

# ARGOSY-ALLSTORY W E E K L Y

VOL. CLXIX

SATURDAY, JUNE 13, 1925

NUMBER 4



## *Flight to the Hills*

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### FOREWORD

**I**T is the sincere belief of the editorial department that this serial is a truly great achievement. Its unforgettable characters scale the very peaks of emotion.

Our readers will share the torturing doubt that came to Cynthia Meade. Which of her two gallant suitors should she marry? In what environment would she be happier? What of the losing man's deep sorrow?

There is a moot question among readers as to whether the endings of stories always should be happy. Some are keenly disappointed when a finale is sad. Others are as sharply critical if a tragic situation winds up in comedy.

If you had been the editor, which of the optional conclusions would you have preferred in this masterly analysis of a woman's soul? Would you have turned thumbs down on Wade Murrell, mountaineer, or Jock Harrison, man of the town?

After you have read the serial in its entirety you will be *deus ex machina*—a god from the machine, as in the Classical tragedies, brought on the stage to solve super-human difficulties—if you communicate your decision to the editor. The majority of

opinions so received will determine the ending that the author is to retain in the book version soon to be published.

Therefore, read with a critical mind, but vote as your heart dictates because you are giving joy or sorrow to characters that literally are in search of their fate.

THE EDITOR.

## CHAPTER I.

### THIS SON OF FEUDS.

THE attorney arose from his chair with the briskness of gratification for having brought a doubtful undertaking to a successful close. From a sharply official directness, his tone and manner altered to an indulgent jocularity.

"And now, Mr. Murrell," he suggested, "since nothing remains except for me to draw your check and for you to deposit it, I may ask you how it feels to find yourself a capitalist?"

The other man had remained seated and neither his eyes nor lips responded to the smiling cue. He ignored the question as to his personal reactions and shook his head with an obdurate deliberation.

"I don't want no check an' I don't low ter put ther money in no bank," he made drawling announcement. "I reckon I'll hev ter disconfit ye ter go ter ther bank-house an' git hit out. I'll tote hit along back home with me in cash."

The lawyer's brows gathered into little wrinkles of protest, although he reflected this hairbrained folly was no concern of his.

"My dear fellow," he made dutiful expostulation. "Thirty thousand dollars is a sizable sum." He broke off on a self interruption of laughter. "Did you ever handle, or even see, thirty thousand dollars in cash—in one lump?"

"Ef I hain't," came the calm response, "I aims ter see hit right soon now."

"It's your affair, of course," the attorney answered, "but I'd feel derelict if I didn't try to dissuade you. How far is it from Asheville here to your home in Kentucky? You said you lived at the head of Little Flinty Creek, didn't you?"

"Hit's a matter of some seventy measured miles—ther way a crow'd fly," came the reply. "But ther way I've got ter fare

along ter git thar hain't es straight ner yit as level es thet. Hit wiggles an' wingles roun'about an' hit hists an' draps acrost some siv'ral successions of ridges." The speaker paused, then added: "But still, though, ther new roads is good endurin' ther nigh part of ther journey."

Again there was a brief pause, and then in after reflection the hillsman added: "Hit hain't nowise so slavish a journey es what hit was when Dan'l Boone went acrost thet way."

Mr. Chilton stood looking into the face of the man across his office table. He was seeking to determine whether back of the unflickering gravity of those features there lurked an ambushed sense of humor, or whether this mountaineer occasionally dropped into solemn toned comments, savoring of jest, with entire unconsciousness of their flavor.

The man had risen now, and he stood a shade above six feet, topped off by the black felt hat which he had worn throughout the interview. The dark clothes, palpably his Sunday raiment, were typical of the sternly repressed life in the strange uplands that have stood isolated and almost unamended for two centuries.

They were cheap store clothes, but—and this was not so typical—they were scrupulously neat, and they sat on the splendid oak-and-leather strength of the man's lithe body as plumage might on a hawk or the sleek pelt on a fox.

Beneath them one seemed to feel the flow of muscles, not bulky but resilient with power, and the clean-shaven face itself might be searched vainly for the betrayal of any faltering or weakness. The eyes had that fresh alertness of men who live largely outside house walls, of men who must compete with the keen physical senses of animals that prey and are preyed upon; the sharp nose of the skulking fox; the long-ranged vision of the soaring eagle.

It was to be assumed that just as Wade Murrell had known, in a century when most of his kind had forgotten it, the self-reliance of the pioneer, so he had also known the meager poverty of the backwoodsman.

He had a little while ago assured the lawyer: "Over th'ar wh'ar I lives at, folks is right often hurtin' bad fer ther needcessities of life."

So it must have marked a high point in his experience to have concluded the sale of a timber tract, which had been an almost forgotten property in his family since the days when a great-grandfather had emigrated from North Carolina to Kentucky. To have sold, for thirty thousand dollars, land that he had never himself seen and for which he felt no rooted attachment might have been construed as a reasonable cause for elation.

Surely back there, where he and his kind lived in log houses among rocky and tilting fields, thirty thousand dollars must spell wealth, and wealth suddenly acquired should spell excitement.

It did not matter, reflected Chilton, that thirty thousand was much less than the land was worth, since the city of Asheville had with its own growth developed adjacent values. It was thirty thousand, none the less, and Wade Murrell should show some stirring of delight.

But as he looked at the face of his visitor again, Shelby Chilton smiled. No, the illogic would lie in this man's showing surprise at anything. He was woven of stoic tissue and reticent fiber.

For an uneasy instant, the lawyer felt almost a qualm of fear less Murrell learn hereafter how ungenerous a bargain had been driven with him. Men throughout Appalachia remembered the story of the "Murrell-Skidmore war," the feud that had scorched and blighted two generations of grudge-nursing families until a brittle peace had been accomplished.

This man was of that blood, too, and one could fancy his face, even in a scene set to the desperation of smoking rifles, with no other change upon it than a somber fury in its eyes and a tautened straightness at its lips.

Wade must still be in his later twenties, but the volcano of hatred over there in the "Kaintuck Ridges" had not become dormant or ceased to spew its lava of vindictiveness too soon for him to remember it. It had not quieted to a specious tranquillity before he had grown up enough to handle a gun—and presumably he had handled a gun.

It seemed somehow easy to think of him as standing in deep woods or on the streets of a ragged mountain town with little spirals of rifle smoke curling about him and an acrid stench of burned powder lingering in the air.

"Ye says," Chilton heard the other announcing quietly, "that thirty thousand dollars is a right sizable sum of money an' I hain't a seekin' ter belie ye. We've done set our hand-write ter ther papers an' a trade's a trade, but I don't delight none ter look like no fool."

He paused, then went on in the same level, almost monotonous, drawl. "That's why I'm ergoin' ter name hit ter ye right now that I knows full well ye hain't paid me no fa'r price. Hit hain't because I don't know better that I'm gittin' scrouged. Hit's jest because hit satisfies me. I've got a license ter sell cheap an' quick, ef I sees fit, 'stid of hangin' on an' cavilin'."

Mr. Chilton was both startled and relieved, but he gave smiling assurance: "I am acting for others as you know. I am bound by my instructions."

"I didn't aim ter haggle over hit," Murrell reminded him, "or I'd hev done hit afore now—but I hain't ter say ridin' home feelin' like no charity's been done me—an' now I'd be obleeged ter ye ef ye'd go down thar ter ther bank-house an' bid 'em count me out ther money."

Once more the lawyer demurred.

"It's an insane risk to take, Murrell. You're riding lonely roads, and I dare say people in your neighborhood know what you came over here for. Most men have enemies as well as friends. You're probably like the rest of us in that respect."

Beginnings of anger dawned in the gray clarity of the hillsman's eyes, but the rest of the face remained impassive.

"What enemies I've got don't steal," he

said brusquely. "Amongst my friends an' foes alike thar's been some siv'ral killin's off an' on—but I hain't niver heered tell of no thievin'."

"Perhaps then you'll be safe enough when you get into your own hills," suggested Chilton dryly. "And I congratulate you on living in such secure surroundings. But before you cross the Kentucky border you *will* meet people who aren't above stealing."

"Not from me. Once I gits that money, I'll leastways hev hit fer a spell—an' then ther feller thet man-powers hit loose from me, he'll come nigh ter earnin' hit." Murrell broke off abruptly, and once more the warning gleam flashed into his eyes. "I hain't got hit yit, though," he added. "Hev ye got any due reason fer seekin' ter put me off any longer?"

Shelby Chilton laughed and reached for his hat.

"Come on," he said brusquely. "You're your own man and the blood of this folly is on your own head."

Murrell nodded briefly.

"I've done been in thet thar fix afore now. I'll be more satisfied when thet money's in my own saddlebags, too."

Together the two men, one dapper and worldly of appearance, the other an anachronism who had stepped out of another age, left the office and walked past the display windows of gift-shops, tea-rooms and drug stores along Haywood Street to a substantial bank building in Patton Avenue.

The attorney smiled quietly as he explained to the cashier his somewhat unusual wish for so much money in specie and paper. The cashier glanced up, caught a glimpse of the sober faced mountaineer, and an amused grin made its beginnings at the corners of his lips and eyes, the grin of indulgence for the vagaries of a clodhopper. Then, for some reason, as he felt those steady eyes piercingly, unhumorously meeting his own, the smile died aborning, and he nodded with a discreet politeness.

"I see," he said, as if such transactions were the rule rather than the exception. "Suppose you gentlemen step inside," and he waved a directing hand toward a small conference room.

A few minutes later, having verified the count with painstaking care, and having stowed a small amount of money in his trousers pocket, the man from the "Kaintuck Ridges" wrapped a piece of newspaper around the sealed envelope which contained the larger balance. This packet he stowed under his arm as he arose.

To the lawyer, at the door of the bank, he commented briefly: "Now I reckon I'll bid ye farewell." Then, as if a sense of social obligation had belatedly asserted itself, he amended: "Howsoever hit's nigh noontime, hain't hit? I'd enjoy ter hev ye eat a snack with me, ef so be ye kin show me a place whar they sells good vittles at. I reckon ye knows this town better than what I does."

Chilton hesitated, then accepted. This barbarian was a type and to him something of a human enigma. Perhaps now that his money was safe in his pocket, he might be beguiled into conversation, and if he chose to talk there was apt to be rugged drama in his recitals.

"How do you travel back home—horse-back?" inquired the lawyer.

The two were seated now at a dining table in a hotel not so fashionable as others farther from the center of the town, yet fashionable enough, he fancied, to contain elements of wonderment for a backwoodsman.

He had selected the place with a rather malicious delight of anticipation. He wanted to observe the uneasiness of a countryman unacquainted with such an atmosphere of sophistication, and to analyze that countryman's reactions. Whatever acquaintances saw him there would know he had a client in tow, and would understand.

