

***OPIE
PERCIVAL
READ***

A photograph of the Chicago skyline at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a golden glow over the city and reflecting on the water in the foreground. The Willis Tower is the most prominent building, with its distinctive antenna spire. Other skyscrapers of varying heights and architectural styles are visible in the background. The sky is filled with soft, golden clouds.

THE COLOSSUS

Opie Percival Read

The Colossus

A Novel

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CHAPTER I.

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LOOKING BACK AT EARLY LIFE.

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When the slow years of youth were gone and the hastening time of manhood had come, the first thing that Henry DeGolyer, looking back, could call from a mysterious darkness into the dawn of memory was that he awoke one night in the cold arms of his dead mother. That was in New Orleans. The boy's father had aspired to put the face of man upon lasting canvas, but appetite invited whisky to mix with his art, and so upon dead walls he painted the trade-mark bull, and in front of museums he exaggerated the distortion of the human freak.

After the death of his mother, the boy was taken to the Foundlings' Home, where he was scolded by women and occasionally knocked down by a vagabond older than himself. Here he remembered to have seen his father but once. It was a Sunday when he came, years after the gentle creature, holding her child in her arms, had died at midnight. The painter laughed and cried and begged an old woman for a drink of brandy. He went away, and after an age had seemed to pass the matron of the place took the boy on her lap and told him that his father was dead, and then, putting him down, she added: "Run along, now, and be good."

The boy was taken by an old Italian woman. In after years he could not determine the length of time that he had lived

in her wretched home, but with vivid brightness dwelled in his memory the morning when he ran away and found a free if not an easy life in the newsboys' lodging-house. He sold newspapers, he went to a night school, and as he grew older he picked up "river items" for an afternoon newspaper. His hope was that he might become a "professional journalist," as certain young men termed themselves; and study, which in an ill-lighted room, tuned to drowsiness by the buzzing of youthful mumblers, might have been a chafing task to one who felt not the rowel of a spurring ambition, was to him a pleasure full of thrilling promises. To him the reporter stood at the high-water mark of ambition's "freshet." But when years had passed and he had scrambled to that place he looked down and saw that his height was not a dizzy one. And instead of viewing a conquered province, he saw, falling from above, the shadows of trials yet to be endured. He worked faithfully, and at one time held the place of city editor, but a change in the management of the paper not only reduced him to the ranks, but, as the saying went, set him on the sidewalk. Then he wrote "specials." His work was bright, original and strong, and was reproduced throughout the country, but as it was not signed, the paper alone received the credit. Year after year he lived in this unsettled way—reading in the public library, musing at his own fireside, catching glimpses of an important work which the future seemed to hold, and waiting for the outlines of that work to become more distinct; but the months went by and the plan of the work remained in the shadow of the coming years.

DeGolyer had now reached that time of life when a wise man begins strongly to suspect that the past is but a future stripped of its delusions. He was a man of more than ordinary appearance; indeed, people who knew him, and who believed that size grants the same advantages to all vocations, wondered why he was not more successful. He

was tall and strong, and in his bearing there was an ease which, to one who recognizes not a sleeping nerve force, would have suggested the idea of laziness. His complexion was rather dark, his eyes were black, and his hair was a dark brown. He was not handsome, but his sad face was impressive, and his smile, a mere melancholy recognition that something had been said, did not soon fade from memory.

One afternoon DeGolyer called at the office of a morning newspaper, and was told that the managing editor wanted to see him. When he was shown in he found an aspiring politician laughing with forced heartiness at something which the editor had said. To the Southern politician the humor of an influential editor is full of a delirious mellowness.

When the politician went out the editor invited DeGolyer to take a seat. "Mr. DeGolyer, a number of your sketches have been well received."

"Yes, sir; they have made me a few encouraging enemies."

The editor smiled. "And you regard enemies as an encouragement, eh?"

"Yes, as a proof of success. Our friends mark out a course for us, and if we depart from it and do something better than their specifications call for, they become our enemies."

