

Ramsey Milholland

by Booth Tarkington

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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Thenceforth it became the most pressing care of Ramsey's life to prevent his roommate from learning that there was any conversation at all, even botanical. Fortunately, Fred was not taking the biological courses, though he appeared to be taking the sentimental ones with an astonishing thoroughness, and sometimes, to Fred's hilarious delight, Ramsey attempted to turn the tables and rally him upon whatever last affair seemed to be engaging his fancy. The old Victorian and pre-Victorian blague word "petticoat" had been revived in Fred's vocabulary, and in others, as "skirt." The lightsome sprig was hourly to be seen, even when university rulings forbade, dilly-dallying giddily along the campus paths or the town sidewalks with some new and pretty skirt. And when Ramsey tried to fluster him about such a matter Fred would profess his ardent love for the new lady in shouts and impromptu song. Nothing could be done to him, and Ramsey, utterly unable to defend his own sensibilities in like manner, had always to retire in bafflement. Sometimes he would ponder upon the question thus suggested: Why couldn't he do this sort of thing, since Fred could? But he never discovered a satisfying answer.

Ramsey's watchfulness was so careful (lest he make some impulsive admission in regard to the botanical laboratory, for instance) that Mr. Mitchell's curiosity gradually became almost quiescent but there arrived a day in February when it was plucked into the liveliest activity. It was Sunday, and Fred, dressing with a fas-

tidiousness ever his daily habit, noticed that Ramsey was exhibiting an unusual perplexity about neckties. "Keep the black one on," Fred said, volunteering a suggestion, as Ramsey muttered fiercely at a mirror. "It's in better taste for church, anyhow. You're going to church, aren't you?" "Yes. Are you?" "No. I've got a luncheon engagement."

"Well, you could go to church first, couldn't you? You better; you've got a lot of church absences against you."

"Then one more won't hurt. No church in mine this morning, thanks! G'by, ole sox; see you at the 'frat house' for dinner."

He went forth, whistling syncopations, and began a brisk trudge into the open country. There was a pro-

fessor's daughter who also was not going to church that morning and she lived a little more than three miles beyond the outskirts of the town. Unfortunately, as the weather was threatening, all others of her family abandoned the idea of church that day, and Fred found her before a cozy fire, but surrounded by parents, little brothers and big sisters. The professor was talkative; Fred's mind might have been greatly improved, but with a window in range he preferred a melancholy contemplation of the snow, which had begun to fall in quantity. The professor talked until luncheon, throughout luncheon, and was well under way to fill the whole afternoon with talk, when Fred, repenting all the errors of his life, got up to go.

Heartily urged to remain, for there was now something just under a blizzard developing, he said no, he had a great deal of "curriculum work" to get done before tomorrow, and passed from the sound of the professor's hospitable voice and into the storm. He had a tedious struggle against the wind and thickening snow, but finally came in sight of the town, not long before dark. Here the road led down into a depression, and, lifting his head as he began the slight ascent on the other side, Fred was aware of two figures outlined upon the low ridge before him. They were dimmed by the driving snow and their backs were toward him, but he recognized them

with perfect assurance. They were Dora Yocum and Ramsey Milholland. They were walking so slowly that their advance was almost imperceptible, but it could be seen that Dora was talking with great animation; and she was a graceful thing, thus gesticulating, in her long, slim fur coat with the white snow frosting her brown fur



They Were Dora Yocum and Ramsey Milholland.

cap. Ramsey had his hands deep in his overcoat pockets and his manner was wholly that of an audience.

Fred murmured to himself, "What did you say to her? 'Nothin'. I started to, but—'" Then he put on a burst of speed and passed them, sweeping off his hat with operatic deference, yet hurrying by as if fearful of being thought a killjoy if he lingered. He went to the "frat house," found no one downstairs, and established himself in a red leather chair to smoke and ruminate merrily by a great fire in the hall.

Half an hour later Ramsey entered, stamped off the snow, hung up his hat and coat, and sat himself down defiantly in the red leather chair on the other side of the fireplace.

"Well, go on," he said. "Commence!" "Not at all!" Fred returned, amiably. "Fine spring weather today. Lovely to see all the flowers and the birds as we go a-strolling by. The little bobolinks—"

"You look here! That's the only walk I ever took with her in my life. I mean by—by asking her and her saying she would and so forth. That other time just sort of happened, and you know it. Well, the weather wasn't just the best in the world, maybe, but she's an awful conscientious girl and once she makes an engagement—"

"Why, of course," Fred smiled for him, "she'd be too pious to break it just on account of a mere little blizzard or anything. Wonder how the weather will be next Sunday?"

