



***OPIE
PERCIVAL
READ***

***A YANKEE
FROM
THE WEST***



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Opie Percival Read

A Yankee from the West

A Novel

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CHAPTER I.

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MILFORD.

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In his mind the traveler holds of Illinois a tiresome picture, the kitchen garden of a great people, a flat and unromantic necessity. The greatest of men have trod the level ground, but it is hard to mark history upon a plane; there is no rugged place on which to hang a wreath, and on the prairie the traveling eye is accommodated by no inn whereat it may halt to rest. Such is the Illinois as remembered by the hastening tourist. But in the southern part of the State there are mountains, and in the north, the scene of this story, there is a spread and a roll of romantic country—the green billows of Wisconsin gently breaking into Illinois; lakes scattered like a handful of jewels thrown broadcast, quiet rivers singing low among the rushes. Traveling north, we have left the slim, man-tended tree of the prairies, and here we find the great oak. There are hillsides where the forest is heavy. There are valleys sweet in a riot of flowers. Along the roads the fences are almost hidden by grape-vines. On a knoll the air is honeyed with wild crab-apple; along a slope the senses tingle with the scent of the green walnut. There are lanes so romantic that cool design could have had no hand in their arrangement—they hold the poetry of accident. The inhabitants of this scope of country have done nothing to beautify it. They have built wooden houses and have scarred the earth, but

persistent nature soon hides the scars with vines and grasses. The soil is wastefully strong. In New England and in parts of the South, the feeble corn is a constant care, but here it grows with the rankness of a jungle weed. And yet, moved by our national disease, nervousness, the farmer sells his pastoral dales to buy a wind-swept space of prairie in the far West. A strange shiftlessness, almost unaccountable in a climate so stimulating, has suffered many a farm to lie idle, with fences slowly moldering under flowering vines—a reproach to husbandry, but a contribution to sentiment. Amid these scenes many an astonished muser has asked himself this question: "Where are the poets of this land, where the bluebell nods in metre to the gentle breeze?" Not a poem, not a story has he seen reflecting the life of this rude England in America. In the summer the Sunday newspaper prints the names of persons who, escaping from Chicago, have "sardined" themselves in cottages or suffered heat and indigestion at a farm-house; the maker of the bicycle map has marked the roads and dotted the villages; the pen and ink worker for the daily press has drawn sketches of a lily pad, a tree and a fish much larger than the truth; the reporter has caught a bit of color here and there, but the contemplative writer has been silent and the American painter has shut his eyes to open them upon a wood-shod family group in Germany.

This region was settled by Yankees. They brought with them a tireless industry and a shrewd humor. But to be wholly himself the Yankee must live on thin soil. Necessity

must extract the full operation of his energy. Under his stern demand, the conquered ground yields more than enough. Vanquished poverty stuffs his purse. He sets up schools and establishes libraries. But on a soil that yields with cheerful readiness, he becomes careless and loses the shrewd essence of his energy. His humor, though, remains the same. Nervous and whimsical, he sees things with a hollow eye, and his laugh is harsh. Unlike his brother of the South, he does not hook arms with a joke, walk with it over the hill and loll with it in the shade of the valley; it is not his companion, but his instrument, and he makes it work for him.

One afternoon in early summer a man got off a train at Rollins, a milk station, and stood looking at a number of farmers loading into wagons the empty milk cans that had been returned from the city. He was tall and strong-appearing. He wore a dark, short beard, trimmed sharp, and his face was almost fierce-looking, with a touch of wildness, such as the art of the stage-man tries in vain to catch. He was not well dressed; he carried the suggestion that he might have lived where man is licentiously free. With his sharp eye he must have been quick to draw a bead with a gun; but his eye, though sharp, was pleasing. A dog sniffed him and walked off, satisfied with his investigation. The countryman stands ready to sanction a dog's approval of a stranger—it is wisdom fortified by superstition, by tales told around the fire at night—so a look of mistrust was melted with a smile, and the owner of the dog spoke to the stranger.

"Don't guess you've got a newspaper about you?" said the farmer, putting his last can into the wagon.