"I don't know but you are right." After a short silence the editor continued: "Mr. DeGolyer, we have been thinking of sending a man down into Costa Rica. Our merchants believe that if we were to pay more attention to that country we might thereby improve our trade. What we want is a number of letters intended to familiarize us with those people—want to show, you understand, that we are interested in them."

They talked during an hour. The next day DeGolyer was on board a steamer bound for Punta Arenas. On the vessel he met a young man who said that his name was Henry Sawyer; and this young man was so blithe and light-hearted that DeGolyer, yielding to the persuasion of contrast, was drawn toward him. Young Sawyer was accompanied by his uncle, a short, fat, and at times a crusty old fellow. DeGolyer did not think that the uncle was wholly sound of mind. One evening, just before reaching port, and while the two young men were standing on deck, looking landward, young Sawyer said:

"Do you know, I think more of you than of any fellow I ever met?"

"I don't know it," DeGolyer answered, "but I am tempted to hope so."

"Good. I do, and that's a fact. You see, I've led a most peculiar sort of life. I never had any home—that is, any real home. I don't remember a thing about my father and mother. They died when I was very young, and then my uncle took me. Uncle never married and never was particularly attached to any one place. We have traveled a good deal; have lived quite a while in New Orleans, but for the past two years we have lived in a little bit of a place called Ulmata, in central Costa Rica. Uncle's got an interest in some mines not far from there. Say, why wouldn't it be a good idea for you to go to Ulmata and write your letters from there? Ain't any railroad, but there's a mule line running to the coast. How does it strike you?"

"I'd like to, but I'm afraid that it would take my letters too long to reach New Orleans; still, I don't know what difference that would make, as I'm not going to write news. After all," he added, as though he were arguing with himself, "I should think that the interior is more interesting than the

coast, for people don't hang their characteristics over the coast line."

"There, you've hit the nail the very first lick. You go out there with us, and I'll bet we have a magnificent time."

"But your uncle might object."

"How can he? It ain't any of his business where you go."

"Of course not."

"Well, then, that settles it. But really, he'd like to have you. You'll like him; little peculiar at times, but you'll find him all right. You'll get a good deal of money for those letters, won't you?"

"No; a hired mail on a newspaper doesn't get much money."

"But it must take a good deal of brains to do your work."

"Presumably, but there stands a long row of brains ready to take the engagement—to take it, in fact, at a cut rate. The market is full of brains."

"How old did you say you were?"

"I am nearly thirty," DeGolyer answered.

"I'm only twenty-five, but that don't make any difference; we'll have a splendid time all the same. You read a good deal, I notice. Uncle's got a whole raft of books, and you can read to me when you get tired of reading to yourself. I've gone to school a good deal, but I'm not much of a hand with a book; but I tell you what I believe—I believe I could run a business to the queen's taste if I had a chance, and I'm going to try it one of these days. Uncle tells me that after awhile I may be worth some money, and if I am I'll get rich as sure as you're born. Business was born in me, but I've never had a chance to do anything, I have traded around a

little, and I've made some money, too, but the trouble is that I've never been settled down long enough to do much of anything, I've scarcely any chance at all out at Ulmata. What would you rather be than anything else?"

"I don't know. It doesn't seem that nature has exerted herself in fitting me for anything, and I am a strong believer in natural fitness. We may learn to do a thing in an average sort of way, but excellence requires instinct, and instinct, of course, can't be learned."

"I guess that's so. I can see hundreds of ways to make money. I'd rather be a big merchant than anything else. Old fellow," he suddenly broke off, "I am as happy as can be to have you go out yonder with us; and mark what I tell you—we're going to have a splendid time."

CHAPTER II.

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A SLEEPY VILLAGE AND A FUSSY OLD MAN.

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In the village of Ulmata there was just enough of life to picture the dreamy indolence of man. Rest was its complexion, and freedom from all marks of care its most pleasing aspect.

Old Sawyer was so demonstrably gratified to have a companion for his nephew that he invited DeGolyer to take a room in his house, and DeGolyer gratefully accepted this kindness. Young Sawyer was delighted when the household had thus been arranged, and with many small confidences and unstudied graces of boyish friendship, he kept his guest in the refreshing atmosphere of welcome. And in the main the uncle was agreeable and courteous, but there were times when he flew out of his orbit of goodfellowship.

