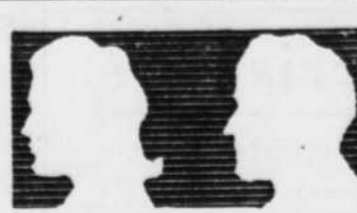




# Hawk in the Wind

BY HELEN TOPPING MILLER

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## THE STORY THUS FAR

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 for a time, Bradford Willis, a young stranger, who has been lost in the mountains for three days, finds his way to the Morgan home. He is fed and allowed to remain overnight. He identifies himself as a government employee, working with surveyors in the district. Virgie develops pneumonia and is forced to remain in the household. Marian, Virgie's daughter, dislikes Willis. Trouble is developing as Withers meets Stanley Daniels, the mill's chemist. Virgie learns someone is attempting to obtain title to timber lands owned by Tom Pruitt, life-long friend of her deceased husband and part owner of the mill.

## CHAPTER III—Continued

"We"—the older man had thin lips and a mouth that shut like a trap—"are victims of the Phillips' outfit."

Virgie kept silent. Very likely there were some of the crowd who had put up the money to back Phillips. Obviously they had no idea who she was. They thought her a quaint mountain character, probably, so she kept to the part, staring dully and curiously at them, as mountain people did.

Slamming her worn gears, she drove on up the ridge, turning south at her line and bumping across a stony meadow, sun-washed and pleasant.

She found her foresters eating their lunch, their legs dangling from the muddy tail of their truck. She shared their lukewarm coffee, inspected the damp little hillocks where baby spruce stood and shivered, feeling their cold, small bearded roots groping in strange, chill darkness.

"I hope we get a snow so they don't dry out too fast," she said.

"We heard a car a while back," one of the men said. "See anybody down that way, Miss Morgan?"

"I was going to speak about that," Virgie screwed the lid on a thermos bottle. "Much obliged, you boys—I meant to get home for lunch but I got delayed, as usual. About that car—I saw 'em. And I want you to quit early—you, too, Joe—knock off before three, leave the truck here, and go over to the other side down toward Little Fork. There's a piece of sixty-odd acres. Take a good look at it and call me up tonight."

"Pruitt's stuff, eh?" said Joe, who knew these timbered slopes and ridges as well as Virgie did.

"It used to be Pruitt's stuff. Something's up. And I'm not going to let Tom be gyped by another bunch of slick talkers with blue-prints in their hands and black iniquity in their minds. Don't call up till after seven, hear? And don't talk to anybody but me about this business."

"Sure, boss—we understand. You don't want it mentioned to Pruitt, then?"

"I'll talk to Pruitt. Crank this old caboose for me, will you?"

She was thinking so absently as she drove in at the gate of the plant that she ran over a steam hose and ripped a sizable sliver from the corner of the tool-house before she came to and stopped the truck.

Tom Pruitt heard the impact of her arrival and came slouching out of the back shed, picking gum off the palms of his hands.

"Anybody else bust up the premises like that and you'd fire him," he drawled amiably. "That steering-gear busted?"

"Oh, shut up!" grumbled Virgie, climbing down stiffly.

She was irritated by Tom. No man so huge should be so naive, so helpless.

"Whoever stuck that shanty out there in the way must have thought we'd be hauling stuff in here in oxcarts forever," Virgie continued to fume as she tramped into the office.

Tom opened the door for her. "I reckon Dave put it there," he said, calmly.

"Come in here," Virgie ordered.

Tom followed her obediently and began punching at the stove. Virgie made a complicated task out of getting her hat off and her desk opened. She did not look at Tom. She was exasperated, and when her temper got the upper hand her tongue slipped, and she did not want it to slip. She had to say the right thing to Tom, who was so helpless in the presence of law and finance and the crisscross web men weave of these two strands to hide the simple intent of their acts.

"Sit down," directed Virgie, "and don't squirm. Lucy, you go out and get the time slips. Pruitt and I have got business to talk over."

Lucy rose meekly, put on her coat.

"How soon shall I come back, Mrs. Morgan?"

