

FRONTIER LEGACIES

MAIN-TRAVELED ROADS



HAMLIN GARLAND

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by

HAMLIN GARLAND



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Content Advisory

Main-Traveled Roads is a work of historical fiction first published in the 1890s. It reflects the language, attitudes, and social tensions of its time, including the use of racial slurs that are offensive and unacceptable today. These terms have been retained in this edition to preserve the historical integrity of the text and to allow readers to engage with it as it was originally written.

We considered replacing the most offensive terms, but doing so did not lessen the impact of the ideas being expressed, nor did it accurately represent the characters' realities or social views. In this case, we believe it is more honest—and ultimately more respectful to readers—to confront these moments directly and thoughtfully.

While the language may be disturbing, encountering it in context can deepen understanding of the social struggles and injustices the book addresses. We encourage readers to approach the text with historical awareness and sensitivity to its ongoing relevance.

DEDICATION

TO MY FATHER AND MOTHER

Whose Half-Century Pilgrimage on the Main-Travelled Road of Life Has Brought Them Only Toil and Deprivation, This Book of Stories Is Dedicated By a Son to Whom Every Day Brings a Deepening Sense of His Parents' Silent Heroism

OPENING THOUGHT

The main-travelled road in the West (as everywhere) is hot and dusty in summer, and desolate and drear with mud in fall and spring, and in winter the winds sweep the snow across it; but it does sometimes cross a rich meadow where the songs of the larks and bobolinks and blackbirds are tangled. Follow it far enough, it may lead past a bend in the river where the water laughs eternally over its shallows.

Mainly it is long and wearyful, and has a dull little town at one end and a home of toil at the other. Like the main-travelled road of life it is traversed by many classes of people, but the poor and the weary predominate.

Foreword

In the summer of 1887, after having been three years in Boston, and six years absent from my old home in northern Iowa, I found myself with money enough to pay my railway fare to Ordway, South Dakota, where my father and mother were living, and as it cost very little extra to go by way of Dubuque and Charles City, I planned to visit Osage, Iowa, and the farm we had opened on Dry Run prairie in 1871.

Up to this time I had written only a few poems, and some articles descriptive of boy life on the prairie, although I was doing a good deal of thinking and lecturing on land reform, and was regarded as a very intense disciple of Herbert Spencer and Henry George—a singular combination, as I see it now. On my way westward, that summer day in 1887, rural life presented itself from an entirely new angle. The ugliness, the endless drudgery, and the loneliness of the farmer's lot smote me with stern insistence. I was the militant reformer.

The farther I got from Chicago the more depressing the landscape became. It was bad enough in our former home in Mitchell County, but my pity grew more intense as I passed from northwest Iowa into southern Dakota. The houses, bare as boxes, dropped on the treeless plains, the barbed-wire fences running at right angles, and the towns mere assemblages of flimsy wooden sheds with painted-pine battlement, produced on me the effect of an almost helpless and sterile poverty.

My dark mood was deepened into bitterness by my father's farm, where I found my mother imprisoned in a small cabin on the enormous sunburned, treeless plain, with no expectation of ever

living anywhere else. Deserted by her sons and failing in health, she endured the discomforts of her life uncomplainingly—but my resentment of “things as they are” deepened during my talks with her neighbors who were all housed in the same unshaded cabins in equal poverty and loneliness. The fact that at twenty-seven I was without power to aid my mother in any substantial way added to my despairing mood.

My savings for the two years of my teaching in Boston were not sufficient to enable me to purchase my return ticket, and when my father offered me a stacker’s wages in the harvest field I accepted and for two weeks or more proved my worth with the fork, which was still mightier—with me—than the pen.

However, I did not entirely neglect the pen. In spite of the dust and heat of the wheat ricks I dreamed of poems and stories. My mind teemed with subjects for fiction, and one Sunday morning I set to work on a story which had been suggested to me by a talk with my mother, and a few hours later I read to her (seated on the low sill of that treeless cottage) the first two thousand words of Mrs. Ripley’s Trip, the first of the series of sketches which became *Main Travelled Roads*.

I did not succeed in finishing it, however, till after my return to Boston in September. During the fall and winter of ‘87 and the winter and spring of ‘88, I wrote the most of the stories in *Main Travelled Roads*, a novelette for the *Century Magazine*, and a play called “Under the Wheel.” The actual work of the composition was carried on in the south attic room of Doctor Cross’s house at 21 Seaverns Avenue, Jamaica Plain.

