

## [Cordie Underwood]

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Cordie Underwood (Textile Worker)

Newton, N.C.

Ethel Deal, Writer

Dudley W. Crawford, Reviser Original Names: Changed Names:

Cordie Underwood Carrie Overcash

Flossie Underwood Flora Overcash C9 - 1/22/41 N.C.

It was Tuesday afternoon and the regular weekly session of county criminal court was drawing to a close. The judge looked tired and cross; the clerk bored; the deputy apparently asleep; and the array of prisoners, awaiting sentence, indifferent. The solicitor and defense lawyers still maintained a degree of alertness, as they listened to the last witness in one of the numerous "liquor cases" heard during the day.

The spectators constituted a motly group; farmers, mill hands, mechanics, business and professional men, boys of school age, mothers, with infants tugging at their breasts, and women of uncertain ages and doubtful reputations. The Negroes, occupying one side of the room, rolled their eyes and craned their necks in an effort to see all that transpired before the court. Something the witness said amused them and their giggles disturbed the quiet of the sultry room, bringing the sleeping deputy to his feet with a demand for "order."

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I dropped into a seat near the rear, in front of an attractive dark-haired woman of about thirty. She sat with chin resting in one hand and the other tightly gripped on the back of the seat in front. A smile and a remark about the weather brought her into a conversation.

"I'll say it's hot. I have been here since 9 o'clock this morning; hope they soon get through up there.

"I'm Carrie Overcash. That's my daddy up there with the grey shirt on. I'm just waiting to hear what sentence they put on him. They're trying him for nonsupport. My mother's dead-been dead for eight years. My Dad married again but the woman wasn't good to the children and our home was broke up. One of my brothers went to the C.C.Camps and me and my 12 year old sister went and stayed in the country fer awhile. That's when I couldn't get work. Things got so bad at home Dad left her and now she's suing him for support and he's got no work; ain't had a regular job in three years.

"Ever since Dad and my step mother separated I've been trying to keep the home together. There's five of us children. Dad's kinda good and helps all he can. He just can't seem to get a job and hold it. Mother got T.B. from having the flu and side pleurisy and only lived three months." The judge was pronouncing sentence on a tall weak faced young man who was charged 3 with driving while drunk. Carrie stopped to listen. "Fifty dollars fine and costs or three months on the roads," droned the judge. Carrie shivered and the lines in her face looked deeper. "Dad can help around the house some. I work in the cotton mill. We live way up above the old depot in an old four-room house. We have a garden but I don't have time to work it. Nobody else cares. The younger children don't take no interest in gardens. Dad's careless about sich things, too.

"Yes, I am the main support of the family; been working fer years. I usta do all the house work and work in the mill too. Now my sister Flora helps and it ain't quite as bad as it usta be. I don't know what they're going to do with him. He ain't got no money though and I ain't got none myself. It pushes me to make ends meet. Six in family to feed and cloths, house

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rent to pay and water and lights. We don't have no bathroom; just a privy. I don't have much left.

“Yes, I've thought of getting married lots of times. Every woman wants to get married-they might say they don't, but they do. Poor chance I got of doing it. I've turned down several chances. I can't 4 marry a man and bring him in to support a ready-made family, and I can't walk out on them kids and leave 'em with nobody to raise 'em and look after 'em; saying nothing about what they'd eat. Dad just can't be depended on.”

Carrie pushed back the curly hair from her moist forehead and fanned herself with a paper.

“I never had a chance to go to school. I just went as fur as the third grade. Mother kept me home and made me 'tend to the younguns and help do the house work. I usta make dough standing on a chair. Mother never was strong 'fore she took T. B. She was in the bed lots of the time. Dad usta work regular then. I had all the work to do and 'tend to the kids. I'd put on beans and fry meat and bake bread and that's about all I knowed how to do. Now I can cook almost anything if I've got it to cook.”

The judge had passed sentence on the entire row of prisoners. The group stood up at the command of the court. None of them were able to pay their fine, so the sleepy deputy escorted them to the jail.

Carrie rose from her seat and went to speak to her father. The tall sun-burned man placed his hand 5 affectionately on her shoulder, whispered a few words and they both smiled. Hastily Carrie came back to her seat, just as her sister Flora arrived. I heard a noise and thought it was a sob, but turning around found both girls were laughing.

“It's so funny,” Carrie said. “My step mother was so sure she'd make Dad keep her up. He's tickled about it. The judge gave him 30 days in jail. He'll be outside at that just helping with the work. I'll bet she's mad all right. Dad's good to us if he won't work much.

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"I'm not satisfied with my work. I only make \$12.80 a week. Now if I could get on at a full fashioned hosiery mill I could make twice that much. Flora here is big enough to cook and do the house work, but I can't get on."

"There goes Dad," said Flora, as the prisoners filed out.

"I feel more like a parent myself," said Carrie. " There's not much fun in my life.

"Sometimes a crowd of us goes down to a cafe in town and dance. That's just Saturday nights though. I have to work all the others except Sundays. I go on at two o'clock and work till ten. I guess I'll go to sleep tonight. I ain't been in bed today. Usually I 6 sleep until up in the morning. I felt like I had to come to court and see what they'd do with Dad. I'm sure glad there was no fine. I was born on the farm but I'm sure glad I'm not on it now. At the end of the week I know what I'm going to have. On the farm at the and of the week you have nothing, except something to eat.

"I do all the buying myself as I have to make it go a long ways. Friday evening before I go to work I buy the groceries for the next week. We can't do on less than sixty pounds of flour which costs \$1.35 and ten pounds of fat back, \$1,00, four pounds of lard, 40¢, ten pounds of pinto beans and maybe a mess of green beans. For Sunday dinner we have something extra; a chicken or a pot of stew beef. I don't forget to get the kids a bag of candy-they always look for it on pay day."

"It wouldn't seem like pay day 'thout it," said Flora. Carrie looked proudly at her young sister. "It's little enough to do fer you kid," she said.

"When we stayed out in the country the hogs and the chickens got more there than I can buy. I milked three cows and gallons of the good milk was fed to the 7 chickens and hogs every day. I can't buy milk to drink at home; my pay won't cover it, but I'd rather be at home and all of us together than to have all that to eat. We wasn't satisfied when we's all

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separated. The Bible says be content with what you have and I try to be, but sometimes I can't understand why life is so hard for some folks and so easy for others.”

The crowd was leaving the court room. Friends and, relatives stood around in groups discussing the trials. I lingered with the girls in the back seat till Carrie got up to go.

“I'll have to be going or I won't get to work any today. I told my boss I might not get there on time. He'll understand, he's mighty good to me. That counts a lot when you know folks understand. I know lots of people think Dad ain't much account because I have to make the living, but it seems like I jist have to stand by him. Right now he's jolly as can be. He knows I'll keep things going at home and look after the kids. I don't guess I'll ever have a chance to live my own life. I must be going — come along Flora, we have a long walk ahead of us.”

At the top of the stairs a young man was waiting.

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He was tall, dark-haired and good-looking.

“I've been waiting to hear what they done”, he said.

“It's all right” said Carrie. “Dad's going to work it out in the jail.”

“That's Carrie's beau,” said Flora to me in a whisper. “When the rest of us get big enough to work and make a living Carrie and him will git married. He's sure good to us; he brings us candy and things.”