

Ramsey Milholland

by Booth Tarkington

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—With his grandfather, small Ramsey Milholland is watching the "Decorated Day Parade" in the home town. The old gentleman, a veteran of the Civil war, endeavors to impress the youngster with the significance of the great conflict, and many years afterward the boy was to remember his words with startling vividness.

CHAPTER II.—In the schoolroom, a few years afterward, Ramsey was not distinguished for remarkable ability, though his two pronounced dislikes were arithmetic and "Recitations." In sharp contrast to Ramsey's backwardness is the precocity of little Dora Yocum, a young lady whom in his bitterness he designates "Teacher's Pet."

CHAPTER III.—In high school, where he and Dora are classmates, Ramsey continues to feel that the girl delights to manifest her superiority, and the vindictiveness he generates becomes alarming, culminating in the resolution that some day he would "show" her.

CHAPTER IV.

With Wesley Bender, Ramsey was again upon fair terms before the winter had run its course; the two were neighbors and, moreover, were drawn together by a community of interests which made their reconciliation a necessity. Ramsey played the guitar and Wesley played the mandolin.

All ill feeling between them died with the first duet of spring, yet the tinkling they made had no charm to soothe the savage breast of Ramsey whenever the Teacher's Pet came into his thoughts. He day-dreamed a thousand ways of putting her in her place, but was unable to carry out any of them, and had but a cobwebby satisfaction in imagining discomfitures for her which remained imaginary. "Just once!" he said to Fred Mitchell. "That's all I ask, just once. Just gimme one chance to show that girl what she really is. I guess if I ever get the chance she'll find out what's the matter with her, for once in her life, anyway." Thus it came to be talked about and understood and expected in Ramsey's circle, all male, that Dora Yocum's day was coming. "You'll see!" said Ramsey. "The time'll come when that ole girl'll wish she'd moved out o' this town before she ever got appointed monitor of our class! Just you wait!"

They waited, but conditions appeared to remain unfavorable indefinitely. Perhaps the great opportunity might have arrived if Ramsey had been able to achieve a startling importance in any of the "various divergent yet parallel lines of school endeavor"—one of the phrases by means of which teachers and principal clogged the minds of their unarmed auditors. But though he was far from being the dumb driven beast of misfortune that he seemed in the schoolroom, and, in fact, lived a double life, exhibiting in his out-of-school hours a remarkable example of "secondary personality"—a creature fearing nothing and capable of laughter; blue eyed, fairly robust, and anything but dumb—he was nevertheless without endowment or attainment great enough to get him distinction.

He "tried for" the high-school eleven, and "tried for" the nine, but the experts were not long in eliminating him from either of these competitions, and he had to content himself with cheering instead of getting cheered. He was by no manner of means athletic, or enough of anything else, to put Dora Yocum in her place, and so he and the great opportunity were still waiting in May, at the end of the second year of high school, when the class, now the "10 A," reverted to an old fashion and decided to entertain itself with a woodland picnic.

They gathered upon the sandy banks of a creek in the blue shade of big, patchy-barked sycamores, with a dancing sky on top of everything and gold dust atwinkle over the water. Hither the napkin-covered baskets were brought from the wagons and assembled in the shade, where they appeared as an attractive little meadow of white napery, and gave both surprise and pleasure to communities of ants and to other original settlers of the neighborhood.

From this nucleus or headquarters of the picnic, various expeditions set forth up and down the creek and through the woods that bordered it. Two envied boy fishermen established themselves upon a bank up-stream with hooks and lines thoughtfully brought with them, and poles which they fashioned from young saplings. They took muskels from the shallows for bait, and having gone to all this trouble, declined to share with friends less energetic and provident the perquisites and pleasures secured to themselves.

Albert Paxton was one person who proved his enterprise. Having vis-

ited the spot some days before, he had hired for his exclusive use throughout the duration of the picnic an old rowboat belonging to a shanty squatter; it was the only rowboat within a mile or two and Albert had his own uses for it. Albert was the class lover and, after first taking the three chaperon teachers "out for a row," an excursion concluded in about ten minutes, he disembarked them; Sadie Clews stepped into the boat, a pocket camera in one hand, a tennis racket in the other; and the two spent the rest of the day, except for the luncheon interval, solemnly drifting along the banks or grounded on a shoal. Now and then Albert would row a few strokes, and at almost any time when the populated shore glanced toward them, Sadie would be seen photographing Albert, or Albert would be seen photographing Sadie, but the tennis racket remained an enigma. They were sixteen, and had been "engaged" more than two years.

