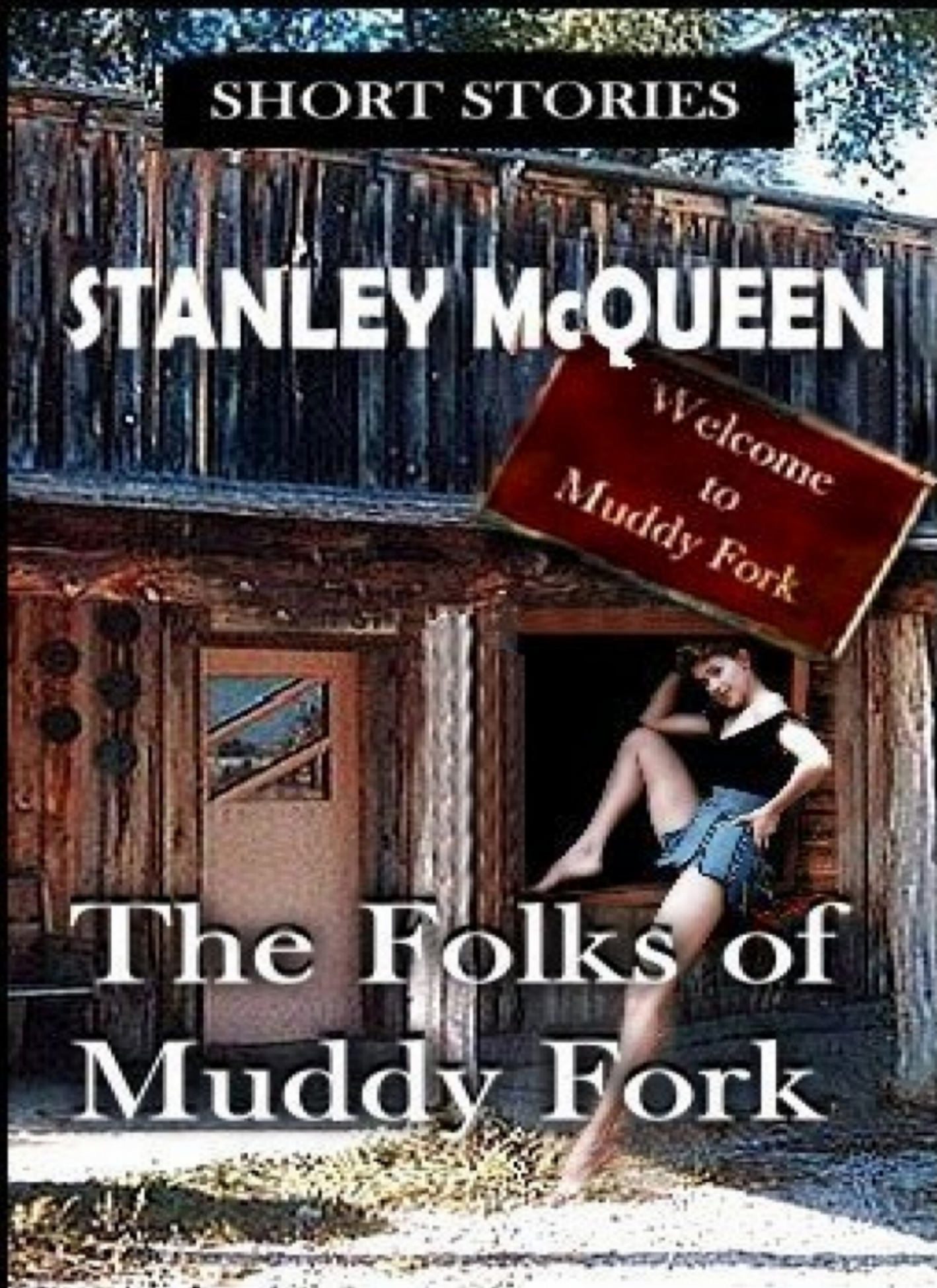


SHORT STORIES

STANLEY McQUEEN

Welcome
to
Muddy Fork

The Folks of
Muddy Fork



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A woman with dark hair, wearing a black sleeveless top and blue shorts, is sitting on the wooden steps of a rustic building. She is leaning back with her right hand on her head and her left hand on her hip. The building has a weathered wooden facade and a door with a small window. The scene is set outdoors with trees in the background.