Once he came puffing into the room where DeGolyer was writing, and blusteringly flounced upon a sofa. He remained quiet for a few moments, and then he blew so strong a spout of annoyance that DeGolyer turned to him and asked:

"Has anything gone wrong?"

The old fellow's eyes bulged out as if he were straining under a heavy load. "Yes," he puffed, "the devil's gone wrong."

"But isn't that of ancient date?" DeGolyer asked.

"Here, now, young fellow, don't try to saw me!" And then he broke off with this execration: "Oh, this miserable world—this infernal pot where men are boiled!" He rolled his eyes like a choking ox, and after a short silence, asked: "Young fellow, do you know what I'd do if I were of your age?"

"If you were of my temperament as well as of my age I don't think you'd do much of anything."

"Yes, I would; I would confer a degree of high favor on myself. I would cut my throat, sir."

"Pardon me, but is it too late at your time of life?"

"Yes, for my nerve is diseased and I am a coward, an infamous, doddering old coward, sir. Good God! to live for years in darkness, bumping against the sharp corners of conscience. I have never told Henry, but I don't mind telling you that at times I am almost mad. For years I have sought to read myself out of it, but to an unsettled mind a book is a sly poison—the greatest of books are but the records of trouble. Don't you say a word to Henry. He thinks that my mind is as sound as a new acorn, but it isn't."

"I won't—but, by the way, he is young; why don't you advise him to kill himself?"

The old fellow flounced off the sofa and stood bulging his eyes at DeGolyer.

"Don't you ever say such a thing as that again!" he snorted. "Why, confound your hide! would you have that boy dead?"

DeGolyer threw down his pen. "No, I would have him live forever in his thoughtless and beautiful paradise; I would not pull him down to the thoughtful man's hell of self-communion."

"Look here, young man, you must have a history."

"No, simply an ill-written essay."

"Who was your father?"

"A fool."

"Ah, I grant you. And who was your mother?"

"An angel."

"No, sir, she—I beg your pardon," the old man quickly added. "You are sensitive, sir."

DeGolyer, sadly smiling, replied: "He who suffered in childhood, and who in after life has walked hand in hand with disappointment, and is then not sensitive, is a brute."

"How well do I know the truth of that! DeGolyer, I have been acquainted with you but a short time, but you appeal to me strongly, sir. And I could almost tell you something, but it is something that I ought to keep to myself. I could make you despise me and then offer me your regard as a compromise. Oh, that American republic of ours, fought for by men who scorned the romance of kingly courts, is not so commonplace a country after all. Many strange things happen there, and some of them are desperately foul. Is that Henry coming? Hush."

The young man bounded into the room. "Say," he cried, "I've bargained for six of the biggest monkeys you ever saw. That old fellow"—

"Henry," the uncle interrupted, taking up a hat and fanning his purplish face, "you are getting too old for that sort of foolishness. You are a man, you must remember, and it may not be long until you'll be called upon to exercise the judgment of a man."

"Oh, I was going to buy the monkeys and sell them again for three times as much as I gave for them, but you bet that when I'm called on to exercise the judgment, of a man I'll be there. And do you think that I'd fool with mines or anything else in this country? I wouldn't. I'd go to some American city and make money. Say, DeGolyer, when are you going to start off on that jaunt?"

"What jaunt?" the old man asked.

"I am going to make a tour of the country," DeGolyer answered. "I'm going to visit nearly every community of interest and gather material for my letters, and shall be gone a month or so, I should think."

"And I'm going with him," said Henry.

"No," the old man replied, "you are not going to leave me here all that time alone. I'm old, and I want you near me."

"All right, uncle; whatever you say goes."

When DeGolyer mounted a mule and set out on his journey, young Sawyer, as if clinging to his friendship, walked beside him for some distance into the country.

"Well, I'd better turn back here," said the young man, halting. "Say, Hank, don't stay away any longer than you can help. It's devilish lonesome here, you know."

"I won't, my boy."

