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Poor White

Sherwood Anderson

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TO

TENNESSEE MITCHELL ANDERSON

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

Hugh McVey was born in a little hole of a town stuck on a mud bank on the western shore of the Mississippi River in the State of Missouri. It was a miserable place in which to be born. With the exception of a narrow strip of black mud along the river, the land for ten miles back from the town—called in derision by river men "Mudcat Landing"—was almost entirely worthless and unproductive. The soil, yellow, shallow and stony, was tilled, in Hugh's time, by a race of long gaunt men who seemed as exhausted and no-account as the land on which they lived. They were chronically discouraged, and the merchants and artisans of the town were in the same state. The merchants, who ran their stores—poor tumble-down ramshackle affairs—on the credit system, could not get pay for the goods they handed out over their counters and the artisans, the shoemakers, carpenters and harnessmakers, could not get pay for the work they did. Only the town's two saloons prospered. The saloon keepers sold their wares for cash and, as the men of the town and the farmers who drove into town felt that without drink life was unbearable, cash always could be found for the purpose of getting drunk.

Hugh McVey's father, John McVey, had been a farm hand in his youth but before Hugh was born had moved into town to find employment in a tannery. The tannery ran for a year or two and then failed, but John McVey stayed in town. He also became a drunkard. It was the easy obvious thing for him to do. During the time of his employment in the tannery he had been married and his son had been born. Then his wife died and the idle workman took his child and went to live in a tiny fishing shack by the river. How the boy

lived through the next few years no one ever knew. John McVey loitered in the streets and on the river bank and only awakened out of his habitual stupor when, driven by hunger or the craving for drink, he went for a day's work in some farmer's field at harvest time or joined a number of other idlers for an adventurous trip down river on a lumber raft. The baby was left shut up in the shack by the river or carried about wrapped in a soiled blanket. Soon after he was old enough to walk he was compelled to find work in order that he might eat. The boy of ten went listlessly about town at the heels of his father. The two found work, which the boy did while the man lay sleeping in the sun. They cleaned cisterns, swept out stores and saloons and at night went with a wheelbarrow and a box to remove and dump in the river the contents of out-houses. At fourteen Hugh was as tall as his father and almost without education. He could read a little and could write his own name, had picked up these accomplishments from other boys who came to fish with him in the river, but he had never been to school. For days sometimes he did nothing but lie half asleep in the shade of a bush on the river bank. The fish he caught on his more industrious days he sold for a few cents to some housewife, and thus got money to buy food for his big growing indolent body. Like an animal that has come to its maturity he turned away from his father, not because of resentment for his hard youth, but because he thought it time to begin to go his own way.

In his fourteenth year and when the boy was on the point of sinking into the sort of animal-like stupor in which his father had lived, something happened to him. A railroad pushed its way down along the river to his town and he got a job as man of all work for the station master. He swept out the station, put trunks on trains, mowed the grass in the station yard and helped in a hundred odd ways the man who held the combined jobs of ticket seller, baggage master and telegraph operator at the little out-of-the-way place.

Hugh began a little to awaken. He lived with his employer, Henry Shepard, and his wife, Sarah Shepard, and for the first time in his life sat down regularly at table. His life, lying on the river bank through long summer afternoons or sitting perfectly still for endless hours in a boat, had bred in him a dreamy detached outlook on life. He found it hard to be definite and to do definite things, but for all

his stupidity the boy had a great store of patience, a heritage perhaps from his mother. In his new place the station master's wife, Sarah Shepard, a sharp-tongued, good-natured woman, who hated the town and the people among whom fate had thrown her, scolded at him all day long. She treated him like a child of six, told him how to sit at table, how to hold his fork when he ate, how to address people who came to the house or to the station. The mother in her was aroused by Hugh's helplessness and, having no children of her own, she began to take the tall awkward boy to her heart. She was a small woman and when she stood in the house scolding the great stupid boy who stared down at her with his small perplexed eyes, the two made a picture that afforded endless amusement to her husband, a short fat bald-headed man who went about clad in blue overalls and a blue cotton shirt. Coming to the back door of his house, that was within a stone's throw of the station, Henry Shepard stood with his hand on the door-jamb and watched the woman and the boy. Above the scolding voice of the woman his own voice arose. "Look out, Hugh," he called. "Be on the jump, lad! Perk yourself up. She'll be biting you if you don't go mighty careful in there."