"I don't know and I don't care," said Ramsey. "You don't suppose I asked her to go again, do you?"

"Why not?" "Well, for one thing, you don't suppose I want her to think I'm a perfect fool, do you?"

Fred mused a moment or two, looking at the fire. "What was the lecture?" he asked, mildly.

"What lecture?" "She seemed to me to be—"

"That wasn't lecturing; she was just—"

"Just what?" "Well, she thinks war for the United States is coming closer and closer—"

"But it isn't." "Well, she thinks so, anyhow," said Ramsey, "and she's all broken up about it. Of course she thinks we oughtn't to fight and she's trying to get everybody else she can to keep working against it. She isn't goin' home again next summer, she's goin' back to that settlement work in Chicago and work there among those people against our goin' to war; and here in college she wants to get everybody she can to talk against it, and—"

"What did you say?" Fred asked, and himself supplied the reply: "Nothin'. I started to, but—"

Ramsey got up. "Now look here! You know the 'frat' passed a rule that if we broke any more furniture in this house with our scrapperin' we'd both be fined the cost of repairs and five dollars apiece. Well, I can afford five dollars this month better than you can, and—"

"I take it back!" Fred interposed, hastily. "But you just listen to me; you look out—letting her think you're on her side like that."

"I don't—" "You don't?"

Ramsey looked dogged. "I'm not goin' around always arguin' about everything when arguin' would just hurt people's feelings about something they're all excited about, and wouldn't do a bit of good in the world—and you know yourself just talk hardly ever settles anything—so I don't—"

"Aha!" Fred cried. "I thought so! Now you listen to me—"

"I won't. I—"

But at this moment they were interrupted. Someone slyly opened a door, and a snowball deftly thrown from without caught Ramsey upon the back of the neck and head, where it flattened and displayed itself as an ornamental star. Shouting fiercely, both boys sprang up, ran to the door, were caught there in a barrage of snowballs, ducked through it in spite of all damage, charged upon a dozen besweated figures awaiting them and began a mad battle in the blizzard. Some of their opponents treacherously joined them and turned upon the ambushers.

In the dusk the merry conflict waged up and down the snow-covered lawn, and the combatants threw and threw, or surged back and forth, or

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clenched and toppled over into snowbanks, yet all coming to chant an extemporized battle-cry in chorus, even as they fought the most wildly.

"Who? Who? Who?" they chanted. "Who? Who? Who says there ain't goin' to be no war?"

CHAPTER XIII.

So everywhere over the country, that winter of 1916, there were light-hearted boys skylarking—at college, or on the farms; and in the towns the young machinists snowballed one another as they came from the shops; while on this Sunday of the "frat" snow fight probably several hundreds of thousands of youthful bachelors, between the two oceans, went walking, like Ramsey, each with a girl who could forget the weather. Yet boys of nineteen and in the twenties were not light-hearted all the time that winter and that spring and that summer. Most of them knew long, thoughtful moments, as Ramsey did, when they seemed to be thinking not of girls or work or play—nor of anything around them, but of some more vital matter or prospect. And at such times they were grave, but not ungentle.

