

# Ramsey Milholland



by Booth Tarkington

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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## CHAPTER I.

When Johnnie comes marching home again.  
Hurray! Hurray!  
We'll give him a hearty welcome then.  
Hurray! Hurray!  
The men with cheers, the boys with shouts,  
The ladies they will all turn out,  
And we'll all feel gay when Johnnie comes marching home again!

The old man and the little boy, his grandson, sat together in the shade of the big walnut tree in the front yard, watching the "Decoration Day Parade," as it passed up the long street; and when the last of the veterans was out of sight the grandfather murmured the words of the tune that came drifting back from the now distant band at the head of the procession.

"Did you, Grandpa?" the boy asked.  
"Did I what?"  
"Did you all feel gay when the army got home?"

"It didn't get home all at once, precisely," the grandfather explained. "When the war was over I suppose we felt relieved, more than anything else."

"You didn't feel so gay when the war was, though, I guess?" the boy ventured.

"I guess we didn't."  
"Were you scared, Grandpa? Were you ever scared the Johnnies would win?"

"No. We weren't ever afraid of that."  
"Well, weren't you ever scared yourself, Grandpa? I mean when you were in a battle?"

"Oh, yes; I was." The old man laughed. "Scared aplenty!"

"I don't see why," the boy said promptly. "I wouldn't be scared in a battle."

"Wouldn't you?"  
"Course not! Grandpa, why don't you march in the Decoration Day parade? Wouldn't they let you?"

"I'm not able to march any more. Too short of breath and too shaky in the legs and too blind."

"I wouldn't care," said the boy. "I'd be in the parade anyway, if I was you."

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grandfather without preface or apology, sped across the lawn and out of the gate, charging headlong upon the commander of the company.

"You get off that lopedie, Wesley Bender!" he bellowed. "You gimme that sword! What rights you got to go bein' captain o' my army, I'd like to know! Who got up this army, in the first place, I'd like to know! I did myself, yestery' afternoon, and you get back in line or I won't let you b'long to it at all!"

The pretender succumbed; he instantly dismounted, being out-shouted and overawed. On foot he took his place in the ranks, while Ramsey became sternly vociferous. "In-tention, company! Farwad march! Col-lum right! Right-shoulder harms! Halt! Farwad march. Carry harms—"

The army went trudging away under the continuous but unheeded fire of orders, and presently disappeared round a corner, leaving the veteran chuckling feebly under his walnut tree and alone with the empty street. All trace of what he had said seemed to have been wiped from the grandson's mind; but memory was curious ways.

Ramsey had understood not a fifth part of a tenth of his grandfather's talk, and already he had "forgotten" all of it—yet not only were there many, many times in the boy's later life when, without ascertainable cause, he would remember words and sentences spoken by the grandfather, though the listener, half-drowsily, had heard but the sound of an old, earnest voice—and even the veteran's meaning finally took on a greater definiteness till it became, in the grandson's thoughts, something clear and bright and beautiful that he knew without being just sure where or how he had learned it.

## CHAPTER II

Ramsey Milholland sat miserably in school, his conscious being consisting principally of a dull hate. Torpor was a little dispersed during a fifteen-minute interval of "Music," when he and all the other pupils in the large room of the "Five B. Grade" sang repeatedly fractions of what they enunciated as "The Star Spangul-hulle-Banner"; but afterward he relapsed into the low spirits and animosity natural to anybody during enforced confinement under instruction. No alleviation was accomplished by an invader's temporary usurpation of the teacher's platform, a brisk and unsympathetically cheerful young woman mounting thereon to "teach German."

For a long time mathematics and German had been about equally repulsive to Ramsey, who found himself daily in the compulsory presence of both; but he was gradually coming to regard German with the greater horror, because, after months of patient mental resistance, he at last began to comprehend that the German language has sixteen special and particular ways of using the German article corresponding to that flexible bit of a word so easily managed in English—the. What in the world was the use of having sixteen ways of doing a thing that could just as well be done in one? If the Germans had contented themselves with insisting upon sixteen useless variations for infrequent words, such as hippopotamus, for instance, Ramsey might have thought the affair unreasonable but not necessarily vicious—it would be easy enough to avoid talking about a hippopotamus if he ever had to go to Germany. But the fact that the Germans picked out a and the and many other little words in use all the time, and gave every one of them sixteen forms, and expected Ramsey Milholland to learn this dizzying uselessness down to the last

crotchety detail, with "When to employ Which" as a nausea to prepare for the final convulsion when one didn't use Which, because it was an "Exception"—there was a fashion of making easy matters hard that was merely hellish.