The mood of bitterness in which these books were written was renewed and augmented by a second visit to my parents in 1889, for during my stay my mother suffered a stroke of paralysis due to overwork and the dreadful heat of the summer. She grew better before the time came for me to return to my teaching in Boston, but

I felt like a sneak as I took my way to the train leaving my mother and sister on that bleak and sun-baked plain.

“Old Paps Flaxen,” “Jason Edwards,” “A Spoil of Office,” and most of the stories gathered into the second volume of *Main Travelled Roads* were written in the shadow of these defeats. If they seem unduly austere, let the reader remember the times in which they were composed. That they were true of the farms of that day no one can know better than I, for I was there—a farmer.

Life on the farms of Iowa and Wisconsin—even on the farms of Dakota—has gained in beauty and security, I will admit, but there are still wide stretches of territory in Kansas and Nebraska where the farmhouse is a lonely shelter. Groves and lawns, better roads, the rural free delivery, the telephone, and the motor car have done much to bring the farmer into a frame of mind where he is contented with his lot, but much remains to be done before the stream of young life from the country to the city can be checked.

The two volumes of *Main Travelled Roads* can now be taken to be what William Dean Howells called them, “historical fiction,” for they form a record of the farmer’s life as I lived it and studied it. In these two books is a record of the privations and hardships of the men and women who subdued the midland wilderness and prepared the way for the present golden age of agriculture.

H. G.

March 1, 1922.

Introduction

I

An interesting phase of fiction, at present, is the material prosperity of the short story, which seems to have followed its artistic excellence among us with uncommon obedience to a law that ought always to prevail. Until of late the publisher has been able to say to the author, dazzled and perhaps deceived by his magazine success with short stories, and fondly intending to make a book of them, "Yes. But collections of short stories don't sell. The public won't have them. I don't know why; but it won't."

This was never quite true of the short stories of Mr. Bret Harte, or of Miss Sarah Orne Jewett, or of Mr. T. B. Aldrich; but it was too true of the short stories of most other writers. For some reason, or for none, the very people who liked an author's short stories in the magazine could not bear them, or would not buy them, when he put several of them together in a volume. They then became obnoxious, or at least undesirable; somewhat as human beings, agreeable enough as long as they are singly domiciled in one's block, become a positive detriment to the neighborhood when gathered together in a boarding-house. A novel not half so good by the same author would formerly outsell his collection of short stories five times over. Perhaps it would still outsell the stories; we rather think it would; but not in that proportion. The hour of the short story in book form has struck, apparently, for with all our love and veneration for publishers, we have never regarded them as martyrs to literature, and we do not believe they would now be issuing so many volumes of short stories if these did not pay. Publishers, with all their virtues,

are as distinctly made a little lower than the angels as any class of mortals we know. They are, in fact, a tentative and timid kind, never quite happy except in full view of the main chance; and just at this moment, this chance seems to wear the diversified physiognomy of the collected short stories. We do not know how it has happened; we should not at all undertake to say; but it is probably attributable to a number of causes. It may be the prodigious popularity of Mr. Kipling, which has broken down all prejudices against the form of his success. The vogue that Maupassant's tales in the original or in versions have enjoyed may have had something to do with it. Possibly the critical recognition of the American supremacy in this sort has helped. But however it has come about, it is certain that the result has come, and the publishers are fearlessly adventuring volumes of short stories on every hand; and not only short stories by authors of established repute, but by new writers, who would certainly not have found this way to the public some time ago.

The change by no means indicates that the pleasure in large fiction is dying out. This remains of as ample gorge as ever. But it does mean that a quite reasonless reluctance has given way, and that a young writer can now hope to come under the fire of criticism much sooner than before. This may not be altogether a blessing; it has its penalties inherent in the defective nature of criticism, or the critics; but undoubtedly it gives the young author definition and fixity in the reader's knowledge. It enables him to continue a short-story writer if he likes, or it prepares the public not to be surprised at him if he turns out a novelist.

II

These are advantages, and we must not be impatient of any writer who continues a short-story writer when he might freely become a novelist. Now that a writer can profitably do so, he may prefer to grow his fiction on the dwarf stock. He may plausibly contend

that this was the original stock, and that the novella was a short story many ages before its name was appropriated by the standard variety, the duodecimo American, or the three-volume English; that Boccaccio was a world-wide celebrity five centuries before George Eliot was known to be a woman. To be sure, we might come back at him with the Greek romancers; we might ask him what he had to say to the interminable tales of Heliodorus and Longus, and the rest, and then not let him say.

