

## Comment by the Editor

### A COMMONWEALTH OF VILLAGERS

Napoleon's contemptuous remark that England was "a nation of shopkeepers" might be legitimately paraphrased "a nation of villagers". Indeed, the same might be said of America. Iowa in particular is a commonwealth of villages — and therein lies the glory of the State, an explanation of its loyal spirit.

Most of us live in or near small towns. If it were not so the uncanny realism of "The Days of Real Sport" would lose its universal appeal.

The notion seems to be prevalent that village life implies inevitable, unmitigated narrowness. It is true that people who live apart are inclined to be provincial, but that is equally true of city dwellers.

Small town society may be unsophisticated, but it is not entirely simple and shallow and drab. Human existence may be complex without being dramatic, commonplace without being dull. To be sure there are bumpkins in villages: the same type of person is a cad in the city. Of the world's greatest thinkers the village has furnished more than its share because it breeds leadership.

## THE VILLAGE IN LITERATURE

Ever since the time of *Piers Plowman* village taverns, spires, and cottages have figured in English literature. In the modern era Goldsmith, pleading the cause of the gentle, kindly folk of sweet Auburn, put the essence of all community life into his *Deserted Village*. Crabbe told of the hopeless wretchedness of the people of Aldeburgh — a surly, joyless, unlovely race akin to the place they lived in. The artistry, freshness, and fidelity of Mary Mitford's sketches of *Our Village* have never been excelled, while Mrs. Gaskell contrasts the naïve, individualistic inhabitants of untroubled *Cranford* with the growing industrialism of the cities.

The typical American village has never been described. Perhaps there is no single type. Much has been written about New England towns; the uncouth, ephemeral frontier posts and mining camps continue to live in Bret Harte's stories and Joaquin Miller's poems; Mark Twain, Octave Thanet, and Zona Gale have immortalized midwestern small town life.

While American literature contains no village epic, the villagers, wherever the scene may be laid, seem to be endowed with common traits. Such homely virtues as honesty, contentment, industry, reverence, tranquility, and strength are usually revealed. But all American villages are not replicas of Longfellow's idyllic Grand-Pré where the "dwell-

ings were open as day and the hearts of the owners” and where “the richest was poor, and the poorest lived in abundance”. Villagers, being human, have their faults. They live by the standards they know — and in general those standards have met with approval.

A profound change seems to be reflected in the literature of to-day. People who live in small towns are treated contemptuously or with pity. Their lot is depicted as sordid and monotonous — and theirs is the fault. Has the character of the village changed? Have the sturdy virtues of the “village smithy” been supplanted by the sophistication of the garage tinker? Is the modern American village really decadent, insufferable, inhabited by dullards? Or is this interpretation confined to the imagination of urban sophists who do not see and can not understand?

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