"All right. And say, if you can't do the thing up as well as you want to, throw up the job and come back here, for I'll turn loose, the first thing you know, and make enough money for both of us."

"God bless you, I hope that you may always make enough for yourself."

"And you bet I will, and for you, too. I hate like the mischief to see you go away. Couldn't think any more of you if we were twin brothers. And you think a good deal of me, too, don't you, Hank?"

"My boy," said DeGolyer, leaning over and placing his hand on the young fellow's shoulder, "I have never speculated with my friendship, and I don't know how valuable it is, but all of it that is worth having is yours. You make friends everywhere; I don't. You have nothing to conceal, and I have nothing to make known. To tell you the truth, you are the only real friend I ever had."

"Look out, now. That sort of talk knocks me; but say, don't be away any longer than you can help."

"I won't!" He rode a short distance, turned in his saddle, waved his hand and cried: "God bless you, my boy."

CHAPTER III.

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ALL WAS DARKNESS.

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Delays and difficulties of traveling, together with his own determination to do the work thoroughly, prolonged DeGolyer's absence. Nearly three months had passed. Evening was come, and from a distant hill-top the returning traveler saw the steeple of Ulmata's church—a black mark on the fading blush of lingering twilight. A chilly darkness crept out of the valley. Hungry dogs barked in the dreary village. DeGolyer could see but a single light. It burned in the priest's house—a dark age, and as of yore, with all the light held by the church. The weary man liberated his mule on a common, where its former companions were grazing, and sought the house of his friends. The house was dark and the doors were fastened. He knocked, and a startling echo, an audible darkness, came from the valley. He knocked again, and a voice cried from the street:

"Who's that?"

"Helloa, is that you, my boy?"

There was no answer, but a figure rushed through the darkness, seized DeGolyer, and in a hoarse whisper said:

"Come where there's a light."

"Why, what's the matter, Henry?"

"Come where there's a light."

DeGolyer followed him to a wretched place that bore the name of a public-house, and went with him into a room. A lamp sputtered on a shelf. Young Sawyer caught DeGolyer's hands.

"I have waited so long for you to come back to this dreadful place. I am all alone. Uncle is dead."

DeGolyer sat down without saying a word. He sat in silence, and then he asked:

"When did he die?"

"About two weeks after you left."

"Did he kill himself?"

"Good God, no! Why did you think that?"

"Oh, I didn't really think it—don't know why I said it."

"He was sick only a few days, and the strangest thing has come to light! He seemed to know before he was taken sick that he was going to die, and he spent nearly a whole day in writing—writing something for me—and the strangest thing has come to light. I can hardly realize it. Here it is; read it. Don't say a word till you have read every line of it. Strangest thing I ever heard of."

And this is what DeGolyer read by the light of the sputtering lamp:

"Years ago there lived in Salem, Mass., two brothers, George and Andrew Witherspoon. Their parents had passed away when the boys were quite young, but the youngsters had managed to get a fair start in life. Without ado let me say that I am Andrew Witherspoon. My brother and I were of different temperaments. He had graces of mind, but was

essentially a business man. I prided myself that I was born to be a thinker. I worshiped Emerson. I know now that a man who would willingly become a thinker is a fool. When I was twenty-three—and George nearly twenty-one—I fell in love with Caroline Springer. There was just enough of poetry in my nature to throw me into a devotion that was almost wild in its intensity, and after my first meeting with her I knew no peace. The chill of fear and the fever of confidence came alternating day by day, and months passed ere I had the strength of nerve to declare myself; but at last the opportunity and the courage came together. I was accepted. She said that if I had great love her love might be measured by my own, and that if I did not think that I could love her always she would go away and end her days in grief. The wedding day was appointed. But when I went to claim my bride she was gone—gone with my brother George. To-day, an old man, I look back upon that time and see myself raving on the very brink of madness. I had known that George was acquainted with Caroline Springer—indeed, I had proudly introduced him to her. I will tell my story, though, and not discourse. But it is hard for an old man to be straightforward. If he has read much he is discursive, and if he has not read he is tedious with many words. I didn't leave Salem at once. I met George, and he did not even attempt to apologize for the wrong he had done me. He repeated the fool saying that all is fair in love. 'You ought to be glad that you discovered her lack of love in time,' he said. This was consolation, surely. My mind may never have been well-balanced, and I think that at this time it tilted over to one side, never to tilt back. And now my love, trampled in the mire, arose in the form of an evil determination. I would do my brother and his wife an injury that could not be repaired. I did not wish them dead; I wanted them to live and be miserable. A year passed, and a boy was born. I left my native town and went west. I lived there nearly three years, and then I sent to a Kansas