Hugh got little money for his work at the railroad station but for the first time in his life he began to fare well. Henry Shepard bought the boy clothes, and his wife, Sarah, who was a master of the art of cooking, loaded the table with good things to eat. Hugh ate until both the man and woman declared he would burst if he did not stop. Then when they were not looking he went into the station yard and crawling under a bush went to sleep. The station master came to look for him. He cut a switch from the bush and began to beat the boy's bare feet. Hugh awoke and was overcome with confusion. He got to his feet and stood trembling, half afraid he was to be driven away from his new home. The man and the confused blushing boy confronted each other for a moment and then the man adopted the method of his wife and began to scold. He was annoyed at what he thought the boy's indolence and found a hundred little tasks for him to do. He devoted himself to finding tasks for Hugh, and when he could think of no new ones, invented them. "We will have to keep the big lazy fellow on the jump. That's the secret of things," he said to his wife.

The boy learned to keep his naturally indolent body moving and his clouded sleepy mind fixed on definite things. For hours he plodded straight ahead, doing over and over some appointed task. He forgot the purpose of the job he had been given to do and did it because it was a job and would keep him awake. One morning he was told to sweep the station platform and as his employer had gone away without giving him additional tasks and as he was afraid that if he sat down he would fall into the odd detached kind of stupor in which he had spent so large a part of his life, he continued to sweep for two or three hours. The station platform was built of rough boards and Hugh's arms were very powerful. The broom he was using began to go to pieces. Bits of it flew about and after an hour's work the platform looked more uncleanly than when he began. Sarah Shepard came to the door of her house and stood watching. She was about to call to him and to scold him again for his stupidity when a new impulse came to her. She saw the serious determined look on the boy's long gaunt face and a flash of understanding came to her. Tears came into her eyes and her arms ached to take the great boy and hold him tightly against her breast. With all her mother's soul she wanted to protect Hugh from a world she was sure would treat him always as a beast of burden and would take no account of what she thought of as the handicap of his birth. Her morning's work was done and without saying anything to Hugh, who continued to go up and down the platform laboriously sweeping, she went out at the front door of the house and to one of the town stores. There she bought a half dozen books, a geography, an arithmetic, a speller and two or three readers. She had made up her mind to become Hugh McVey's school teacher and with characteristic energy did not put the matter off, but went about it at once. When she got back to her house and saw the boy still going doggedly up and down the platform, she did not scold but spoke to him with a new gentleness in her manner. "Well, my boy, you may put the broom away now and come to the house," she suggested. "I've made up my mind to take you for my own boy and I don't want to be ashamed of you. If you're going to live with me I can't have you growing up to be a lazy good-for-nothing like your father and the other men in this hole of a place. You'll have to learn things and I suppose I'll have to be your teacher."

"Come on over to the house at once," she added sharply, making a quick motion with her hand to the boy who with the broom in his hands stood stupidly staring. "When a job is to be done there's no use putting it off. It's going to be hard work to make an educated man of you, but it has to be done. We might as well begin on your lessons at once."

* * * * *

Hugh McVey lived with Henry Shepard and his wife until he became a grown man. After Sarah Shepard became his school teacher things began to go better for him. The scolding of the New England woman, that had but accentuated his awkwardness and stupidity, came to an end and life in his adopted home became so quiet and peaceful that the boy thought of himself as one who had come into a kind of paradise. For a time the two older people talked of sending him to the town school, but the woman objected. She had begun to feel so close to Hugh that he seemed a part of her own flesh and blood and the thought of him, so huge and ungainly, sitting in a school room with the children of the town, annoyed and irritated her. In imagination she saw him being laughed at by other boys and could not bear the thought. She did not like the people of the town and did not want Hugh to associate with them.