But the man who sat opposite him gave no evidence of either discomfiture or amazement. He sat straight, but not stiff; he looked about him with only a casual and restrained interest, and before he laid his hand on a knife, a fork or a spoon he paused to see how others did these things.

His eyes took in the business of manners so quickly that only one watching him closely would have noted any hesitation. A rude but genuine dignity sat upon the fellow who was in an atmosphere alien to his

life and whose spirit of stoicism scorned any manifestation of embarrassment.

A few tables away a scrupulously dressed man paused and studied him.

That man was a well known actor of the screen who had come to the mountains of North Carolina to make a feud picture. The continuity called for such scenery as was to be had here, and since the hero of red-blooded drama required also, when the make-up was removed and the grease paint cold-creamed away, to have about him the luxuries of civilization, he and his company had selected Hickory Nut Gap near Asheville for their location.

Now he was thinking that for his part, particularly for its manners and its bearing, he might do well to revise his former conception. If he could manage to look like that fellow there—undoubtedly the thing in the flesh that he was aping—he might strengthen his characterization.

It occurred to him suddenly that he had been heretofore in danger of burlesquing it.

"How does I fare home?" repeated Wade Murrell slowly. "Wa'al, from Cowbell Mountain I goes mule-back. I left my ridin' critter th'ar because he fell lame on me. I've got ter git new mule irons on one fore foot an' one hind one."

"But Cowbell Mountain is almost half way, isn't it? How do you cover that distance?"

"Tom Ike Quillen, he aimed ter hev a new fifth wheel put on his joltwagon—an' he didn't want ter leave his corn patch. So I horried his jolt-wagon an' driv ther balance of the way to town. I aims ter hev hit fixed fer him."

"And you start back that same way?"

"When I goes back. I lowed ter sleep hyar ternelight. I misdoubts ther joltwagon hain't finished yit."

"You mean to knock about this town overnight with all that money on you? Don't do it, Murrell."

"I'm obleeged ter ye fer yer counsel," said the hillsman briefly. "I reckon I hain't in no sore peril."

At a near-by table a woman had drawn a silver case from her vanity bag and was lighting a cigarette.

Wade Murrell looked at her for a mo-

ment and his eyes clouded with the intolerant disapproval of the strait-laced—or so his companion read the expression.

"The lady," Chilton informed him quietly, "is a rather celebrated movie actress. Did the cigarette surprise you? It's getting quite ordinary these days."

Murrell's reply was again a surprise.

"I reckon thet's her business—albeit I hates them nasty leetle contraptions," said he shortly. "Hit put me in mind of some-thin' I'd done disremembered, though. I've got ter take my mammy back some pipe tobacco. She loves ther fatched-on kind."

The expression in the clear eyes showed that, for Wade Murrell, the novelties of this place had already faded in interest and that the hillsman's thoughts were back again in his hills. He smiled slowly, and Chilton remembered that he had not seen him smile before.

"God help me," exclaimed the mountaineer, with an explosive burst of emphasis as rare as his smile, "ef I disremembers ter git mule irons put on that ridin' critter of mine afore I starts back! Mammy, she won't niver cease ter fault me fer hit ef I does."

They were rising from the table now, and for an instant Chilton thought the countryman was going to turn away, leaving his packet of new wealth on the tablecloth.

"Don't forget your package, there," he cautioned, and the other turned with an unexcited nod and picked it up.

"I was thinkin' erbout them mule irons," he explained—but it is doubtful if he was so absent-minded as he appeared.

## CHAPTER II.

### AN UNFAIR GAME.

CYNTHIA MEADE was walking with a lively scorn in her eyes. She was searching the shop windows for a news stand where she could satisfy her mental hunger with a New York paper.

Her shallow mind needed occupation and it was to be had only in the news of what was being done in the world. To her, the world meant New York and New York meant Broadway; Broadway, that is to say,

in its generic aspect of febrile sophistication in brains that chronically run a mental temperature.

Like one who had become wedded to the delusion that the only active people are those with St. Vitus dance, he was feeling marooned here in the enforced quiet of Asheville. That it was scenically one of the world's wonder places carried no thrill to her soul—if she had a soul.

The idea that people of wealth and discrimination from her own adored metropolis came here from choice she repudiated in disbelief. If they left a place like that for a place like this, it must be because the poor fish were tubercular and driven by their misfortune into exile.

For the brooding and superb dignity of the ranges that pitched their purple heights against the sky, she had no emotion whatever beyond a realization that she would go to-morrow somewhere into their ruggedness "on location." She would go there for the shooting of those few scenes in the picture in which she had a small and inconsequential part.

Let sick people come here if they must. It made her sick to come. She devoutly wished she had not come. She might be feverish and distempered in her brain, but her young body was brimming with superb health, and it was as magnificent a young body as the brain that inhabited it was trivial.

Passing eyes turned for a second glance at her, and she accepted this sniping scrutiny as a rightful tribute to her beauty, not realizing at all that it was less due to admiration than amusement for the bizarre exaggeration of her street makeup and the challenging indecorousness of her dress. What admiration there was, was purely animal and entirely, if not purely, sensual.

Yet for all the sleazy and overdone cheapness of her finery, for all the overlying stucco gaudiness of painted cheeks and carmine mouth, there was in this girl herself, or would have been if it had been left unspoiled by artifice, a flaming vividness and a breath-catching beauty.

Jock Harrison walked meditatively a half dozen paces behind her until she turned off of Patton Avenue at the post office corner

into Haywood Street. His eyes held a flickering amusement, and although he had been walking with a deliberate detachment of manner he lengthened his stride a little now and, as he came abreast of her, fell into step at her side.

"Hello, Little Bright-Eyes," he accosted her with a patronizing mockery. "This is quite a coincidence—meeting so far from home—isn't it?"

The girl did not alter her pace, and as she looked about at her uninvited companion there was a cool defiance in her eyes; a defiance of unwelcome tinged with anger.

"It isn't any coincidence at all, if you ask me," she replied inhospitably but quietly. "If you ask me, it's a case of butting into my affairs and following me without being asked."

The man smiled. "You didn't tell me you were leaving town," he suggested softly.

"Why should I?" she inquired in a level tone. "What do you think you are—a probation officer? I thought I'd have a little vacation from you down here in this hick burg." She paused, and demanded with a mounting anger: "How did you find out where I'd gone?"

"Aren't you putting a rather flattering aspect on the matter—flattering to yourself, I mean?" He smiled again with a proprietary self-assurance. "Isn't it likelier that business brought me on a twenty-four hour railroad jump than just the hunger to feast my eyes on your young beauty and my ears on your silver voice?"

"I'd get more kick out of thinking you'd stayed away altogether," she announced with a prompt repudiation of his suggestion. "But I know your stuff. I know you snooped around and found out where I'd gone, and then you trailed along. What I want to know is *how* you found out."

Harrison's eyes narrowed into predatory slits, but he kept his voice free of irritation.

"If you want to know," he told her ironically, "you wouldn't have got this job at all except for me. I told Wolf that you could handle a small part. I recommended you. That's why the agency sent for you. That's why you're here working in this triple-star, supremely important super-feature."

The girl glanced up quickly. The gray-green of her fine eyes flashed abruptly and her too brightly painted lips curled.

"I'd half guessed that," she said shortly. "But I didn't stop guessing there. There was a part in this thing I could have eaten up and I asked for it. Did I get it? I did not. Maybe, since you know so much, you know why I didn't get it."

"Perhaps, dearie," he answered easily, "it was because the casting director didn't realize, as well as you did, your transcendent fitness for a bigger role."

"Perhaps—and perhaps not," she flared out at him. "No, when you told your friend Wolf to do this much for me—when you came around doing the Santa Claus act with your cheap little candy cane, you saw to it that he shouldn't put anything better in my stocking."

Cynthia drew her breath between her teeth in a quick and furious little gasp.

"You knew," she went hotly on, "that if I got a chance—a real chance—I'd make good. You know I have the looks and the ability. You know I'm willing to work. You knew, too, that if I got a real chance, I'd tie a can to you—and you saw to it that this gang of pirates just teased me along."

"Such is gratitude," sighed the well-groomed man with the handsome but somewhat dissipated face, who walked at her side. "Scorn for the little boost because it wasn't a ready-to-wear career. A fine young hate on me because I didn't get you starred. Wolf has his own ideas when he hires his people. I call it damned decent of him to do what he could."

"I could have eaten up that other part," she repeated stubbornly. "And it would have made me. Maybe you knew that, too. I suppose you read the continuity?"

"Perhaps."

"Yes, and you headed me off. You black-balled me, didn't you? It's your old game. I know your rotten mind inside-out."

"You think if you keep me dangling long enough—if you can break my heart with discouragement before I make good, I'll give up and drop off the tree—and when I drop you'll be there with your little basket to catch me."

She stopped dead still on the sidewalk, and for a moment the man whose outward seeming, except for the fact that he was walking with a too-flashy woman, was conservative, experienced an apprehensive pang. She appeared on the verge of making a public scene. He knew the storm signal of that mounting temper of old, and he dreaded it.

Cynthia clenched her small fists and her gray-green eyes blazed. Her red head of bobbed hair seemed to blaze, too, and for an instant her anger was the uncensored fury of the gutter-child.

"You—you damned low-life!" she exclaimed.

"And when you drop—and I catch you in my basket," announced the man with deliberate and insulting softness, "there won't be any change in you except that you'll be doing physically what you've always done mentally. You'll merely be playing the game out instead of teasing and quitting, that's all. You'll be giving something for something, instead of just grafting—and now since we've exchanged compliments, let's go somewhere and have a cup of tea."

"No, thank you. I don't want tea, and if I were perishing for it, I'd rather die than have it with you."

"'Rags are royal raiment'—eh?" The man stood looking down on her, and if there was a dawning of anger in his mood, it was only for the circumstance that her fury here on the sidewalk threatened him with an unpleasant conspicuousness. "What's the idea of pulling the affronted virtue stuff, Cynthia? There are no illusions between us. I'd never have known you if I hadn't practically picked you up, would I?"

"You complain that you've never had your real chance, but you wouldn't have had even as much as you have if I hadn't looked after you, would you? I've staked you and I've never made any pretense of doing it out of fatherly charity. Sooner or later you'll drop off the tree all right, little Bright-Eyes, and I might as well catch you as anyone else."

"After all, I like you—and I've got a couple of flasks in my room. Come on and tear my hair in a less public place. You

can work yourself up to a more artistic frenzy with the help of a drink or two."

"I've got my own flask," she told him sullenly. "I don't start out to a dump like this without carrying ammunition."

"Still it will keep," he reminded her. "And once gone it's expensive to replace where one is a stranger and alone. Life is so hard on a woman—in a place where she doesn't know the bootleggers. You'd better hoard your little flask—and drink out of mine."

Cynthia had turned her back and started to walk indignantly away, but suddenly she halted and came back.