But no such controversy is necessary to the enjoyment of the half dozen volumes of short stories at hand, and we gladly postpone it till we have nothing to talk about. At present we have only too much to talk about in a book so robust and terribly serious as Mr. Hamlin Garland's volume called *Main-Traveled Roads*. That is what they call the highways in the part of the West that Mr. Garland comes from and writes about; and these stories are full of the bitter and burning dust, the foul and trampled slush, of the common avenues of life, the life of the men who hopelessly and cheerlessly make the wealth that enriches the alien and the idler, and impoverishes the producer.

If any one is still at a loss to account for that uprising of the farmers in the West which is the translation of the Peasants' War into modern and republican terms, let him read *Main-Traveled Roads*, and he will begin to understand, unless, indeed, Mr. Garland is painting the exceptional rather than the average. The stories are full of those gaunt, grim, sordid, pathetic, ferocious figures, whom our satirists find so easy to caricature as Hayseeds, and whose blind groping for fairer conditions is so grotesque to the newspapers and so menacing to the politicians. They feel that something is wrong, and they know that the wrong is not theirs. The type caught in Mr. Garland's book is not pretty; it is ugly and often ridiculous; but it is heart-breaking in its rude despair.

The story of a farm mortgage, as it is told in the powerful sketch "Under the Lion's Paw," is a lesson in political economy, as well as

a tragedy of the darkest cast. "The Return of the Private" is a satire of the keenest edge, as well as a tender and mournful idyl of the unknown soldier who comes back after the war with no blare of welcoming trumpets or flash of streaming flags, but foot-sore, heart-sore, with no stake in the country he has helped to make safe and rich but the poor man's chance to snatch an uncertain subsistence from the furrows he left for the battle-field.

"Up the Coolly," however, is the story which most pitilessly of all accuses our vaunted conditions, wherein every man has the chance to rise above his brother and make himself richer than his fellows. It shows us once for all what the risen man may be, and portrays in his good-natured selfishness and indifference that favorite ideal of our system. The successful brother comes back to the old farmstead, prosperous, handsome, well-dressed, and full of patronizing sentiment for his boyhood days there, and he cannot understand why his brother, whom hard work and corroding mortgages have eaten all the joy out of, gives him a grudging and surly welcome. It is a tremendous situation, and it is the allegory of the whole world's civilization: the upper dog and the under dog are everywhere, and the under dog nowhere likes it.

But the allegorical effects are not the primary intent of Mr. Garland's work: it is a work of art, first of all, and we think of fine art; though the material will strike many gentilities as coarse and common. In one of the stories, "Among the Corn-Rows," there is a good deal of burly, broad-shouldered humor of a fresh and native kind; in "Mrs. Ripley's Trip" is a delicate touch, like that of Miss Wilkins; but Mr. Garland's touches are his own, here and elsewhere. He has a certain harshness and bluntness, an indifference to the more delicate charms of style, and he has still to learn that though the thistle is full of an unrecognized poetry, the rose has a poetry, too, that even over-praise cannot spoil. But he has a fine courage to leave a fact with the reader, ungarnished and unvarnished, which

is almost the rarest trait in an Anglo-Saxon writer, so infantile and feeble is the custom of our art; and this attains tragical sublimity in the opening sketch, "A Branch Road," where the lover who has quarrelled with his betrothed comes back to find her mismated and miserable, such a farm wife as Mr. Garland has alone dared to draw, and tempts the broken-hearted drudge away from her loveless home. It is all morally wrong, but the author leaves you to say that yourself. He knows that his business was with those two people, their passions and their probabilities.

W. D. HOWELLS

(In the Editor's Study, "Harper's Magazine").

A Branch Road

“Keep the main-travelled road till you
come to a branch leading off—keep to the right.”

I

IN the windless September dawn a voice went ringing clear and sweet, a man's voice, singing a cheap and common air. Yet something in the sound of it told he was young, jubilant, and a happy lover.

Above the level belt of timber to the east a vast dome of pale undazzling gold was rising, silently and swiftly. Jays called in the thickets where the maples flamed amid the green oaks, with irregular splashes of red and orange. The grass was crisp with frost under the feet, the road smooth and gray-white in color, the air was indescribably pure, resonant, and stimulating. No wonder the man sang!

He came into view around the curve in the lane. He had a fork on his shoulder, a graceful and polished tool. His straw hat was tilted on the back of his head; his rough, faded coat was buttoned close to the chin, and he wore thin buckskin gloves on his hands. He looked muscular and intelligent, and was evidently about twenty-two years of age.