newspaper an account of my death. It was printed, and I sent my brother a marked copy of the paper. Two weeks later I was in Salem. I wore a beard, kept myself close, and no one recognized me. I waited for an opportunity. It came, and I stole my brother's boy. I went to Boston, to Europe, back to America; lived here and there, and you know the rest. My dear boy, I repented somewhat, and it was my intention, at some time, to restore you to your parents, but you yourself were their enemy; you crept into my heart and I could not pluck you out. For a time the story of your mysterious disappearance filled the newspapers. You were found in a hundred towns, year after year, and when your sensation had run its course, you became the joke of the paragraphers. It was no longer, 'Who struck Billy Patterson?' but 'Who stole Henry Witherspoon?' Once I saw your father in New Orleans. He had come to identify his boy; but he went away with another consignment added to his large stock of disappointment. Finally all hope was apparently abandoned and even the newspapers ceased to find you.

"Your father and mother now live in Chicago. George Witherspoon is one of the great merchants of that city, and is more than a millionaire. This is why I have so often told you that one day you would be worth money. You were young and could afford to wait; I was old, and to me the present was everything, and you were the present.

"For some time I have been threatened with sudden death; I have felt it at night when you were asleep; and now I have written a confession which for years I irresolutely put aside from day to day. I charge you to bury me as Andrew Witherspoon, for in the grave I hope to be myself, with nothing to hide. Write at once to your father, and after settling up my affairs, which I urge you not to neglect, you can go to him. In the commercial world a high place awaits you, and though I have done you a great wrong, I hope that

your recollection of my deep love for you may soften your resentment and attune your young heart to the sweet melody of forgiveness.

"ANDREW WITHERSPOON."

DeGolyer folded the paper, returned it to Henry and sat in silence. He looked at the smoking lamp and listened to the barking of the hungry dogs.

"What do you think, Hank?"

"I don't know what to think."

"But ain't it the strangest thing you ever heard of?"

"Yes, it is strange, and yet not so strange to me. It is simply the sequel to a well-known story. In the streets of New Orleans, years ago, when I could scarcely carry a bundle of newspapers, I cried your name. The story was getting old then, for I remember that the people paid but little attention to it."

They sat for a time in silence. Young Witherspoon spoke, but DeGolyer did not answer him. They heard a guitar and a Spanish love song.

"Yes, it is strange," said DeGolyer, coming hack from a wandering reverie. "It is strange that I should be here with you;" and under a quickening of his newspaper instincts, he added, "and I shall have the writing of it."

"But wait awhile before you let your mind ran on on that, Hank. I don't want to be described and talked about so much. I know it can't be kept out of the papers, but we'll discuss that after a while. Now, let me tell you what I've done. I wrote to—to—father—don't that sound strange? I wrote to him and sent him a copy of uncle's paper—I would have sent the original, but I wanted to show that to you. I

also sent a note that mother—there it is again—wrote to uncle a long time ago, and a lock of hair and some other little tricks. I told him to write to me, and here's his letter. It came nearly four weeks ago. And think, Hank, I've got a sister—grown and handsome, too, I'll bet."

Ecstasy had almost made the letter incoherent. It was written first by one and then another hand, with frequent interchanges; and DeGolyer; who fancied that he could pick character out of the marks of a pen, thought that a mother's heart had overflowed and that a hard, commercial hand had cramped itself to a strange employment—the expression of affection. The father deplored the fact that his son could not be reached by telegraph, and still more did he lament his inability, on account of urgent business demands, to come himself instead of sending a letter. "Admit of no delay, but set out for home at once," the father commanded. "Telegraph as soon as you can, and your mother and I will meet you in New Orleans. I hope that this may not be exploited in the newspapers. God knows that in our time we have had enough of newspaper notoriety. Say nothing to any one, but come at once, and we can give for publication such a statement as we think necessary. Of course your discovery, as a sequel to your abduction years ago and the tremendous interest aroused at the time, will be of national importance, but I prefer that the news be sent out from this place."