"You're right at that," she declared somewhat breathlessly. "We might as well have this thing out, once and for all. The sidewalk isn't the place to settle it and I'm not going to tell you where I'm living. Lead the way to your place—but watch your step. I'm sore as a crab."

"Good," he acquiesced. "I daresay wherever we repair for our little chat you can jolly well take care of yourself."

"That's a bet you can play across the board," she assured him with self-reliant ferocity. "I'll take care of myself all right, but I doubt if you enjoy your tea-party."

Into the hotel that stood in grounds of attractive shrubbery he led the way through a door at a passage end. They did not have to pass through the lobby or entresol, and in the ground level hall, where he turned his key in a door, there was just now a sounding vacancy.

Cynthia looked about the place absently, yet with the attentiveness of one accustomed to question her bearings and to memorize her immediate environs.

As she went through the door, which Harrison swung wide, she paused on the threshold and saw that she was entering a sitting room, from which, on one side, a bedroom gave off.

She flung down on a table the hand bag which she carried, and then flounced sullenly into a morris chair as her host closed the door and disappeared with the announcement that he was in quest of refreshment.

While Cynthia waited she let her smol-

dering eyes travel about the place, and almost at once she found herself gazing into a long mirror that made a fictitious window through an inside wall.

She was, in this instant, prepared to regard herself with the eye of an exacting critic, but unfortunately she was not equipped with the fundamentals of mellowed criteria. The artifice and the vulgarity of her make-up was lost on herself.

She studied the almost full-length portrait that the framed glass gave back to her, and she told herself that none of these screen beauties, whose names and faces were constantly exploited, had anything on her. She tossed aside her small hat, and the bobbed hair of tawny copper flared out around the child face that would have been beautiful except for being cosmetically disfigured.

The body, over which the thin clothes clung like draperies, was slim and as tenderly curved as that of an Aphrodite. Stripped to pagan nakedness or clothed in conservatively considered garments, it would have held the eye and exacted the admiration of a sculptor.

Clothed as it was, it conveyed the rather pathetic impression of calculated enticement.

There was no reason, she told herself fiercely as she studied herself, why she should cool her heels on the lot, struggling for extra parts, or haunt the agencies, begging without success for musical comedy bits, while girls that were less lovely and less industrious progressed toward stardom. There was no reason except one, she concluded bitterly. She was too virtuous.

Such is the pathos of an undeveloped self-analysis. Men like Harrison had, more than once, been willing to set her on the way, for a price. They had always been fatally able to hold her back and thwart and balk her, in default of payment.

She did not recognize that it was less her refusal to pay the price than her equivocal attitude of trying to deceive and use them first that had stood in her way. She could not realize that, in the first place, she had invited such attitudes by leading men on and seeking to gain from them influence and generosity.

"They get on because they pay the price—those successful women," mused Cynthia wrathfully. "And I don't get on—because I'm straight; in spite of the fact that I've got it over lots of them like a roof."

Harrison appeared in the bedroom door with a bantering smile on his face and with a cocktail shaker in his hands. The rattle of the thing was, under his manipulation, like the invocation of some barbaric rite.

"I can read your thoughts, little Bright-Eyes," he declared with a mocking solemnity. "Beauty and virtue in distress. Pining for the empire of success where others are crowned while you look on unsatisfied."

He came over and, setting down the mixer on his table, went back for glasses. From her hand bag the girl extracted a small silver case and lighted a cigarette. She watched the man from under sullenly drooping lids, but her only response was a low and hostile:

"Rave on. You like to hear yourself, and nothing bothers me."

"You hate me," he continued equably, "because I'm honest with you. I've never pulled a line of bunk about worshiping the ground you walk on. I've admitted I like you. I've staked you, from time to time, and paid your bills. Perhaps I understand you better than you understand yourself. So I see you for just about what you are—an unusually pretty little spitfire who wants all the rewards of a life of adventure and who wants to pay none of its penalties. You have still to learn that you can't have both milk and beef from the same cow."

Harrison handed her one of the cocktail glasses with a bow of extreme and exaggerated deference. Suddenly infuriated, she snatched the glass from him and flung it in his face.

The man wheeled, and for an instant his scowl was dangerous. Then with a sudden change of manner he laughed, and, drawing an initialed handkerchief from his pocket, wiped away the stains of his baptism of anger.

"There is an Eighteenth Amendment, little shrew," he reminded her. "Throw lighted lamps or brickbats or bric-à-brac;

but for God's sake spare good liquor! However, here's a dividend," and he retrieved the miraculously unbroken glass.

After refilling it, he handed it to her, and in a quieter but more authoritative voice commanded: "Now lay off the temperamentals and listen to me. Quit kidding yourself with the idea of your great virtue, or else be virtuous."

"What do you mean, be virtuous?" she demanded angrily. "When was I ever anything else?"

"You have never been that—except technically," he assured her calmly. "Because virtue isn't limited to the physical side of life. You think you have in you the makings of an actress. Well, I'll be honest: I think so, too. You're uneducated, but that can be remedied. You're vulgar, but possibly even that can be overcome."

"Perhaps if we'd happened to meet differently—that is to say, on a more platonic plane—I might be willing to get behind you with the big brother stuff and undertake to push you on to victory. As it happens, I didn't meet you that way, and I'm not a fool. You're too light, my dear, to go through the scrimmage and come out unscathed."

After a pause, during which he endured a withering fire out of Cynthia's green eyes, he went on:

"Other men have been nice to you. Why have you picked me out to graft on and quarrel with? I'll tell you. You're in love with me, or infatuated with me, or something of the sort, just as I'm infatuated with you. You rave about hating me, and you run away from me, but you don't run very far."

"If I leave you alone long enough, you call me up. I think you've always had a sneaking hope that you can get me so wild I'll propose marriage. You can't do it, my child. You can get me pretty wild, but not enough for that."

The girl had gulped down her cocktail and had set down her glass.

Now her voice was quiet.

"You say I've played around with other men," she declared. "I suppose you've played around with other girls, too. Why

don't you leave me alone and go back to one of those others?"

She had risen from her chair and was standing by the table.

Slowly the man came over to her, and as he came she stood rigid until they were so close that he looked down into a face from which he could feel the stirring breath.

"Because, you little witch," he broke out in the strained voice of passion—"because I can't break your spell! Because there's something in you that gives the lie to your damned cheap outside. You've the makings of a woman, and life hasn't ever taken hold of you right to shape your moral contours and stiffen your moral fiber. I'm not the man to do it, but I can't break the infatuation. I admit it freely."

Her breast was rising and falling rapidly, and although her lips sneered up at him she did not move. He was right, she thought. At times his hold over her emotions was hypnotic. This, in spite of her anger, was such a moment.

"And you," he went rapidly on—"you can't break permanently with me, either, because, though you pretend to hate me, you love me in your heart. You can't face facts, and you still hope to tie me and throw me and brand me, and marry me—and, so help me God, you shan't do it!"

He broke off with abruptness and stood gasping, and the girl smiled satirically.

"Why should I be so keen about marrying you?" she demanded.

"Because," he answered, "although I'm a rotter of sorts, you want me. Because there's something in me that makes an appeal to you. I don't know what—probably you don't know what—but it's there."

"If you think I'd marry you," she said slowly, "ask me and see."

He smiled sardonically and shook his head.

"I'm not a candidate," he told her.

Suddenly, in a paroxysm of gusty passion, he caught her and crushed her close. For an instant she relaxed in his arms, then her arms closed around his neck and he found her lips responding to his own.

"Yes," she whispered, "I do love you. I hate you like hell—but I love you, too."

"I'll just wait a while," he said with a deliberate brutality, as he drew away and held her at arm's length. "I'll wait until the terms are easier. The time will come."

Cynthia began beating at his face and shoulders with her clenched fists. Her breath was coming fast and hot and her lips were drawn up over her white teeth. "You low-life!" she screamed. "You low-life!"

Harrison walked over toward the hall door. He felt that he had been a fool and turned his back for a moment of self-collection. The girl slowly straightened and turned toward the window, which looked off across the grounds where the sunset was giving way to twilight.

She stood there panting and shaken, and the attitudes of the two were those of persons who have turned their backs on each other in separation.

Suddenly there was a sharp report, like the blowout of an automobile tire. The girl started and peered through the window with the instinct of determining what had happened. She did not remember any driveway just there where a bursting tire would sound with such distinctness. Then she looked back, her attention challenged by another sound within. It was a groan, and she saw the man who had just held her in his arms crumpled on the floor with two hands clutching at his breast: Those hands became instantly still. The whole body became still. This thing was death, she found herself realizing.

Shot! By whom? What had happened?

Suddenly the hysteria of panic seized upon her and wholly obsessed her. What matter who had shot him? If she was found here, it would be she who must suffer. She was in his room. She was not registered. Even in the motion picture company she had no friends to whom she was anything but an extra.

On her quaking knees by his fallen body she laid an ear to his breast. It caught no sound of heartbeat. In a frenzy of fear she went back for her bag and held her tiny mirror to his lips. It showed no breath mist—but her test was made in a fury of hurry.

Whatever had befallen, she must get

away. Get far away and at once! She paused to listen, fearful that hurrying feet and a rush of inquiring humanity would pour in to cut off her escape. So far there was none of that.

She seized up her bag and hat and cautiously let herself out of the door. Very carefully she had walked around the figure that lay on the floor—no longer a man, it seemed—only an insensate thing. Palpably he was dead. He needed no help, and no help would avail, but she desperately needed the help of moments and distance.

The hall was vacant, and she hurried to the door that let her out onto the long porch. Here little groups of people sat indolently in large hickory chairs. She collected herself and strolled through them with the air of one having much leisure and little to break the boredom of life. Now she was acting a part in which it would not do to fail.

Once out in the shrubbery of the grounds, which the dark was taking, that air of detached leisure gave way to the panic spirit of flight once more. Wolf, the motion picture producer, knew Harrison. When the alarm was sounded and the chase began Wolf would speak a word or two, and the trails would converge about her.

She must get away—far away. Not toward civilization, which is linked up into a coöperative system, but toward those mountains where a wilderness lay close at hand.

The one thought that dominated her was flight—fast flight—and flight to the hills.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE SHINING PASSWORD.

A COOL head, inured by experience to the chances of life, would have paused there in the shadow of the lilac bushes that so pleasantly spotted the hotel grounds, and taken stock of the situation. Cynthia Meade was called on now to handle problems with which she was momentarily unable to grapple.

Every thought that paraded across an inflamed panorama of terror joined in a pell-mell stampede which mutilated sanity.

Each new idea presented itself to her imagination as a ponderous block of circumstance, building on others to wall her up in a vault of guilt and conviction.

It did not even occur to her to pause now and question what the actual solution of the mystery might be. Harrison was dead. Of that she did not permit herself to admit any questioning doubt.

