

Windy McPherson's Son

by

Sherwood Anderson

Web-Books.Com

Windy McPherson's Son

CHAPTER I.1	3
CHAPTER I.2	9
CHAPTER I.3	19
CHAPTER I.4	32
CHAPTER I.5	43
CHAPTER I.6	49
CHAPTER I.7	56
CHAPTER I.8	62
CHAPTER II.1.....	72
CHAPTER II.2.....	80
CHAPTER II.3.....	91
CHAPTER II.4.....	97
CHAPTER II.5.....	106
CHAPTER II.6.....	118
CHAPTER II.7	125
CHAPTER II.8.....	136
CHAPTER II.9.....	154
CHAPTER III.1	159
CHAPTER III.2	173
CHAPTER III.3	179
CHAPTER III.4	181
CHAPTER III.5	194
CHAPTER III.6	203
CHAPTER IV.1.....	206
CHAPTER IV.2.....	215

CHAPTER I.1

At the beginning of the long twilight of a summer evening, Sam McPherson, a tall big-boned boy of thirteen, with brown hair, black eyes, and an amusing little habit of tilting his chin in the air as he walked, came upon the station platform of the little corn-shipping town of Caxton in Iowa. It was a board platform, and the boy walked cautiously, lifting his bare feet and putting them down with extreme deliberateness on the hot, dry, cracked planks. Under one arm he carried a bundle of newspapers. A long black cigar was in his hand.

In front of the station he stopped; and Jerry Donlin, the baggage-man, seeing the cigar in his hand, laughed, and slowly drew the side of his face up into a laboured wink.

"What is the game to-night, Sam?" he asked.

Sam stepped to the baggage-room door, handed him the cigar, and began giving directions, pointing into the baggage-room, intent and business-like in the face of the Irishman's laughter. Then, turning, he walked across the station platform to the main street of the town, his eyes bent on the ends of his fingers on which he was making computations with his thumb. Jerry looked after him, grinning so that his red gums made a splash of colour on his bearded face. A gleam of paternal pride lit his eyes and he shook his head and muttered admiringly. Then, lighting the cigar, he went down the platform to where a wrapped bundle of newspapers lay against the building, under the window of the telegraph office, and taking it in his arm disappeared, still grinning, into the baggage-room.

Sam McPherson walked down Main Street, past the shoe store, the bakery, and the candy store kept by Penny Hughes, toward a group lounging at the front of Geiger's drug store. Before the door of the shoe store he paused a moment, and taking a small note-book from his pocket ran his finger down the pages, then shaking his head continued on his way, again absorbed in doing sums on his fingers.

Suddenly, from among the men by the drug store, a roaring song broke the evening quiet of the street, and a voice, huge and guttural, brought a smile to the boy's lips:

"He washed the windows and he swept the floor,
And he polished up the handle of the big front door.
He polished that handle so carefuller,
That now he's the ruler of the queen's navee."

The singer, a short man with grotesquely wide shoulders, wore a long flowing moustache, and a black coat, covered with dust, that reached to his knees. He held a smoking briar pipe in his hand, and with it beat time for a row of men sitting on a long stone under the store window and pounding on the sidewalk with their heels to make a chorus for the

song. Sam's smile broadened into a grin as he looked at the singer, Freedom Smith, a buyer of butter and eggs, and past him at John Telfer, the orator, the dandy, the only man in town, except Mike McCarthy, who kept his trousers creased. Among all the men of Caxton, Sam most admired John Telfer and in his admiration had struck upon the town's high light. Telfer loved good clothes and wore them with an air, and never allowed Caxton to see him shabbily or indifferently dressed, laughingly declaring that it was his mission in life to give tone to the town.

John Telfer had a small income left him by his father, once a banker in the town, and in his youth he had gone to New York to study art, and later to Paris; but lacking ability or industry to get on had come back to Caxton where he had married Eleanor Millis, a prosperous milliner. They were the most successful married pair in Caxton, and after years of life together they were still in love; were never indifferent to each other, and never quarrelled; Telfer treated his wife with as much consideration and respect as though she were a sweetheart, or a guest in his house, and she, unlike most of the wives in Caxton, never ventured to question his goings and comings, but left him free to live his own life in his own way while she attended to the millinery business.

