

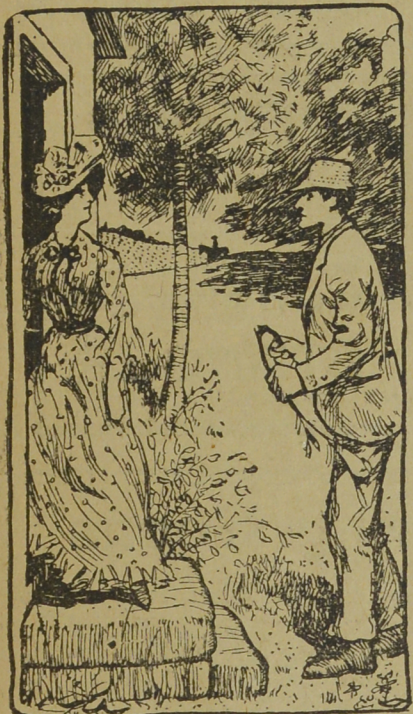
A Backwoods Sunday

By Opie Read

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A SUNDAY in the backwoods of Tennessee, viewed by one whose feet rarely stray from the worn paths of active life, may hold nothing attractive, but to the old men and women—the youth and maiden of the soil—it is a poem that comes once a week to encourage young love with its soft sentiment and soothe old labor with its words of promise. In the country where the streams are so pure that they look like strips of sunshine, where the trees are so ancient that one almost stands in awe of them, where the moss, so old that it is gray and, hanging from the rocks in the ravine, looks like venerable beards growing on faces that have been hardened by years of trouble—in such a country even the most slouching clown, walking as though stepping over clods when plowing where the ground breaks up hard, has in his untutored heart a love of poetry. He may not be able to read, may never have heard the name of a son of genius, but in the evening, when he stands on a purple "knob" watching the soul of day sink out of sight in a faraway valley, he is a poet.

When the shadow of Saturday night falls upon a backwoods community in Tennessee, a quiet joy seems to lurk in the atmosphere. The whippoorwill has sung unheeded every night during the week, but tonight his song brings a promise of rest. The tired boy sits in the door and, taking off his shoes, strikes them against the log doorstep to knock the dirt out, and the cat that has followed the women when they went to milk the cows comes and rubs against him. The humming bird, looking for a late supper, buzzes among the honeysuckle blossoms, and the tree



"Anybody goin' home with you, Liza?"

tead cries in the locust tree. The boy goes to bed thrilled with an expectation. He muses, "I will see somebody tomorrow."

On the morrow the woods are full of music. The great soul of day rises with a burst of glory, and the streams, bounding over the rocks or dreaming among the ferns, laugh more merrily and seem to be brighter than they were yesterday. Horses neigh near an old log church, and a swelling hymn is borne away on the blossom-scented air. The plowboy, sitting near the spring, heeds not the sacred music, but gazes intently down the shady road. He sees some one coming—sees the fluttering of a gaudy ribbon—and is thrilled. A young woman comes up the road, coyly tapping an old mare with a dogwood switch, and, eager lest some one else may perform the endearing office, he hastens to help the young woman to alight. He tries to appear unconcerned as he takes hold of the bridle rein, but he stumbles awkwardly as he leads the animal toward the horse block. When he has helped her down and has tied the horse, it is his blessed privilege to walk with the girl as far as the church door.

"What's Jim a-doin'?" he asks as they walk along under the embarrassing gaze of a score of men.

"Plowed yistidy; ain't doin' nothin' today."

"Be here today, I reckon," he rejoins.

"He went to preachin' at Ebenezer."

"What's Tom a-doin'?"

"Went to mill yistidy; ain't doin' nothin' today."

"Be here today, I reckon."

"He 'lowed he mout, but I don't know whether he will or not."

"What's Alf a-doin'?"

"Cut sprouts on deadened trees yistidy; ain't doin' nothin' today."

"Be here today, I reckon."

"Yes, 'lowed he was comin' with Sue Prior."

"Anybody goin' home with you, Liza?"

"Not that I know of."

"Waal, if nobody else ain't spoke, I'd like to go."

"We'll see about it," she answers and then enters the church. He saunters off and sits down under a tree where a number of young men are wallowing on shawls spread on the grass. The preacher becomes warm in his work, and the plowboy hears him exclaim, "What can a man give in exchange for his own soul?" But he is not thinking of souls or of any existence beyond the horizon of this life. His mind is on the girl with the gaudy ribbon, and he is asking his heart if she loves him. The shadows are now shorter, and hungry men cast glances at the sun, but the preacher, shouting in broken accents, appears not to have reached the first milestone of his text, and it is evident that he started out with the intention of going a "Sabbath day's journey." One young fellow places his straw hat over his face and tries to sleep, but some one tickles him with a spear of grass. An old man who has stood it as long as he could in the house and who has come out and lain down gets up, stretches himself, brushes a clinging leaf off his gray jeans trousers and declares: "A bite to eat would hit me harder than a sermon writ on a rock. Don't see why a man wants to talk all day."