"No. The afternoon papers weren't out when I left town."

"Morning paper would suit me just as well—haven't seen one to-day. I get a weekly all winter, and I try to get a daily in the summer, but sometimes I fail. Goin' out to anybody's house?"

"I don't know."

The farmer looked at him sharply. A man who did not know—who didn't even guess that he didn't know—was something of a curiosity to him. "Did you expect anybody to meet you?"

"No; I came out to look around a little—thought I might rent a farm if I could strike the right sort of terms."

"Well, I guess you've come to the right place." He turned and pointed far across a meadow to a windmill above tree tops on the brow of a hill. "Mrs. Stuvic, a widow woman, that lives over yonder, has an adjoinin' farm to rent. Get in, and I'll drive you over—goin' that way anyhow, and it shan't cost you a cent. Throw your carpet-bag in there, it won't fall out. Whoa, boys! They won't run away. Yes, sir, as good a little place as there is in the county," he added, turning down a lane. "But the old woman has had all sorts of bad luck with it. That horse would have a fit if he couldn't clap his tail over that line every five minutes. But he won't run away."

"I don't care if he does," said the stranger.

"Well, you would if you had to pick up milk cans for half a mile. He scattered them from that house up yonder down to that piece of timber day before yesterday."

"Did he run away?"

"Well, he wasn't walkin'."

"Then how do you know he won't run away again?"

"Well, I think I've sorter Christian scienced him."

The stranger laughed, and the farmer clucked an applause of his own wisdom. They had reached a corner where a large white house stood surrounded by blooming cherry trees. Bees hummed, and the air was heavy with sweetness. The stranger took off his hat, and straightening up breathed long. "Delicious," he said. The farmer turned to the right, into another road. "I'm almost glad I'm alive," said the stranger.

"You must have paid your taxes and got it over with," the farmer replied. The stranger did not rejoin. His mind and his eye had gone forth to roam in a piece of woods gently sloping toward the road. He saw the mandrake's low canopy, shading the sod, the crimson flash of a woodpecker through the blue of the air beneath the green of the trees, like a spurt of blood. The farmer's eye, cloyed with the feasts that nature spreads, followed a horse that galloped through the rank tangle of a marsh-dip in a meadow.

"Over on that other hill is where the old lady lives," he said.

"What did you say her name was?"

"Well, her name *was* first one thing then another, but it's Stuvic now. She's been married several times—a Dutchman the last time, a good-hearted fellow that used to work for her first husband—a good talker in his way, smokin' all the time, and coughin' occasionally fit to kill himself. He liked to read, but he had to keep his books hid in the barn, for the old lady hates print worse than she does a snake. He'd wait

till she was off the place, and then he'd go out and dig up his learnin'. But the minute he heard her comin'—and he could hear her a mile—he'd cover up his knowledge again. One day he told her he was goin' to die, and she might have believed him, but he had lied to her a good deal, so she hooted at him; but a few days afterwards he convinced her, and when she found he had told the truth, she jumped into a black dress and cried. Strangest creature that ever lived, I guess; and if you want to come to good terms with her tell her you can't read. She gets on a rampage once in a while, and then she owns the road. I saw her horse-whip a hired man. He had let a horse run away with him. She took the horse, hitched him to a buggy, jumped in, laid on the whip, and drove him at a gallop till he was only too glad to behave himself. Well, you can get out here."

The stranger got down in front of a white "frame" house near the road. The farmer waved him a good-bye and drove on. From a young orchard behind the house there came the laughter of children at play. In the yard sat an aged man beneath an old apple tree. The place was a mingling of the old and the new, a farm-house with an extension for summer boarders.

As the stranger entered the gate, a tall, heavy, but graceful old woman stepped out upon the veranda. "Wasn't that Steve Hardy that you rode up with?" she asked, gazing at him. The visitor bowed, and was about to answer when she snapped: "Oh, don't come any of your bowin' and scrapin' to me. All I want is the truth."

"The man didn't tell me his name, madam."

"Well, you didn't lose anythin'. It was Steve Hardy, and a bigger liar never trod luther. Come in."