Sarah Shepard had come from a people and a country quite different in its aspect from that in which she now lived. Her own people, frugal New Englanders, had come West in the year after the Civil War to take up cut-over timber land in the southern end of the state of Michigan. The daughter was a grown girl when her father and mother took up the westward journey, and after they arrived at the new home, had worked with her father in the fields. The land was covered with huge stumps and was difficult to farm but the New Englanders were accustomed to difficulties and were not discouraged. The land was deep and rich and the people who had settled upon it were poor but hopeful. They felt that every day of hard work done in clearing the land was like laying up treasure against the future. In New England they had fought against a hard climate and had managed to find a living on stony unproductive soil. The milder climate and the rich deep soil of Michigan was, they felt, full of promise. Sarah's father like most of his neighbors had

gone into debt for his land and for tools with which to clear and work it and every year spent most of his earnings in paying interest on a mortgage held by a banker in a nearby town, but that did not discourage him. He whistled as he went about his work and spoke often of a future of ease and plenty. "In a few years and when the land is cleared we'll make money hand over fist," he declared.

When Sarah grew into young womanhood and went about among the young people in the new country, she heard much talk of mortgages and of the difficulty of making ends meet, but every one spoke of the hard conditions as temporary. In every mind the future was bright with promise. Throughout the whole Mid-American country, in Ohio, Northern Indiana and Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa a hopeful spirit prevailed. In every breast hope fought a successful war with poverty and discouragement. Optimism got into the blood of the children and later led to the same kind of hopeful courageous development of the whole western country. The sons and daughters of these hardy people no doubt had their minds too steadily fixed on the problem of the paying off of mortgages and getting on in the world, but there was courage in them. If they, with the frugal and sometimes niggardly New Englanders from whom they were sprung, have given modern American life a too material flavor, they have at least created a land in which a less determinedly materialistic people may in their turn live in comfort.

In the midst of the little hopeless community of beaten men and yellow defeated women on the bank of the Mississippi River, the woman who had become Hugh McVey's second mother and in whose veins flowed the blood of the pioneers, felt herself undefeated and unbeatable. She and her husband would, she felt, stay in the Missouri town for a while and then move on to a larger town and a better position in life. They would move on and up until the little fat man was a railroad president or a millionaire. It was the way things were done. She had no doubt of the future. "Do everything well," she said to her husband, who was perfectly satisfied with his position in life and had no exalted notions as to his future. "Remember to make your reports out neatly and clearly. Show them you can do perfectly the task given you to do, and you will be given a chance at a larger task. Some day when you least expect it something will

happen. You will be called up into a position of power. We won't be compelled to stay in this hole of a place very long."

The ambitious energetic little woman, who had taken the son of the indolent farm hand to her heart, constantly talked to him of her own people. Every afternoon when her housework was done she took the boy into the front room of the house and spent hours laboring with him over his lessons. She worked upon the problem of rooting the stupidity and dullness out of his mind as her father had worked at the problem of rooting the stumps out of the Michigan land. After the lesson for the day had been gone over and over until Hugh was in a stupor of mental weariness, she put the books aside and talked to him. With glowing fervor she made for him a picture of her own youth and the people and places where she had lived. In the picture she represented the New Englanders of the Michigan farming community as a strong god-like race, always honest, always frugal, and always pushing ahead. His own people she utterly condemned. She pitied him for the blood in his veins. The boy had then and all his life certain physical difficulties she could never understand. The blood did not flow freely through his long body. His feet and hands were always cold and there was for him an almost sensual satisfaction to be had from just lying perfectly still in the station yard and letting the hot sun beat down on him.

Sarah Shepard looked upon what she called Hugh's laziness as a thing of the spirit. "You have got to get over it," she declared. "Look at your own people—poor white trash—how lazy and shiftless they are. You can't be like them. It's a sin to be so dreamy and worthless."

Swept along by the energetic spirit of the woman, Hugh fought to overcome his inclination to give himself up to vaporous dreams. He became convinced that his own people were really of inferior stock, that they were to be kept away from and not to be taken into account. During the first year after he came to live with the Shepards, he sometimes gave way to a desire to return to his old lazy life with his father in the shack by the river. People got off steamboats at the town and took the train to other towns lying back from the river. He earned a little money by carrying trunks filled with clothes or traveling men's samples up an incline from the steamboat landing to the railroad station. Even at fourteen the strength in his long gaunt

body was so great that he could out-lift any man in town, and he put one of the trunks on his shoulder and walked slowly and stolidly away with it as a farm horse might have walked along a country road with a boy of six perched on his back.