As he walked on, and the sunrise came nearer to him, he stopped his song. The broadening heavens had a majesty and sweetness that made him forget the physical joy of happy youth. He grew almost sad with the vague thoughts and great emotions which rolled in his brain as the wonder of the morning grew.

He walked more slowly, mechanically following the road, his eyes

on the ever-shifting streaming banners of rose and pale green, which made the east too glorious for any words to tell. The air was so still it seemed to await expectantly the coming of the sun.

Then his mind flew back to Agnes. Would she see it? She was at work, getting breakfast, but he hoped she had time to see it. He was in that mood, so common to him now, wherein he could not fully enjoy any sight or sound unless sharing it with her. Far down the road he heard the sharp clatter of a wagon. The roosters were calling near and far, in many keys and tunes. The dogs were barking, cattle-bells were jangling in the wooded pastures, and as the youth passed farmhouses, lights in the kitchen windows showed that the women were astir about breakfast, and the sound of voices and the tapping of curry-combs at the barn told that the men were at their morning chores.

And the east bloomed broader! The dome of gold grew brighter, the faint clouds here and there flamed with a flush of red. The frost began to glisten with a reflected color. The youth dreamed as he walked; his broad face and deep earnest eyes caught and retained some part of the beauty and majesty of the sky.

But his brow darkened as he passed a farm gate and a young man of about his own age joined him. The other man was equipped for work like himself.

“Hello, Will!”

“Hello, Ed!”

“Going down to help Dingman thrash!”

“Yes,” replied Will, shortly. It was easy to see he did not welcome company.

“So’m I. Who’s goin’ to do your thrashin’—Dave McTurg?”

“Yes, I guess so. Haven’t spoken to anybody yet.”

They walked on side by side. Will hardly felt like being rudely broken in on in this way. The two men were rivals, but Will, being

the victor, would have been magnanimous, only he wanted to be alone with his lover's dream.

"When do you go back to the Sem?" Ed asked after a little.

"Term begins next week. I'll make a break about second week."

"Le's see: you graduate next year, don't yeh?"

"I expect to, if I don't slip up on it."

They walked on side by side, both handsome fellows; Ed a little more showy in his face, which had a certain clear-cut precision of line, and a peculiar clear pallor that never browned under the sun. He chewed vigorously on a quid of tobacco, one of his most noticeable bad habits.

Teams could be heard clattering along on several roads now, and jovial voices singing. One team coming along rapidly behind the two men, the driver sung out in good-natured warning, "Get out o' the way, there." And with a laugh and a chirp spurred his horses to pass them.

Ed, with a swift understanding of the driver's trick, flung out his left hand and caught the end-gate, threw his fork in and leaped after it. Will walked on, disdaining the attempt to catch the wagon. On all sides now the wagons of the ploughmen or threshers were getting out into the fields, with a pounding, rumbling sound.

The pale-red sun was shooting light through the leaves, and warming the boles of the great oaks that stood in the yard, and melting the frost off the great gaudy, red and gold striped threshing machine standing between the stacks. The interest, picturesqueness, of it all got hold of Will Hannan, accustomed to it as he was. The horses stood about in a circle, hitched to the ends of the six sweeps, every rod shining with frost.

The driver was oiling the great tarry cog-wheels underneath. Laughing fellows were wrestling about the yard. Ed Kinney had scaled the highest stack, and stood ready to throw the first sheaf. The sun, lighting him where he stood, made his fork-handle gleam like

dull gold. Cheery words, jests, and snatches of song rose everywhere. Dingman bustled about giving his orders and placing his men, and the voice of big David McTurg was heard calling to the men as they raised the long stacker into place:

“Heave ho, there! Up she rises!”

And, best of all, Will caught a glimpse of a smiling girl-face at the kitchen window that made the blood beat in his throat.

“Hello, Will!” was the general greeting, given with some constraint by most of the young fellows, for Will had been going to Rock River to school for some years, and there was a little feeling of jealousy on the part of those who pretended to sneer at the “seminary chaps like Will Hannan and Milton Jennings.”

Dingman came up. “Will, I guess you’d better go on the stack with Ed.”

“All ready. Hurrah, there!” said David in his soft but resonant bass voice that always had a laugh in it. “Come, come, every sucker of yeh git hold o’ something. All ready!” He waved his hand at the driver, who climbed upon his platform. Everybody scrambled into place.

