

# Ramsey Milholland

by Booth Tarkington

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## SYNOPSIS

**CHAPTER I.**—With his grandfather, small Ramsey Milholland is watching the "Decoration 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.**—At a class picnic Ramsey, to his intense surprise, appears to attract the favorable attention of Miss Milla Rust, a young lady of about his own age and the acknowledged belle of the class. Milla has the misfortune to fall into a creek while talking with Ramsey, and that youth promptly plunges to the rescue. The water is only some three feet deep, but Milla's gratitude for his heroic act is embarrassing. He is in fact taken captive by the fair one, to his great consternation.

**CHAPTER V.**—The acquaintance ripens, Ramsey and Milla openly "keeping company," while the former's parents wonder. His mother indeed goes so far as to express some disapproval of his choice, to even hitting that Dora Yocum would be a more suitable companion, a suggestion which the youth receives with horror.

## CHAPTER VI

Vacation, in spite of increased leisure, may bring inconvenience to people in Ramsey's strange but not uncommon condition. At home his constant air was that of a badgered captive plaintively silent under injustice; and he found it difficult to reply calmly when asked where he was going—an inquiry addressed to him, he asserted, every time he touched his cap, even to hang it up!

The amount of evening walking he did must also have been a trial to his nerves, on account of fatigue, though the ground covered was not vast. Milla's mother and father were friendly people, but saw no reason to "move out of house and home," as Mr. Rust said, when Milla had "callers"; and on account of the intimate plan of their small dwelling a visitor's only alternative to spending the evening with Mr. and Mrs. Rust as well as with Milla, was to invite her to "go out walking."

Evening after evening they walked and walked and walked, usually in



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company—at perhaps the distance of half a block—with Albert Paxton and Sadie Clews, though Ramsey now and then felt disgraced by having fallen into this class; for sometimes it was apparent that Albert casually had his arm about Sadie's waist. This allured Ramsey somewhat, but terrified him more. He didn't know how such matters were managed.

Usually the quartet had no destination; they just went "out walking" until ten o'clock, when both girls had to be home—and the boys did, too, but never admitted it. On Friday evenings there was a "public open-air concert" by a brass band in a small park, and the four were always there.

Milla hung wearily upon his arm, and they dawdled, drifting from one side of the pavement to the other as they slowly advanced. Albert and Sadie, ahead of them, called "good night" from a corner, before turning down the side street where Sadie lived; and then, presently, Ramsey and Milla

were at the latter's gate. He went in with her, halting at the front steps. "Well, g'night, Milla," he said. "Want to go out walking tomorrow night? Albert and Sadie are."

"I can't tomorrow night," she told him with obvious regret. "Isn't it the worst luck! I got an aunt comin' to visit from Chicago, and she's crazy about playing 'Five Hundred,' and mama and papa said I haf to stay in to make four to play it. She's liable to be here three or four days, and I guess I got to be around home pretty much all the time she's here. It's the worst luck!"

He was doleful, but ventured to be literary. "Well, what can't be helped must be endured. I'll come around when she's gone."

He moved as if to depart, but she still retained his arm and did not prepare to relinquish it.

"Well—" he said.

"Well what, Ramsey?"

"Well—g'night."

She glanced up at the dark front of the house. "I guess the family's gone to bed," she said absently.

"I s'pose so."

"Well, good night, Ramsey." She said this, but still did not release his arm, and suddenly, in a flutter, he felt that the time he dreaded had come. Somehow, without knowing where, except that it was somewhere upon what seemed to be a blurred face too full of obstructing features, he kissed her.

She turned instantly away in the darkness, her hands over her cheeks; and in a panic Ramsey wondered if he hadn't made a dreadful mistake.

"Scuse me!" he said, stumbling toward the gate. "Well, I guess I got to be gettin' along back home."

He woke in the morning to a great self-loathing; he had kissed a girl. Mingled with the loathing was a curious pride in the very fact that caused the loathing, but the pride did not last long. He came downstairs morbid to breakfast, and continued this mood afterward. At noon Albert Paxton brought him a note which Milla had asked Sadie to ask Albert to give him.