"Fifteen minutes is all I need. And if you hang around that laboratory, walk in the air some before you come back in here. There may be worse smells than young Daniels' invents, but Satan has got a monopoly on 'em."

Tom draped his long legs over a stool and twisted his hat.

"I reckon you found a seeder tree cut that hadn't ought to be cut," he said. "I expect I done it."

Virgie swiveled her chair around. The darkened leather cushion on the back of it still held the print of David Morgan's lean shoulder-blades.

"I'm not going to talk about Morgan trees," she said. "I want to talk about yours. Do you know anything about that property of yours over the ridge—that hardwood tract? What shape is it in?"

Tom twisted the hat nervously. "I sold it. 'Way back in '26. You know about that I reckon. I sold it to that Phillips' outfit. They paid me the first payment. They ain't never paid any more."

"What sort of papers did you get? Have you got a lien?"

"They're all in the safe. Dave put 'em away for me. Dave told me I'd ought to foreclose—then he got down and you know how we been ever since—we ain't had time to think of nothing but keeping this here mill running."

Virgie sighed. "It's my fault, I suppose. I've got to take care of you—just like I've got to take care of Lottie and Lucy out yonder and some more helpless people."

"I got a good piece of money out of that land," Tom defended.

"They defaulted on the contract, didn't they? The company's out of existence. It will take a lawsuit, probably, to repossess it—but somebody's interested in it. I met a couple of men—bankers, they looked like—up on the ridge. They were asking the way to that piece you've got over there—that strip down Hazel Fork with the big poplar on it. You get those papers out, Tom, and let me look into them."

Tom lumbered out of his chair. There was one kind of action he could understand, indorse, and follow. Strange men had been on his land—land that Virgie said was his.

"I low them fellers better keep off, yonder," he boomed, his eyes door.

"I don't know no law, but if that's my poplar them bankers better keep off my place."

"Well, you've got to have the papers first. I'll have Lucy open the safe for you."

But when Lucy came back, moon-eyed and absent, with a droop of unhappiness about her mouth, Virgie regarded her with impatience. Lucy had been strung tight as a fiddle lately, making mistakes and being rushingly apologetic about them, jumping when the telephone rang.

Virgie knew what the matter with Lucy. Young Stanley Daniels was flattered by the sight of Lucy's little silver heart fluttering on her sleeve. He had grown arrogant and cagey.

Lucy needed shaking. So, because she was disgusted with Lucy's meekness, Virgie climaxed a day of exasperations by giving the girl a raise.

"Go out and buy yourself a new hat and some lipstick," she ordered. "And if that young Daniels is hanging on the gate when you start home give him the back of your hand and your chin in the air. I can do all the moping we need in this pulp business."

Lucy was tremulously grateful and husky. "It isn't—that exactly, Mrs. Morgan. It's—oh, everything! Old lamps and the rug wearing out—and food costing so much—"

"I know," Virgie was gentle. "We had a sofa that fopped over and made a bed and my brother had to sleep on it. It was always fopped down in the parlor when I had a beau. Don't let it get you down, Lucy."

At night Joe and Ed reported that the two strangers had walked over Pruitt's land, climbed back into their car, and gone away again. She would hunt up her lawyer, as soon as she had time, Virgie decided, and find out just what could be done for Tom.

Young Mr. Bradford Willis was still seriously ill. A half-dozen telegrams had so far failed to locate anyone who belonged to him or who might be interested in him. Virgie had that to worry about.

She took time to hope that Lucy had found a decent hat.

She did not know that Lucy was sitting alone at home, among the ravellings, and that Stanley Daniels was, at that moment, occupying a rocker in front of Wallace Withers' old wood-burning stove, smoking one of Wallace's five-cent cigars and thinking very well of himself.

When he let himself go, Wallace Withers was an eloquent man. He loved to hear his own voice editorializing, expounding opinions, setting the world right.

Now he walked up and down his sitting-room, talking as he had not talked in months, his rough hair standing away from his temples, a flush coming and going on his wretched neck.