Even that certainty was a part of her panic. If there were any chance that he was still living, even she could not callously have turned her back on him without calling help; without doing anything to succor his desperate plight. So scurrying along twisted avenues of subconscious thought, she assured herself there could be no doubt of his death—and so there was nothing she could do—nothing, even, she need try to do.

To get away—that was the one thing. An hour or two ago those timber-cloaked crags had filled her with dread and distaste. Now, like a fox whose heart pounds to the baying of pursuit, no tangle could be too thick, no wilderness of forest too full of concealing shadows.

She drew what scant store of knowledge she possessed about this locality from the haphazard talk of the picture people with whom her fortunes had been temporarily cast, supplemented by what she had seen since her arrival here. The town itself, for all her scorn of it, was a city like other cities. It had hotels and estates that connoted luxury and wealth. It had motor cars like those that one saw in Longacre Square or on Fifth Avenue—and the traffic officers, who directed these, were clad in the livery of the law.

Yet, for all the cosmopolitan aspect of immediate surroundings, she knew that back there beyond those mountain walls there was said to be a life cut off and remote. There dwelt a people who were semi-illiterate and who set their faces against encroachment. Of that life she had a sketchy notion from the picture play in which she had expected to be an actor.

It was being made from a book which she had skimmed through on the train. If that book was a true representation, there lived men and women over yonder who

operated illicit stills far back in the laurel tangles. They guarded their rights jealously with long-barreled rifles; they engaged in feudal warfare, and disliked the law.

Now she must throw herself on the mercy of those rude, fierce folk, who held no brief for police or juries. The story had said that while they set an appallingly cheap price on human life, while they retorted with a rifle shot to inquisitiveness treading too close upon their secrets, yet for the traveler who refrained from such trespass their hospitality was openhanded.

The same authority gave assurance that as the mountaineers answered few questions, so they asked few, and that through the hardihood of the race ran a shagbarked conception of chivalry that safeguarded women in places where men found peril.

She hoped that picture was true, because to its frail warranty she was about to trust her life. Fugitive from a civilization which, to her disordered wildness of thought, was a human system dominated by a hangman, she was plunging for sanctuary into the utterly unknown. She was turning to a life of which she had one portrayal—a depiction contained in a novel whose author, in writing it, had kept one eye fixed on moving picture possibilities and concepts, and no eye at all fixed upon the verities.

It is as well that Cynthia did not know upon what a superficial authority she was depending.

But to get into those hills! She was now at the center of the town, and between this spot and the hinterland lay successive zones of suburb and private estate, of metalled highways where motor traffic swept in seemingly endless current—of ragged and nondescript border country.

Soon the search would start. As soon as the body was discovered, that search would swing into its full and irresistible headway with forces gathering and multiplying at its back—and she would be its victim. She would be the victim because she would, at first glance, fit logically into an assumption of guilt. The inquiry would then pause—the trail grow cold—and the prosecutors would hold on to her, esteeming one defendant in the hand worth two in the bush.

She had read of people being “framed” because the enforcers of the law must make a substantial showing of success. She must be away from here at once—before, in the sense of its modern equivalent, the gates of the city closed and the drawbridges swung up.

Cynthia Meade was in a mania of terror. Frenzy was paralyzing a mind which, for all its shallowness, in normal conditions was shrewdly keen. She was driven by furies of nightmare horror, and all her perceptions, thoughts, instincts, came back to the hammering reiteration of one refrain—“flight to the hills—flight to the hills!”

To-morrow morning, when the company came together to start on location, even so unimportant a member as herself would be missed. Then, even if the links had not before been drawn together, Wolf, the picture producer, who had appeared to be unaware of her existence when she sought to emphasize it, would find her immensely important.

He would know, as others did not, that this girl had been a protégée of the dead man’s; that they had been together; that one was dead and the other gone. It behooved her to be far away before that discovery was made, before questions were asked.

This was all the sheer folly of disordered fright, and even Cynthia would have known it in a saner mood. The one circumstance that could link her perilously to the crime was this very flight she was undertaking. Had she stayed and stoutly asserted the facts, she would have thrown the burden elsewhere.

Had she even stayed and held her tongue, it is doubtful if any one could have testified that she had gone with Harrison to his room. But this phase of the matter she could not consider, or could consider only to reject it. It seemed to her that every one in Haywood Street must have seen the two of them walking together—must have seen her stop on the sidewalk and clench her fists and call the man an ugly name.

Except for casual acquaintances in the cast, some of whom had already evinced a catty dislike of her, she knew not a soul

in this city. She could not think of a friend in the whole sovereign State which would have the task of putting her into the prisoner's dock and trying her for her life.

But over there "back of beyond," where the mountains were broken ramparts, she had heard some say that State lines came together in ragged spurs like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. She had a vague idea that once across a State boundary one gained an initial advantage against prosecutors. People could fight extradition, if the worst came. That was all for later consideration. The thing now was to get away—far away and speedily.

She did not even dare go to her lodgings for her suit case, or to change out of the clothes she wore; a sleazy finery absurdly unsuited to mountain travel. That room was shared by another girl, and the girl might be there. At a question she felt she would shriek. At the requirements of conversation she would begin raving.

She turned after a deeply long breath, seeking to crush out of sight her facial betrayal of fear, as one hastily crowds rumpled and untidy things into a chest and slams down the cover. Then she went out again to Haywood Street, walking carefully, assuming a nonchalance that might not transform her conspicuously from what she had been before the moment that had changed everything.

Harrison had been right. She had in her the makings of an actress. Now she was giving a performance that proved intrinsic ability. With a conflagration of terror running destructively through the whole fabric of her consciousness, she still carried herself with the cool, deliberate slouch of a bored flapper.

Every few steps she had to conquer anew the impulse to break and run—and to scream as she ran, but she went on with an impudent half smile on her painted lips, a picture of human vacancy.

After walking a while she came to a cross street that seemed a quieter byway. The houses facing on it were, in many instances, unlighted and looked like feed establishments and produce stores. Into it Cynthia turned, her ears still tense for the general outcry which her alarm predicted.

One could not plan definitely in surroundings of utter strangeness. One could only make wild haste, trusting to instinct, seeking concealment, hurrying and doubling as the rabbit and the fox do when the chase is on. But the rabbit and fox are born to that necessity, and react to the needs and the experience of countless generations trained in the same school.

This girl came from a city where six million souls lived a collective life which encroached on individual action and became dependent on a thousand complexities—a life that stifled independence when the call came to stand alone or run alone.

Now she turned into the less traveled street only because it seemed darker and quieter, only because she felt that there she could catch her breath for a few moments—and yet her inward urge spurred her steps almost to a run.

Soon the side street betrayed her.

She saw a burst of electric glare just ahead and found herself standing with a brightly lighted drug store at one side, an equally garish moving picture theater just across the way, and before her Pack Square, the central nucleus of the town. That open area clanged with trolley cars that centered here from every radiation of the system's web, linking all the places, urban and suburban, that were served by the enterprise of a growing city.

The light of Pack Square, even here at its less crowded end, seemed to beat upon her sensitiveness with the painful intensity of the Kleigs when a studio scene is being shot and when the ghastly blaze stabs at the eyeballs. To the fear-appalled spirit whose windows were these throbbing eyes, the publicity appeared as intensified as if this were in actuality a studio set.

To her fancy it seemed that the camera man had his instrument trained on her, and the director was yelling through his megaphone: "Register despair! Register that every one thinks you've just killed a man, and you can't prove your innocence."

There was a strangling gasp in the girl's throat, but seeing a man pause and look at her, she stood indolent for a moment, forcing into her face the blankness of a bored indifference.

The man, who had stopped near her, was heavy of stature and heavy of feature. He looked like a traveling salesman, but he thought he knew his world and inferred that such costume and make-up denoted the offer of casual companionship in a strange town.

"Hello, Cutie!" he accosted her genially. "How about taking in a picture show?"

He had drawn alongside now, and Cynthia noticed with the insistence of absurd detail, that although his clothes were not shabby, his belt and patches of silk shirt showed under the side flaps of his waistcoat.

"I guess you've made a mistake," she said with a heavy dignity. There was no time to be wasted now in giving him the disdainful sort of turn-down that she would have preferred. Dignity was the cue, and with a flash of positive genius she drawled: "I reckon you don't know the South very well—or its women. That policeman over there—"

The man was gone, and a laugh of sheer hysteria sought to break outward through the girl's tight throat. Even to her the grim humor of suggesting an appeal to the police seemed infinitely ironic. It proved, though, that now she could play a bluffing hand.

There was no time for worrying about would-be mashers. She was in one of the most public spots in the town, and the vital thing was to get out of it. For only so long a time could she go on acting out this calm indifference when her emotions were seething like lava. For only so long a time could she carry this effrontery before getting off the lighted stage and collapsing in the wings.

Now that she was here, and the street cars were here, the best move appeared to be to grab a car. Here came one now, and it was going west. Her eyes could not read the sign that told its destination, despite their seeming clarity. Of her eyes just now she was making objects to be seen, and not to see; screens, and not windows; agents to deceive, and not to inform. For such things as a car placard they were, to all intents and purposes, blind.

The thing was headed west. That was the point. There was enough afterglow over the shaggy poll of Sunset Mountain, over there, to prove that; and every one knew that as the east stands for civilization, so the west connotes the wilderness. That was her direction, and here was her conveyance. She crossed the tracks and climbed aboard, and, with a sigh of relief, realized that so soon as it had left the square behind the track pointed along a dipping and climbing street where the lights were spaced to a rarer frequency.

She could never remember much about that trolley ride. She knew only that she was being jerked and jolted through wastes of blind agony. The terror had brought a physical as well as a mental nausea. Her head spun to a vertigo, and she rode with her teeth clamped and her hands clenched, yet striving to sit straight and look untroubled. It seemed to the refugee that her features had set like cement or like the face that has compelled a certain expression in the throes of death so that it shall remain unchanged when *rigor mortis* has put a period to the flexibility of nerves and muscles.

Vagueiy at last she heard a pleasantly drawling voice coming softly through space: "This is the end of the line, lady. Are you ridin' back with us?"

With a start and an attempt to smile, which she felt to be a grimace, she arose, achieving the feat with great effort, and left the car.

Night had come down like a blanket now, and as she stood on the small platform where the car line made its loop she was looking off into a darkness in which a mountain loomed only as a gigantic shadow a little heavier than the general shadow which made up the west. Spots of light, here and there, proclaimed scattered houses growing sparser as they went up the slopes.

But there seemed to be a road running toward unlit obscurity—a road which was not metaled and which did not break into stripes of white glare with the frequent onrush of motor headlights. The road looked to her as if it plunged straight from the end of the rails into the other world of which she had read in that novel, which was

her one standard of information. She could not guess that it was one some few miles long, giving a steep short cut to another broad and metaled thoroughfare that reached smoothly toward Tennessee—a ragged filament clinging to the Dixie Highway.

