



Hawk in the Wind

BY HELEN TOPPING MILLER

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THE STORY

When Virgie Morgan, widow, and owner of the Morgan paper mill in the Carolina mountain district, turns down a marriage proposal from Wallace Withers, he leaves her house in a rage. Virgie turns him down because she believes he is more interested in possession of her mill than in obtaining a wife. After he has gone, Branford Willis, a young stranger, who has been lost on the mountain-side for three days, finds his way to the Morgan home. Taken in, he is fed and warmed and allowed to remain overnight.

CHAPTER I—Continued

"Not even when they're on the opposite side of the feud?" Willis asked, whimsically.

"Well, I don't dignify any argument I get into with the title of feud," said Virgie. "Though the Government is hen-fussy—sticking its bill into every little mess that the rain would cover up charitably in a couple of days! But I'm like this—if I've got a spoonful of meal, I'll share it. You get some rest tonight. It's a wonder you aren't half dead. You must be as tough as a balsam knot. Tomorrow I'll put chains on a car and send you wherever you want to go."

"You're very generous." He stood up, wavering a little and grinning sadly at his weakness. She saw his well-knit, lean young body, the unconscious grace of youth, with silken muscles and leaping blood—youth that knows exactly where it is going and has not learned yet the grudging welcome of the world. "I was fortunate," he went on, "in having tumbled on your door-step."

"You can pay me back some time. I'm merely circulating some propaganda to the effect that there are one or two decent pulp people in the world. You can carry that word back to Washington."

"I'll do it gladly. I'll add some personal endorsements. In fact, I think I'll launch a campaign—"

He stopped. A tinny horn blared. The dogs set up an excited yelping outside and a car door smacked shut. Then the front door crashed open, letting in a blast of wind, a swish of icy rain, and a girl in a green rubber coat and beret.

A slim, small girl, with reddish-chestnut hair tumbled damply on her collar, with a small, tanned face and very big brown eyes.

"Oh—" she stopped, surprised, seeing him.

"Shut the door," directed Virgie calmly. "This is my daughter, Marian Morgan. This is Mr. Branford Willis—from Washington. He's staying with us tonight. He's been lost."

"Oh—I—" Willis was confused. A slow, unhappy red crept over his haggard face.

"We've met before," announced Marian, coolly.

"Good gracious," her mother exclaimed.

"He"—Marian's pansy-warm eyes had turned flat and unfriendly, her small red mouth hardened—"he doesn't like pulp people!"

"So I've heard," said Virgie, unperturbed, thinking how like her father Marian was. Shrewd and small and implacable, like David Morgan, hanging in his gold frame above the mantel fire. "But we've declared a truce on that. It's too darned cold tonight to keep up any kind of a fight."

But Marian was scarcely listening. She was looking at Branford Willis with hostile eyes.

"So you got lost?"

"So it appears. Your mother was charitable enough to take me in and feed me."

"Nothing much happens to mother. He thinks"—Marian turned to her mother, her voice crackling a little—"that all pulp people should be burned at the stake—slowly—he told me so. At the dance the other night."

"That's unfair," declared young Mr. Willis. "I didn't know you, I was spouting to hear my own voice. I apologize."

"Don't bother. It doesn't matter to me in the least." Marian pulled off the damp beret, shook rain from it. "The road is dreadful, Mother—you'll need chains in the morning. I'll go up, I think. Did Lottie make a fire in my room?"

"Andrew did."

"Please," interposed young Mr. Willis, anxiously, "don't go away without letting me explain—I'll eat any amount of crow—I'll even pick the bones if you wish—"

Marian's head went up. She pushed back her damp, fruit-tinted hair with a palm, regarded him aloofly.

"I see no reason to discuss it, thank you. This is mother's house. She is free to entertain whomever she likes in it. Good night."

She walked past them, her head held rigidly. Virgie Morgan's mouth drew in at one corner.

"Don't worry about her, son," she advised. "She'll be all over it in the morning. She's a loyal little trick—and all the Morgans are fighters. What did you say to her at that dance?"

He shook his head ruefully. "I can't even remember!" he admitted.

The mill of the Morgan Pulp Company had never been an imposing structure.

David Morgan had built it early in the century, and David Morgan had inherited from a Highland root of his family a preponderant caution, a carefulness that erected slowly, with due regard for foundations and a keen eye out for credit, but no par-

ticular anxiety as to appearances.

