

**ON CLOUD  
MOUNTAIN:  
A NOVEL**

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On Cloud Mountain: A Novel by Frederick Thickstun Clark

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# ON CLOUD MOUNTAIN

A Novel

BY

FREDERICK THICKSTUN CLARK

AUTHOR OF

"A MEXICAN GIRL" "IN THE VALLEY OF HAVILAH" ETC.



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## ON CLOUD MOUNTAIN

### CHAPTER I

THE brakeman appeared long enough to emit that series of consonantal explosives which travellers have learned to regard as the name of the next station. Then a whirl of dusty wind bore him out of sight on the rear platform of the forenoon train. The name, as the passengers understood it, was as impossible as a Sanskrit sentence without a knowledge of inferential vowels; and those who had been brought up on a simpler system of phonetics craned their necks for assistance in the sign-board on the depot:

"DONHALA CITY"

People who had never before heard of the place classified it at once as one of those innumerable points in Colorado where civilization is trying to get a foothold. A few philosophers in the sleeping-car went so far as to wonder whether civilization were not getting the worst of it. In the day-coach, among those unfortunates who recognized the town as a terminus, there

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was a pushing of bundles into readiness for removal, a readjustment of limp figures, a peering about of anxious eyes. The brakes ground stridently, the couplings clanked, there was a final exhalent wail from the air fixtures, then a halt.

The passengers descended one by one. A policeman loomed sublimely on the depot platform, his face rigid in the expression of justice encouraging the peaceable and quieting the disaffected.

First came a modish sportsman, thin and tall as a totem-pole—as grotesque, too, in these surroundings—but absorbing experiences which, on his return to the East, would stamp him as a “devil of a fellow.” He was followed by a hulking ranchman, who slouched away as if wading in high rubber boots. There was a commercial traveller, of course, with a sample-case, an oleaginous smile, and a look of salaried prosperity. Close on his heels pushed and crowded a troop of giggling waitresses, brought up from Denver by the proprietor of the Donhala City Palace Hotel, and already eying the loafers with tentative friendliness. Then came half a dozen cowboys—one of whom was drunk, and had been blood-thirsty earlier in the journey. A soaked apathy had finally settled down upon him, and he was borne unresistingly away by his companions, only muttering maudlin complaints at their keeping him from “laying down.”

The policeman watched, ready to interfere if the good of the public demanded it. Your frontier policeman's existence is positive—he makes himself felt in the cause of order, even to superfluity. He loves to be pointed out as the brave fellow who “raided Bowie's place,” or



"ran" that mysterious identity, The Red Terror, out of town. But more than all, it is his pride to tower above a crowd of common mortals and direct them by the silence of decorated authority. The desire to interfere is restless, assertive; the disposition to pose is steady and supporting. The two traits are to his soul what his physiology and anatomy are to his body.

The natives who had assembled to see the train come in bore the stamp of experiment, of doubtful conclusions. Every man of them was still in the making; he might turn out a cattle-thief or a millionaire. One thing was certain, however—none of them had ever come in contact with the clean side of life. Moral filth was as unmistakable all over them as physical dirt on a wet dog after rolling in the street. Such aspirations as their faces expressed were of the crude, material sort which one cannot run up against without a shock. Their surroundings had taught them a new formula of faith—the credo of dirt and physical health: "I believe that I came from the dirt, I believe that I am dirt, I believe that it all ends in six feet of dirt." This world hardly fits such people for heaven, but it makes use of them as pioneers to smooth the way for a generation who will have a better chance.

A series of howls went up at sight of the dude:

"Throw a timber at it, 'n' see if it's alive!"

"Lend us the toe o' yer shoe fer a toothpick!"

"Hang a rock on yer gun or it'll blow away!"

The dude hurried on. He had discovered the solemn humor of the Colorado joke, but had never gone so far as to comprehend his own connection therewith.

The last to descend from the day-coach was a woman.

She looked nervous and fluttered. There was the appeal of helpless doubt in her troubled blue eyes as she glanced about, after taking the final step from the car to the platform. There she stopped with a frightened abruptness, dropping her small bundle. It fell at the feet of one of the urchins who had hailed the dude. He bent to pick it up, but the woman, mistaking his intentions, made a dash at him.

"I wa'n't a-goin' to snipe it," said the boy, in resentful protest.

She seized the bundle herself, and stood holding it by its strong hempen string.

"Well, you let my things be," she muttered, gazing about her uneasily.

One might have affirmed with assurance that she had never travelled much, but there was something more than the vehement watchfulness of inexperience in the gaze with which she confronted the boy—a hysterical reticence, a strained attempt to look unconcerned. She appeared hunted, guilty; yet with the light of inward peace in her blue eyes, one would have called her gentle, womanly, and good.

"Mebbe ye'd better try slappin' 'im," suggested a larger boy, edging towards her threateningly. "I'm 'is brother!"

The woman turned pale.

"I never thort o' sech a thing!" she cried, drawing back.

"Well," said the big brother, mollified by the impression he had made.

"Move on, Jim!" cried the policeman.

The big brother receded into the background. He

had interpreted his rôle admirably, and the loafers, whose taste for the drama had been whetted by long abstinence, looked balked and disappointed at his early exit.

As the woman faced the policeman—her attention had heretofore been taken up by the importunities of the two boys—her look of dread changed in an instant to one of cringing terror. There was no mistaking it. That emotion became visible in every pallid feature, every drawn and quivering line. Terror did not stop with her eyes; it took possession of her whole body, and made her for the moment an incarnation of repressed fear.

"That gal's a-goin' to keel over," said a man in the crowd, chancing to observe her nearly. And indeed the woman's fright seemed about to culminate in some sort of paroxysm. She put out her hands grapplingly, like a sick man opposing an enemy in delirium. Some one reached forward to support her. She wavered a moment. That blank horror, faintness, seemed about to engulf her. Then with an effort she stiffened her slight figure. She stood erect.

"No," she said, in a voice which she tried in vain to keep steady, "I—I ain't a-goin' to keel over. I'm only tired—'n' it's so stiflin' hot!"

The line of peering eyes closed in about her. She shrank back as from a narrowing circle of fire. The men turned the tobacco in their mouths with some excitement, detecting the possibility of a strong passage in the drama, even after Jim's exit. The policeman stood examining her with hard scrutiny, but made no attempt to speak to or detain her.