Stanley Mcqueen

The Folks of Muddy Fork

Mail Order Bride and Other Stories

To my grandson.

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Mail Order Bride

Second Edition

Mammy used to say that if Willie North could bottle his ugliness, he would have several jars full. Despite his lack of good looks, Willie was a kind soul and a hardworking hog farmer, who owned a prosperous farm along the Muddy Fork River.

Pa told us that he met up with Willie in town yesterday and Willie told him he had ordered himself a woman out of a catalog. She was due to arrive in about two weeks.

After Pa told us about this strange state of affairs, Ma started laughing her head off. She said it must be near the end of time if folks had to resort to ordering wives out of catalogs. "You mean to tell me old pig nose Willie has bought himself a woman from a catalog?" Ma had a fit of the giggles and could not stop laughing. Pa told Mammy it wasn't funny, and that every man deserved a woman, even a round, fat, ugly man such as Willie.

"Poor Willie," said Pa. "I feel sorry for him, living alone on that farm of his, all by himself. He doesn't even have any kinfolks in these parts to visit him. A man gets lonesome after his day's work is done, when he's sitting on his porch stoop, watching the cows roaming the pastures. It's like the good book says - 'A man should not be alone.'"

Pa told us about the prospective bride Willie had ordered from the catalog.

"He showed me a picture of the woman," Pa said, "and boy, is she a good looker. She's tall and thin, with black hair, and a figure like a squeezed rain barrel. He paid a thousand dollars up front for the shipping," Pa confided. "Seems like a good bargain to me! She's coming on the train soon and if I am alive and well I sure won't miss seeing Willie's bride when she arrives. It's all over the district about Willie ordering a wife, and if that woman is as pretty

as her picture, Willie will be the envy of every man in Muddy Fork.” Pa turned to look at Ma who was smirking as she stirred the pot of soup on the stove.

“Mammy, you quit poking fun at my friend, Willie. He’s a good man and some say he has a lot of money put away from his pig sales. When a man don’t have a wife and a house full of kids, he’s able to put some savings aside. Fact is, that mail order woman will be lucky to get herself a man like Willie, him being a good manager and not wasting his money on whiskey and things of pleasure.”

Ma snorted. “When that woman sees that little wimp of a man, she will get back on the train and tell the conductor to take her back from where she came.”

Turning back to her cooking she had the last word. “Women love big, tall, handsome men with tall hats and big wallets. Short ugly pig farmers don’t appeal to women at all. Willie has just wasted a thousand dollars of his pig money, in my opinion. It’s a shame a man would stoop to such sinning.” Mammy banged a few pots and pans to make her point.

Pa could not believe his ears. “Woman, don’t you know that love is not in looks but in character? I’ve never spoken to a better minded man than Willie. He might scare a bugger to death, but I still say a man should be judged by his character not his looks.”

I stood there, listening to my parents discuss Willie. One was building him up and the other was cutting him down. *One of them has to be wrong, I thought, and it ain’t Pa!* I decided to take his side because we both knew what a kind hearted man Willie was. There wasn’t a selfish bone in his body. If a man needed to borrow a dollar or two for a few days, Willie was always ready to help out. There was not a person in Muddy Fork who could say a bad word against him.

When some poor soul died, Willie was always ready to help dig a neighbor’s grave, which is more than can be said

about some of the lazy folk who live in these parts.

“There’s one more thing I want to add,” said Pa. “There’s not a harder working man than Willie North. He milks his cows before the chickens come off their roosts, and grows all kinds of good garden vittles. He’s a doer that’s for sure.”

