville to see Tom Pruitt's lawyers. I'd better telephone her."

"I wouldn't," Wills said. "The fire is out. Why worry her? She has troubles enough already."

"That's true. I won't tell her. You'd better clean this up, Frank."

"Let's have a look at it first," Wills looked at Daniels. "We can



Her face went red and then white as Wills came in.

find out perhaps where this stuff came from."

For an instant Wills sensed an edge of hesitation in Daniels' manner. His eyes flicked around, then were as quickly guarded. But his voice was carefully casual when he answered, "Not much left—but there may be a clue."

Wills went back to his work at the Jordan machine. It was an hour later that one of the Spain boys came to him and said, "Lucy wants to see you. In the office."

Wills crossed the yard to the little structure that stood so bleakly alone. Lucy Fields sat at her little desk, and her face went first red and then white as Wills came in.

"Sit down, please," she faltered a little, then plunged rapidly. "Mr. Wills, I'm doing a very bold thing—asking you to come here. But I had to talk to you. There's—nothing else to do."

"I see. And what was it you wanted to say to me?" He took the chair opposite—the chair that still bore the imprints of David Morgan's shoulder-blades.

Her throat fluttered. A strained look came over her small wistful face.

"This is such a little town," she began. "It's rather awful to live in such a gossip little place. It isn't easy—what I have to say—to make it clear, I mean. About the town. About the mill. It belongs to the town—to all of us, Mr. Wills. The men who work here have been here always. Nobody ever came in from outside till Mr. Daniels came last year."

"What is it you're trying to tell me?" Wills asked bluntly. "That I'm an outsider? That somehow or other I am to blame for the trouble in the mill?"

"And so your suggestion is that I leave town in haste and never come back!"

Tears ran down her pale face. "I know I sound like a fool to you, but Mrs. Morgan has been a mother to me—to all of us. We've all fought and worked and struggled together—always for the mill."

"All but the fellow who poured oil on the newspapers and ruined the pulp. He was fighting for himself."

"Perhaps he thought he was fighting for the mill. Perhaps he thought that outsiders would be coming in to take it away from us. He might have thought that you were the first."

"It sounds fantastic. But it may

be true. I'll talk to Mrs. Morgan—and you can be sure I won't let the mill be destroyed on my account."

"Oh—please don't talk to Mrs. Morgan! Please—just go! You can make some excuse—you had a job, you can say you are going back to it. You could say you had changed your mind."

"I'm sorry—I couldn't leave without talking to Mrs. Morgan. I'm very much indebted to her."

"I appealed to you," she sighed. "It's all I can do. But—if you were convinced—"

"You've done your part. Whatever happens—I'm to blame."

"I hope nothing happens. I hope I'm wrong." She smiled thinly.

But there was a dubious uneasiness in her heart, as Wills went away. Had Stanley Daniels been a little odd—a trifle curt and watchful? He couldn't know anything about this affair—and yet, he alone carried the keys.

Lucy was heavily unhappy as she walked home alone that night. Life could be so hopeless, so ghastly when you lived in a shabby old house at the end of a shabby street, when you were so achingly in love!

CHAPTER XI

Marian Morgan had driven her little car up a twisting stretch of ridge road, without having any very definite idea of where she was going or why.

She drove slowly because she told herself that it was thrifty to spare tires on a rocky, boulder-edged track. She searched the hills above and below with her eyes, but not even to herself would she admit that she looked for anything. She had heard her mother telephoning instructions that morning, but she had kept her mind sternly on her breakfast grapefruit and adjoined herself not to listen. What did it matter where the woods truck went or who went with it?

She slipped out of the car, dragged the cushion out and rummaged for the pump, set it up on the ground. With a nail-file from her purse she pressed down the valve of a front tire, let the air escape until the tire sagged, loose and flabby, a discouraging flummox of limp rubber. Then she climbed back into the car, wrapped the rug around her knees and sat in a small, cold huddle waiting.

Instantly, now that the thing was done, a hundred accusing and condemning voices clamored in her ears. She was being cheap, she was doing the sort of shallow trick that a girl of Lossie's class might devise, she was forgetting that she was the daughter of Virgie Morgan of the Morgan mills. But drawing out all these self-reproaches was the thin, poignant cry that had trembled through her heart and beat in her blood since the night she had talked to her mother before the fire.

"I have to know!" she said, plaintively, aloud. "I know it isn't true—but I have to be sure!"

This contradictory patching up of her conscience helped her to be calm, to wait, though her feet tingled with cold. A mountain jay came and shrieked at her from a sumac clump. A deer stood for an instant, tense and listening under some gnarled ancient apple-trees beside the ruin of a stone chimney. Then suddenly he bounded away. There was a metallic vibration through the woods. The truck was starting. She caught the backfire of a cold engine and the clank of shovels tossed aboard, and leaned her elbow on the button of her horn. The blare made the jays and the little pine sparrows and crossbills scatter with a whirring and snapping of twigs.

Then the rusty radiator appeared over the rise emitting steam. Joe had let the engine run hot on the grade. He was always doing that, too impatient to cool it out properly when they reached the top of a long climb.

Two men jumped down when they saw Marian's car, and came running. One was Joe. The other was Branford Wills. Swiftly Marian put every scruple out of her mind. She was a woman, using a woman's devious and often unfair weapons.

She said, "I'm stuck. That miserable old tire insists on going flat. And I left the key to the spare in my other purse. Isn't mother with you? I thought she came up here. There's a long-distance call for her—I came up to tell her."

"She didn't come with us. She must be at the mill," Wills said. "Let's have a look at that tire."

"It's flat, all right," Joe gave the wheel a kick. "But there's still a little air in it. Maybe we can pump it up so you can get down to the road."

They pumped up the tire, and Joe studied it, testing the valve.

"Must be a pressure leak," he said. "Valve's all right. Can you turn around here without getting stuck?"

"I think so—I'll try."

"You better do it," Joe said to Wills. "It's steep off there. She could turn over easy."

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