The visitor stepped upon the veranda, and sat down upon a bench. The old woman stood looking at him. "Do you want board?" she asked. He took off his hat and placed it upon the bench beside him. She gazed at his bronzed face, his white brow, and grunted:

"I asked if you wanted board."

"I want something more than board, madam; I want work."

She snapped her eyes at him. "You look more like you was dodgin' it than huntin' for it; yes, you bet. I know all about a man lookin' for work. All he wants is a chance to get drunk and lie down in the corner of the fence. Yes, you bet. What sort of work do you want?"

"A man that needs work is not very particular. I've never been lazy enough to look for an easy job."

She leaned toward him; she held out her hand. "Shake! You've earned your supper by sayin' that." He took her hard hand and smiled. She frowned. "Don't try to look putty at me! No, you bet! It won't work with me."

There came a hoarse cry from the old apple tree. An enormous Dutch girl ran by, laughing. An old man came forward, brushing himself.

"Now what's the matter with you, Lewson?" the old woman asked.

The aged man was in a rage. "That infernal Dutch cow ran over me again. Why the devil can't she walk? What does she want to snort around for like a confounded heifer? If I

don't get me a gun and shoot her I'm the biggest liar on the earth."

"Now, you keep still, Lewson; you keep right still!"

"Still! How the deuce am I going to keep still when she's knocking me down all the time? Every time I walk out she runs over me; if I sit down she runs over me; if I go to my room to take a nap she runs against the house and wakes me up. She can't understand a word you say to her—and confound her, I hit her with a stick, and was three days trying to explain it. Why don't you drive her away?"

A bell at the end of a pole at the kitchen door rang furiously. There came an answering shout from the lake across the meadow. "You've earned your supper," said the old woman. "Yes, you bet!"



CHAPTER II.

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LIKED HIM.

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Summer was just opening, and there were not many boarders at Mrs. Stuvic's house. But the posting of a railway time-card in the dining-room showed that everything was in readiness. A cook had come from the city to set up her temper against the slouching impudence of the hired man, and an Irish girl stood ready to play favorites at the table. Mrs. Stuvic gave the stranger a seat at the head of the table, and three tired women—hens, worn out with clucking to their boisterous broods—began a whispered comment upon him. One, with a paper novel lying beside her plate, said that he was fiercely handsome. Mrs. Stuvic sat down near him.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Milford," he answered, and the woman with the novel seemed pleased with the sound.

"Yes, I know," said Mrs. Stuvic, as if she had divined as much, "but your other name. I can't remember outlandish names."

"William."

"Yes, Bill," she said. "Well, Bill, you hinted you wanted work."

The woman with the novel withdrew her attention. Milford shot a glance at her. "Yes," he replied. "The man you

say is the biggest liar that ever trod leather told me that you had a farm to rent."

"Well, land sakes! when did he take to tellin' the truth? But just keep still now and say nothin'. Don't say a word, but keep still, and after supper I'll show you somethin'."

A red-headed boy, the natural incumbrance of the woman with the novel, snorted over his plate, and the old woman set her teeth on edge and looked hard at him. "Yes, well, now what's the matter with you? Who told you to break out?"

"Eat plenty of supper, Bobbie, or you'll be hungry before bed-time," said the mother. "He hasn't had much appetite lately," she added, and the boy tried to look pitiful. Mrs. Stuvic cleared her throat, and under her breath muttered "Calf." The mother looked at Milford. "I beg your pardon," she said, "but are you related to the Milfords that live down in Peoria County?"

"I think not, madam," Milford answered.

"They are such nice people," the woman went on; "distant relatives of mine. Sit up straight, Bobbie. One of the boys has made quite a name as a lawyer—Alfred, I think. And I hear that the daughter, Julia, is about to be married to a foreigner of considerable distinction."

"I've lived down in that part of the country," said a woman with a lubberly cub in her arms, "and I know a family down there named Wilford. They have a son named Alfred, and a daughter Julia who is about to be married to a foreigner."

"Wilford, now let me see," mused the mother of the red boy. "Well, I declare, I believe that is the name!"