I decided to attend the arrival of the train that would bring Willie’s new bride to town. I expected that just about every person in Muddy Fork who had heard about him ordering a bride would be there to cheer him on. Although Pa told me that he was going to watch as well, I wasn’t sure about Mammy. She was still laughing and scoffing about the whole thing.

News got around Muddy Fork about Willie just as I'd thought, and when the fine day eventually came, Pa and I rode our mules into town, arriving early so as not to miss a thing. Folks were gathered around the train station, reminding me of the time a popular banjo player came to Muddy Fork to play some tunes in old man Short's saloon.

Willie showed up in his corn wagon, which was gaily decorated and clean as a whistle. He was decked out in a checkered suit that looked too small for him, buttoned tightly against his round, fat belly. I sure wasn't going to stand in front of him, because if one of those buttons were to come loose, it surely would kill the person who happened to be in front of him. The few strands of hair that were left on his round head were greased down, shining in the morning sun. He wore brogan work shoes which looked totally out of place with his checkered suit. Still, he had a broad grin on his face as he stepped off the corn wagon, and folks applauded and cheered. He gave a little nod and thanked everyone for being there to welcome his new bride. The excitement in the crowd was contagious - you'd have thought we had elected him for mayor or something. Folks talked and traded pocket knives, while others waited patiently for the train to arrive.

At last we heard the train's whistle blowing in the distance and some woman shouted, "It's coming!" The crowd watched in hushed silence as the train slowly drew up to the station, and then stopped with a whoosh of steam. As several folks got off, all eyes were focused on the carriage door. When we thought everyone had disembarked, out from the train stepped the biggest woman ever to set foot in Muddy Fork County. Beside her were two chubby kids - a boy and a girl - who looked to be eating candy bars as they shuffled off the train.

The big, rawboned woman shouted, "Is Willie North here?"

Poor Willie raised his short, chubby arm and responded, "I am Willie North."

"I am Lola Westerfield, your new bride-to-be."

"But you're not the woman in the picture in the catalog," stammered Willie, clearly in shock. "She was slim, and as pretty as a blue tick hound's ear," he went on. "And I never ordered no kids in the deal!"

"The kids are added for good measure," retorted the huge woman. "Little Arvil and Sadie are their names. Do you really think the catalog is going to send you a picture of an ugly mail-order bride? They are smarter than that." With that, she picked up her skirt and made her way off the train, towards Willie, the two kids following like little ducks.

Looks like Willie has got more than he bargained for, I was thinking. I could tell folks were dying to laugh but were afraid to. That gal looked like she could whip some of the timber jacks who had showed up for the welcome of Willie's new bride. The crowd parted to let her pass through to Willie's corn wagon, and it took six men to help her climb up. The two kids scampered onto the back of the wagon, and threw their chubby legs over the back.

"Let's be off," she cried, looking at Willie. "I am starved to death for some good food."

Poor Willie looked sort of pitiful, but it was obvious he was too afraid to back out of the deal and lose face. Everyone waited until he'd driven his team out of town, and then the crowd began laughing their heads off.

One man spoke up and said, "Willie's old shack floor better be strong, or that gal will fall through it." That made the onlookers laugh even harder. Even Pa laughed at that one.

Another man commented, "Looks like Willie has got his money's worth of woman, if he measures her in pounds." And again the crowd roared with laughter.

Folks were astonished at what they had just witnessed and gossiped about the event for months to come. Like the old saying goes, 'Never buy a pig in a poke. Take the pig out and look at it before buying.'

* * *

A year later, no one had seen nor heard of Willie or his new bride and kids, since the day they had arrived in Muddy Fork. One day, Pa and I were traveling down the road into town when we spotted Willie in his wagon. Sitting next to him was a beautiful looking woman, and on the back of the wagon were two slim kids. Pa hardly recognized Willie, and pulled over to have a few words.