Into it, staggering a little now with the grogginess of suppressed excitement, and walking as unsteadily as a drunken wench, Cynthia Meade set her steps as if into a Rubicon of blackness. Soon she paused and let the pent-up stress of her soul run out in a sobbing moan of relief. For a little while it seemed to her that she had obliterated herself, that she had reached a refuge of obscurity, and had locked a door against the world.

It was as if she had gained the boon of invisibility.

But that was momentary.

A road like that exists only because it is steep and rutty. A short cut, that only slow teams can pantingly manage, is no easy thoroughfare for a young woman, however lithe and strong, who walks on the absurd little stilts of high-heeled slippers, and who is clad in the sleazy gossamer of a costume that is easily shredded by brier and thorn.

After a stumbling half hour Cynthia sat down and cried. Already she had turned an ankle, and though it had not been sprained, it had given her pangs of pain and the deeper pangs of realizing her inadequacy to face what lay ahead of her—as yet hardly tasted.

Before she could bury herself in the forested hinterland, where dwelt the people to whom she was fleeing, she must cover a score or more of miles that were worse than this beginning—and she saw now that if this sort of thing kept up she would reach them with her thin clothes stripped to tatters, or as naked as a Lady Godiva. Not only must she hurry, but also she must grope along carefully, straining her eyes and feeling her way.

Then the greater fear, like a wolf preying on its fallen pack-mates, devoured lesser alarms. The urge of putting space between her and the town whose lights hung in the easterly sky consumed pain, weakness,

every lesser thing, and she arose and stumbled on with an increasingly reckless haste.

It seemed to her that for hours she went like that, stopping to pant, blundering into tree trunks and rocks—sometimes being violently tripped and thrown, then rising sobbingly and forging ahead once more.

Perhaps in reality she had covered four miles.

But in a few hours she had been through a century of anguished dread and a purgatory of shock. She had eaten no food since noon. The high heel of one slipper had turned sidewise and then had broken loose. She had carefully put it in her hand bag. Now she was limping with one foot stilted and the other flat. Her stockings of sheer silk had been scratched into runs and tears, and the legs under them smarted and bled.

In sensible clothes and by daylight she could have done the same thing as a hike, and done it cheerfully. Now she was dangerously close to collapse—on the very threshold of her enterprise.

She went on, blundering more and more, and beginning to dread what lay ahead almost as much as what lay behind. There came moments when it seemed almost easier to turn back. That at least was known. Even the police would take her to jail in a motor-driven patrol wagon.

But she brushed those misgivings aside with savage obduracy and plodded westward. A human being fleeing for his life may falter, but the spur of instinct drives him on. Twice she stumbled and seemed to wrench every muscle in her body. The third time she lay for a while sobbing softly in a tide of weak self-pity. Then she swore a little and clambered up and went on. Her young body was strong, but her mind was demoralized and its weakness spread contagiously to her muscles.

But the fourth time she caught her foot in a stiff root that reached out tremendously on the broken way, and when she went down her head struck something hard. She lay where she fell.

She was not quite insensible, and yet not quite conscious.

Either in actuality or in a troubled dream

—she did not know or inquire which—she saw a small spot of light that appeared to come slowly closer, as tediously as a glow-worm.

She felt the need of rising and crawling back into the timber, but a large and impersonal languor had overwhelmed her. She did nothing, and in the stargleam the smudge of dull light made its slow approach.

With that approach might come anything—yet at the moment any effort to escape its menace was as impossible as it sometimes becomes in nightmare to run from calamity. She had come this far with a supreme effort, and now at the first approach of tangible danger she found herself helpless. Groping in the shadowy half consciousness of one stunned, the girl sought to focus—to revitalize—her energies for one move more, but like a guttering candle flame her self-defensive consciousness flared and went out. She was insensible.

Her next moment of anything like clear perception was when she saw a human shape looming over her, grotesquely magnified and distorted by the wavering light of a lantern held close to her face, and heard a voice exclaiming:

“Afore God, hit’s a woman! An’ hit ain’t no mounting woman!”

Cynthia Meade held her breath until it almost suffocated her. Here in the person of a rough countryman stood the figure of fate. Here might be deliverance, protection—or the power to turn her back into the hands she sought to escape with the ruthless ease of tossing a rat to a terrier.

In the flicker from the yellow lantern the girl could make out, in the road, the shape of a wagon with a canvas top stretched over arching supports. In the streets of Asheville she had seen several of these same strange vehicles, and they had appeared as out of place among the limousines that swept by them, as high-pooped galleons riding at anchor in the shipping of a modern harbor.

The flare fell, too, on the face of a man who held the lantern, and in that deceptive lighting he looked gigantic, formidable.

But the face was, on the whole, reassuring. There was a kindliness in the eyes

and a lean strength of jaw and feature that declared generosity as well as granite-firm boldness. At all events, his one utterance had been in the dialect of the mountaineer. Sooner or later she must throw herself wholly on the mercy of such a hillsman. That was the essence of her plan. The chance was no more perilous now than it would be later.

He was holding a flask in his hand, and as she looked up, wide eyed, he knelt down without a word, slipped an arm under her shoulders, and pressed the thing to her lips.

“Ye seems plum spent,” he announced briefly. “Don’t aim ter talk none yit a while. Jest take a long swig outen this.”

As if a liquid fire had been poured between her lips, she gasped and coughed, then felt the potent liquor delightfully tempered below her spasmodic throat, warming and reviving her arteries and soothing the nerves that had seemed dead.

Meanwhile the man said nothing more. But when she arose unsteadily to her feet and he saw that she could stand, he spoke gravely:

“I don’t know what manner of mischance befell ye, ma’am, an’ I hain’t a-seekin’ ter question ye none. But I kain’t handily leave ye hyar ter perish by ther roadside.” He broke off, and then went on again with a trace of impatience in his voice. “An’ yit I reckon ye belongs back thar in Asheville town, an’ I’m headed t’other way.”

He shook his head and added doggedly: “Thar hain’t nuthin’ else fer hit. I’ve p’intedly got ter head round ergin an’ fotch ye back ter town.”

A flood of unspeakable fears rushed afresh on the girl. She must not go back to town, and yet what could she tell this man? There appeared one effort only worth making, and that effort was to throw herself completely and unequivocally on his mercy. She had hoped to be farther away from the city before she cast the dice—but she could not govern fate.

“No, no!” she exclaimed, clutching spasmodically at his arm. “I can’t go back. It would mean death. Death, I tell you! Which way are you going?”

"I'm a-faring a longish distance over inter Kaintuck," he informed her gravely. "But thet's a kinderly rough land—an' I don't reckon hit's no place fer *you*."

"Let me go with you," she pleaded, still holding desperately to the forearm, which under her clutching fingers had grown as hard as rawhide bound over steel. "For God's sake, let me go with you—it's life or death to me!"

The words were few, but they came with a vehemence of despair, and the eyes in the lantern's light were those of one who looks up, drowning, out of deep water. For a long time, it seemed to her, the man stood with eyes boring into her face. She could see that back of those eyes many thoughts were tangled in conflict; that they were moving forward and backward across an area of judgment at once impulsive and cool.

At length the man said slowly: "I told ye jest now that I didn't aim ter question ye none—but thet was afore I knowed ye sought ter fare along with me. Ye says ye're in some fashion of dire peril back thar. What that peril is, is yore business, not mine."

He paused, and his voice hardened. "But afore I kin take ye on with me I've got ter put one question ter ye, p'int-blank. Air ye decent?"

"So help me God," she said solemnly, "I am decent. That's why I'm in trouble."

The man's head snapped down and up in a nod of determination and of a decision fully made.

"All right, then," he answered crisply, "thet's all I've got ter know—right now. I'm a-farin' over ter ther head of Leetle Flinty, in ther Kaintuck Ridges—an' I goes by ther name of Wade Murrell."

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### SPEAKING OF THE LAW.

**I**T had seemed to Cynthia a long, indecisive moment when she had put her impassioned plea and when the stranger, who called himself Wade Murrell, had stood there soberly weighing it while her

future hung balanced. He had said he "didn't aim ter ask her no questions," yet she felt that the steady searching of his eyes had not only questioned but cross-questioned and tried her.

Then had come his one interrogation, "Air ye decent?" seeming to dismiss and cut away all irrelevancies, all the complexities which such a man could afford to jettison, and to summarize the issue into a stark but uncompromising simplicity.

Amazingly swift had been his decision when his one question had been put and answered. Astonishingly free from complication had been the stride of his mind from problem to solution, and in that solution she had read for herself a verdict of acquittal.

Now, after the first surge of enormous relief, came the reaction of physical and nervous exhaustion. She stood leaning weakly against the shaggy bole of a towering pine, and her eyes slowly began taking in unconsidered items of the picture before her as if with returning sight after blindness. It was a picture which had for its background a gigantic bulk of timbered mountain, and nearer at hand the clumsiness of a tarpaulin-covered wagon and a team which stood with hanging heads and shagily uncurried coats.

But in the narrow circle of lantern light it was the man himself, standing a few paces away from her, who naturally dominated the picture and the interest of the picture.

He was a tall man, sloping wedgelike from a generous breadth of shoulder to a slenderness of waist and hips, and his unsmiling face looked at her out of eyes that abashed her with their seriousness and penetration. Before his scrutiny she felt transparent, and yet he did not seem to stare. Rather, he appeared incurious.

His features gave the impression of being boldly painted on canvas with the sure breadth and unmincing strokes of a large brush. For standing there, almost immovable, with the tricky light of the lantern causing bits of ragged tree trunk and scraps of drooping pine branch to bite into vision out of the darkness, it was all more like a picture than animate life.

Suddenly the girl, who had been so obsessed with a single fear that lesser fears had been merged, began to be afraid of the wilderness and of this man who seemed a spirit of the wilderness.

She would be riding into the hinterland with an unknown young giant who had about him the strength, the boldness, and perhaps also the ruthlessness of a wolf. Perhaps back of the abrupt decision he had made lay an intent rather wolfish than generous, and as she looked into his face his eyes hardened until they frightened her into violent trembling.

He opened his lips as if to speak, a sudden scowl sweeping blackly over his face, then closed them still in silence. He had been standing with his feet wide apart and his hands hanging at his side, looking at her with unflickering yet detached intentness.

Against that dark curtain of forest and night she was a vivid thing to see, a scrap of living color like human fire. She was bareheaded and the curling bobbed hair caught the lantern light and flung it into a coppery nimbus. Her eyes were of gray-green, like illumined jade, and her features, under their paint, were arrestingly good. Cynthia, when she forgot the slouch which she affected as her idea of fashionable poise, carried her supple young body with the instinctive grace of a dancer. To the man she seemed almost unbelievably beautiful.