"And that," said Milford, "is no doubt the reason, or at least one of the reasons, why they are not kin to me."

"Oh, you keep still!" Mrs. Stuvic cried, snapping a smile in two. "You didn't have to say that—but when you don't know what to say, Bill, say the next best thing. Yes, you bet! Oh, I know a lot, but I don't tell it all. People come here and think they can fool me, but they can't. Some of them come a turnin' up their noses at the table, when I know as well as I know anythin' that they haven't got half as good at home. We had one family in particular that was always growlin'. And when they went home in the fall I said to myself, 'I'll just slip into town one of these days, and see what you've got to eat.' I did, and I never set down to such a meal in my life—soup that looked like tea, and birds put on thin pieces of burnt bread. But if you are through, Bill, come with me; I want to show you somethin'."

She put on her bonnet, and as she stepped out told the Irish girl to take Milford's bag upstairs. It was evident that her favorable impression of him extended as far as a night's lodging. They crossed the road, passed through a gate, so heavy on its hinges that it had to be dragged open, and entered a grove of hickory trees. The sward was thick. Here and there were patches of white and pink wild flowers. The sun was going down, and the lake, seen through a gap in the trees, looked like a prairie fire. They came to a broad lane shaded by wild-cherry trees. Milford stopped.

"I've never seen anything more beautiful than this," he said.

"You just keep still!" she replied. "Yes, and I'll show you somethin' worth lookin' at."

They passed through another gate, went up a graceful rise, into a field, along a broad path hedged with vines and flowers. "Just look at this!" she said. "There ain't better land in this county, and here it lies all gone to waste. The men out here ain't worth the powder and lead it would take to kill 'em. I've rented this farm half a dozen times in the last three years. And what do they do? Get so drunk Sunday that it takes them nearly all week to sober up. I've had to drive 'em away. And the last one! Mercy sakes! The biggest fool that ever made a track; and a hypercrit with it. I found him in the corner of the fence prayin' for rain. Well, I just gathered a bridle and slipped up on him, and if his prayer didn't have a hot end I don't know beans when I see 'em. There was a streak of barbed wire on the fence, and in tryin' to get over he got tangled; and if I didn't give it to him! The idea of a fool gettin' down on his knees tryin' to persuade the Lord to change his mind! All that belongs to me," she went on, waving her hand—"best farm right now in Lake County. And there's the house on the hill, as nice a cottage as you'd want to live in. What do you think of it all?"

"Charming," said Milford. "There's many an old cow in the West that would like to stick her nose up to her eyes into this rich grass."

"You bet, Bill! Are you from the West?"

"Yes, from all over the West. I used to herd cattle; I tried to raise sheep—and I could have done something, but I was restless and wanted to stir about. But I've got over that. Now I want to work."

"That's the way I like to hear a man talk," she said, lifting the latch of a gate. "I don't believe you'd pray for rain."

"The only thing worth prayin' for, madam, is a soul."

"Good enough! Bill, I like you. They say you have to eat a barrel of salt with a man before you know him, and I reckon it's true. But I've eaten so many barrels of salt with men that I know one as far as I can see him. You don't profess to be so awful honest, do you?"

There was hollowness in his laugh, and bitterness in his smile. "I haven't made any pretensions," he said.

"Well, you just keep still and don't make any," she replied.

Through an orchard, they passed to a house on a hill. It stood in the shade of a great walnut tree. She pointed out the barn, the garden-patch, and the woods that belonged to the place. In the soft light it appeared a paradise to the man from the West, green with grass, purple with flowers. She asked him a question, and he answered with a sigh. Then he told her that he was almost moneyless. He had no capital but his will—his muscle. Such a place would be a godsend to him. In his past life there was much to grieve over—time thrown away, opportunities laughed at, money squandered. He could not help dreaming over his follies, and his dream choked him; so he wanted to work with his hands, to fight against a blunt opposition. He stood bareheaded, his face strong. She looked upon him with admiration. From the first, something about him had caught her odd fancy. She was an implacable enemy and a surprising friend. She put her hand on his arm.