The driver began to talk:

“Chk, chk! All ready, boys! Stiddy there, Dan! Chk, chk! All ready, boys! Stiddy there, boys! All ready now!” The horses began to strain at the sweeps. The cylinder began to hum.

“Grab a root there! Where’s my band-cutter? Here, you, climb on here!” And David reached down and pulled Shep Watson up by the shoulder with his gigantic hand.

Boo-oo-oo-oom, Boo-woo-woo-oom-oom-ow-owm, yarr, yarr! The whirling cylinder boomed, roared, and snarled as it rose in speed. At last, when its tone became a rattling yell, David nodded to the pitchers and rasped his hands together. The sheaves began to fall from the stack; the band-cutter, knife in hand, slashed the bands in twain, and the feeder with easy majestic movement gathered them

under his arm, rolled them out into an even belt of entering wheat, on which the cylinder tore with its smothered, ferocious snarl.

Will was very happy in a quiet way. He enjoyed the smooth roll of his great muscles, the sense of power in his hands as he lifted, turned, and swung the heavy sheaves two by two upon the table, where the band-cutter madly slashed away. His frame, sturdy rather than tall, was nevertheless lithe, and he made a fine figure to look at, so Agnes thought, as she came out a moment and bowed and smiled.

This scene, one of the jolliest and most sociable of the Western farm, had a charm quite aside from human companionship. The beautiful yellow straw entering the cylinder; the clear yellow-brown wheat pulsing out at the side; the broken straw, chaff, and dust puffing out on the great stacker; the cheery whistling and calling of the driver; the keen, crisp air, and the bright sun somehow weirdly suggestive of the passage of time.

Will and Agnes had arrived at a tacit understanding of mutual love only the night before, and Will was powerfully moved to glance often toward the house, but feared as never before the jokes of his companions. He worked on, therefore, methodically, eagerly; but his thoughts were on the future—the rustle of the oak-tree near by, the noise of whose sere leaves he could distinguish sifting beneath the booming snarl of the machine, was like the sound of a woman's dress; on the sky were great fleets of clouds sailing on the rising wind, like merchantmen bound to some land of love and plenty.

When the Dingmans first came in, only a couple of years before, Agnes had been at once surrounded by a swarm of suitors. Her pleasant face and her abounding good-nature made her an instant favorite with all. Will, however, had disdained to become one of the crowd, and held himself aloof, as he could easily do, being away at school most of the time.

The second winter, however, Agnes also attended the seminary, and Will saw her daily, and grew to love her. He had been just a bit

jealous of Ed Kinney all the time, for Ed had a certain rakish grace in dancing and a dashing skill in handling a team, which made him a dangerous rival.

But, as Will worked beside him all the Monday, he felt so secure in his knowledge of the caress Agnes had given him at parting the night before that he was perfectly happy—so happy that he didn't care to talk, only to work on and dream as he worked.

Shrewd David McTurg had his joke when the machine stopped for a few minutes. "Well, you fellers do better'n I expected yeh to, after bein' out so late last night. The first feller I see gappin' has got to treat to the apples."

"Keep your eye on me," said Shep Wilson.

"You?" laughed one of the others. "Anybody knows if a girl so much as looked crossways at you, you'd fall in a fit."

"Another thing," said David. "I can't have you fellers carryin' grain goin' to the house every minute for fried cakes or cookies."

"Now you git out," said Bill Young from the straw pile. "You ain't goin' to have all the fun to yerself."

Will's blood began to grow hot in his face. If Bill had said much more, or mentioned Agnes by name, he would have silenced him. To have this rough joking come so close upon the holiest and most exquisite evening of his life was horrible. It was not the words they said, but the tones they used, that vulgarized it all. He breathed a sigh of relief when the sound of the machine began again.

This jesting made him more wary, and when the call for dinner sounded and he knew he was going to see her, he shrank from it. He took no part in the race of the dust-blackened, half-famished men to get at the washing-place first. He took no part in the scurry to get seats at the first table.

Threshing-time was always a season of great trial to the housewife. To have a dozen men with the appetites of dragons to cook for, in addition to their other everyday duties, was no small task for a couple

of women. Preparations usually began the night before with a raid on a hen-roost, for "biled chickun" formed the pièce de resistance of the dinner. The table, enlarged by boards, filled the sitting room. Extra seats were made out of planks placed on chairs, and dishes were borrowed from neighbors, who came for such aid in their turn.