At the age of forty-five John Telfer was a tall, slender, fine looking man, with black hair and a little black pointed beard, and with something lazy and care-free in his every movement and impulse. Dressed in white flannels, with white shoes, a jaunty cap upon his head, eyeglasses hanging from a gold chain, and a cane lightly swinging from his hand, he made a figure that might have passed unnoticed on the promenade before some fashionable summer hotel, but that seemed a breach of the laws of nature when seen on the streets of a corn-shipping town in Iowa. And Telfer was aware of the extraordinary figure he cut; it was a part of his programme of life. Now as Sam approached he laid a hand on Freedom Smith's shoulder to check the song, and, with his eyes twinkling with good-humour, began thrusting with his cane at the boy's feet.

"He will never be ruler of the queen's navee," he declared, laughing and following the dancing boy about in a wide circle. "He is a little mole that works underground intent upon worms. The trick he has of tilting up his nose is only his way of smelling out stray pennies. I have it from Banker Walker that he brings a basket of them into the bank every day. One of these days he will buy the town and put it into his vest pocket."

Circling about on the stone sidewalk and dancing to escape the flying cane, Sam dodged under the arm of Valmore, a huge old blacksmith with shaggy clumps of hair on the back of his hands, and sought refuge between him and Freedom Smith. The blacksmith's hand stole out and lay upon the boy's shoulder. Telfer, his legs spread apart and the cane hooked upon his arm, began rolling a cigarette; Geiger, a yellow skinned man with fat cheeks and with hands clasped over his round paunch, smoked a black cigar, and as he sent each puff into the air, grunted forth his satisfaction with life. He was wishing that Telfer, Freedom Smith, and Valmore, instead of moving on to their nightly nest at the back of Wildman's grocery, would come into his place for the evening. He thought he would like to have the three of them there night after night discussing the doings of the world.

Quiet once more settled down upon the sleepy street. Over Sam's shoulder, Valmore and Freedom Smith talked of the coming corn crop and the growth and prosperity of the country.

"Times are getting better about here, but the wild things are almost gone," said Freedom, who in the winter bought hides and pelts.

The men sitting on the stone beneath the window watched with idle interest Telfer's labours with paper and tobacco. "Young Henry Kerns has got married," observed one of them, striving to make talk. "He has married a girl from over Parkertown way. She gives lessons in painting--china painting--kind of an artist, you know."

An ejaculation of disgust broke from Telfer: his fingers trembled and the tobacco that was to have been the foundation of his evening smoke rained on the sidewalk.

"An artist!" he exclaimed, his voice tense with excitement. "Who said artist? Who called her that?" He glared fiercely about. "Let us have an end to this blatant misuse of fine old words. To say of one that he is an artist is to touch the peak of praise."

Throwing his cigarette paper after the scattered tobacco he thrust one hand into his trouser pocket. With the other he held the cane, emphasising his points by ringing taps upon the pavement. Geiger, taking the cigar between his fingers, listened with open mouth to the outburst that followed. Valmore and Freedom Smith dropped their conversation and with broad smiles upon their faces gave attention, and Sam McPherson, his eyes round with wonder and admiration, felt again the thrill that always ran through him under the drum beats of Telfer's eloquence.

"An artist is one who hungers and thirsts after perfection, not one who dabs flowers upon plates to choke the gullets of diners," declared Telfer, setting himself for one of the long speeches with which he loved to astonish the men of Caxton, and glaring down at those seated upon the stone. "It is the artist who, among all men, has the divine audacity. Does he not hurl himself into a battle in which is engaged against him all of the accumulative genius of the world?"

Pausing, he looked about for an opponent upon whom he might pour the flood of his eloquence, but on all sides smiles greeted him. Undaunted, he rushed again to the charge.

"A business man--what is he?" he demanded. "He succeeds by outwitting the little minds with which he comes in contact. A scientist is of more account--he pits his brains against the dull unresponsiveness of inanimate matter and a hundredweight of black iron he makes do the work of a hundred housewives. But an artist tests his brains against the greatest brains of all times; he stands upon the peak of life and hurls himself against the world. A girl from Parkertown who paints flowers upon dishes to be called an artist--ugh! Let me spew forth the thought! Let me cleanse my mouth! A man should have a prayer upon his lips who utters the word artist!"

"Well, we can't all be artists and the woman can paint flowers upon dishes for all I care," spoke up Valmore, laughing good naturedly. "We can't all paint pictures and write books."

"We do not want to be artists--we do not dare to be," shouted Telfer, whirling and shaking his cane at Valmore. "You have a misunderstanding of the word."

He straightened his shoulders and threw out his chest and the boy standing beside the blacksmith threw up his chin, unconsciously imitating the swagger of the man.

"I do not paint pictures; I do not write books; yet am I an artist," declared Telfer, proudly. "I am an artist practising the most difficult of all arts--the art of living. Here in this western village I stand and fling my challenge to the world. 'On the lip of not the greatest of you,' I cry, 'has life been more sweet.'"