No artist had ever etched the steaming ugliness of the plant, dome and stack, snatching cable and roaring chute. There was no chilled, modern music of steel and glass, no men in white, no ranked battery of shining stacks and retorts. But there was good pulp. Through the defeating lag of the depression, since David's death, Virgie's market had held. When a finishing mill got an order for extra quality paper they wired for Morgan pulp to mill it from. There had been half-time work, half-week lay-offs, but always the pay-roll ready on the fifth and the twentieth, whether Virgie's rusty old leather handbag had a nickel of spending money in it or not.

Tom Pruitt knew how it had run on. And Virgie Morgan knew.

Tom Pruitt had been David Morgan's friend. Once Tom Pruitt's timber land had covered three counties. Little rivers that he owned had shuttled with trout; coves and ridges to which he held title had sheltered pronged buck and snuffling bear, and the frantic industry of beavers slowed mountain creeks that began and ended on Tom's domain.

Then had come the incredible hysteria of '25.

Men, their blood carbonated by a virus bred of the madresses of Florida, came prowling into the mountains, a wild, acquisitive light in their eyes. They bought land, optioned it, leased and contracted for it.

Men came—gray men with the air of affairs, who spoke slowly and little. Men to inspire confidence. They wanted to buy Tom Pruitt's land. Tom thought things out slowly. He was a meditative, heavy, slow-moving man. His great body was slow, but terrible with strength.

Tom sold his land finally. There was considerable pressure before they got him up to the point, two concerns bidding for it, and when he at last gave in, there was a tremendous down payment made—more money than Tom Pruitt had ever seen in his life. Too much money. Not a check—Tom was suspicious of checks—but cash in green sheafs, with heavy paper bands around it. Fifty thousand dollars. And more in five, seven, and ten years, according to the contract.

Tom was dazed. The sum total of his former possession diminished in his mind, became subordinate to the cash. He forgot the great stand of virgin poplar up the Hazel Fork, forgot the mellow bottom land with orchards on it, where his mother's turkeys had fed. All he thought about was this money. Enough money to last as long as he lived, if he spent it. But he would not spend it. He would hold onto it. It numbed and thrilled and frightened him.

He took it to David Morgan, his friend. "You keep it for me," he begged. "Put it some place."

"I'll put it in the bank for you," David, the cautious, said.

But Tom Pruitt had little faith in banks. They got robbed every now and then. You read in the paper where a bank had busted and some fellow gone off to South America with all the money belonging to other people.

"No, you keep it, Dave," Tom begged. "Then if I want it I can get it back again. If a banker gets it he'll lend it to some of these real-estate fellers over to Asheville, and then when the concern goes bust my money will be sunk in one of them subdivisions with fancy gates and red-white-and-blue flags stuck in the ground. And I don't want none of them."

Morgan argued. "I can't put fifty thousand dollars in this old safe, Tom."

"You put it somewhere, Dave. Put it in something so I'll know you've got it. Anywhere's is all right—just so I know you got it."

"I can sell you a share of the mill," Morgan said abruptly.

"Would you want that? I can use your money to buy that spruce up Cheota and to put in a new drier. And you'll own part of the mill."

Old and taciturn as he was, Tom Pruitt trembled, with sudden exaltation. To own even a fragment of a thing as splendid to his eyes as the Morgan mill—to touch a brick of it or a pet-cock from an acid tank and think, "Mine!" He wanted nothing more from life.

He surrendered the sheaf of lush green bills to David Morgan.

Tom was glad of his heartening part of Morgan's work. The fifth and the seventh year saw the payments on his land defaulted. The title was almost inextricably tangled in a snarl of holding companies, stock companies, second and third mortgages, judgments, and suits.

"Foreclose," David Morgan told Tom, just before David lay down at night to wake in the morning with a crooked, drooping mouth, a helpless arm and leg, and a fogged brain that would never clear again.

But Tom, lost in the frantic trouble of helping Virgie to keep the mill running while David lay helpless in the white house on the mountain, had no time to think of himself or his problems.

Stocks had crashed, orders were few, men were frightened, restive, alert for bad news from any quarter. Tom held his peace and kept pulp wood coming into the mill. At

night he rode the rusty old truck up the mountain road to Morgan's house, where he shaved helpless David, cut his toe-nails, trimmed the white dry locks of hair, rubbed his weary, wasting back.

In the meantime Tom's land on Little Fork and Hazel Fork became one of a hundred tracts lost in a fog of indefinite involvement; owned and not owned.

Tom waited, worried, dubious, and unhappy. Then David Morgan died. And after that there was no chance of selling Morgan pulp stock enough to finance a suit to foreclose and clear title, even if Tom had known how to begin it.