Sometimes the neighboring women came in to help; but Agnes and her mother were determined to manage the job alone this year, and so the girl, in a neat dark dress, her eyes shining, her cheeks flushed with the work, received the men as they came in, dusty, coatless, with grime behind their ears, but a jolly good smile on every face.

Most of them were farmers of the neighborhood, and her school-mates. The only one she shrank from was Bill Young, with his hard, glittering eyes and red, sordid face. She received their jokes, their noise, with a silent smile which showed her even teeth and dimpled her round cheek. "She was good for sore eyes," as one of the fellows said to Shep. She seemed deliciously sweet and dainty to these roughly dressed fellows.

They ranged along the table with a great deal of noise, boots thumping, squeaking, knives and forks rattling, voices bellowing out.

"Now hold on, Steve! Can't hev yeh so near that chickun!"

"Move along, Shep! I want to be next to the kitchen door! I won't get nothin' with you on that side o' me."

"Oh, that's too thin! I see what you're—"

"No, I won't need any sugar, if you just smile into it." This from gallant David, greeted with roars of laughter.

"Now, Dave, s'pose your wife 'ud hear o' that?"

"She'd snatch 'im bald-headed, that's what she'd do."

"Say, somebody drive that ceow down this way," said Bill.

"Don't get off that drive! It's too old," criticised Shep, passing the milk-jug.

Potatoes were seized, cut in halves, sopped in gravy, and taken one, two! Corn cakes went into great jaws like coal into a steam-

engine. Knives in the right hand cut meat and scooped gravy up. Great, muscular, grimy, but wholesome fellows they were, feeding like ancient Norse, and capable of working like demons. They were deep in the process, half-hidden by steam from the potatoes and stew, in less than sixty seconds after their entrance.

With a shrinking from the comments of the others upon his regard for Agnes, Will assumed a reserved and almost haughty air toward his fellow-workmen, and a curious coldness toward her. As he went in, she came forward smiling brightly.

“There’s one more place, Will.” A tender, involuntary droop in her voice betrayed her, and Will felt a wave of hot blood surge over him as the rest roared.

“Ha, ha! Oh, there’d be a place for him!”

“Don’t worry, Will! Always room for you here!”

Will took his seat with a sudden, angry flame.

“Why can’t she keep it from these fools?” was his thought. He didn’t even thank her for showing him the chair.

She flushed vividly, but smiled back. She was so proud and happy she didn’t care very much if they did know it. But as Will looked at her with that quick, angry glance, she was hurt and puzzled. She redoubled her exertions to please him, and by so doing added to the amusement of the crowd that gnawed chicken-bones, rattled cups, knives, and forks, and joked as they ate with small grace and no material loss of time.

Will remained silent through it all, eating his potato, in marked contrast to the others, with his fork instead of his knife, and drinking his tea from his cup rather than from his saucer—“finnickies” which did not escape the notice of the girl nor the sharp eyes of the other workmen.

“See that? That’s the way we do down to the Sem! See? Fork for pie in yer right hand! Hey? I can’t do it? Watch me.”

When Agnes leaned over to say, “Won’t you have some more

tea, Will?” they nudged each other and grinned. “Aha! What did I tell you?”

Agnes saw at last that for some reason Will didn't want her to show her regard for him—that he was ashamed of it in some way, and she was wounded. To cover it up, she resorted to the natural device of smiling and chatting with the others. She asked Ed if he wouldn't have another piece of pie.

“I will—with a fork, please.”

“This is 'bout the only place you can use a fork,” said Bill Young, anticipating a laugh by his own broad grin.

“Oh, that's too old,” said Shep Watson. “Don't drag that out agin. A man that'll eat seven taters—”

“Shows who does the work.”

“Yes, with his jaws,” put in Jim Wheelock, the driver.

“If you'd put in a little more work with soap 'n water before comin' in to dinner, it 'ud be a religious idee,” said David.

“It ain't healthy to wash.”

“Well, you'll live forever, then.”

“He ain't washed his face sence I knew 'im.”

“Oh, that's a little too tough! He washes once a week,” said Ed Kinney.

“Back of his ears?” inquired David, who was munching a doughnut, his black eyes twinkling with fun.

“Yep.”

“What's the cause of it?”

“Dade says she won't kiss 'im if he don't.”

Everybody roared.

“Good fer Dade! I wouldn't if I was in her place.”

Wheelock gripped a chicken-leg imperturbably, and left it bare as a toothpick with one or two bites at it. His face shone in two clean sections around his nose and mouth. Behind his ears the dirt lay undisturbed. The grease on his hands could not be washed off.