He had no power to differentiate between the genuine and the artificialities of city women, between the sterling mark of high breeding and its cheaply bizarre imitation. Here the spurious struck him with all the force of the real, and with such men as he first impressions bite deep.

If for an instant there had leaped in his own eyes a light that had frightened her, it is not to be wondered at, and if she had shivered in a momentary fear of him, that was not to be wondered at either. But he saw and rightly interpreted the shudder.

Wade Murrell took off his black hat and ran his hand through his blacker hair.

"Ef so be, ye're afeared ter trust yoreself with me," he announced bluntly, "ye hain't got no bound ter go on. God knows, I hain't a'seekin' ter over-persuade ye."

Instantly her fears switched again from the minor to the major import. The one cardinal danger was not that of trusting herself to him, but of his changing his mind and refusing to take her. He had appeared to her a shape of rescue, and the thought of losing him stunned her.

"Why should I be afraid of you?" she demanded almost breathlessly. "I asked you to take me, didn't I? You *must* take me."

"An' yit I seed hit in yore eyes jest now thet ye was affrighted of me," he made grave response. "I hain't faultin' ye none fer thet. I reckon men hev done give women full cause ter feel thetaway since ther world began—an' ye hain't nuver seed me afore. Fer all *you* knows I mout be ther orneriest hellion atter women in these mountings."

The girl's eyes flared with illogical anger.

"I took you for a man of your word," she blazed out with the sudden gusty temper of one whose nerves are overtried and edgy. "You said you would take me into the mountains. If you've changed your mind, for God's sake, say so. Don't try to make me back out of it by frightening me. There isn't anything in your hills—including yourself—that I'm as much afraid of as—as things back there."

"Mebby thet's because ye don't know them hills," he suggested.

Wade Murrell put his hat back on his head with a slow gesture. Then he opened his coat and vest, and from a huge holster strapped under his armpit drew out a heavy automatic pistol.

Cynthia's eyes widened at the sight of the wicked looking weapon and instinctively she drew back a step, but the man twirled the thing on his palm so that the muzzle was at his own chest and the grip toward her.

"I said I wasn't faultin' ye, an' I meant hit," he repeated slowly. "Ef so be ye're timorous ter start out journeyin' through ther night, all alone with a man ye hedn't nuver seed afore—wa'al, I couldn't handily blame ye."

He took a step nearer and proffered the pistol.

"When I gives ye that," he said simply,

"ye're a better man then what I be, because I hain't got no other weepin' on me, save only a jack-knife—an' thet's got a busted blade. Now I reckon ye'd better git inter thet thar jolt-wagon, because I aims ter fare onward. I'm in haste—but I'm willin' ter go forward or back—whichever ye says."

He pointed to the wagon, and she went toward it, refusing to accept the pistol and pausing for a moment to consider the matter of reaching the high seat over the wheel. Murrell remained standing where he was and made no offer to assist her. Some sense told the girl that, for all his disclaimers, he was affronted at her suspicions, and that, even to help her mount to the awkwardly steep place where she must sit, he would not touch her unless she asked it.

She flirted her bobbed head and climbed up with the unaided agility of a monkey, and as she went the man, who was used to barefooted women in calicoes, caught a glimpse of shapely legs that showed the flesh of their knees over rolled stockings of silk—now torn and spoiled.

"Which way—once an' fer all?" he demanded.

"Any way," she made savagely emphatic reply, "except back."

When she had seated herself, he himself hung the lantern under the forward axle and mounted to his own place, gathering up his reins and flapping them over the backs of the two horses.

For a while Cynthia leaned against the hooped support that held the covering, her eyes, in the duskiess, looking through half-closed lids at the head that was a silhouette of shadow.

"Is the road all like this?" she asked in a low voice, feeling a vast relief in the shadowy protection of the dark and the wildness—in the absence of alarming headlights and the shriek of motor horns.

She saw the driver's head shake.

"Hit hain't skeercely more'n a whoop an' a holler from hyar afore we comes out ergin on a new-fangled road with automobiles ski-hootin' along hit like shootin' stars," he said.

Cynthia gasped and for a little while sat silent, her heart palpitating with a new fear.

She had hoped that the hills had taken them.

At length she heard the voice, this time soothingly low, inquiring:

"Don't ye enjoy ter ride highways thet's full-traveled?"

Just as between her involuntary exclamation of fear and his question there had been a margin of silence, so now between his question and her answer another elapsed. Then she found her voice sounding strained and taut—though she was trying stanchly to conceal her desperation.

"No, I hate them," she said, "I might as well tell you. I haven't done anything wrong—but I've been put in a position I can't explain. I don't want to be where there are officers of the law." She broke off, then swept on again passionately. "I give you my word, I'm as innocent as a baby—but I can't prove it."

He made no answer for a few moments, but as the wagon lumbered around the first turn of the journey the rutted road dropped suddenly, and, at what seemed a steep distance below, the girl could see shafts of rapidly traveling light cutting swaths in the darkness. That must be the road of which he had spoken—the road where ended her little plunge into a concealing wilderness.

Wade Murrell jerked his horses to a standstill and clamped on the cumbersome brake. He turned and faced Cynthia, holding her eyes with his own.

"I'm travelin' in ther night time 'stid of by day," he informed her, "because hit's kinderly easier on ther horse-critters an' likewise because ther shortest way ter Cowbell Mounting lays along thet thar road. In the night time a man kin drive handier, because he don't hev ter keep turnin' out so offen fer them automobiles. Nuthur me ner these critters hain't none too well used ter them things."

He paused, and the girl nodded her head as if accepting a necessary ordeal.

"Ef we makes good time," the man went on, "come sun-up, we'll be offen thet thar new-fangled highway ergin an' gittin' right nigh ter Cowbell Mounting."

"Is that where you live?"

"Not by a jugful," he answered. "That's jest ter say ther start of ther jour-

ney, but thet's es fur as this jolt-wagon goes. From thar on, we journeys acrost ther tail end of Tennessee over ter old Kaintuck—an' we goes with one mule critter. We travels ride an' tie."

"Ride and tie?" she repeated in bewilderment. "I don't understand."

Patiently he explained. "Thet's ther only way two folks kin go when they hain't got but only one ridin' critter betwixt 'em—save only ef they rides double, an' most of ther goin's too slavish fer thet. One body rides on a spell an' then gits down an' ties his critter ter a flyin' limb an' goes on hoofin' hit. T'other comes along an' mounts an' passes ther feller on foot, an' then atter a spell he lights down an' ties. Hit's jest takin' turnabout ridin' an' walkin', that's all."

"Where did you say you lived?"

"In ther Kaintuck Ridges back beyant Big Pine."

"Oh," she murmured somewhat feebly.

"Didn't ye never hear tell of ther Kaintuck Ridges?"

"No."

"I reckon ye hain't niver lived nowhars save in hugeous big cities like Asheville-town, hev ye?"

Through all her nervous tension, the Broadway instinct in this shallow-witted young fugitive wanted to break into derisive laughter. What sort of savage could this be to whom Asheville appealed as a "hugeous big city?"

But she spoke soberly.

"I come from New York."

"I've done heered tell of hit," he replied with equal gravity, and it was as if he felt, although he was too polite to express it, a sense of superior information, since he knew of her place while she was ignorant of his.

But if a little fleck of the ludicrous had flashed across her heavy mindedness with that interchange, it went into instant darkness like a shooting star. With his lines hanging and his eyes on hers, Wade Murrell began again and this time his voice carried a note of grimness.

"I reckon fer a gal like you, thet only knows how ter live in crowds of folks an' thet goes dressed up in fancy fixin's—I

reckon fer a gal like that, hit hain't nuthin' less then plain unshirted hell ter be farin' over inter a place like ther Kaintuck Ridges—with a man thet she don't know ther which ner ther whether erbout. I reckon nobody wouldn't skeercely undertake hit—ef they wasn't leavin' somethin' behind 'em thet was—wa'l, a liddle bit wuss then unshirted hell."

"I've told you—" she began, but he cut her short with an uplifted hand.

"Don't tell me nuthin'," he commanded. "I hain't askin' questions. I'm aimin' ter tell *you* somethin, an' hit's kinderly slavish because I hain't hed no master great schoolin' in handlin' words."

He broke off and then went on with an obdurate sort of intentness. "I knows ye wouldn't hev tuck up with me this fashion save only thet ye felt plum obleeged ter git erway. Ye says ye dastn't face ther law albeif ye're innocent of any wrong."

"I guess that sounds queer," she began again, and again he cut her short.

"Hit don't sound quare ter me," he assured her. "Hit sounds right sensible. Thar's good laws an' thar's bad laws. Thar's laws thet hit's seemly ter keep and laws thet hit's seemlier ter bust. Thar's laws thet hit's seemly ter keep sometimes an' seemly ter break other times, an' then ergin, thar's laws thet's all right in themselves, but thet jedges an' sheriffs an' ther like kin make a stench in ther nostrils of mankind." Once more the man interrupted himself with a parenthesis.

"I'm talkin' now erbout man-made laws. I reckon no godly man seeks ter cavil with ther laws of God. Ther amount of what I'm drivin' at is this. Hit's plum nat'ral that ye mout mistrust me. I'm a man, an' albeif I don't aim ter brag, I'm a survigrous strong man. Ye haint nuthin' but a gal. Ye starts out with me, an' ef I wanted ter do hit I could make light of ye. Thet's why I proffered ye my pistol-gun—ter ease yore mind. Es fer ther law—ter hell with hit! I don't owe hit nuthin'. I've got a kinsman thet's a jedge an' he's a good man. I've got another one thet's in ther penitenshery, an' he's a good man, too."

Cynthia felt that she ought to say something, but a large doubt as to what it should

be silenced her. She felt all afloat in unstable and strange waters.

"I stopped hyar afore I went down inter thet highway," he told her, "because I aimed ter make ye understand me if so be I could. Ye kin crawl back thar inter ther bed of this jolt-wagon afore we turns outen this trail, if ye've a mind ter do hit. Thar's some hay in thar that I was totin' along fer ther critters an' thar's a kinderly kiver thar thet ye kin pull up over ye. Nobody hain't ergoin' ter meddle round peerin' inter this jolt-wagon whilst I sets on ther box.

"I'm a right ignorant sort of a man-person, but someways I've done tutored myself. I knows some law. No sheriff ner deputy, ner yit no milishyman kain't stick his nose inter my jolt-wagon without he shows me a s'arch warrant—an' hit's got ter be a plum legal s'arch warrant. So long as we fares along that road an' so long as ye stays outen sight inside thar, I reckon ye kin feel tol'able safe. When we gits ter Cowbell Mounting, I reckon them officers ye dreads won't skeerly find ye."

The young woman with the bobbed head and the absurd Broadway finery leaned forward and laid a trembling hand on his forearm.