On the borders of the little meadow of baskets there had been deposited two black shapes, which remained undisturbed throughout the day, a closed guitar case and a closed mandolin case, no doubt containing each its proper instrument. So far as any use of these went they seemed to be of the same leisure class to which Sadie's tennis racket belonged, for when one of the teachers suggested music, the musicians proved shy. Wesley Bender said they hadn't learned to play anything much, besides, he had a couple of broken strings he didn't know as he could fix up; and Ramsey said he guessed it seemed kind o' too hot to play much. Joining friends, they organized a contest in marksmanship, the target being a floating can which they assailed with pebbles; and after that they "skipped" flat stones upon the surface of the water, then went to join a group gathered about Willis Parker and Heinie Krusemeyer.

No fish had been caught, a lack of luck grossly attributed by the fishermen to the noise made by constant advice on the part of their attendant gallery. Messrs. Milholland, Bender, and the other rock throwers came up shouting, and were ill received.

"For heaven's sakes," Heinie Krusemeyer demanded, "can't you shut up? Here we just first got the girls to keep their mouths shut a minute and I almost had a big pickerel or something on my hook, and here you got to up and yell so he chases himself away!"



"For Heaven's Sakes," Heinie Krusemeyer Demanded, "Can't You Shut Up?"

Why can't nobody show a little sense—sometimes when they'd ought to? A fish isn't goin' to bite when he can't even hear himself think! Anybody ought to know that much."

But the new arrivals hooted. "Fish!" Ramsey vociferated. "I'll bet a hundred dollars there hasn't been even a gummy in this creek for the last sixty years!"

"There is, too!" said Heinie, bitterly. "But I wouldn't be surprised there wouldn't be no longer if you got to keep up this noise. If you'd shut up just a minute you could see yourself there's fish here."

Ramsey leaned forth over the edge of the overhanging bank, a dirt precipice five feet above the water, and peered into the indeterminate depths below. The pool had been stirred, partly by the inept pokings of the fishermen and partly by small clods and bits of dirt dislodged from above

by the feet of the audience. The water, consequently, was but brownly translucent and revealed its secrets reluctantly; nevertheless certain dim little shapes had been observed to move within it, and were still there. Ramsey failed to see them at first.

"Where's any ole fish?" he inquired, scornfully.

"Look!" whispered the girl who stood nearest to Ramsey. She pointed. "There's one. Right down there by Willis' hook. Don't you see him?" Ramsey was impressed enough to whisper. "Is there? I don't see him. I can't."

The girl came closer to him and, the better to show him, leaned out over the edge of the bank and, for safety in maintaining her balance, rested her left hand upon his shoulder while she pointed with her right. Thereupon something happened to Ramsey. This touch upon his shoulder was almost nothing, and he had never taken the slightest interest in Milla Rust (to whom that small warm hand belonged), though she was the class beauty, and long established in the office. Now, all at once, a peculiar and heretofore entirely unfamiliar sensation suddenly became important in the upper part of his chest. For a moment he held his breath, an involuntary action—he seemed to be standing in a shower of flowers.

"Don't you see it, Ramsey?" Milla whispered. "It's a great big one. Why, it must be as long as—as your shoe! Look!"

Ramsey saw nothing but the thick round curl on Milla's shoulder. That curl was shot with dazzling fibers of sunshine. He seemed to be trembling.

"I don't see it," he murmured huskily, afraid that she might remove her hand. "I can't see any fish, Milla."

She leaned farther out over the bank. "Why, there, goosie!" she whispered. "Right there."

"I can't see it."

She leaned still further, bending down to point. "Why, right there—"

At this moment she removed her hand from his shoulder, though unwillingly. She clutched at him, in fact, but without avail. She had been too amiable.

A loud shriek was uttered by throats able to vocalize. Just then, then, Milla's, for in her great surprise she said nothing whatever—the shriek came from the other girls as Milla left the crest of the overhanging bank and almost horizontally disappeared into the brown water. There was a tumultuous splash, and then of Milla Rust and her well-known beauty there was nothing visible in the superficial world, nor upon the surface of that creek. The vanishment was total.

"Save her!"

Several girls afterward admitted having used this expression, and little Miss Floy Williams, the youngest and smallest member of the class, was unable to deny that she had said, "Oh, God!" Nothing could have been more natural, and the matter need not have been brought before her with such insistence and frequency, during the two remaining years of her undergraduate career.