The teacher was strict but enthusiastic; she told the children, over and over, that the German was a beautiful language, and her face always had a glow when she said this. At such times the children looked patient; they supposed it must be so, because she was an adult and their teacher; and they believed her with the same manner of believing which those of them who went to Sunday school used there when the Sunday school teachers were pushed into explanation of various matters set forth in the Old Testament, or gave reckless descriptions of heaven. That is to say, the children did not challenge or deny; already they had been driven into habits of resignation and were passing out of the age when childhood is able to reject adult nonsense.

Ramsey Milholland did not know whether the English language was beautiful or not; he never thought about it. Moreover, though his deeper inwardly hated "German," he liked his German teacher, and it was pleasant to look at her when that glow came upon her face.

Sometimes, too, there were moments of relaxation in her class, when she would stop the lesson and tell the children about Germany: What a beautiful, good country it was, so trim and orderly, with such pleasant customs and all the people sensible, energetic and healthy. There was "Music" again in the German class, which was an other alleviation; though it was the same old "Star Spangul-hulle-Banner" over again. Ramsey was tired of the song and tired of "My Country 'Tis of Thee"; they were hoarse, but it was amusing to sing them in German. In German they sounded "sort o' funny," so he didn't mind this bit of the day's work.

Half an hour later there arrived his supreme trial of this particular morning. Arithmetic then being the order of business before the house, he was sent alone to the blackboard, supposed to make lucid the proper reply to a fatal conundrum in decimals, and under the glare and focus of the whole room he breathed heavily and fished everywhere; his brain at once became sheer hash. He consumed as much time as possible in getting the terms of the problem stated in chalk; then, affecting to be critical of his own handwork, erased what he had done and carefully wrote it again. After that he erased half of it, slowly retraced figures, and stepped back as if to see whether perspective improved their appearance. Again he lifted the eraser.

"Ramsey Milholland!"  
"Ma'am?"  
"Put down that eraser!"  
"Yes'm, I just thought—"

Sharply bidden to get forward with his task, he explained in a feeble voice that he had first to tie a shoestring and stooped to do so, but was not permitted. Miss Ridgely tried to stimulate him with hints and suggestion; found him, so far as decimals went, mere protoplasm, and wondering how so helpless a thing could live, summoned to the board little Dora Yocum, the star of the class, whereupon Ramsey moved toward his seat.

"Stand still, Ramsey! You stay right where you are and try to learn something from the way Dora does it."

The class giggled, and Ramsey stood, but learned nothing. His conspicuousness was unendurable, because all of his schoolmates naturally found more entertainment in watching him than

in following the performance of the capable Dora.

Instructed to watch every figure chalked up by the mathematical wonder, his eyes, grown sodden, were unable to remove themselves from the part in her hair at the back of her head, where two little braids began their separate careers to end in a couple of blue-and-red-checked bits of ribbon, one upon each of her thin shoulder blades. His sensations clogged his intellect; he suffered from unsought notoriety, and hated Dora Yocum; most of all he hated her busy little shoulder blades.

He had to be "kept in" after school; and when he was allowed to go home he averted his eyes as he went by the house where Dora lived. She was out in the yard, eating a doughnut, and he knew it; but he had passed the age when it is just as permissible to throw a rock at a girl as at a boy; and stifling his normal inclinations, he walked sturdily on, though he indulged himself so far as to engage in a murmured conversation with one of the familiar spirits dwelling somewhere within him. "Pfa!" said Ramsey to himself—or himself to Ramsey, since it is difficult to say which was which. "Pfa! Thinks she's smart, don't she?"

Well, I guess she does, but she ain't! . . . "I hate her, don't you?" "You bet your life I hate her!" . . . "Teacher's Pet, that's what I call her!" . . . "Well, that's what I call her, too, don't I?" "Well, I do; that's all she is, anyway—dirty ole Teacher's Pet!"

CHAPTER III.

He had not forgiven her four years later when he entered high school in her company, for somehow Ramsey managed to shovel his way through examinations and stayed with the class. He was unable to deny that she had become less awful looking than she used to be. At least, he was honest enough to make a partial retraction when his friend and classmate, Fred Mitchell, insisted that an amelioration of Dora's appearance could be actually proven.

"Well, I'll take it back. I don't claim she's every last bit as awful looking as she always has been," said Ramsey, toward the conclusion of the argument. "I'll say this for her, she's awful looking, but she may not be as awful looking as she was. She don't come to school with the edge of some of her underclo'es showin' below her dress any more, about every other day, and her eyewinkers have got to stick in out some, and she may not be so abbasalootly skinny, but she'll haf to wait a mighty long while before I want to look at her without gettin' sick!"

The implication that Miss Yocum cared to have Ramsey look at her, either with or without gettin' sick, was mere rhetoric, and recognized as such by the producer of it; she had never given the slightest evidence of any desire that his gaze be bent upon her. What truth lay underneath his flourish rested upon the fact that he could not look at her without some symptoms of the sort he had tersely sketched to his friend; and yet, so pungent is the fascination of self-inflicted misery, he did look at her, during periods of study, often for three or four minutes at a stretch. His expression at such times indeed resembled that of one who has dined unwisely; but Dora Yocum was always too eagerly busy to notice it. He was almost never in her eye, but she was continually in his; moreover, as the banner pupil she was with hourly frequency an exhibit before the whole class.