"Why do you do these things for me?" she asked. "Why do you take this trouble?"

"Mebby I've done been in trouble myself afore now," he answered. "Mebby I've done needed friends ter hide me out, an' then ergin—" He stopped suddenly and his voice changed. "Mebby," he added, "I'm jest aimin' ter beguile ye twell I gits ye out thar in them hills whar ye kain't defend yoreself erginst me."

"The funniest thing about it," she declared, "is that I'm not worrying about that last thing. I did for a minute, but that's over. You're a good scout."

"All right, then, I reckon we kin start onward," suggested Murrell. "So soon es ye've done laid down in ther jolt-wagon."

As the girl started to climb back he added slowly:

"Ye hain't give me no name ter call ye by yit, an' hit's kinderly handy ter know a body's name.

"It's Cynthia—"

Before she could finish he stopped her.

"Hold on," he enjoined. "Sometimes when a person finds hit wuth while ter change from one dwellin' place ter another fer reasons thet's th'ar own business, hit's kinderly thoughted ter change names es well es places. What I don't know I kain't tattle erbout—even ef I gits swore on ther Bible. Stop an' study a minute afore ye gives me any name at all—an' whilst ye're erbout hit ye mout jest es well think up a pretty one."

"Call me Cynthia Stokes," she said, laughing in spite of herself. Because she was suddenly enveloped in a sense of secure protection, she laughed without restraint, and the man thought it a musical sound.

She was back now in the covered wagon, stretched at length on sweet smelling hay with a tarpaulin where, at need, it could be drawn up to cover her from head to heel.

Wade Murrell handed a bulky something back to her.

"Ye mout put thet under yore head fer a pillow," he said. "Them's my saddlebags, but be kinderly heedful not ter lose 'em outen ther jolt-wagon because thar's thirty thousand dollars inside 'em."

## CHAPTER V.

### IN OUTLANDER GARB.

ONCE the wagon had toiled down the rough declivity and turned into the white road, it lumbered along with less bone racking, and with the bed of hay under her, Cynthia Meade's tired body relaxed. For awhile, each flare from the lamps of a passing car caused her to start into fresh wakefulness and palpitation. But the motors always swept by without pausing, and that anxiety gradually dulled until she found herself growing drowsy.

At length, she heard a seemingly strange, shrill voice crooning a song, and half sat up with a start. She had not yet learned how these mountain people, when they sing, change into thin minors that are almost falsetto, or with what a weird sadness they resort to minstrelsy.

But she assured herself it was only Wade Murrell, and she settled back again, letting

the quavering song serve as a lullaby. That was the last thing she remembered of the night, and through her dreams ran fantastic variations of the verses:

Wa'al Joseph was an old man,  
An old, old man was he,  
When he wed ther Virgin Mary,  
Ther Queen of Galilee.

Murrell had breakfast ready when Cynthia opened her eyes upon a depressing grayness of dawn-mists with the momentarily lost feeling of one who awakens in strange surroundings and is conscious only of bleak forebodings. Then as the train of events which had followed on a single moment of catastrophe trooped back to her memory her heart sank in a sickening depression.

The first elation of escape had ceased now to be everything. Even if she were indeed safe from pursuit, she had bought her immunity at the price of an exile that was hardly better.

Heretofore, she had seen these mountains only from a train window or towering against the skyline from a city's streets. Now, although the morning fog swallowed their parapets in a wet and dispiriting gray, she could feel them bleak, forbidding and monumental, appearing to crowd menacingly upon her and stifle her with nameless terrors.

Even the man whom she had seen last night by lantern light appeared changed in the gray dawn. He seemed more domineering now and more wolflike in the certainty of his strength. It was as though, in his own habitat, he had expanded and thrown off the humility of a strange environment.

To her city eyes, this morning, he appeared rather the tyrant than the hero, and from his back-country roughness she recoiled in fastidious distaste.

When the coffee and coarse corn-pone had been eaten the early mists had begun to lift, and the sun that had been a pallid disc had turned to rose, awakening patches of color amazingly delicate and beautiful. Over an infinity of peak piled upon peak the day was strengthening into a flawless clarity.

To another eye there must have been

sublimity in the prospect of this immense unveiling. Ridges magnificently timbered to their tops and cloaked with blooming rhododendron; walls of cliff that had the splendor of palisades and the sparkle of water tumbling into long cascades made a majesty of beauty—but Cynthia thought of elevated railways and sighed heavily-heartedly. These were the hills to which she had fled, but she found them unlike her preconceived ideas and vastly more terrifying.

"God knows," she told herself in bitter silence, "if I ever get back to New York again, I'll never kick at anything. Even the East Side and Harlem look pretty good to me now."

Loneliness like that of a child in an empty house laid its chill and cramp against her heart—a heart that could beat comfortably only in the feverish excitement of crowds.

Near noon Murrell pointed his hand from a hill-top to a scrap of ragged land in a hollow deep below, where stood a dilapidated building of tawdry meanness.

"Thet thar's whar Tom Ike Quillen dwells at," he informed her. "An' thet's whar we stops at ter leave this hyar jolt-wagon an' git our ridin'-critter. I reckon we'll eat us some dinner thar, too."

The young woman's heart sank lower, and the only answer she could manage was a sullen nod of her unreconciled head.

The wagon strained slowly down a boulder-strewn way, rocking from side to side until the fagged team plodded into a creek bed and followed its course between rank screens and heavy foliage. Down there the air hung damp and stifling.

Then the way straightened and climbed abruptly until it became a narrow, rutted strip of sun baked clay from which one could see, near at hand and with more dispiriting detail, the structure which was their destination.

It had not even the alleviating dignity of the pioneer log cabin, but stood gaunt and squalidly hideous with its exterior of undressed lumber in a yard area trampled bare of grass, but thriving in ragwood and jimson. The only paint this residence boasted showed on its door and window

frames, and this was a scaling and poisonous pink.

A narrow porch of rough and broken boarding went across its front, and here and there inside the palings, which one crossed by a rotting stile, lay odds and ends of farming gear exposed to the weather and red with rust.

Wade Murrell drew the team to a halt at the stile and halloed a greeting to which he had no response.

"There doesn't seem to be anybody at home," suggested Cynthia hopefully. She felt somehow that wherever else they might have to go, the chances were bright for an improvement over this stopping place.

But the man had jumped down and nodded to her to follow.

"I reckon they hain't fur away," he said. "We'll jest sot us a couple of cheers an' tarry twell some person shows up ter bid us welcome."

On the porch, he left her alone with two kittens and a puppy—all afflicted with mange—and a small pet lamb, while he himself went off to unharness and stable the team.

Cynthia sat gingerly in a broken rocker. The reeking uncleanness of the place nauseated her with its attack upon eye and nostril. Already in the face of such present afflictions, she was beginning to wonder whether it wasn't better to be a defendant charged with murder in civilization than to be a free agent here. She didn't know whether they hanged or electrocuted in North Carolina, but they didn't exile one among savages.

But she could not go back now. There was no way of going back. She had no money beyond a few fives and twos. She thought with a bitter irony of the thirty thousand dollars upon which she had pillowed her head last night. Thirty thousand dollars which belonged to a backwoods boob—thirty thousand dollars which would have spelled independence to her and made her safe from such things as that which had happened yesterday.

"My God," she groaned, "and they talk about the East Side!"

She looked down at her torn stockings and the finery which was already be-

draggled. She glanced shudderingly about at the squalor of this place, and then she opened the bag to which she had so tenaciously clung even after she had lost her hat, took out her vanity case and studied her own face in its small hand mirror.

Sitting there alone in the shadow of the Great Smokies, she sought, according to her lights, to remedy the ravages of demoralizing hardship. She restored the effaced scarlet exaggeration about her lips, repencilled her eyebrows, set little spots of flaring color on her cheeks and powdered her nose—but she felt like a crippled bird preening its feathers among cats.

Around the corner of the house appeared a tow-headed child in a single garment. It stood staring at her for a moment with wide, amazed eyes, then turned incontinently and fled. Around the other corner came Wade Murrell, and at his side walked a girl *who* looked about twenty, but who was probably fifteen. She was a tall, deep-bosomed girl with a comeliness as full and transient as that of a morning glory; the brief beauty of womanhood nurtured in drudgery and doomed before its blossoming.

"This is Tom Ike's youngest gal, Ivy," began Murrell. He stopped abruptly and stood staring at the woman he had taken under his protection. She knew that he was taking in the transformation of her hasty make-up and she read a sudden gusty blackness in his eyes.

Whatever were the thoughts that gave birth to that scowl, he repressed them and went on where he had broken off. "Ivy's accounted ter be ther purtiest gal along this hyar creek—but she's barefoot, though."

The mountain girl looked at him in surprise. "Why wouldn't I be barefoot?" she inquired. "Hit's summer time, hain't hit?"

The man laughed and put a question of his own.

"Whar's yore mammy an' pappy?"

"Mammy, she's pickin' a bait of salat," came the response in a matter-of-fact drawl. "An' pappy, he's hoe-workin' in ther corn patch. I reckon they'll be hyar d'reckly. Thar comes mammy now."

A raw-boned, elderly woman appeared

around a screen of brush carrying a basket of "salat peas," and behind her, as she swung along, trooped a cue of three children, all dirty, all tow-headed and all staring of eye.

The woman came across the stile and up to the porch. To the man, she nodded. At the stranger of her own sex, she looked with searching, non-committal eyes.

"This gal," Wade Murrell made haste to inform her, "is farin' over ter Kaintuck an' I'm kindly lookin' atter her. She goes by ther name of Cynthia Stokes."

Tom Ike Quillen's woman nodded with a grim set to her jaw. It was evident that here was a specimen new to her experience, and one which every instinct of her own stood ready to condemn, but it was equally evident that she would have regarded it as an affront to Murrell to question his judgment of character. Her only comment was addressed to her daughter.

"Ring ther bell fer yore pappy, Ivy. Thet's ther belatedest man-person thet ever drawed ther breath of life. He hain't niver been timely fer a meal sence his mammy weaned him."

But when the farm bell had sent out its brazen voice, Tom Ike was prompt to respond, and with him came two younger men—his sons.

The head of the family stood looking at Cynthia with drawn brows and stiff lips, and he acknowledged her introduction only with the grimmest and scantest of nods. In his eyes was a positive bleakness of unwelcome, and as he stalked morosely into the house with Wade Murrell following him, Cynthia heard him demanding angrily:

"Whar does she fare from—Sodom or Gomorry?"

Murrell's reply was low-pitched and grave. Its tone could be heard on the porch, but its words were lost.

Yet five minutes later the two men reappeared both smiling. Murrell, who carried a bottle and a glass, came over to Cynthia.