Ramsey was one of those who heard this exclamation, later so famous, and perhaps it was what roused him to heroism. He dived from the bank, headlong, and the strange thought in his mind was "I guess this'll show Dora Yocum!" He should have been thinking of Milla, of course, at such a time, particularly after the little enchantment just laid upon him by Milla's touch and Milla's curls; and he knew well enough that Miss Yocum was not among the spectators. She was half a mile away, as it happened, gathering "botanical specimens" with one of the teachers—which was her idea of what to do at a picnic!

Ramsey struck the water hard, and in the same instant struck something else harder. Wesley Bender's bundle of books had given him no such shock as he received now, and if the creek bottom had not been mud, just there, the top of his young head might have declined the strain. Half stunned, choking, spluttering, he somehow floundered to his feet; and when he could get his eyes a little cleared of water he found himself wavering face to face



She Had Risen Up Out of the Pool and Stood Knee Deep, Like a Lovely Drenched Figure in a Fountain.

with a blurred vision of Milla Rust. She had risen up out of the pool and stood knee deep, like a lovely drenched figure in a fountain.

figure in a fountain.

Upon the bank above them, Willis Parker was jumping up and down, gesticulating and shouting fiercely. "Now I guess you're satisfied our fishin' is spottin'! Why'n't you listen me? I told you it wasn't more'n three foot deep! I and Heinie waded all over this creek gettin' our bait. You're a pretty sight!"

Of Milla he spoke unwittingly the literal truth. Even with her hair thus wild and sodden, Milla rose from immersion blushing and prettier than ever; and she was prettiest of all when she stretched out her hand helplessly to Ramsey and he led her up out of the waters. They had plenty of assistance to scramble to the top of the bank, and there Milla was surrounded and borne away with a great clacketing and tumult. Ramsey sat upon the grass in the sun, rubbed his head, and experimented with his neck to see if it would "work." The sunshine was strong and hot; in half an hour he and his clothes were dry—or at least "dry enough," as he said, and except for some soreness of head and neck, and the general crudeness of his apparel, he seemed to be in all ways much as usual, when shouts and whistlings summoned all the party to luncheon at the rendezvous. The change that made him different was invisible.

Yet something must have been seen, for everyone appeared to take it for granted that he was to sit next to Milla at the pastoral meal. She herself understood it, evidently, for she drew in her puckered skirts and without any words made a place for him beside her as he drifted toward her, affecting to whistle and keeping his eyes on the foliage overhead. He still looked upward, even in the act of sitting down.

"Squirrel or something," he said feebly, as if in explanation.

"Where?" Milla asked.

"Up there on a branch." He accepted a plate from her (she had provided herself with an extra one), but he did not look at it or at her. He continued to keep his eyes aloft, because he imagined that all of the class were looking at him and Milla, and he felt unable to meet such publicity. It was to him as if the whole United States had been scandalized to attention by this act of his in going to sit beside Milla; he gazed upward so long that his eye-balls became sensitive under the strain. He began to blink. "I can't make out whether it's a squirrel or just some leaves that kind o' got fixed like one," he said. "I can't make out yet which it is, but I guess when there's a breeze, if it's a squirrel he'll prob'ly hop around some then, if he's alive or anything."

It had begun to seem that his eyes must remain fixed in that upward stare forever; he wanted to bring them down, but could not face the glare of the world. But finally the brightness of the sky between the leaves settled matters for him; he sneezed, wept, and for a little moment again faced his fellowmen. No one was looking at him; everybody except Milla had other things to do.

Having sneezed involuntarily, he added a spell of coughing for which there was no necessity. "I guess I must be wrong," he muttered thickly.

"What about, Ramsey?"

"About it's been a squirrel." With infinite timidity he turned his head and encountered a gaze so soft, so halting, that it disconcerted him, and he dropped a "drumstick" of fried chicken, well dotted with ants, from his plate. Scarcely he picked it up, but he did not eat it. For the first time in his life he felt that eating fried chicken held in the fingers was not to be thought of. He replaced the "drumstick" upon his plate and allowed it to remain there untouched, in spite of a great hunger for it.

Having looked down, he now found difficulty in looking up, but gazed steadily at his plate, and into this limited circle of vision came Milla's delicate and rosy fingers, bearing a gift. "There," she said in a motherly little voice. "It's a tomato mayonnaise sandwich and I made it myself. I want you to eat it, Ramsey."