Here the handwriting was changed, and "love," "thank God," "darling child," and emotion blots filled out the remainder of the page.

"You see," said Witherspoon, "that I have a reason for depriving you of an early whack at this thing. Now, I have written again and told them not to be impatient, and that I would leave here as soon as possible. I have settled up

everything here, but I've got to go to a little place away over on the coast and close out some mining interests there."

"It must be of but trifling importance, my boy, and I should think that you'd let it go."

"No, sir; I'm going to do my duty by that dear old man if I never do anything else while I live."

He held not a mote of resentment. Indeed was his young heart "attuned to the sweet melody of forgiveness."

"By the way, Hank, here's a letter for you."

The communication was brief. It was from New Orleans and ran thus: "The five letters which we have published have awakened no interest whatever, and I am therefore instructed to discontinue the service. Inclosed please find check for the amount due you."

"What is it, Hank?"

"Oh, nothing except what I might have expected. Read it."

Witherspoon read the letter, and crumpling it, broke out in his impulsive way: "That's all right, old fellow. It fits right into my plan, and now let me tell you what that is. We'll leave here to-morrow and go over to Dura and settle up there. I don't know how long it will take, and I won't try to telegraph until we get through. Dura isn't known as a harbor, it is such a miserably small place, but ships land there once in awhile, and we can sail from there. But the main part of my plan is that you are to go with me and live in Chicago; and I'll bet we have a magnificent time. I'll go in the store, and I'll warrant that father—don't that sound strange?—that father can get you a good place on one of the newspapers. You haven't had a chance. Hank, and when you do get one, I'll bet you can lay out the best of them. What do you say?"

"Henry," said the dark-visaged DeGolyer—and the light of affection beamed in his eyes—"Henry, you are a positive charm; and if I should meet a girl adorned with a disposition like yours, I would unstring my heart, hand it to her and say, 'Here, miss, this belongs to you.'"

"Oh, you may find one. I've got a sister, you know. What! are you trying to look embarrassed? Do you know what I'm going to say? I'm going to lead you up to my sister and say, 'Here, I have caught you a prince; take him.'"

"Nonsense, my boy."

"That's all right; but, seriously, will you go with me?"

"I will."

"Good. We'll get ready to-night and start early in the morning. But I mustn't forget to see the priest again. He was a friend when I needed one; he took charge of uncle's burial. But," he suddenly broke off with rising spirits, "won't we have a time? Millionaire, eh? I'll learn that business and make it worth ten millions."

CHAPTER IV.

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A STRANGE REQUEST.

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The next morning, before it was well light, and at a time when brisk youth and slow age were seeking the place of confession, Henry Witherspoon went to the priest, not to acknowledge a sin, but to avow a deep gratitude. The journey was begun early; it was in July. The morning was braced with a cool breeze, the day was cloudless, and night's lingering gleam of silver melted in the gold of morn. Young Witherspoon's impressive nature was up with joy or down with sadness. The prospect of his new life was a happiness, and the necessity to leave his old uncle in a foreign country was a sore regret; so happiness and regret strove against each other, but happiness, advantaged with a buoyant heart as a contest-ground, soon ended the struggle.

On a brown hill-top they met the sunrise, and from a drowsy roosting-place they flushed a flock of greenish birds. Witherspoon stood in his stirrups and waved his hat. "Good-by," he cried, "but you needn't have got up so soon. We didn't want you. Hank," he said, turning sideways in his saddle, "I think we can get there in about five days, at the pace we'll be compelled to go; and we can sell these mules or give them away, just as we like. Going home! I can't get the strangeness of it out of my head. And a sister, too, mind you. I'm beginning to feel like a man now. You see, uncle