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EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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Susan Glaspell

Unlike some of the literary great, who, in making themselves into cosmopolites, have travelled so far actually and figuratively from the place of their birth as to pass quite out of any connection with it, Susan Glaspell is still at heart a daughter of Iowa. The surroundings of her girlhood, it is evident, made an ineffaceable impression upon her memory. While some of the stories in *Lifted Masks*, her first volume, have a Chicago background, and at least one other, that of Paris, several have the settings that she knew so well while an undergraduate at Drake University, and a newspaper woman, covering the doings of the legislature. To her drama, *The Inheritors*, she has given a setting strongly suggestive of Davenport, with its references to Black Hawk, and to the steel works. The denominational college of the drama might well be a composite of several such Iowa institutions, while the radical

professor, with his long-suppressed passion for Greece, must remind every reader of her late husband, George Cram Cook. Her general experience of rural life also served her in good stead in the composition of her powerful novel, *Brook Evans*.

The Iowa experiences of which these works are the record were those from birth to early maturity. Born in Davenport in 1882, she was educated at Drake University, where in 1899 she was an unsuccessful candidate for the editorship of the *Delphic*. She remained for some time in Des Moines as a practical newspaper woman on the *Daily News* and the *Capital*. Following this, she was for a time a postgraduate student at the University of Chicago. *The Glory of the Conquered* (1909), with its background inspired by Chicago, was sufficiently successful to finance a year in the Latin quarter of Paris.

The desire to live life at its fullest, and to experience all its varieties, took her thereafter to a ranch in Idaho, and then to Provincetown, Massachusetts, where some of her most memorable years were destined to be spent. A succession of works followed; some fiction, some drama. *The Visioning* (1911), *Lifted Masks* (1912), *Fidelity* (1915), *Brook Evans* (1928), and *Fugitive's Return* (1929) belong to the first named group.

Association at Provincetown with George Cram Cook, whom she married in 1913, made her a sharer, as actress and producer as well as author, in the project known then and now as the Provincetown

Players, one of the most significant dramatic enterprises of our generation. Among the plays written by her for this group of intellectual amateurs were *Suppressed Desires* (1914) and *Trifles* (1917) — two of the best short plays in our language. Following the removal of Cook and Miss Glaspell to Greenwich Village, New York, in 1917, where he was manager and she was chief playwright, *Woman's Honor* (1918), *Bernice* (1919), *The Inheritors* (1921), and *The Verge* (1922) were produced.

Immediately afterward came the journey to Greece with her husband in 1922, which ended with his death and burial at Delphi. The incidents of this journey, and indeed of their entire married life, are contained in her volume, *The Road to the Temple* (1926). To a volume printed the year previous, *Greek Coins*, some poems by George Cram Cook, with memorabilia by Floyd Dell, Edna Kenton, and Susan Glaspell, she had contributed an affectionate memoir. Shortly thereafter, she married Norman Matson, author and critic, and with him produced her latest works, *The Comic Artist* (1927), and *Fugitive's Return* (1929). They have moved to an old farm house at Truro, Cape Cod, where they plan to write in retirement.

The work of Susan Glaspell reveals considerable variety in form, setting, and style; but there is also a degree of continuity and coherence in ideals and point of view. In her early volume of stories, *Lifted Masks*, in her novel, *Brook Evans*, and in her

play, *The Inheritors*, she exhibits a sensitiveness to human injustice, an insight into human nature, and a realization of the unceasing struggle between idealism and the animal which is not cynical but sympathetic. No one can follow her through the moving pages of *Brook Evans*, and her analyses of the feelings and motives of her chief characters, without feeling the complexity and contradictoriness of the natures of men and women; nor, it might be added, without realizing that the author of this novel of rural life is herself a daughter of the soil.

The Inheritors, more than most of her works, emphatically dates itself. There is the satire on babbittism (French authors assure us that no capital is now required) and one hundred per cent Americanism. There is, too, the specific reference to the injustice of keeping in federal prisons, two years after the end of the war, men who opposed our entrance into that war. No one can doubt, reading this play, where Miss Glaspell's sympathies were in such matters. Clearly, she was no jingo; no narrow nationalist. This play, curiously enough, has about it more than a passing suggestion of Ibsen's *The Friend of the People*. Though talky, and at times tiresome, it has power, as evidenced by its revival by Eva Le Gallienne at the Civic Repertory Theatre. It will not soon be forgotten.

The Comic Artist, one of her latest works, is a sophisticated drama of artist life. The local color, acquired through years of life in Bohemian circles,

is utilized with skill, while the clash of characters ends in an inevitably tragic conclusion.

Some of her remaining works are too little known to warrant comment; others, such as *Suppressed Desires* and *Trifles*, are so familiar as to make discussion superfluous. Suffice it to say that in Susan Glaspell Iowa claims an author of wide experience, varied capabilities, and undoubted genius. The Middle Western scene was for her not something to be lived down or forgotten, but one of her richest resources; and, in every reference to the region of her birth, there is affectionate understanding and sympathy.

BARTHOLOW V. CRAWFORD