"Now, don't you fret," she said. "You didn't have to tell me you had no money. That's all right. If you want this farm you can have it. It's no use to me, lyin' this way. Yes, Bill,

you can take it right now. Oh, you may go around here, and some of 'em will tell you that a meaner woman never lived—them that's tried to have their own way over me—but the poor and the needy will tell a different tale. They know where to get somethin' to eat. Well, it's settled. Come on, now, and we'll go back and fix up the particulars when we get time."

He was cheerful as they walked back toward the old woman's home. New tones came out of his voice. There was baritone music in his laugh. She assured him that the details could be arranged without a hitch, that for the present he might rest at ease. He replied that there could be no ease for him, except as he might dig it out of the ground; he seemed to crave a strain of the body to relieve a strain of the mind. She was accustomed to meet all sorts of men, the scum and the leisure of the city, but this man gave her a new feeling of interest. He looked like a man that would fight, and this kindled the fire of her admiration. She loathed a coward. As a girl, she had hunted with her father in the woods of Ohio. One night his house was attacked by roughs, and she had fought with him. To her there was no merit that did not show action; thought that did not lead to action was a waste of the mind. A book was the record of laziness. She tolerated newspapers—in one she had found the announcement that a man whom she hated was dead. Once a man slandered her. She laughed—a sound as cold as the trickling of iced water—and said that she would live to see his last home marked out upon the ground. She did. She was seen in the cemetery, digging. "What are you doing there?" was asked. And she answered: "I'm planting a hog-

weed on Thompson's grave." Old Lewson, the man who sat under the apple tree, gave his meager property to his children. They turned him out to die. Mrs. Stuvic took him. "I won't live long," he said. "I'm eighty-three years old." "Don't you fret," she replied; "a man that's as big a fool as you be may live to be a hundred and fifty." And the heart of this old woman was deeply stirred by Milford, not by his misfortunes, his homelessness, the touch of the adventurous vagabond in his face, but by her belief that he possessed an unconquerable spirit.

"Yes, you keep still, and we'll arrange it all in time," she said, as they entered the hickory grove. "And you needn't tell me anythin' about yourself, nuther. A man's never so big a liar as when he's tellin' things about himself or his enemy. It seems that he can't tell the truth about either one. So you keep still. It's most too late in the season for you to do very much now in the way of plantin', but you can make a good beginnin'. There's stuff enough in the cottage back yonder, and you may take possession to-morrow if you want to. There's a fellow named Bob Mitchell around here that's out of work, and you can hire him to help you. He's a good hand to work—the only trouble is, he thinks he's smart. But he'll follow if there's any one to lead."

"Madam, I wish I knew how to thank you," said Milford, as he opened the gate leading into the main road. "I came without an introduction, without a single letter——"

"Don't you dare come fetchin' any of your letters to me! There ain't nothin' much easier than to write a lie."

"I'm not going in now. I'll walk about a while."

"Do as you like," she replied. "Your room's at the end up there," she added, pointing. She went into the house, and he turned back into the grove. He sat down with his back against a tree, his hat on the ground. He muttered words to himself; he felt the cool air upon his moist brow; he breathed the perfume of the fresh night.

CHAPTER III.

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INTERESTED IN HIM.

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Milford took possession of the farm-cottage. The terms were so loose-jointed that the neighbors lamented the old woman's lack of business sense. She told them to keep still. She said that for years she had been following the advice of a lawyer, and that every string of her affairs had come untied. Now she was going to act for herself. It was hinted that her methods would reflect discredit upon the practical sense of the community. She replied that she paid her own taxes.

On the old farm there was a sprout of new life. At break of day the dozing idler heard a song afield; the hired man, going to milk the cows, the city man, snapping his watch, hastening to catch a train, saw the Westerner working, wet with dew. And when the evening's lamps were lighted, the wild notes of his cowboy song rang from the hillside. Farmers going to the village of a Saturday afternoon stopped at his fence to engage him in talk, but he answered their questions as he went on with his work. One day they heard him say to his hired man: "Go to the house, Mitchell, and rest a while. You are worn out." A man whose table was light, whose shipments of veal and poultry to town were heavy, and who had been requested to put a better quality of water into his milk, declared that he had lived too long and had too much experience of the world to be fooled by a

man from the West. He had committed some crime—murder, no doubt—and Steve Hardy was censured for hauling him over from the station. This surmise reached the ears of Mrs. Stuvic. She waited till she saw the wise man driving past her house, and she stopped him in the road.