He turned from Valmore to the men upon the stone.

"Make a study of my life," he commanded. "It will be a revelation to you. With a smile I greet the morning; I swagger in the noontime; and in the evening, like Socrates of old, I gather a little group of you benighted villagers about me and toss wisdom into your teeth, striving to teach you judgment in the use of great words."

"You talk an almighty lot about yourself, John," grumbled Freedom Smith, taking his pipe from his mouth.

"The subject is complex, it is varied, it is full of charm," Telfer answered, laughing.

Taking a fresh supply of tobacco and paper from his pocket, he rolled and lighted a cigarette. His fingers no longer trembled. Flourishing his cane he threw back his head and blew smoke into the air. He thought that in spite of the roar of laughter that had greeted Freedom Smith's comment, he had vindicated the honour of art and the thought made him happy.

To the newsboy, who had been leaning against the storefront lost in admiration, it seemed that he had caught in Telfer's talk an echo of the kind of talk that must go on among men in the big outside world. Had not this Telfer travelled far? Had he not lived in New York and Paris? Without understanding the sense of what had been said, Sam felt that it must be something big and conclusive. When from the distance there came the shriek of a locomotive, he stood unmoved, trying to comprehend the meaning of Telfer's outburst over the lounge's simple statement.

"There's the seven forty-five," cried Telfer, sharply. "Is the war between you and Fatty at an end? Are we going to lose our evening's diversion? Has Fatty bluffed you out or are you growing rich and lazy like Papa Geiger here?"

Springing from his place beside the blacksmith and grasping the bundle of newspapers, Sam ran down the street, Telfer, Valmore, Freedom Smith and the loungers following more slowly.

When the evening train from Des Moines stopped at Caxton, a blue-coated train news merchant leaped hurriedly to the platform and began looking anxiously about.

"Hurry, Fatty," rang out Freedom Smith's huge voice, "Sam's already half through one car."

The young man called "Fatty" ran up and down the station platform. "Where is that bundle of Omaha papers, you Irish loafer?" he shouted, shaking his fist at Jerry Donlin who stood upon a truck at the front of the train, up- ending trunks into the baggage car.

Jerry paused with a trunk dangling in mid-air. "In the baggage-room, of course. Hurry, man. Do you want the kid to work the whole train?"

An air of something impending hung over the idlers upon the platform, the train crew, and even the travelling men who began climbing off the train. The engineer thrust his head out of the cab; the conductor, a dignified looking man with a grey moustache, threw back his head and shook with mirth; a young man with a suit-case in his hand and a long pipe in his mouth ran to the door of the baggage-room, calling, "Hurry! Hurry, Fatty! The kid is working the entire train. You won't be able to sell a paper."

The fat young man ran from the baggage-room to the platform and shouted again to Jerry Donlin, who was now slowly pushing the empty truck along the platform. From the train came a clear voice calling, "Latest Omaha papers! Have your change ready! Fatty, the train newsboy, has fallen down a well! Have your change ready, gentlemen!"

Jerry Donlin, followed by Fatty, again disappeared from sight. The conductor, waving his hand, jumped upon the steps of the train. The engineer pulled in his head and the train began to move.

The fat young man emerged from the baggage-room, swearing revenge upon the head of Jerry Donlin. "There was no need to put it under a mail sack!" he shouted, shaking his fist. "I'll be even with you for this."

Followed by the shouts of the travelling men and the laughter of the idlers upon the platform he climbed upon the moving train and began running from car to car. Off the last car dropped Sam McPherson, a smile upon his lips, the bundle of newspapers gone, his pocket jingling with coins. The evening's entertainment for the town of Caxton was at an end.

John Telfer, standing by the side of Valmore, waved his cane in the air and began talking.

"Beat him again, by Gad!" he exclaimed. "Bully for Sam! Who says the spirit of the old buccaneers is dead? That boy didn't understand what I said about art, but he is an artist just the same!"

CHAPTER I.2

Windy McPherson, the father of the Caxton newsboy, Sam McPherson, had been war touched. The civilian clothes that he wore caused an itching of the skin. He could not forget that he had once been a sergeant in a regiment of infantry and had commanded a company through a battle fought in ditches along a Virginia country road. He chafed under the fact of his present obscure position in life. Had he been able to replace his regimentals with the robes of a judge, the felt hat of a statesman, or even with the night stick of a village marshal life might have retained something of its sweetness, but to have ended by becoming an obscure housepainter in a village that lived by raising corn and by feeding that corn to red steers --ugh!--the thought made him shudder. He looked with envy at the blue coat and the brass buttons of the railroad agent; he tried vainly to get into the Caxton Cornet Band; he got drunk to forget his humiliation and in the end he fell to loud boasting and to the nursing of a belief within himself that in truth not Lincoln nor Grant but he himself had thrown the winning die in the great struggle. In his cups he said as much and the Caxton corn grower, punching his neighbour in the ribs, shook with delight over the statement.