"Dearie: I am just wondering if you thought as much about something so sweet that happened last night as I did you know what. I think it was the sweetest thing. I send you one with this note and I hope you will think it is a sweet one. I would give you a real one if you were here now and I hope you would think it was sweeter still than the one I put in this note. It is the sweetest thing you are mine and I am yours forever kiddo. If you come around about Friday eve it will be all right. Aunt Jess will be gone back home by then so come early and we will get Sade and Alb to go to the band concert. Don't forget what I said about my putting something sweet in this note, and I hope you will think it is a sweet one but not as sweet as the real sweet one I would like to—"

At this point Ramsey impulsively tore the note into small pieces. He turned cold as his imagination projected a sketch of his mother in the act of reading this missive, and of her expression as she read the sentence: "It is the sweetest thing now you are mine and I am yours forever kiddo." He wished that Milla hadn't written "kiddo." She called him that, sometimes, but in her warm little voice the word seemed not at all what it did in ink. He wished, too, that she hadn't said she was his forever.

Suddenly he was seized with a horror of her.

Moisture broke out heavily upon him; he felt a definite sickness, and, wishing for death, went forth upon the streets to walk and walk. He cared not whether, so that his feet took him in any direction away from Milla, since they were unable to take him away from himself—of whom he had as great a horror. Her loving face was continually before him, and its sweetness made his flesh creep. Milla had been too sweet.

When he met or passed people, it seemed to him that perhaps they were able to recognize upon him somewhere the marks of his low quality. "Softy! Ole sloppy fool!" he muttered, addressing himself. "Slushy ole mush! Spooner!" And he added, "Yours forever, kiddo!"

Convulsions seemed about to seize him.

Turning a corner with his head down, he almost charged into Dora Yocum. She was homeward bound from a piano lesson, and carried a rolled leather case of sheet music—something he couldn't imagine Milla carrying—and in her young girl's dress, which attempted to be nothing else, she looked as wholesome as cold spring water. Ramsey had always felt that she despised him and now, all at

once, he thought that she was justified. Long as he had become, he was unworthy to be even touching his cap to her! And as she nodded and went briskly on, he would have given anything to turn and walk a little way with her, for it seemed to him that this might fumigate his morals. But he lacked the courage, and, besides, he considered himself unfit to be seen walking with her.

He had a long afternoon of anguishes, these becoming most violent when he tried to face the problem of his future course toward Milla. He did not face it at all, in fact, but merely writhed, and had evolved nothing when Friday evening was upon him and Milla waiting for him to take her to the "band concert" with "Alb and Sade." He made shift to seek a short interview with Albert, just before dinner.

"I got a pretty rotten headache, and my stomach's upset, too," he said, drooping upon the Paxtons' fence. "I been gettin' worse every minute. You and Sadie go by Milla's, Albert, and tell her if I'm not there by ha'-pas'-seven, tell her not to wait for me any longer."

"How do you mean 'wait'?" Albert inquired. "You don't expect her to come pokin' along with Sade and me, do you? She'll keep on sittin' there at home just the same, because she wouldn't have anything else to do, if you don't come like she expects you to. She hasn't got any way to stop waitin'!"

At this, Ramsey moaned, without affectation. "I don't expect I can, Albert," he said. "I'd like to if I could, but the way it looks now, you tell her I wouldn't be much surprised maybe I was startin' in with typhoid fever or pretty near anything at all." He moved away, concluding feebly: "I guess I better crawl on home, Albert, while I'm still able to walk some. You tell her the way it looks now—I'm liable to be right sick."

And the next morning he woke to the chafings of remorse, picturing a Milla somewhat restored in charm, waiting hopefully at the gate, even after the half-past seven, and then, as time passed and the sound of the distant horns came faintly through the darkness, going sadly to her room—perhaps weeping there. It was a picture to wring him with shame and pity, but was followed by another which electrified him, for out of school he did not lack imagination. What if Albert had reported his illness too avidly to Milla? Milla was so fond! What if, in her alarm, she should come here to the house to inquire of his mother about him? What if she told Mrs. Milholland they were "engaged"? The next moment Ramsey was projecting a conversation between his mother and Milla in which the latter stated that she and Ramsey were soon to be married, that she regarded him as already virtually her husband, and demanded to nurse him.

In a panic he fled from the house before breakfast, going out by way of a side door, and he crossed back yards and climbed back fences to reach Albert Paxton the more swiftly. This creature, a ladies' man almost professionally, was found exercising with an electric iron and a pair of flannel trousers in a basement laundry, by way of stirring his appetite for the morning meal.

"See here, Albert," his friend said breathlessly. "I got a favor. I want you to go over to Milla's—"

"I'm goin' to finish pressin' these trousers," Albert interrupted. "Then I've got my breakfast to eat."