The money earned in this way Hugh for a time gave to his father, and when the man had become stupid with drink he grew quarrelsome and demanded that the boy return to live with him. Hugh had not the spirit to refuse and sometimes did not want to refuse. When neither the station master nor his wife was about he slipped away and went with his father to sit for a half day with his back against the wall of the fishing shack, his soul at peace. In the sunlight he sat and stretched forth his long legs. His small sleepy eyes stared out over the river. A delicious feeling crept over him and for the moment he thought of himself as completely happy and made up his mind that he did not want to return again to the railroad station and to the woman who was so determined to arouse him and make of him a man of her own people.

Hugh looked at his father asleep and snoring in the long grass on the river bank. An odd feeling of disloyalty crept over him and he became uncomfortable. The man's mouth was open and he snored lustily. From his greasy and threadbare clothing arose the smell of fish. Flies gathered in swarms and alighted on his face. Disgust took possession of Hugh. A flickering but ever recurring light came into his eyes. With all the strength of his awakening soul he struggled against the desire to give way to the inclination to stretch himself out beside the man and sleep. The words of the New England woman, who was, he knew, striving to lift him out of slothfulness and ugliness into some brighter and better way of life, echoed dimly in his mind. When he arose and went back along the street to the station master's house and when the woman there looked at him reproachfully and muttered words about the poor white trash of the town, he was ashamed and looked at the floor.

Hugh began to hate his own father and his own people. He connected the man who had bred him with the dreaded inclination toward sloth in himself. When the farmhand came to the station and demanded the money he had earned by carrying trunks, he turned away and went across a dusty road to the Shepard's house. After a

year or two he paid no more attention to the dissolute farmhand who came occasionally to the station to mutter and swear at him; and, when he had earned a little money, gave it to the woman to keep for him. "Well," he said, speaking slowly and with the hesitating drawl characteristic of his people, "if you give me time I'll learn. I want to be what you want me to be. If you stick to me I'll try to make a man of myself."

* * * * *

Hugh McVey lived in the Missouri town under the tutelage of Sarah Shepard until he was nineteen years old. Then the station master gave up railroading and went back to Michigan. Sarah Shepard's father had died after having cleared one hundred and twenty acres of the cut-over timber land and it had been left to her. The dream that had for years lurked in the back of the little woman's mind and in which she saw bald-headed, good-natured Henry Shepard become a power in the railroad world had begun to fade. In newspapers and magazines she read constantly of other men who, starting from a humble position in the railroad service, soon became rich and powerful, but nothing of the kind seemed likely to happen to her husband. Under her watchful eye he did his work well and carefully but nothing came of it. Officials of the railroad sometimes passed through the town riding in private cars hitched to the end of one of the through trains, but the trains did not stop and the officials did not alight and, calling Henry out of the station, reward his faithfulness by piling new responsibilities upon him, as railroad officials did in such cases in the stories she read. When her father died and she saw a chance to again turn her face eastward and to live again among her own people, she told her husband to resign his position with the air of one accepting an undeserved defeat. The station master managed to get Hugh appointed in his place, and the two people went away one gray morning in October, leaving the tall ungainly young man in charge of affairs. He had books to keep, freight waybills to make out, messages to receive, dozens of definite things to do. Early in the morning before the train that was to take her away, came to the station, Sarah Shepard called the young man to her and repeated the instructions she had so often given her husband. "Do everything neatly and carefully," she said. "Show yourself worthy of the trust that has been given you."