"Thought you was mighty fond of preachin', Uncle John?" some one remarks.

"Am; but I don't want a man to go over an over what he has already dun said. If my folks wa'n't in thar I'd mosey off home an' git suthin' to eat."

"Good book says a man don't live by bread alone, Uncle John."

"Yas; but it don't say that he lives by preachin' alone, nuther. Hol' on; they are singin' the doxology now, an' I reckon she will soon be busted."

The plowboy goes home with his divinity, Uncle John's daughter. "Reckon Jim will be at home?" he asks as they ride along.

"He mout be. Air you awful anxious to see him?"

"Not so powerful. Jest 'lowed I'd ask. I know who's yo' sweetheart," he says after a pause.

"Bet you don't."

"Bet I do."

"Who is it, then, Mr. Smarty?"

"Aleck Jones."

"Who, him? Think I'd have that freckle-faced thing?"

"Waal, if he ain't, I know who is."

"Bet you couldn't think of his name in a hundred years."

"You mout think I can't, but I can."

"Waal, who, then, since you air so smart?"

"Morg Atcherson."

"Hol' I wouldn't speak to him if I was to meet him in the road."

"But you'd speak to some people if you was to meet them in the road, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, of course I would."

"Who would you speak to?"

"Oh, lots of folks. Did you see that bird almost hit me?" she suddenly exclaims.

"I reckon he 'lowed you was a flower."

"Oh, he didn't, no such of a thing. You ought to be ashamed of yo'self to make fun of me that er-way."

"I wa'n't makin' fun of you. Hol' if I was to ketch anybody makin' fun of you it wouldn't be good for him."

"What would you do?"

"I'd whale him."

"You air awful brave, ain't you?"

"Never mind what I am. I know that if any man was to make fun of you he'd have me to whip."

A number of people have stopped at Uncle John's house. They sit in the large passageway running between the two sections of the log building, and the men, who have not heard the sermon, discuss it with the women, who were compelled to hear it from halting start to excited finish. The sun is blazing out in the fields, and the June bugs are buzzing in the yard. It is indeed a day of rest for the young and old, but is it a restful time for the housewife? Does that woman, with flushed face, running from the kitchen to the dining room and then to the springhouse for the crock jar of milk, appear to be resting? Do the young men and women that are lolling in the passage realize that they are making a slave of her? Probably not, for she assures them that it is not a bit of trouble, yet when night comes—when the company is gone—she sinks down, almost afraid to wish that Sunday might never come again, yet knowing that it is the day of her heavy bondage. Old labor has been soothed, and young love has been encouraged, but her trials and anxieties have been more than doubled.

It is night, and the boy sits in the door, taking off his shoes. Tomorrow he must go into the hot field, but he does not think of that. His soul is full of a buoyant love—buoyant, for the girl with the gaudy ribbon has promised to be his wife.

Their Climate.

"Your climate can't possibly be as damp as ours."

"Think not?"

"No, indeed. Why, our climate is so damp we never raise anything but umbrellas."

"But ours is so damp we never think of raising umbrellas. They're always up."—Philadelphia Press.

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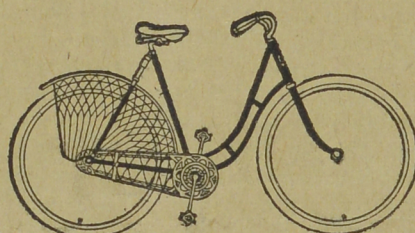
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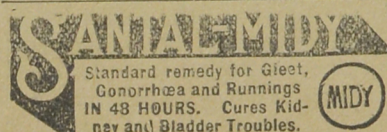
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No. 8 Express for Sussex	17.15
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No. 133 Express from Montreal and Quebec	12.50
No. 5 Mixed from Moncton	15.10
No. 137 Suburban from Hampton	15.30
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No. 25 Express from Halifax, Pictou and Moncton	17.15
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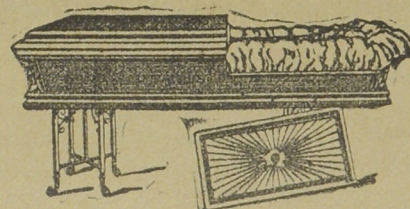
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