"I'm glad you know all about my man over there, Hawkins."

"Why, I don't know anything about him."

"Oh, yes, you said he'd committed murder."

"No, I said most likely; but I didn't want it repeated, for, of course, I don't know."

"Yes, you bet! And there's a good many things you don't want repeated. You don't want it repeated that you put old Lewson's brats up to turning him out of the house."

"Look here, madam, I didn't do anything of the sort. I simply said I didn't see how they could live with him; and I didn't, either."

"Well, it's all right. The old man's got a better home than he ever had; and you needn't worry yourself about my man over yonder. He couldn't sell as much milk from five cows as you can do, and I don't believe you can keep it up unless we have rain pretty soon, but he knows how to attend to his own business, and that's somethin' you've never been able to learn."

"Madam, if you'll step from in front of my horses I'll drive on."

"Yes, and mighty glad of the opportunity. You stir trouble, and are the first one to hitch up and drive out of it. Now go on, and don't you let me hear of any more murder stories."

Mrs. Blakemore, mother of the red boy, would not presume to say that there was a stain on Milford's character; but he was undoubtedly peculiar, with an air which bespoke a constant effort to hide something. She knew, however, that there was good blood somewhere in his family. She believed in blood. Her husband had failed in business, and she could afford to despise trade. One Sunday, with her vacant-eyed husband and her red tormentor, she halted at Milford's cottage. He was sitting on the veranda, with the billows of a Sunday newspaper about him on the floor. She introduced her husband, who nodded. She spoke of the fervor of the day and the ragged cloud-skirts flaunting in the sky. She thought it must be going to rain. In the city a rain was wasted, a sloppy distress; but in the country it was a beautiful and refreshing necessity. In each great drop there was a stanza of sentiment.

Milford's eyes twinkled. "You ought to go to a mining-camp," he said. "Men who couldn't parse would call you a poem."

She turned to her husband. "George, do you hear that? Isn't that sweet? So unaffected, too." George grunted; he was thinking of the receiver that had had charge of his affairs. His wife continued, speaking to Milford: "In my almost hothouse refinement, I have longed to see the rude chivalry of the West—where a rhythm of true gallantry beats beneath a woolen shirt."

"Yes," said Milford, "and beneath a linen shirt, too. The West is just as wide but not so woolen as it was."

"Oh, what quaint conceits! George, do you hear them? George, dear."

"George, dear" turned a tired eye upon her. Affection seeking to console a loved one sometimes chooses an unseasonable moment for the exercise of its tender office. She felt the look of her husband's worry-rusted eye; a memory of his weary pacing up and down the floor at night came to her, of his groans upon a comfortless bed, his sighs at breakfast, his dark brow as he went forth to try again to save his credit. She thought of this; she felt that at this moment he needed her help. And affectionately she put her hand upon his arm, and said: "You have met reverses, George, but you've still got me." And George muttered: "You bet I have." She glanced at him as if she felt that he said it with a lack of enthusiasm, as if it were a sad fact acknowledged rather than a possession declared; and she would have replied with a thin sentiment strained through the muslin of a summer book, but George turned away. She followed and he opened a gate and halted, waiting for her to pass through. The boy crawled under the fence. She scolded the youngster, brushed at his clothes, and said to George:

"He is almost a gentleman."

"Who is so far gone as that?"

"Why, the man back there on the veranda."

"I don't know what you mean by almost a gentleman."

"Oh, George, don't you know that there are distinctions?"

"But I don't see how a man can be almost a gentleman. You might as well say that a man almost has money."

"Bobbie, don't try to climb over that stump. There's a poison vine on it. Money is not everything, George."

"Comes devilish near it."

"No, George. Money is not love."