Ramsey found her worst of all when her turn came in "Declamation," on Friday afternoons. When she ascended the platform, bobbed a little preparatory bow and began, "Listen, my children, and you shall hear," Ramsey included Paul Revere and the Old North Church and the whole Revolutionary war in his antipathy, since they somehow appeared to be the property of the Teacher's Pet. For Dora held this post in "Declamation" as well as in everything else; here, as elsewhere, the hateful child's prowess surpassed that of all others; and the teacher always entrusted her with the rendition of the "patriotic selections," Ramsey himself was in the same

section of declaimers, and performed a ghastly contrast. He gave a "selection from Shakespeare," assigned by the teacher; and he began this continuous misfortune by stumbling violently as he ascended the platform, which stimulated a general giggle already in being at the mere calling of his name. All of the class were bright with happy anticipation, for the miserable Ramsey seldom failed their hopes, particularly in "Declamation."

He faced them, his complexion wan, his expression both baleful and horrified; and he began in a loud, hurried voice, from which every hint of intelligence was excluded:

"Most potent, grave and reverend signers, my countrymen, you've forgotten to bow," she said. "And don't say 'potent.' The word is 'potent.'" Ramsey flopped his head at the rear wall of the room, and began again:

"Most potent potent grave and reverend signers my very noble and approved good masters that I have tan away this sole man's dutter it is most true I have marry dur the very headan frun tuv my fending hath this extent no more rude am I in speech—in speech—rude am I in speech—in speech—in speech—in speech—in speech—"

He had stalled. Perhaps the fatal truth of that phrase, and some sense of its applicability to the occasion had interfered with the mechanism which he had set in operation to get rid of the "recitation" for him. At all events, the machine had to run off its job all at once, or it wouldn't run at all. He gulped audibly. "Rude rude rude am I—rude am I in speech—in speech—in speech. Rude am I in speech—"

"Yes," the irritated teacher said, as Ramsey's falling voice continued huskily to insist upon this point. "I think you are!" And her nerves were a little soothed by the shout of laughter from the school—it was never difficult for teachers to be witty. "Go sit down, Ramsey, and do it after school."

His ears roared, the unfortunate went to his seat and, among all the hilarious faces, one stood out—Dora Yocum's. Her laughter was precocious; it was that of a confirmed superior, insufferably adult—she was laughing at him as a grown person laughs at a child. Conspicuously and unmistakably, there was something indulgent in her amusement. He choked. He didn't care for George Washington, or Paul Revere, or the teacher, or the President of the United States, or Shakespeare, or any of 'em. They could all go to the dickens with Dora Yocum. They were all a lot of smarties anyway and he hated the whole stew of 'em!

There was one, however, whom he somehow couldn't manage to hate, even though this one officially seemed to be as intimately associated with Dora Yocum and superiority as the others were. Ramsey couldn't hate Abraham Lincoln, even when Dora was chosen to deliver the "Gettysburg Address," on the twelfth of February. Lincoln had said "Government of the people, by the people, for the people," and that didn't mean government by the teacher and the Teacher's Pet and Paul Revere and Shakespeare and suchlike; it meant government by everybody, and therefore Ramsey had as much to do with it as anybody else had. Beyond a doubt, Dora and the teacher thought Lincoln belonged to them and their crowd of exclusives; they seemed to think they owned the whole United States; but Ramsey was sure they were mistaken about Abraham Lincoln.

He felt that it was just like this little Yocum snipet to assume such a thing, and it made him sicker than ever to look at her.

Then, one day, he noticed that her eyewinkers were stickin' out farther and farther.

His discovery irritated him the more. Next thing, this ole Teacher's Pet would do she'd get to thinkin' she was pretty! If that happened, well, nobody could stand her! The long lashes made her eyes shadowy, and it was a fact that her shoulder blades ceased to insist upon notoriety; you couldn't tell where they were at all, any more.

A contemptible thing happened. Wesley Bender was well known to be the most untidy boy in the class, and had never shown any remorse for his reputation or made the slightest effort either to improve or to dispute it. He was content; it failed to lower his standing with his fellows or to impress them unfavorably. In fact, he was treated as one who has attained a slight distinction. It helped him to become better known, and boys liked to be seen with him. But one day, there was a rearrangement of the seating in the schoolroom; Wesley Bender was given a desk next in front of Dora Yocum's; and within a week the whole room knew that Wesley had begun voluntarily to wash his neck—the back of it, anyhow.

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"Most Potent, Grave and Rev—"