The New England woman wanted to assure the boy, as she had so often assured her husband, that if he would but work hard and faithfully promotion would inevitably come; but in the face of the fact that Henry Shepard had for years done without criticism the work Hugh was to do and had received neither praise nor blame from those above him, she found it impossible to say the words that arose to her lips. The woman and the son of the people among whom she had lived for five years and had so often condemned, stood beside each other in embarrassed silence. Stripped of her assurance as to the purpose of life and unable to repeat her accustomed formula, Sarah Shepard had nothing to say. Hugh's tall figure, leaning against the post that supported the roof of the front porch of the little house where she had taught him his lessons day after day, seemed to her suddenly old and she thought his long solemn face suggested a wisdom older and more mature than her own. An odd revulsion of feeling swept over her. For the moment she began to doubt the advisability of trying to be smart and to get on in life. If Hugh had been somewhat smaller of frame so that her mind could have taken hold of the fact of his youth and immaturity, she would no doubt have taken him into her arms and said words regarding her doubts. Instead she also became silent and the minutes slipped away as the two people stood before each other and stared at the floor of the porch. When the train on which she was to leave blew a warning whistle, and Henry Shepard called to her from the station platform, she put a hand on the lapel of Hugh's coat and drawing his face down, for the first time kissed him on the cheek. Tears came into her eyes and into the eyes of the young man. When he stepped across the porch to get her bag Hugh stumbled awkwardly against a chair. "Well, you do the best you can here," Sarah Shepard said quickly and then out of long habit and half unconsciously did repeat her formula. "Do little things well and big opportunities are bound to come," she declared as she walked briskly along beside Hugh across the narrow road and to the station and the train that was to bear her away.

After the departure of Sarah and Henry Shepard Hugh continued to struggle with his inclination to give way to dreams. It seemed to him a struggle it was necessary to win in order that he might show his respect and appreciation of the woman who had spent so many

long hours laboring with him. Although, under her tutelage, he had received a better education than any other young man of the river town, he had lost none of his physical desire to sit in the sun and do nothing. When he worked, every task had to be consciously carried on from minute to minute. After the woman left, there were days when he sat in the chair in the telegraph office and fought a desperate battle with himself. A queer determined light shone in his small gray eyes. He arose from the chair and walked up and down the station platform. Each time as he lifted one of his long feet and set it slowly down a special little effort had to be made. To move about at all was a painful performance, something he did not want to do. All physical acts were to him dull but necessary parts of his training for a vague and glorious future that was to come to him some day in a brighter and more beautiful land that lay in the direction thought of rather indefinitely as the East. "If I do not move and keep moving I'll become like father, like all of the people about here," Hugh said to himself. He thought of the man who had bred him and whom he occasionally saw drifting aimlessly along Main Street or sleeping away a drunken stupor on the river bank. He was disgusted with him and had come to share the opinion the station master's wife had always held concerning the people of the Missouri village. "They're a lot of miserable lazy louts," she had declared a thousand times, and Hugh, agreed with her, but sometimes wondered if in the end he might not also become a lazy lout. That possibility he knew was in him and for the sake of the woman as well as for his own sake he was determined it should not be so.

The truth is that the people of Mudcat Landing were totally unlike any of the people Sarah Shepard had ever known and unlike the people Hugh was to know during his mature life. He who had come from a people not smart was to live among smart energetic men and women and be called a big man by them without in the least understanding what they were talking about.

Practically all of the people of Hugh's home town were of Southern origin. Living originally in a land where all physical labor was performed by slaves, they had come to have a deep aversion to physical labor. In the South their fathers, having no money to buy slaves of their own and being unwilling to compete with slave labor, had tried to live without labor. For the most part they lived in

the mountains and the hill country of Kentucky and Tennessee, on land too poor and unproductive to be thought worth cultivating by their rich slave-owning neighbors of the valleys and plains. Their food was meager and of an enervating sameness and their bodies degenerate. Children grew up long and gaunt and yellow like badly nourished plants. Vague indefinite hungers took hold of them and they gave themselves over to dreams. The more energetic among them, sensing dimly the unfairness of their position in life, became vicious and dangerous. Feuds started among them and they killed each other to express their hatred of life. When, in the years preceding the Civil War, a few of them pushed north along the rivers and settled in Southern Indiana and Illinois and in Eastern Missouri and Arkansas, they seemed to have exhausted their energy in making the voyage and slipped quickly back into their old slothful way of life. Their impulse to emigrate did not carry them far and but a few of them ever reached the rich corn lands of central Indiana, Illinois or Iowa or the equally rich land back from the river in Missouri or Arkansas. In Southern Indiana and Illinois they were merged into the life about them and with the infusion of new blood they a little awoke. They have tempered the quality of the peoples of those regions, made them perhaps less harshly energetic than their forefathers, the pioneers. In many of the Missouri and Arkansas river towns they have changed but little. A visitor to these parts may see them there to-day, long, gaunt, and lazy, sleeping their lives away and awakening out of their stupor only at long intervals and at the call of hunger.

