

The Beginnings

The two letters which were published in *THE PALIMPSEST* for December, 1950, under the title "Farming in 1866," afford an all but perfect preview of our field. It is clear that both "Maggie May" and "Farmer's Wife" were fictionizing a bit — exaggerating, emphasizing some details, and suppressing others, in accordance with their feeling about farm life in Iowa, the one anti- and the other pro-everything about it. These letters give evidence that the impulse to record and interpret their experience was general among the farm people of Iowa in the nineteenth century. There are thousands of such letters in the old newspapers.

Yet this impulse was surprisingly slow in finding the form of literary art. I have examined all of the stories in a file of *The Midland Monthly*, the "family magazine" with distinct literary emphasis which was edited by Johnson Brigham at Des Moines in the 1890's. The first item in Volume I is a story by Octave Thanet, Miss Alice French of Davenport, then Iowa's most distinguished writer. Its scene is an Iowa poor farm — but there is not a single detail in the story which would identify its setting as a farm, or as Iowa. Another story

by Octave Thanet, in Volume III, is similarly devoid of validating detail for its Iowa farm setting. To Volume VI Mrs. W. S. Kerr contributed a story called "The Graveyard at Dorn," which has a theme typical of farm life — a quarrel about a fence-line — but no localizing detail. Hamlin Garland's autobiographical sketches, *Boy Life on the Prairie*, were serialized in *The Midland Monthly*. But the three stories I have mentioned are the only Iowa farm stories I could find in this Iowa magazine! There are stories of Scotland and Italy, of Louisiana and New England and the Dakotas, and some of them are rich in regional detail; but there are none of Iowa. I cannot believe that Mr. Brigham had an editorial prejudice against Iowa farm stories. Apparently no more were offered to him.

It seems, then, the result of a fortunate accident — that Hamlin Garland lived for a time on Iowa farms and went to school in Iowa — that "the Iowa farm in fiction" is firmly established in the literary history of America and is represented in almost all anthologies of our national literature. The short stories of Garland's *Main Travelled Roads* were the product of the impact of Midwestern farm life on Garland after he had gained perspective by residence in the East. They portray a period of widespread hardship on Iowa farms, and of ruthless exploitation of farmers. Most of the stories are about Wisconsin farm

people, but the few which have definite Iowa settings are among the best: "Under the Lion's Paw," "A Day's Pleasure," "Mrs. Ripley's Trip." These stories are achieved in bold and broad strokes. They are sometimes faulty in technique; but they have authority, integrity, and emotional power. They are worthy of the contemporary recognition which they gained from Howells, and of the place they have won in American literature.

Garland himself was inclined in later years to underrate these early realistic stories. In his novel, *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (1895), he has his hero — a writer — say: "I don't admire the country people unreservedly . . . my experience with them has not been such as to make them heroic sufferers, as the new school of fiction sets 'em forth." But these stories remain, after sixty years, very much alive. They have strong characterization, rich texture of farm experience, vigorous drama. They meet the requirements of literature, and of regional literature.