His own fingers approached tremulously as he accepted the thick sandwich from her and conveyed it to his mouth. A moment later his soul filled with horror, for a spurt of mayonnaise dressing had caused a catastrophe: the scene of which occupied no inconsiderable area of his right cheek, which was the cheek toward Milla. He groped wretchedly for his handkerchief but could not find it; he had lost it. Sudden death would have been relief; he was sure that after such grotesquerie Milla could never bear to have anything more to do with him; he was ruined.

In his anguish he felt a paper napkin pressed gently into his hand; a soft voice said in his ear, "Wipe it off with this, Ramsey. Nobody's noticing."

So this incredibly charitable creature was still able to be his friend, even after seeing him mayonnaised! Humbly marveling, he did as she told him, but avoided all further risks. He ate nothing more.

He sighed his first sigh of inexpressible relief, had a chill or so along the spine, and at intervals his brow was bedewed.

Within his averted eyes there dwelt not the Milla Rust who sat beside him, but an iridescent, fragile creature who had become angelic.

He spent the rest of the day dawdling helplessly about her; wherever she went he was near, as near as possible, that of no deliberate volition of his own. Something seemed to tie him

to her, and Milla was nothing loth.

He seldom looked at her directly, or for longer than an instant, and more rarely still did he speak to her except as a reply. What few remarks he ventured upon his own initiative nearly all concerned the landscape, which he commended repeatedly in a weak voice, as "kind of pretty," though once he said he guessed there might be bugs in the bark of a log on which they sat; and he became so immoderately personal as to declare that if the bugs had to get on anybody he'd rather they got on him than on Milla. She said that was "just perfectly lovely" of him, asked where he got his sweet nature, and in other ways encouraged him to continue the revelation, but Ramsey was unable to get forward with it, though he opened and closed his mouth a great many times in the effort to do so.

At five o'clock everybody was summoned again to the rendezvous for a ceremony preliminary to departure; the class found itself in a large circle, standing, and sang "The Star Spangled Banner." Ordinarily, on such an open-air and out-of-school occasion, Ramsey would have joined the chorus uproariously with the utmost blatancy of which his vocal apparatus was capable; and most of the other boys expressed their humor by drowning out the serious efforts of the girls; but he sang feebly, not much more than humming through his teeth. Standing beside Milla, he was incapable of his former inelegances and his voice was in a semi-paralyzed condition, like the rest of him.

Opposite him, across the circle, Dora Yocum stood a little in advance of those near her, for of course she led the singing. Her clear and earnest voice was distinguishable from all others, and though she did not glance toward Ramsey he had a queer feeling that she was assuming more superiority than ever, and that she was jolly scornful of him and Milla. The old resentment rose—he'd "show" that girl yet, some day!

When the song was over, cheers were given for the class, "the good ole class of Nineteen Fourteen," the school, the teachers, and for the picnic, thus officially concluded; and then the picnickers, carrying their baskets and faded wild flowers and other souvenirs and burdens, moved toward the big "express wagons" which were to take them back into the town. Ramsey got his guitar case, and turned to Milla.

"Well—g-by."

"Why, no," said Milla. "Anywyy, not yet. You can go back in the same wagon with me. It's going to stop at the school and let us all out there, and then you could walk home with me if you felt like it."

"Well—well, I'd be perfectly willing," Ramsey said. "Only I heard we all had to go back in whatever wagon we came out in, and I didn't come in the same one with you, so—"

Milla laughed and leaned toward him a little. "I already 'tended to that," she said confidentially. "I asked Johnnie Fiske, that came out in my wagon, to go back in yours, so that makes room for you."

"Well—then I guess I could do it." He moved toward the wagon with her. "I expect it don't make much difference one way or the other."

"And you can carry my basket if you want to," she said, adding solicitously, "unless it's too heavy when you already got your guitar case to carry, Ramsey."

This thoughtfulness of hers almost overcame him; she seemed divine.

"I'll be glad to carry the basket, too," he faltered. "It—it don't weigh anything much."

"Well, let's hurry, so's we can get places together."

Then, as she maneuvered him through the little crowd about the wagon, with a soft push this way and a gentle pull that, and hurried him up the improvised steps and found a place where there was room for them both to sit, Ramsey had another breathless sensation heretofore unknown to him. He found himself taken under a dove-like protectorship; a wonderful, inexpressible being seemed to have become his proprietor.