As for Hugh McVey, he stayed in his home town and among his own people for a year after the departure of the man and woman who had been father and mother to him, and then he also departed. All through the year he worked constantly to cure himself of the curse of indolence. When he awoke in the morning he did not dare lie in bed for a moment for fear indolence would overcome him and he would not be able to arise at all. Getting out of bed at once he dressed and went to the station. During the day there was not much work to be done and he walked for hours up and down the station platform. When he sat down he at once took up a book and put his mind to work. When the pages of the book became indistinct before his eyes and he felt within him the inclination to drift off into

dreams, he again arose and walked up and down the platform. Having accepted the New England woman's opinion of his own people and not wanting to associate with them, his life became utterly lonely and his loneliness also drove him to labor.

Something happened to him. Although his body would not and never did become active, his mind began suddenly to work with feverish eagerness. The vague thoughts and feelings that had always been a part of him but that had been indefinite, ill-defined things, like clouds floating far away in a hazy sky, began to grow definite. In the evening after his work was done and he had locked the station for the night, he did not go to the town hotel where he had taken a room and where he ate his meals, but wandered about town and along the road that ran south beside the great mysterious river. A hundred new and definite desires and hungers awoke in him. He began to want to talk with people, to know men and most of all to know women, but the disgust for his fellows in the town, engendered in him by Sarah Shepard's words and most of all by the things in his nature that were like their natures, made him draw back. When in the fall at the end of the year after the Shepards had left and he began living alone, his father was killed in a senseless quarrel with a drunken river man over the ownership of a dog, a sudden, and what seemed to him at the moment heroic resolution came to him. He went early one morning to one of the town's two saloon keepers, a man who had been his father's nearest approach to a friend and companion, and gave him money to bury the dead man. Then he wired to the headquarters of the railroad company telling them to send a man to Mudcat Landing to take his place. On the afternoon of the day on which his father was buried, he bought himself a handbag and packed his few belongings. Then he sat down alone on the steps of the railroad station to wait for the evening train that would bring the man who was to replace him and that would at the same time take him away. He did not know where he intended to go, but knew that he wanted to push out into a new land and get among new people. He thought he would go east and north. He remembered the long summer evenings in the river town when the station master slept and his wife talked. The boy who listened had wanted to sleep also, but with the eyes of Sarah Shepard fixed on him, had not dared to do so. The woman had talked of

a land dotted with towns where the houses were all painted in bright colors, where young girls dressed in white dresses went about in the evening, walking under trees beside streets paved with bricks, where there was no dust or mud, where stores were gay bright places filled with beautiful wares that the people had money to buy in abundance and where every one was alive and doing things worth while and none was slothful and lazy. The boy who had now become a man wanted to go to such a place. His work in the railroad station had given him some idea of the geography of the country and, although he could not have told whether the woman who had talked so enticingly had in mind her childhood in New England or her girlhood in Michigan, he knew in a general way that to reach the land and the people who were to show him by their lives the better way to form his own life, he must go east. He decided that the further east he went the more beautiful life would become, and that he had better not try going too far in the beginning. "I'll go into the northern part of Indiana or Ohio," he told himself. "There must be beautiful towns in those places."

Hugh was boyishly eager to get on his way and to become at once a part of the life in a new place. The gradual awakening of his mind had given him courage, and he thought of himself as armed and ready for association with men. He wanted to become acquainted with and be the friend of people whose lives were beautifully lived and who were themselves beautiful and full of significance. As he sat on the steps of the railroad station in the poor little Missouri town with his bag beside him, and thought of all the things he wanted to do in life, his mind became so eager and restless that some of its restlessness was transmitted to his body. For perhaps the first time in his life he arose without conscious effort and walked up and down the station platform out of an excess of energy. He thought he could not bear to wait until the train came and brought the man who was to take his place. "Well, I'm going away, I'm going away to be a man among men," he said to himself over and over. The saying became a kind of refrain and he said it unconsciously. As he repeated the words his heart beat high in anticipation of the future he thought lay before him.