Motioning Willie to stop, Pa said, "Willie! Is that you? You're a slim man now; I hardly recognized you. And that woman beside you is the best looking woman I have ever seen in Muddy Fork."

Willie was beaming. "She is the woman I wrote off for; she's just a might leaner now. She and the kids have helped me clear about twenty acres of farmland. It took us a full year to do it - that's why we haven't been in town for so long. We've been working our tails off," he explained.

Pa tipped his hat to the whole family, giving a little bow to the pretty new bride. "Willie, keep your eyes on that beauty sitting next to you because all the single men will envy you now for sure."

We bid Willie goodbye, and watched as he and his new family drove on down the road towards the trade store. We could see folks stopping to stare as Willie passed them by.

Pa looked at me and said, "Son, it don't pay to make fun of folks because of how they look. A man is known by his character, not his features. Real beauty is in the heart and soul of folks, not in their outward appearance. See what hard work and twenty acres of cleared farmland has done for Willie and his new family. It's made him the envy of every man and woman in Muddy Fork County.

When we got back to our shack, Pa told Mammy about meeting Willie and his new bride and how pretty she had become since losing a heap of weight. "The whole lot of them are as slim as young poplar trees," declared Pa. "I've never seen such a change in folks in all my born days. Hard honest work has certainly made a huge difference in the way they look - and for the better."

Mammy said she was happy for Willie, and felt bad about making fun of him. She apologized for what she had said. I guess she had learned a lesson too.

Now when folks meet Willie and his good looking family, they say "howdy" and the men folks tip their hats at his pretty wife. I learned you can never judge a book by its cover, nor judge a man lest you look into his heart and soul. Willie might not be a handsome man, but now he has someone to love and share his life with. A beautiful woman sits on his porch stoop in the evenings, and two well behaved kids play in the yard. What more could a man ask for in this life? Sometimes things get better than taters and beans, and I do believe this to be one of those times. It's funny how the ugliest man in the county ended up with the prettiest wife in Muddy Fork, and to beat it all -- two ready-made young'uns to boot.

Like granny always said, 'All's well that ends well.'

Wings of Heaven

It was on the wagon road that I first met the raggedy looking man that folks called "Crazy Old Mark." He was carrying a coffee sack over his shoulder, and I noticed that his clothes were too big for him and his shoes were torn up and tattered, with holes in them.

He was a medium sized man with dirty, greasy hair and a long grey beard. When he saw me approaching he called out, "Howdy."

I shouted back, "It's hot today," and he stopped and said, "Look what I done found down the road."

I walked over and he showed me a half smoked cigar that someone had discarded.

"It must have been a rich man who threw this away," he said, and asked me for a match.

I gave him one and he lit up the cigar, blowing blue clouds of smoke into the air.

"I know your pa," he said. "You're old man Turner's son, 'aint you?"

"Yup," I replied. "How did you know that?"

"I helped your pa dig potatoes some years back when you was just a little 'un. I don't guess you remember me helping your pa?"

"No, I don't," I said.

"What's in that sack?" I asked.

"I guess you've heard that I'm a junk peddler," he explained. "I dig in old junk heaps alongside the wagon roads around these parts, and you'd be surprised at the good stuff I find."

He looked me up and down, spitting a wad of tobacco out of his mouth as he spoke.

"What's your name, boy?" he asked.

"Jake," I answered.

"I guess you know my name," he said. "I'm called 'Crazy Old Mark'. Folks around here are scared of me. Kids throw rocks at me when I pass their shacks. I s'pose when a man is as poor as me -- one that lives like a varmint on a lonesome ridge that belongs to the sawmill man who gave me enough cull scrap lumber to make me a makeshift shack -- well, I guess they have a right to be scared of the likes of me.

"Let me tell you, boy, something awful strange happened to me some years ago. I woke up just past the old bridge that enters into Muddy Fork County. I'd been hit over the head with some large object, and from that time on, I never knew where I came from or even what my name was. I just called myself "Mark" and that's what folks have called me ever since around these parts. They added the 'crazy' part because most folks think I am crazy," he added, sadness clouding his eyes.