"Mebby a leetle toddy mout frisk yore sperits atter yore journey, ma'am," he said. "Tom Ike, he lowed he wouldn't proffer hit ter ye fer a hundred dollars lest hit insult ye, but I told him ye couldn't do nothin'

but refuse hit nohow. Hit war jest a kinderly charitable offer."

Cynthia wondered whether she was expected to accept or refuse, and decided to accept. Instantly the sullen reserve of Tom Ike melted. He took the bottle and shook it meditatively, watching bubbles form and dance in the colorless liquid.

"I reckon ye've done heered tell of moonshine?" he questioned jovially. "That's honest liquor. I knows because I made hit myself. Thar hain't nuthin' in hit save good corn an' sunshine an' water outen a live spring branch."

"Granny," bleated the smallest and the shyest of the children, conquering his diffidence for the first time. "Granny, I wants a toddy, too. Granny, gimme a little-bitty sup!"

"La! I lowed ther cat had yore tongue," drawled the woman good humoredly. "Ack like a gentleman an' I'll give ye a lettle."

From the door Ivy's voice interrupted the convivialities.

"Come in an' eat," she gave summons.

"La! Wade Murrell, he's a quare body," Tom Ike's wife informed Cynthia while Ivy was clearing up the dinner dishes and when the "men folks" were all out about the barn. The hostess sat with a cob pipe between her teeth, and she was feeding the pet lamb with a nursing bottle devised from a whisky flask. "We-all was raised up 'longside his folks over thar in Old Kaintuck afore we moved acrost hyar inter Cyar'liny. Everybody lows thet thar's jest one of two-three things kin happen ter Wade."

"What are they?" inquired the visitor with a dutiful semblance of interest.

"Either he'll die on ther gallers fer killin' somebody without no alibi, or he'll drap in a creek bed with a bullet hole drilled straight through him, or else he'll wind up preachin' ther gospel an' fotchin' in sinners ter salvation. But which of them three places he fotches up at, I'd reckon hit'd take ther prophet Isaiah ter foretell."

Casual chatter about the gallows was strongly distasteful to Cynthia, but she felt the obligation of carrying her end of the conversation.

"Those are pretty different finishes," she hazarded, "to predict for one and the same man."

"Thet's why he's quare," was the prompt response, given with a sagely nodded head. "Wade, he was jest a mid-grown boy when ther Murrell-Skidmore war was goin' on full-blasted—but I reckon thar's more'n one Skidmore in hell right now, thet wouldn't be thar yit, save only fer meetin' up with Wade. Come on a fight, be hit with rifle-guns or jest fist an' skull, Wade, he's in ther dead center of ther ruction. Come thar's a big meetin' with a shoutin' of hallelujahs an' a tempest of ther Holy Sperit—Wade, he's thar, too. He's a mighty man in prayer or battle—either one—an' thet's God's truth."

"He's a quiet enough looking man," observed Cynthia Meade indifferently. It seemed to her that this was the rustic spirit of boasting about petty neighborhood heroes. She remembered an old vaudeville song entitled "He's a devil in his own home town"—but this paragon of warfare and piety didn't even have a home town. He hailed from the tall timbers.

"La, yes," went on the older woman, "an' gin'rally a quiet-spoke man, too. They norates thet ther madder he gits ther quieter he gits—an' when he gits plumb still like, hit's right heedful ter tread soft. Thar's a long scar that runs acrost one temple up close ter his hat brim. A Skidmore bullet breshed along thar when Wade, he was still a boy—but land's sakes, I'm a strayin'! Thet hain't what I started out ter tell ye erbout nohow. Ef so be ye're goin' to dwell over thar along with ther Murrels, jest watch thet thar scar—an' when hit turns kindly white—don't contrary him no further."

The girl raised a hand which on yesterday had been fastidiously manicured, and masked a little yawn.

"I'm afraid I don't get much kick out of hearing what a dangerous man Mr. Murrell is," she said indifferently. "I watch my step with all men, as far as that goes, and I usually see to it that they watch their step with me."

The old wife laughed almost silently.

"Wa'al, I'm jest a counsellin' ye be-

times," she reminded her guest. "Thar's one thing as sartain es God's own word. So long es a woman's trustin' herself ter Wade, nobody else hain't ergoin' ter harm her."

When the two wayfarers were taking their departure, the household of Tom Ike Quillen stood with them in full quota by the stile. The children, no longer affrighted, raised thin voices and the puppy yapped.

The city bred young woman could not guess that these same people might have refused her entertainment altogether but for the passport of Wade Murrell's companionship. She did not understand that the mountain code withholds its ready hospitality for one reason which it considers valid, or that to their eyes she was a painted woman wearing the outward trappings of sin and as such more fittingly to be stoned than fed.

But she had come vouched for, and as the two started away, riding double on the mile, the whole-tribe waved and shouted the farewells of established friendship.

Cynthia was sitting sidewise on a gunny-sack folded into a sort of cushion over the saddle-bags behind her escort, and though the greasy food and the unclean tins of the dinner table had almost sickened her, the hearty fueling of the provender had started her out again with something like renewed spirits.

Even her eyes could begin to see something of the grandeur of the hills beyond the squalid details of hovel habitation. A sense of brooding immensities somehow stole into her realization and made her gasp. From a twisting road at the peak of a ridge she found her eye swinging out over a radius that seemed to spread illimitable space and color before her. Clouds appeared to move on a level with themselves and eagles on spread wings to float beneath them.

The man had fallen into a silence which remained unbreakable, and when she asked questions his answers were in clipped monosyllables.

Always they seemed boring into more mystifying solitudes, and from backbones of lofty divides they dropped down watersheds into creek beds, where the ripple whispered through corridors all but shut in by chok-

ing tangles of fern, rhododendron and heavily shadowed timber. The bloom of the mountain magnolia caught at the throat with its heaviness of scent. Then again, the way would climb into gorges, where the baldness of rock walls were licked smooth by centuries of watery tongues.

Yet, she reflected, this time yesterday she had met Jock Harrison on one of the principal streets of Asheville, and to-day Jock Harrison was dead and the law was hunting for her!

If the law had not found her, it was because this silent peasant had caught her away from discovery.

At length, where a small creek bed purred along a gravel bottom, where geese waddled and hissed and small yellow butterflies hung about the water's edge, they came to a shack store. There the man drew rein and dismounted.

"You tarry hyar an' hold ther mule critter," he commanded. "Give me thet thar slipper with ther busted heel. Like es not I kin git hit fixed hyar so's ye kin light down an' walk a spell."

He took the bit of collapsed finery with the heel that had broken loose, and went into the rough frame building.

Outside, the girl sat on the mule and waited. She was conscious of curious eyes bent on her from the open door, but she stared straight ahead and in ten minutes Wade Murrell reappeared. Besides the slipper, upon which a crudely makeshift job had been done, he carried a package wrapped in newspaper which, as he remounted, he held under his arm.

A clouded intensity brooded in his eyes and an almost sullen silence sat upon him, seeming to the girl to make his back stiff with hostility as he rode.

When the afternoon was half spent, the mule, limping and footsore, forded a belly-deep stream and the man came again to a halt on the far side.

He nodded to Cynthia to alight, and said: "We've done crossed over inter Tennessee now. North Cyar'liny sheriffs kain't come over that water onlessen they've got papers. Does ye want ter stop off hyar somewhars an' seek a place ter board at, or does ye aim ter go on with me still further?"

The young refugee's eyes widened into an abrupt dread, and her cheeks went so pale that the rouge spots stood out on them in scarlet splashes.

"I—I thought," she gasped with throat and lips that seemed to stiffen into paralysis, "that you agreed to take me all the way. I thought you knew that I had no money—or next to none. If you leave me here, you might as well kill me—I'm worse off than when you found me! They told me back there that I'd be safe with you."

"Es safe es wheat in ther grist-mill," he replied slowly. "But since we met up unforeseed things hev done come ter pass, an' now you an' me we've got ter hev speech tergither."

The old instinct of distrust and self-preservation swept over her anew. The old feeling, that between the woman economically or actively helpless and the man who can help her lies always the old sex issue, came flashing into her mind and blinded her with futile fury. This sort of man she did not know, and with the shallow sophistication of her kind, she tossed him into a category that she did know.

He had played the simple preserver until he had her in the backwoods far away from any other help. Now, presumably, he would reveal himself as the same old type except that he was infinitely cheaper, cruder.

It seemed after all that what Jock Harrison had been in a Tiffany setting, this yokel, who could pray and kill with equal enthusiasm, was in a five-and-ten cent store edition. She had escaped from the lust of a man to fall into the power of a baboon.

The girl straightened with defiance blazing in her green eyes and threw back her thick, short mat of red hair. Her painted lips curled, and the fire of desperation seemed to illuminate her into a sort of human bonfire that might burn quickly to destruction, but that would burn savagely to the end—scorching what touched it.

"All right," she said in a low, tense voice. "Shoot your proposition. What's the big idea? You bring me to this God-forsaken dump—and tell me we've got to talk. Why didn't we talk back there where I had a Chinaman's chance to do something besides

listen? But you needn't tell me your idea. I know it. Men haven't got but one real idea—have they?"

Wade Murrell took off his hat and swept the mop of thick, black hair away from his forehead. His face, too, had suddenly paled under his tan and over one eye the scar showed livid; the color of wood ashes burned down to the last ember.

"Ef ye means ye've got any cause ter fear me—or mistrust me," he said, and the stillness of his tone was almost a whisper,

"ye're a liar an' ye knows hit full well." He paused, and drew a deep breath that caught gaspingly in his round chest, then he went on with a suddenly mounting passion:

"An' ef ye're got a bound ter sermonize at me erbout men an' women an' straight-dealin' betwixt 'em—then for God's good sake go down thar ter thet spring-branch an' wash ther foul paint offen yore face afore ye starts out. Ye talks righteousness whilst ye looks like a trollop."

**TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK**

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## AMBITION!

"**W**HAT am I goin' t' be when I  
Grow up—'n' wear long pants?

*Somebody's* got t' take Babe Ruth's

Place—I got a chance.

We played th' Gaul Street Sons-o'-Guns

T'-day—'n' I made *thirty* runs!

'N' Jack Dempsey is gittin' old—

They say he's *married*, too!

I bet y' I could take his place—

If I jus' *wanted* to.

I've licked some *tough* kids, anyway—

'N' *lots* o' ones like Clarence Ray.

I could go in th' movies too—

Jus' watch me make a face!

I ask y' could Tom Mix do *that*?

I *might* take Bill Hart's place.

I c'n shoot, *good*—ask Mr. Broome;

I shot him in th' sittin' room.

They say: Ted c'n be this 'r that—

I guess it's *me* 'll choose.

I'm wearin' pop's ol' pants right *now*—

Maybe I'll fill his shoes.

I know one thing I'll *do*, b'gee—

*Lick ev'rybody that's licked me!"*

*R. E. Alexander.*