"Well, you could do this first," said Ramsey, hurriedly. "It wouldn't hurt you to do me this little favor first. You just slip over and see Milla for me, if she's up yet, and if she isn't, you better wait around till she is, because I want you to tell her I'm a whole lot better this morning. Tell her I'm pretty near practickly all right again, Albert, and I'll prob'ly write her a note or something right soon—or in a week or so, anyhow. You tell her—"

"Well, you act pretty funny!" Albert exclaimed, fumbling in the pockets of his coat. "Why can't you go on over and tell her yourself? But just as it happens there wouldn't be any use your goin' over there, or me, either."

"Why not?"

"Milla ain't there," said Albert, still searching the pockets of his coat.

"When we went by her house last night to tell her about your headache and stomach and all, why her mother told us Milla'd gone up to Chicago yesterday afternoon with her aunt, and said she left a note for you, and she said if you were sick I better take it and give it to you. I was goin' to bring it over to your house after breakfast." He found it. "Here!"

Ramsey thanked him feebly, and departed in a state of partial stupefaction, brought on by a glimpse of the instabilities of life. He had also, not relief, but a sense of vacancy and loss; for Milla, out of his reach, once more became mysteriously lovely.

Pausing in an alley, he read her note.

"Dearie: Thought I ought to call you up but over the 'phone is just nix for explanations as Mama and Aunt Jess would hear everything and thought I might seem cold to you not aying anything sweet on account of them listenin' and you would wonder why I was so cold when telling you good-by for a while maybe weeks. It is this way Uncle Purv wired Aunt Jess he has just taken in a big touring car on a debt and his vacation starts tomorrow so if they were going to take a trip they better start right way so Aunt Jess invited me. Now dearie I have to pack and write this in a hurry so you will not be disappointed when you come by for the B. C. to-night. Do not go get some other girl and take her for I would hate her and nothing in this world would make me false for one second to my kiddo boy. I do not know just when home again as the folks think I better stay up there for a visit at Aunt Jess and Uncle Purv's home in Chicago after the trip is over. But I think of you all the time and you must think of me every minute and believe your own dearie she will never no for one second be false. So tell Sade and Alb good-by for me and do not be false to me any more than I would be to you and it will not be long till nothing more will interrupt our sweet friendship."

As a measure of domestic prudence, Ramsey tore the note into irreparable fragments, but he did this slowly, and without experiencing any of the revulsion created by Milla's former missive.

He was melancholy, aggrieved that she should treat him so.

## CHAPTER VII

He never saw her again. She sent him a "picture postal" from Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, which his father disengaged from the family mail, one morning at breakfast, and considerately handed to him without audible comment. Upon it was written, "Oh, you Ramsey!" This was the last of Milla.

Just before school opened, in the autumn, Sadie Clews made some revelations. "Milla did like you," said Sadie. "After that time you jumped in the creek to save her she liked you better than any boy in town, and I guess if it wasn't for her cousin Milt up in Chicago she would of liked you the best anywhere. I guess she did, anyway, because she hadn't seen him for about a year then."

"Well, that afternoon she went away I was over there and took in everything that was goin' on, only she made me promise on my word of honor

did become serious enough to point out that a university was different from a high school.

"It's not like havin' to use one big room as a headquarters, you know, Ramsey. Everything's all split up, and she might happen not be in a single one of your classes."

"You don't know my luck!" the afflicted boy protested. "I wish I'd gone to Harvard, the way my father wanted me to. Why, this is just the worst nuisance I ever struck! You'll see! She'll be in everything there is, just the way she was back home."

He appeared to be corroborated by the events of the next day, when they attended the first meeting to organize the new class. The masculine element predominated, but Dora Yocum was elected vice president. "You see?" Ramsey said. "Didn't I tell you? You see what happens?"

But after that she ceased for a time to intrude upon his life, and he admitted that his harassment was less grave than he had anticipated. There were about five hundred students in the freshman class; he seldom saw her, and when he did it was not more than a distant glimpse of her on one of the campus paths, her thoughtful head bent over a book as she hurried to a classroom. This was bearable; and in the flattering agitations of being sought, and even hunted, by several "fraternities" simultaneously desirous of his becoming a sworn Brother, he almost forgot her. After a hazardous month the roommates fell into the arms of the last "frat" to seek them, and having undergone an evening of outrage which concluded with touching rhetoric and an oath taken at midnight, they proudly wore jeweled symbols on their breasts and were free to turn part of their attention to other affairs, especially the affairs of the Eleven.