This young fellow, Daniels, from the Morgan mill, was a flattering auditor. Middle-age is always a trifle flushed and important when youth condescends to listen. Withers was painting a picture of the pulp business—of the Morgan pulp business, as he averred it could be.

Bigger than any of them, tied in with the big Canadian mills, stacks and vats in batteries, timber rolling in, brown pulp going out by the trainload instead of a single car now and then.

"Dave Morgan was Scotch," he said. "The Scotch build well, but have no mind or imagination. They want security and they sacrifice other things for it. They let the Irish go prowling around into

all the new places, killing off the Injuns, and then along came your Scotchman with a wagonload of goods, for sale, and he took up all the good half-sections. Then they married all the good-looking daughters of the Irish and tamed them down to raise sons to fit this country."

"Maybe they married the Irish girls because, secretly, they wanted to hear somebody laugh," Daniels contributed with a grin.

"Maybe so. Maybe that's why Dave Morgan married Virgie. Virgie was a handsome woman when she was young. She's not bad looking now."

"Rather a fine-looking woman now," agreed young Daniels.

"But darned impractical," declared his host. "Business is getting better fast—but she ain't going to catch up with it."

"Because she turns out a hand-craft product in a machine age," stated Stanley Daniels, much pleased with himself.

"You're kind smart, ain't you?" Wallace Withers relaxed his long jaw. "I reckon you must have collected some ideas about making pulp at a profit?" He sat down, laid his long yellow fingers together,

the few who tended the processes that went on night and day. Daniels unlocked his laboratory, a tacked-on structure half brick, half wood, sheeted with metal. He snapped on the light, unlocked the cupboard where he kept his apparatus. His test-tubes, he saw, were all in good order, the thermometer stood at a safe temperature, and the rusty steam-pipe running along the wall was warm.

He put out the light again, locked the place. Then he saw that a light was burning in the office. It was after ten. Mrs. Morgan must be there. Lucy would not come down at night alone. She never came at night.

He stepped up to the office window and saw that the person inside was old Tom Pruitt.

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"Well, any young man hates to see a business dragging," he said, choosing his words carefully. "Especially when he sees that that business is standing on its own foot, making its own troubles. That's what's wrong with the world now, Mr. Withers—the young people have the ideas and the ambition and the vision and courage—recklessness, I suppose you would call it—and people your age have all the power and all the money."

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Withers did not answer for a moment. The stove clinked, a mouse crept out from beneath an old organ, gave a bright-eyed, terrified look about, scurried back again.

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Stanley Daniels felt a sudden surge of wry distaste. His tongue tasted of copper, his ears buzzed faintly. So this old hick had ideas in his ratty brain, did he? Trick stuff, likely. He had suspected it.

Let him pull his own potatoes out of the fire, then. Daniels felt very noble and superior as he stood up, pulled down his coat.

"Well, this has been very pleasant, Mr. Withers. But I'm a working man. I'd better say good night."

Withers collected his limbs and scrambled out of the chair.

"But wait a minute—you ain't going to walk? I was figuring on taking you back—car's standing outside."

"I think I'd like the walk," Daniels was smooth, impersonal, inscrutable. "Need the exercise."

"Thunder—It's most five miles. I'll run you down to the main road anyway. You can walk from there if you're itching for air."

"Dave Morgan was Scotch," he said. "The Scotch build well, but have no mind or imagination. They want security and they sacrifice other things for it. They let the Irish go prowling around into

ing him somehow. What made him hasten to be out in the wholesome air again was the awareness that he had been ready to hear Withers' schemes.

He had no inner hypocrisy. He knew that no loyalty would ever blind him to his own advantage. But he did not like being maneuvered, so he sat a little stiffly and replied in polite monosyllables to Withers' remarks, as they drove the rutty road to the highway.

He walked rapidly till he reached the outskirts of the village, his nostrils stinging in the frosty air. The town lay on a slope where the river widened, and as Daniels approached it the linked lights made it look like some jeweled ornament on the breast of the mountain.

He would go down to the mill, he decided. The air was keen and he should be certain that his tests were all right. A freeze would ruin several days' work.

