

# **The Gentleman from Indiana Short Guide**

## **The Gentleman from Indiana by Booth Tarkington**

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# Characters

John Harkless is intelligent, fearless, strong, and gentle; but when provoked, he is a fierce fighter. He is also a crusading newspaper editor who within weeks of taking over the Carlow County Herald confronts the political boss of the region, Rodney McCune, with proof of his crookedness, and forces McCune out of politics. McCune threatens Harkless as he goes.

In college Harkless had been known as "the great John Harkless" — athlete, scholar, and above all a gentleman. In Platville where he has revived the moribund Carlow County Herald, Harkless ignores threats against his life, going on long solitary walks at night in the countryside. A number of men in the community have taken it upon themselves to follow him at a distance when he walks about nights. They have come to idolize him as does everyone who knows him. While a hero such as this would be impossible outside of a romance, Harkless is based on a real life model, Tarkington's best friend at Princeton, John Cleve Green, who died suddenly in 1897. Tarkington admired Green intensely, and dedicated *The Gentleman from Indiana* to him.

The novel owed its great popularity to "the manly virtues of the hero and the feminine charm of the heroine."

Helen Sherwood is an equally idealized figure. She is totally feminine but also independent and talented. On one of his walks Harkless hears her singing Schubert's "Serenade" in a manner that would do credit to a professional singer. She plays the piano excellently, and after Harkless's enemies finally catch up with him (in the middle of the novel), she takes over his editorial duties at the Herald, and not only expands the paper's circulation, but also runs a political campaign on Harkless's behalf for a seat in Congress, and enables him to win.

Tarkington knew precisely the right ingredients for a popular romance, and drew his characters accordingly. Rodney McCune's appearance is limited to a scene at the beginning but the reader is told that he is a "dirty-hearted villain" with no redeeming qualities.

Harkless has also opposed a vigilante group, the White Caps, who are hooded precursors of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana. They set several ambushes for Harkless who, although he never carries arms himself, charges into the bushes from which they fire at him.

Helen, equally fearless, on one occasion runs with him. That both of them survive is a miracle.

The local Hoosiers also are seen as a paragon of rural virtue as Tarkington portrays them. Harkless says of them, "I believe they are the best people I know." Tarkington, looking back on the Indiana of his boyhood, truly believed in the goodness of its people.

However, Platville seems to have been modeled on Marshall, Illinois, across the Wabash, where the author spent some of his summer holidays as a boy.

With the end of his romance phase, Tarkington's characters would no longer be the stock types such as he presents in *The Gentleman from Indiana*.

However, the characters in his early historical stories, "Monsieur Beaucaire" (1900), and *The Two Vanrevels* (1902), are also stereotypes.

## Social Concerns

The Gentleman from Indiana presents Tarkington's home state and its inhabitants in a highly idealized fashion. It is a romance, but a romance with realistic touches. It records authentically the speech patterns and lifestyles of Indianians of the 1870s and 1880s. The corruption of local politics is also accurately described. During his single term as a member of the Indiana General Assembly (January to March 1903), Tarkington learned how widespread corruption was in public life. He made his experiences in politics the background for a series of short stories, *In the Arena* (1905).

As *The Gentleman from Indiana* concludes, the author shows that rural Indiana is changing. Oil companies are establishing themselves in the area.

They threaten to bring new classes of people and new problems.

## Techniques

As *The Gentleman from Indiana* begins, the author describes Carlow County as a passenger on a train would see it as he passes through, "flat lonesomeness, miles on miles." He then takes the reader into Platville, the county seat, and convinces him with skillful descriptions, full of local color, that it is a region which a perceptive visitor might come to love. It is unspoiled and quite removed from the intense competition and industrialization which had become commonplace in post-Civil War America. This is why John Harkless, for all his sophistication, has chosen to work here.

Like the descriptive passages, the plot is effectively handled. Enough action and suspense are provided to sustain the reader's attention throughout the novel. The first half of the book shows Harkless as the crusading newspaper editor, and initiates the love story. Almost exactly in the middle of the book, the editor disappears. He is last seen just as his enemies, the White Cappers, have successfully ambushed him. The actual fight is not described directly. After several chapters Harkless is on the scene again, in a hospital swathed in bandages, and in delirium reliving his days as a star college football player. His recovery is uncertain, but even after he is convalescent, a strange apathy seems to have seized him. Now Helen Sherwood has her chance to show what she can do, and she becomes the true heroine. Both characters are thus given the scope they need.

# Themes

A reader of *The Gentleman from Indiana* is constantly reminded that Indiana and its people are examples of what is finest in rural America. Tarkington was presenting his home state as fully worthy of the pride its citizens felt. He anticipates the boosterism that later novelists like Sinclair Lewis would satirize.

As a romance the novel shows that good, as represented by the hero, John Harkless, will be triumphant against all odds. Tarkington in time would look back on his romantic period and its writings with some condescension. As a lifelong optimist, however, he never lost his faith in the essential goodness of the world and its people.

True love will also triumph. John Harkless and Helen Sherwood are meant to be together. They are not married as the novel ends, but this wedding will take place very soon. The happy ending formula of romance guarantees this. It is only later in *Alice Adams* (1921) that Tarkington will frustrate romantic expectations and present a heroine who does not get the man of her choice.

## Literary Precedents

Writers of romances, regional and historical, flourished in Indiana during the last third of the nineteenth century.

It is only natural that Tarkington should have spent his earlier years writing stories of the same sort. In 1871 Edward Eggleston had published *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, still recognized as a regional classic. The Hoosier School consisted of such authors as General Lew Wallace, whose *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) is still read; James Whitcomb Riley, the grassroots poet; Gene Stratton Porter, who wrote popular books set in the Limberlost region of Indiana; and Charles Major, whose *When Knighthood Was in Flower* enjoyed much popularity at the turn of the century. This partial list helps explain why Tarkington himself spent his apprentice years writing romances. He was involved with this genre for ten years.





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