Tom locked the old safe on his beautiful yellow papers, with the gilt seals upon them, pulled his belt tighter, hunched his shoulders, and set to work to help Virgie Morgan save the mill.

It was still partly his and the stacks were still scrawling their bleared autograph of hopefulness upon the Carolina sky.

Afterwards Virgie Morgan looked back on those three years, trying to separate phases, distinguish definite epochs of despair, as a person who has emerged alive from an inundation or a frightful wreck tries to recall incidents of that catastrophe, decide what came first and what



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after. But only one thing stood out clear—Tom Pruitt's unvarying loyalty, his quiet and unflinching support.

There was ice on every branch and dead leaf, every blade of grass and jointed weed, when Tom came through the gate of the mill in that raw November dawn. The wind was still frigid with little promise of a thaw. Smoke was snatched from the stack, torn to pieces, strung along the ground in rags. The steel padlock, with which for twenty years the plank door of the office building had been locked, was like something dipped in melted glass.

Tom beat it against the door frame, twisted the key, pushed the door inward on a musty caddy smelling of mildewed paper and raw chemicals.

The stove was still faintly warm and Tom raked out the ashes into a bucket and kindled a new fire, fanning it encouragingly with his hat.

Then with two buckets he plodded toward the engine room, head down, big hat flapping. He had carefully drained both trucks at sunset last night; hot water would make them start quicker. He took care of all the equipment, he liked to do it. No alcohol in radiators. That made the cars heat on the mountain grades. And today things had to be entirely right because Virgie Morgan was going up to look over her reforestation project.

Tom's old watch, hitched to a braided strip of snakeskin, showed seven o'clock when he went back to the office. Steam was hissing from the boiler-room cocks, two oilers were getting their equipment out of the tool shed. In thirty minutes the whistle would bellow. In twenty-five minutes Virgie's old coupe should enter the mill gate. Tom took an old rag and dabbed dust from Virgie's desk. There was a votive air about what he did, but this devotion was not for Virgie Morgan, the woman. To Tom, Virgie was part of David, part of the mill. She was the mill.

Then the telephone rang. Tom shouted into it.

"Hello!"

"Hello, Tom." It was Virgie's voice. "I won't be going up to the hill with the boys today. Send them out as soon as they are ready."

"Hey!" Tom whooped his arguments, always dubious of the efficiency of the instrument. "Hey—this ice ain't going to last. It'll be gone by nine o'clock. I'll put chains on. You needn't worry."

"I'm not worried, Tom." Virgie's voice came evenly. "Not about anything down there. Ice wouldn't scare me. The trouble's up here, at the house. Something's come up. I can't leave right away."

Tom hung up, grunting, went out to drain the radiator of the second truck.

CHAPTER II

Meanwhile in her kitchen Virgie Morgan held a hot-water bottle over the sink, filled it gingerly, ducking her head as the kettle steamed.

Lottie spooned coffee into a percolator. Her brassy waves were cushioned in a heavy net.

"Think it's pneumonia?" she asked, taking the kettle from her mistress's hand.

"A chill doesn't have to be pneumonia," Virgie said, "but his voice sounds funny and I heard him coughing a lot in the night. That bed was damp probably. Nobody has slept up there in a time. He should have had a fire—worn out the way he was."

"If this house just had a furnace in it—"

"Now, don't go harping on that, Lottie Wilson," Virgie snapped. "Carry up some coal before the doctor comes."

Lottie picked up the coal bucket, stepped into the back hall to remove her hairnet and dab some grayish-lavender powder on her nose. The young man coughing in the bed upstairs had romantic dark eyes and a mouth cut wide for laughter.

But all these devoted pains were wasted after all. Branford Willis was asleep. Red-hot coals of color burned in his cheeks, his hair was disordered and dry looking, his hands twitched, thrusting out of the blue sleeves of a pair of David Morgan's old pajamas.

"He's sick, all right," she said. "And I feel responsible. Putting him in this cold tomb of a room—after two nights out on that mountain."

"Well, you took him in," Lottie comforted her in a whisper. "A lot of people would have set the dog on a trampy looking thing like him."

"I can let his people know—and we can take good care of him, anyway," Virgie said.

Something appealing about this dark young head on the pillow. She had wanted three sons of her own—three boys, tall, dark, and audacious. And Heaven had given her only Marian who was small and slim and peppery—but audacious enough, goodness knew!

Willis stirred as the hot bottle warmed him, lifted his head, looked startled.

"Oh, sorry—I'm getting up right away." He licked his dry lips. "Someone should have called me—"

"You're not getting up just yet," Virgie interposed. "You've got a temperature."