At the mill he moved in authority and this pleased his young vanity. The men he spoke to had to listen. The forms that went out of his laboratory were commands; on them depended the quality of the Morgan pulp.

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"Virgie Morgan don't own all the stock in that mill," he said, looking straight ahead. "There's some of it loose, and a lot of things could happen. Things might happen so that more of it could be had. She ain't got any considerable reserve, I know that. I know how she's fixed. If trouble was to happen in the mill or orders fell off, she'd be hard put to raise the money to carry on."

Stanley Daniels felt a sudden surge of wry distaste. His tongue tasted of copper, his ears buzzed faintly. So this old hick had ideas in his ratty brain, did he? Trick stuff, likely. He had suspected it.

Let him pull his own potatoes out of the fire, then. Daniels felt very noble and superior as he stood up, pulled down his coat.

"Well, this has been very pleasant, Mr. Withers. But I'm a working man. I'd better say good night."

Withers collected his limbs and scrambled out of the chair.

"But wait a minute—you ain't going to walk? I was figuring on taking you back—car's standing outside."

"I think I'd like the walk," Daniels was smooth, impersonal, inscrutable. "Need the exercise."

"Thunder—It's most five miles. I'll run you down to the main road anyway. You can walk from there if you're itching for air."

"Dave Morgan was Scotch," he said. "The Scotch build well, but have no mind or imagination. They want security and they sacrifice other things for it. They let the Irish go prowling around into

ing him somehow. What made him hasten to be out in the wholesome air again was the awareness that he had been ready to hear Withers' schemes.

He had no inner hypocrisy. He knew that no loyalty would ever blind him to his own advantage. But he did not like being maneuvered, so he sat a little stiffly and replied in polite monosyllables to Withers' remarks, as they drove the rutty road to the highway.

He walked rapidly till he reached the outskirts of the village, his nostrils stinging in the frosty air. The town lay on a slope where the river widened, and as Daniels approached it the linked lights made it look like some jeweled ornament on the breast of the mountain.

He would go down to the mill, he decided. The air was keen and he should be certain that his tests were all right. A freeze would ruin several days' work.

At the mill he moved in authority and this pleased his young vanity. The men he spoke to had to listen. The forms that went out of his laboratory were commands; on them depended the quality of the Morgan pulp.

Only a few men were at the mill—the few who tended the processes that went on night and day. Daniels unlocked his laboratory, a tacked-on structure half brick, half wood, sheeted with metal. He snapped on the light, unlocked the cupboard where he kept his apparatus. His test-tubes, he saw, were all in good order, the thermometer stood at a safe temperature, and the rusty steam-pipe running along the wall was warm.

He put out the light again, locked the place. Then he saw that a light was burning in the office. It was after ten. Mrs. Morgan must be there. Lucy would not come down at night alone. She never came at night.

He stepped up to the office window and saw that the person inside was old Tom Pruitt.

Pruitt's status at the mill had always puzzled young Daniels. He knew that Pruitt had worked there since the plant was built, that he was always carrying messages from Virgie Morgan, giving orders that she initiated, yet he had apparently no definite position and no authority.

Daniels opened the office door. "Hello, Tom," he said, "anything new?"

Tom Pruitt looked up from Virgie's desk, where was spread out a loose array of legal-looking papers.

He looked baffled, his hair was standing up, but he grinned at Daniels. "Nope—nothing special. I'm studying out this here. Never did see such fine printing nor so much eyes were full of silver secrets, his knuckles flexed with an involuntary, crushing movement.

"Well, any young man hates to see a business dragging," he said, choosing his words carefully. "Especially when he sees that that business is standing on its own foot, making its own troubles. That's what's wrong with the world now, Mr. Withers—the young people have the ideas and the ambition and the vision and courage—recklessness, I suppose you would call it—and people your age have all the power and all the money."

"Some people," Withers said, "would call you a young fool. But I don't. I'm a thinking man. Personally, I'd like to see what you'd do—running the Morgan mill."

Daniels laughed. "That," he said, "would be a grand idea—but just about as hopeless as most grand ideas. Mrs. Morgan isn't going to surrender the control of that mill to anybody."

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