However, they were instructed by the older brethren of their Order whose duty it was to assist in the proper maneuvering of their young careers, that, although support of the "varsity" teams was important, they must neglect neither the spiritual nor the intellectual by-products of undergraduate doings. Therefore they became members of the college Y. M. C. A. and of the "Lumen Society."

According to the charter which it had granted itself, the "Lumen Society" was an "Organization of male and female students"—so "advanced" was this university—"for the development of the powers of debate and oratory, intellectual and sociological progress, and the discussion of all matters relating to philosophy, metaphysics, literature, art, and current events." A statement so formidable was not without a hushing effect upon Messrs. Milholland and Mitchell; they went to their first "Lumen" meeting in a state of fear and came away little reassured.

"I couldn't get up there," Ramsey declared, "I couldn't stand up there before all that crowd and make a speech, or debate in a debate, to save my soul and gizzard! Why, I'd just keel right over and haf to be carried out."

"Well, the way I understand it,"

said Fred, "we can't get out of it. The seniors in the 'frat' said we had to join, and they said we couldn't resign, either, after we had joined. They said we just had to go through it, and after a while we'd get used to it and not mind it so much."

"I will!" Ramsey insisted. "I couldn't any more stand up there on my feet and get to spoutin' about sociology and the radical metempsychosis of the metempsychic bazoom than I could fly a flyin' machine. Why, I—"

"Oh, that wasn't anything," Fred interrupted. "The only one that talked like that, he was that Blickens; he's a tutor, or something, and really a member of the faculty. Most of the



"What on Earth's the Matter, Ramsey?"

others just kind of blabbered around, and what any of 'em tried to get off their chests hardly amounted to terribly much."

"I don't care. I couldn't do it at all!"

"Well, the way it looks to me," Fred observed, "we simply got to! From what they tell me, the freshmen go to do more than anybody. Every other Friday night, it's all freshmen and nothin' else. You get a postal card on Monday morning in your mail, and it says 'Assignment' on it and—ard—then it's got written underneath what you haf to do the next Friday night—oration or debate, or maybe just I wouldn't even tell Albert. They didn't get any wire from the union about the touring car; it was her cousin Milt that jumped on the train and came down and fixed it all up for Milla to go on the trip, and everything. You see, Ramsey, she was turned back a couple of times in school before she came in our class and I don't know how old she is and she don't look old yet, but I'm pretty sure she's at least eighteen, and she might be over. I didn't think such a great deal of this Milt's looks myself, but he's anyway twenty-one years old, and got a good position, and all their family seem to think he's just fine! It wasn't his father that took in the touring car on the debt, like she said she was writing you; it was Milt himself. He started out in business when he was only thirteen years old, and this trip he was gettin' up for his father and mother and Milla was the first vacation he ever took. Well, of course she wouldn't like my tellin' you, but I can't see the harm of it, now everything's all over."

"All—all over? You mean Milla's going to be—to be married?"

"She already is," said Sadie. "They got married at her Aunt Jess and Uncle Purv's house, up in Chicago, last Thursday. Yes, sir; that quiet, little Milla's a regular old married woman by this time, I expect, Ramsey!"

When he got over the shock, which was not until the next day, one predominating feeling remained: It was a gloomy pride—a pride in his proven maturity. He was old enough, it appeared, to have been the same thing as engaged to a person who was now a Married Woman. His manner thenceforth showed an added trace of seriousness and self-consideration.

Having recovered his equipoise and something more, he entirely forgot that moment of humble admiration he had felt for Dora Yocum on the day of his flattest prostration. When he saw her sitting in the classroom, smiling brightly up at the teacher, the morning of the school's opening in the autumn, all his humility had long since vanished and she appeared to him not otherwise than as the scholar whose complete proficiency had always been so irksome to him.

"Look at her!" he muttered to himself. "Same ole Teacher's Pet!"

Now and then, as the days and seasons passed, and Dora's serene progress continued, never checked or even flawed, there stirred within him some lingerings of the old determination to "show" her; and he would conjure up a day-dream of Dora in loud lamentation, while he led the laughter of the spectators. But gradually his feeling about her came to be merely a dull oppression. He was tired of having to look at her (as he stated it) and he thanked the Lord that the time wouldn't be so long now until he'd be out of that ole school, and then all he'd have to do he'd just take

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