"That's odd." He groped confusedly with his long, facile hands. "I'm never sick. I'll be all right in an hour or two. I was pretty tired—and wet, too."

"Lie down," ordered Virgie, tersely, "and don't talk too much. I'll let your outfit know where you are. But for the present you stay here."

"Please, Mrs. Morgan—I can't be a nuisance to you—" He broke off with a racking cough and pain snatched at him. He looked perplexed and in anguish. He wiped his lips with a corner of the sheet. "I—guess—I am sick!" he muttered, lying back again.

Virgie shifted the counterpane, straightened the shades, poked the fire, went downstairs again. In the breakfast-room Marian was sugaring her fruit. Her hair was brushed flat, the sleeves of her orange pajamas flapped, she looked reproachful.

"Lottie says that hobo is sick," she said. "Have we got him on our hands?"

Virgie sat down, poured her coffee, fingered the toast, raised her voice. "Lottie! I can't eat this cold stuff. Make some hot. Yes, he's sick—it looks like pneumonia. And he's no hobo. I've telephoned for the doctor and you'll have to stay here till he comes. I've got to get down to the mill."

"But I don't know a thing about pneumonia!"

"You aren't expected to know. That's what we have the doctor for. You see that Lottie keeps the fire up. I'll send Ada Clark out if I can get hold of her."

"Oh, my heavens, Mother! She snuffles and her nose is always red, and she thinks that she's going to be kidnaped or something every time she sticks her silly head outside."

"Well, you don't have to look at her. She can take care of this boy till he's well enough to be moved somewhere—home, if he has any home."

"I wouldn't call him a boy. He's over twenty-five, if he's a minute!"

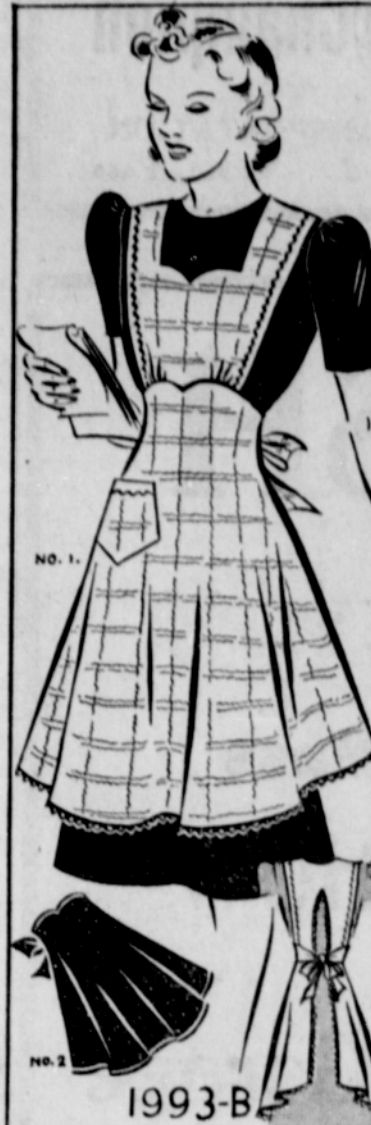
"Well, I'm over fifty and that entitles me to call most any man a boy!"

Virgie went out through the kitchen, collecting a hot kettle on the way. Every year winter came to the mountains with a wretched, freezing storm like this. Her little car would be hard to start.

She drove slowly down the icy road, gripping the steering-wheel, hating the treacherous going. Her hat felt insecure on her head. Her gray hair was thick and strong and these cocky little hats had no crowns anyway.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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Strange Facts

Jap Bride's Pledge 'Buries' Characters Gigantic Sun Trap

Almost every Japanese bride wears, at her wedding, a silk sash over her forehead called a suno kakushi, or horn concealer, which is a symbol of her pledge to refrain forevermore from jealousy, animosity and disobedience.

A writer of detective, gangster and wild-west stories maintains a unique cemetery on his ranch near Oceanside, Calif. It contains the "graves," with appropriate tombstones, of the scores of characters whom he has killed in his novels.

The Chinese tell fortunes by the lines in the feet, impose and collect taxes 10 years in advance, have five directions—north, south, east, west and center—and make losers of games pay for their bad luck by taking a drink of liquor.

Still standing in a high pass of the Peruvian Andes is a monument to one of man's oldest and most incredible beliefs. It consists of two towers, built on opposite peaks, between which, many centuries ago, a primitive tribe hung a gigantic net and tried to catch the sun.—Collier's.

Haunts of Happiness

The haunts of happiness are varied, but I have more often found her among little children, home firesides, and country homes than anywhere else.—Sydney Smith.

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