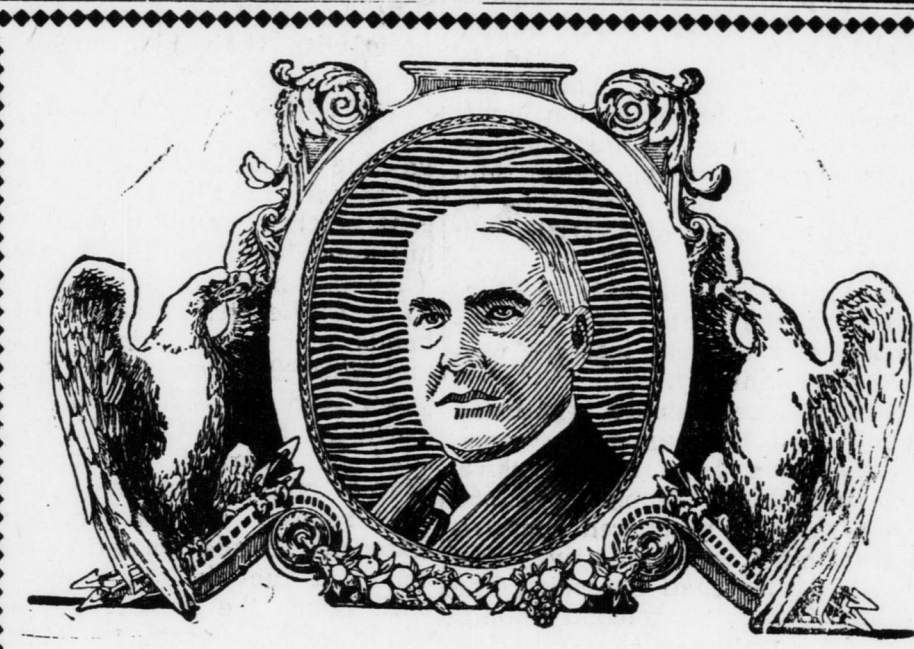
For the long strain was on the country; underneath all its outward seeming of things going on as usual there shook a deep vibration, like the air trembling to vast organ pipes in diapasons too profound to reach the ear as sound; one felt, not heard, thunder in the ground under one's feet. The succession of diplomatic notes came to an end after the torpedoing of the Sussex; and at last the tricky ruling Germans in Berlin gave their word to murder no more, and people said, "This means peace for America, and all is well for us," but everybody knew in his heart that nothing was well for us, that there was no peace.

They said, "All is well," while that thunder in the ground never ceased—it grew deeper and heavier till all America shook with it and it became slowly audible as the voice of the old American soil, a soil wherein lay those who had defended it aforetime, a soil that bred those who would defend it again, for it was theirs; and the meaning of it—Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness—was theirs, and theirs to defend. And they knew they would defend it, and that more than the glory of a Nation was at stake. The Freedom of Man was at stake. So, gradually, the sacred thunder reached the ears of the young men and gave them those deep moments that came to them whether they sat in the classroom or the counting-room, or walked with the plow, or stood to the machine, or behind the ribbon counter. Thus the thunder shook them and tried them and slowly came into their lives and changed everything for them.

Hate of the Germans was not bred; but a contempt for what Germany had shown in America, nor in any country of the world that would be free. And when the German kaiser laid his command upon America, that no American should take his ship upon the free seas, death being the penalty for any who disobeyed, then the German kaiser got his answer, not only to this new law he had made for us, but to many other thoughts of his. Yet the answer was for some time delayed.

(To be continued)

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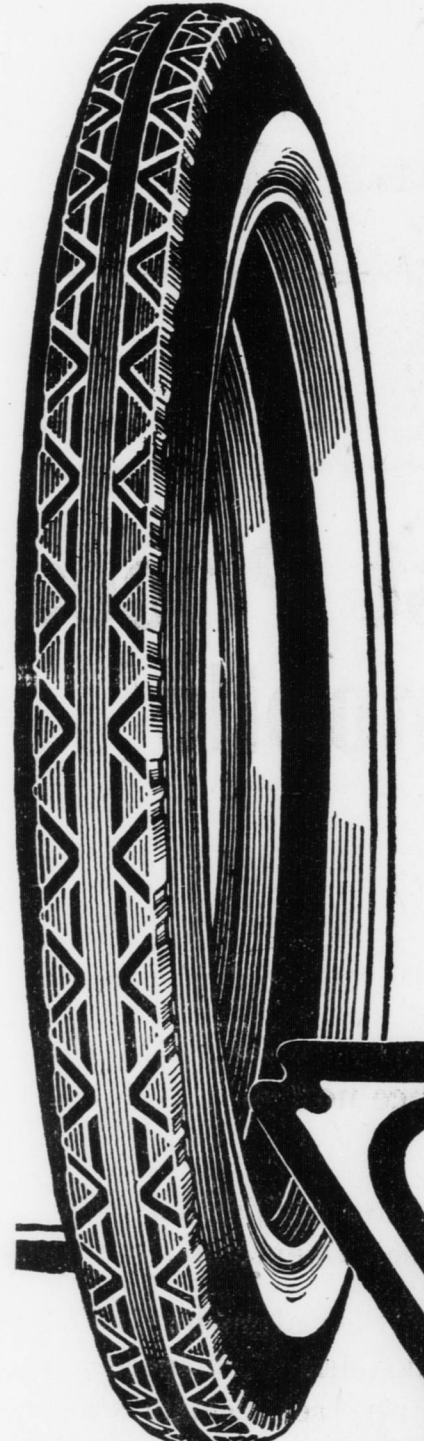
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