"I talk to myself and to Clifton."

"Who's Clifton?" I asked.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you about him. He goes with me everywhere, and the funny thing is, I am the only one who can see him, or hear his voice."

At this point, I was thinking that folks might be right about the old man being touched in the head. Still, I'd been raised to be polite, so I pretended I could see the invisible man and shook hands with 'Clifton' who said he was glad to meet such a good fellow. I told him 'likewise, I'm sure.'

From the way he was rambling on, it appeared to me as if the old man was suffering from memory loss. "Would you have time to come up the ridge to my shack? I'll show you all my junk plunder," he promised.

"I suppose that might be interesting," I said. "I was just on my way to the trade store to buy me a plug of chewin' tobacco, but since you want me to visit your place, I'll oblige you."

"It's a pretty good way up there," he said, as I turned from the direction I'd been heading in. He motioned with his

hand, saying, "Please allow Clifton to walk in front of us. He always loves to be in front."

Down the winding wagon road we traveled and soon came to a path that led off the side towards the ridge where his shack stood. I noticed the path was well worn from his many trips, and after a hard pull up the ridge, we made it to his shack.

I stood there, amazed. He certainly was no carpenter, as the old slab shack looked as if it would fall over sideways at any moment. Lying around was junk of all kinds. Old dolls with missing heads and legs; old broken chairs that folks had discarded; broken dishes and more. You name it - it was there.

Mark stood proudly surveying all the treasure like a kid on Christmas morning. He set himself down in an old rocking chair with a missing rocker and looked up at me. He asked, "How do I look, sitting in this fine old rocking chair? This chair must have belonged to some rich person," he said.

"You look like a fellow with a lot of money," I said, trying to humor the pitiful old man.

"She won't rock like she did when she was brand new, but it still sits good," he said. "I sit in it a lot and watch the rabbits play down there in the evening -- there, in that cleared place in the woods.

"Now follow me boy. You 'aint seen nothin' yet."

So I followed the old man and he led me down a path meandering away from his shack. It wasn't long before we arrived and I looked out in front of me in amazement. It was incredible. The old man had a large pen filled with possums - big possums - baby possums - possums of all shapes and sizes.

"What on earth are you doing with all these possums, all penned up?" I asked.

He looked proud as he gazed at the animals. "I caught two at first, several years back, and now they've had babies,

and before long they filled the pens plum up, as you can see. The possums are my friends. They don't have to look for food, and see that little shelter I made for them inside that pen yonder? They use it in the winter. That old woman who runs the boarding house in Muddy Fork gives me slop to feed my possums. They're all fat and sassy."

I could tell by the look on his face that he was mighty proud of his passel of possums.

"Them possums are a lot of company for me as it gets lonesome up here. Sometimes I get real sad with no one but Clinton to speak to, and he 'aint much of a talker. Old Man Morris tore down his chicken coop and gave me the chicken wire, and I cut them slim poles out of little trees. The steeples were given to me by Mr. Wells."

"You're sure a caring person," I told him.

"Well, boy," he said, "I wish I knew what my real name is and where I come from, and why I was coming to Muddy Fork in the first place. I've no kin that I can recall. It's a shame for a man to get into such bad shape. I must be around fifty years old. I look at my reflection in the river water and I see my hair looks to be white," he said. "Is it white?"

"Yes," I said. "But it's more a grey color than white."

"Do you know how to count, and about numbers and such?" he asked.

"Yes, I know how to count," I told him.

"Would you mind counting to see how many possums I have in that pen?"

"Sure, I'll try and count them," I answered.

I began counting and was amazed at the number. There were seventy-five possums, more or less. It's hard to count a pen full of possums, what with them moving around all the time.

"Boy, would you come up here in the morning? I have something I want you to see," he asked.

"What do you want me to see?"