

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Berries for Sale

Rap, rap, rap.

At the insistent summons, Mrs. Phillips opened the front door with a jerk. What met her eyes was not the peddler she expected, but a box of most luscious strawberries balanced on an extended hand. She peered around the door to locate the owner of that hand and those berries. There he was — a short, slim, well-dressed young man with a disarming smile and a twinkle in his blue eyes.

“Madam, I have a fruit farm two miles from Hiteman. Every afternoon I bring fruits and vegetables to town to sell, in that carriage out there. I should like to show you my berries today. Then on other days, if you want to buy from me, you can just come to the door and raise your hand when you hear the bells I have fastened on my horses. My time is valuable and I won’t bother you by coming to your door again unless you want some of my fruit.”

Intrigued by this entirely novel method of selling things, so different from the ways of the dirty, insistent peddlers whom she had sent away from her back door that morning, Mrs. Phillips pondered.

"What berries have you?"

"I have strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, and cherries, each in season."

"How much are they worth?"

"There is one price on each for the whole season. The strawberries, blackberries, and cherries are fifteen cents a box or three dollars and sixty cents for a crate. The raspberries are four dollars a crate."

"That's higher than other people are asking."

"I realize that, madam, but my fruit is of uniform quality and size and I guarantee it to be that way. You'll find very little waste because of over-ripe fruit."

Mrs. Phillips took the box of berries and stirred the fruit around with an exploring finger. The surprising thing was that the bottom layer of strawberries was of exactly as large size as the ones at the top.

"I'll take a crate of these now, if you have them, and probably more later if they're all as good as this box."

In this manner W. T. Richey went from house

to house in the mining town of Hiteman, adding more and more good customers to his already large list. In 1900 he had started one of the first fruit farms in Monroe County. It was at a time when berries grew wild and plentifully out in the country, and there was already an over-supply of fruit vendors selling wild berries. People told him that he was foolish, that his venture was sure to fail, but these advisers were poor prophets. Will Richey's fruit farm gradually expanded from the three acres, financed with money borrowed from a neighbor, to forty-five acres, entirely free from debt.

The secret of his success was partly to be found in the exceptionally fine quality of his fruits. His prices were higher than those of his competitors, but people paid him willingly. They knew that in a crate of berries only about six berries could not be used, instead of three boxes of bad fruit which was the usual amount to be discarded from a crate sold by any other peddler.

Moreover, Richey's salesmanship was different from that of the average fruit seller. He dressed, as he himself said, "so that I would be quite presentable if I had to go to a meeting." When he introduced his wares he went to the front door and not to the back of the house. His pleasant, deep voice and, above all, that twinkle in his eyes, made

people feel instinctively that he could be trusted.

One lady had a standing order each week for a certain amount of fruit, but usually was not at home when he came to deliver. "Now, Mr. Richey," she said, "I'm going to leave the back door unlocked. You walk right in with the fruit and put it on the kitchen table. And here on the third shelf of the cupboard is a tumbler and I'll leave the money for you in that."

"But I don't want to do that, Mrs. Gaines. If somebody else came in and stole things, I'd not want to be blamed for it."

"I know you're perfectly honest, and we'll do it this way or not at all."

And so the matter was settled. Each week Will Richey delivered his fruit to Mrs. Gaines's kitchen, opened the cupboard and took his pay from the tumbler on the third shelf. Sometimes the lady left a note on the table, telling him of a friend who also wanted to buy some of his berries.

There were some particularly nice late cherries for which Mr. Richey asked a higher price than was customary. Some of his purchasers protested about it. "But Mr. Richey, that's *much* more than other people are asking."

"I know that, but you are getting something extra fine when you buy these Montmorencies."

The supply of these excellent cherries was lim-

ited and so he always sold the whole crop. He found that the miners liked to "eat well", as they themselves admitted. Consequently the fact that his fruits were of superior quality was a guarantee of an adequate market.

"You know," a customer would often begin, "I'll have to tell you about this. I bought some of the cheaper ones, and they were perfectly terrible. They were small and poorly sorted, and had lots of waste to them. Believe me, I'm buying yours from now on, price or no price."

The pickers on his farm knew that their jobs lasted only as long as they did efficient work. During the twelve years when Mr. Richey controlled the enterprise, only two pickers were discharged. They were all allowed to eat as many berries as they wanted, if they also managed to pick the rows clean. Each picker had a card which was presented to Mr. Richey's small daughter, Mae, to be punched, whenever a "haul" was brought in to be sorted. Mae wore the punch on a ribbon around her neck, to be sure that it was not mislaid or stolen. It made a queer mark in the shape of a hand, and would have been hard to duplicate.

The berries were put in absolutely clean boxes. The sorters were careful to have the fruit of as uniform size as possible. There was none of that

reprehensible practice of putting the big berries on top to hide much smaller ones below.

About forty years ago, mining towns had a reputation of being rough and tough, though usually that character was imparted by a few persons. On the outskirts of Hiteman lived a group in bad repute, commonly known as the "Kentuckians". These men, mostly Napiers and Johnsons, were supposed to have been chased out of Kentucky because of their disagreeable habit of ignoring the law. They had come to Iowa and settled near Hiteman, ostensibly to work in the coal mines, particularly in the Enterprise and the Jack Oak. Employment of that sort fell to their lot occasionally, and they were good workers. Ordinarily, however, they lived well and with no visible means of support. Their soft, melodious voices were disarming, especially to strangers who later came to grief because of over-trustfulness in outward appearances.

One time Richey overtook one of the Johnsons along the road and, being somewhat venturesome, he stopped and asked the man if he would like to ride. So Johnson climbed into the wagon and rode to Hiteman. The conversation was confined to commonplaces, and the men parted with mutual expressions of good will. Richey chuckled to himself afterward, because his passenger had so per-

sistently emphasized his affiliation with and interest in the Baptist Church.

However, the Johnsons and Napiers were good customers, and never seemed offensive to Mr. Richey, although he knew them not only by reputation but because of actual lawless deeds in which they had been involved. He had heard, also, that one of the Johnsons never permitted anybody to get behind him. This alleged trait amused the fruit seller and he decided to test its truthfulness. His first opportunity came when he was selling some berries to the man one morning.

"I've got something in the wagon you ought to see," said Mr. Richey, edging back of Mr. Johnson to get to the wagon. Mr. Johnson stepped back close against the horses and Mr. Richey found himself going in front instead of behind the man as he had intended.

At another time, one of Johnson's sons was badly hurt in a mine explosion at Jack Oak and Mr. Richey volunteered to help care for the boy until the father returned from an unexplained absence. His offer was accepted, and he happened to be at the Johnson home when the head of the house reappeared. Again Mr. Richey thought about his original failure to walk behind Johnson who happened to be sitting in a chair in the center of the room.

"I need a drink of water", remarked Richey, getting up and moving to the right with the intention of passing behind on his way to the water pail. But Johnson picked up his chair, moved it back against the wall, and again sat down. Apparently the rumor about his peculiarity was well founded.

Will Richey's fruit route included all the small mining settlements within traveling distance of his farm, as well as some of the larger towns. People became accustomed to the jingle of his bells. And because of his honesty and kind disposition, he found not only regular customers but lifelong friends.

LOIS MARIE OLLIVIER