

"All night long. I slept on the hillside. I must apologize," he smiled, "for my untidy appearance."

"Lands' sake! Then you ain't had a mite o' breakfast?"

Gaither's rueful expression was sufficient reply.

"You keep on right back thar to my kitchen," Ossie commanded. "I'll cook you a small mess o' vittles in two shakes."

"But really," the young man protested, moving hopefully the while to where she pointed. "I cannot allow you to take so much trouble."

"Ain't no buts in these parts," threw back Ossie almost gaily, "when a he-critter needs to be fed."

They moved through the main room, and just at the end stepped down, by one short slanting tread, to the kitchen.

Gaither saw no stove and no preparations for cooking, except that in the wide stone-set fireplace hung a crane. Pots and pans stood along the mantelshelf, and depended by nails from each side of the grate. Overhead, there were festoons of herbs, beans in clustering pods, and vivid chaplets of peppers. Hams and bacon were swung side by side with bundles of drying tobacco and small sheaves of bright yellow corn.

At first the place had seemed empty. Then he heard the rustle of cloth from an alcove, and a girlish voice cried,—a voice perfect, and thrush-