When Sam was a twelve year old, barefooted boy upon the streets a kind of backwash of the wave of glory that had swept over Windy McPherson in the days of '61 lapped upon the shores of the Iowa village. That strange manifestation called the A. P. A. movement brought the old soldier to a position of prominence in the community. He founded a local branch of the organisation; he marched at the head of a procession through the streets; he stood on a corner and pointing a trembling forefinger to where the flag on the schoolhouse waved beside the cross of Rome, shouted hoarsely, "See, the cross rears itself above the flag! We shall end by being murdered in our beds!"

But although some of the hard-headed, money-making men of Caxton joined the movement started by the boasting old soldier and although for the moment they vied with him in stealthy creepings through the streets to secret meetings and in mysterious mutterings behind hands the movement subsided as suddenly as it had begun and only left its leader more desolate.

In the little house at the end of the street by the shores of Squirrel Creek, Sam and his sister Kate regarded their father's warlike pretensions with scorn. "The butter is low, father's army leg will ache to-night," they whispered to each other across the kitchen table.

Following her mother's example, Kate, a tall slender girl of sixteen and already a bread winner with a clerkship in Winney's drygoods store, remained silent under Windy's boasting, but Sam, striving to emulate them, did not always succeed. There was now and then a rebellious muttering that should have warned Windy. It had once burst into an open quarrel in which the victor of a hundred battles withdrew defeated from the field. Windy, half-drunk, had taken an old account book from a shelf in the kitchen, a relic of his days as a prosperous merchant when he had first come to Caxton, and had begun

reading to the little family a list of names of men who, he claimed, had been the cause of his ruin.

"There is Tom Newman, now," he exclaimed excitedly. "Owns a hundred acres of good corn-growing land and won't pay for the harness on the backs of his horses or for the ploughs in his barn. The receipt he has from me is forged. I could put him in prison if I chose. To beat an old soldier!--to beat one of the boys of '61!--it is shameful!"

"I have heard of what you owed and what men owed you; you had none the worst of it," Sam protested coldly, while Kate held her breath and Jane McPherson, at work over the ironing board in the corner, half turned and looked silently at the man and the boy, the slightly increased pallor of her long face the only sign that she had heard.

Windy had not pressed the quarrel. Standing for a moment in the middle of the kitchen, holding the book in his hand, he looked from the pale silent mother by the ironing board to the son now standing and staring at him, and, throwing the book upon the table with a bang, fled the house. "You don't understand," he had cried, "you don't understand the heart of a soldier."

In a way the man was right. The two children did not understand the blustering, pretending, inefficient old man. Having moved shoulder to shoulder with grim, silent men to the consummation of great deeds Windy could not get the flavour of those days out of his outlook upon life. Walking half drunk in the darkness along the sidewalks of Caxton on the evening of the quarrel the man became inspired. He threw back his shoulders and walked with martial tread; he drew an imaginary sword from its scabbard and waved it aloft; stopping, he aimed carefully at a body of imaginary men who advanced yelling toward him across a wheatfield; he felt that life in making him a housepainter in a farming village in Iowa and in giving him an unappreciative son had been cruelly unfair; he wept at the injustice of it.

The American Civil War was a thing so passionate, so inflaming, so vast, so absorbing, it so touched to the quick the men and women of those pregnant days that but a faint echo of it has been able to penetrate down to our days and to our minds; no real sense of it has as yet crept into the pages of a printed book; it yet wants its Thomas Carlyle; and in the end we are put to the need of listening to old fellows boasting on our village streets to get upon our cheeks the living breath of it. For four years the men of American cities, villages and farms walked across the smoking embers of a burning land, advancing and receding as the flame of that universal, passionate, death-spitting thing swept down upon them or receded toward the smoking sky-line. Is it so strange that they could not come home and begin again peacefully painting houses or mending broken shoes? A something in them cried out. It sent them to bluster and boast upon the street corners. When people passing continued to think only of their brick laying and of their shovelling of corn into cars, when the sons of these war gods walking home at evening and hearing the vain boastings of the fathers began to doubt even the facts of the great struggle, a something snapped in their brains and they fell to chattering and shouting their vain boastings to all as they looked hungrily about for believing eyes.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