"Isn't this just perfectly lovely?" she said cozily, close to his ear.

He swallowed, but found no words, for he had no thoughts; he was only an incoherent tumult. This was his first love.

"Isn't it, Ramsey?" she urged. The cozy voice had just the hint of a reproach. "Don't you think it's just perfectly lovely, Ramsey?"

"Yes'm."

CHAPTER V.

The next morning Ramsey came into his father's room while Mr. Milholland was shaving, an hour before church time, and it became apparent that the son had something on his mind, though for a while he said nothing.

"Did you want anything, Ramsey?"

"Well—"

"Didn't want to borrow my razors?"

"No, sir."

Mr. Milholland chuckled. "I hardly supposed so seriously! Shaving is a great nuisance and the longer you keep away from it the better. And when you do, you let my razors alone, young feller!"

"Yes, sir." (Mr. Milholland's razors were safe. Ramsey had already achieved one of his own, but he practiced the art in secret.)

"What is it you really want, Ramsey?"

"I guess I don't want anything."



"And When You Do, You Let My Razors Alone, Young Feller!"

"Money?"

"No, sir. You gay' me some Friday."

Mr. Milholland turned from his mirror and looked over the edge of a towel at his son. In the boy's eyes there was such a dumb agony of interrogation that the father was a little startled.

"Why, what is it, Ramsey? Have you—?" He paused, frowning and wondering. "You haven't been getting into some mess you want to tell me about, have you?"

"No, sir."

His tone was meek, but a mute distress lurked within it, bringing to the father's mind disturbing suspicions, and foreshadowings of indignation and of pity. "See here, Ramsey," he said, "if there's anything you want to ask me, or to tell me, you'd better out with it and get it over. Now, what is it?"

"Well—it isn't anything."

"Are you sure?"

Ramsey's eyes fell before the severe and piercing gaze of his father. "Yes, sir."

Mr. Milholland shook his head doubtfully; then, as his son walked slowly out of the room, he turned to complete his toilet in a somewhat uneasy frame of mind. Ramsey had undoubtedly wanted to say something to him and the boy's expression had shown that the matter in question was serious, distressing, and, it might be, critical.

In fact it was—to Ramsey. Having begun within only the last few hours to regard haberdashery as of vital importance, and believing his father to be possessed of the experience and authority lacking in himself, Ramsey had come to get him to settle a question which had been upsetting him badly, in his own room, since breakfast. What he wanted to know was: Whether it was right to wear an extra handkerchief showing out of the coat breast-pocket or not, and, if it was right—ought the handkerchief to have a colored border or to be plain white? But he had never before brought any such perplexities to his father, and found himself too diffident to set them forth.

However, when he left the house a few minutes later, he boldly showed an inch of purple border above the pocket; then, as he saw himself about to encounter several old lady pedestrians, he blushed and thrust the handkerchief down into deep concealment. Having gone a block farther, he pulled it up again; and so continued to operate this badge of fashion, or unfashion, throughout the morning; and suffered a great deal thereby.

Meantime, his father, rather relieved that Ramsey had not told his secret, whatever it was, dismissed the episode from his mind and joined Mrs. Milholland at the front door, ready for church.

"Where's Ramsey?" he asked.

"He's gone ahead," she answered, buttoning her gloves as they went along. "I heard the door quite a little while ago. Perhaps he went over to walk down with Charlotte and Vance. Did you notice how neat he looks this morning?"

"Why, no, I didn't; not particularly. Does he?"

"I never saw anything like it before," said Mrs. Milholland. "He only has three neckties, but I saw him several times in each of them. He must have kept changing and changing. I wonder—"

"I'm glad he's begun to take a little care of his appearance at last. I'll have to take a look at him and give him a word of praise. I suppose he'll be in the pew when we get there."

But Ramsey wasn't in the pew; and Charlotte, his sister, and her husband, who were there, said they hadn't seen anything of him. It was not until the members of his family were on their way home after the services that they caught a glimpse of him.

They were passing a church a little distance from their own; here the congregation was just emerging to the open, and among the sedate throng descending the broad stone steps appeared an accompanied Ramsey—and a red, red Ramsey was when he beheld his father and mother and sister and brother-in-law staring up at him from the pavement below. They were kind enough not to come to an absolute halt, but passed slowly on, so that he was just able to avoid parading up the street in front of them.