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PROLOGUE*March 14, 1940*

A bitter March wind streamed through the coulees and buffeted the gathering of thirty-five mourners who stood before the rough grave at Neshonoc Cemetery, near the small village of West Salem, Wisconsin. Snow fell lightly upon their shoulders, the ground hard-frozen beneath their feet, as the sexton stood nearby, sweating from his labor. A few stamped the cold from their feet; others clutched the arms of their companions. Few tears were shed, for these mourners were mostly remote acquaintances, a few friends from decades ago, and a couple of distant relatives who were balefully staring at the grave, mindful that all too soon they too would be interred. A flashbulb went off, startling these country folk, reminding those assembled that this was no common burial. Hamlin Garland, the Dean of American Letters, was dead.

“We are assembled here to inter the remains of Hamlin Garland,” intoned the Reverend John B. Fitz, who then went on to praise Garland for celebrating the Midwest’s natural beauty while also delineating its occasional human misery. He concluded by reading one of Garland’s poems, “The Cry of the Age,” first published more than forty years earlier, its opening lines summarizing the guiding purpose of the author’s life:

What shall I do to be just?
What shall I do for the gain
Of the world—

The mourners shivered as the urn containing his ashes was lowered into the frozen ground, beside the graves of his parents, Richard

and Isabelle, who in 1859 had settled nearby. Clods of frozen earth, mixed with snow, fell on the urn, and then a few of his former neighbors laid a wreath upon the mound of dirt before shuffling off to their cars.¹

A week before, on March 7, a more elaborate memorial had taken place at Forest Lawn Cemetery's Wee Kirk o' the Heather in Glendale, California, a mere four miles from Garland's Hollywood home on DeMille Drive overlooking Griffith Park. Among the crowd of mourners in the flower-lined chapel were Hermann Hagedorn, biographer of Theodore Roosevelt; Rufus B. von KleinSmid, president of the University of Southern California; Harry Chandler, publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*; and many others, but not his closest friends—William Dean Howells, Augustus Thomas, John Burroughs, James Whitcomb Riley, Henry B. Fuller, James A. Herne—for Garland had outlived them all.

The seventy-nine-year-old author had been at work on the final volume of his memoirs, "The Fortunate Exiles," when he was stricken with a cerebral hemorrhage. As word of his death on March 4 reached the world, newspapers across the country printed obituaries and tributes that would have gratified him, for he was certain that his fifty years of literary life, recorded in forty-seven books and hundreds of magazine articles, had been forgotten. Only two weeks before his death he had made an address to the Mission Inn and was mortified by the sparse attendance. As he recorded dourly in his diary, honest to the end, "There is no value in keeping up a pose. I am no longer 'a personage' to any considerable part of the public. It was a humiliating experience."² He may have contemplated his former triumphs, the days when he was in demand as a speaker at the nation's universities. "The people mobbed me in the college in K.C.," he had written to his wife after one lecture engagement in Missouri. "I could hardly escape them. They all wanted autographs." He might have remembered his glory days when he was an international celebrity, feted by such authors as Arthur Conan Doyle, George Bernard Shaw, James M. Barrie, Rudyard Kipling, and Joseph Conrad. Or he may have recalled his final trip to New York City when he stopped in Chicago for three days to visit with friends, only to encounter

fans who still remembered his work—all celebrated in a *Chicago Daily News* article headlined, “Hamlin Garland Returns; Admirers Besiege Author.”³

Garland had not been forgotten; he had simply outlived his vogue.

When Hamlin Garland left his prairie homestead in Dakota Territory and journeyed to Boston in 1884 to make his fortune, he was an uncouth, ill-educated youth of twenty-four with a half-formed ambition to become a writer. When he died fifty-six years later, he knew virtually every significant writer of his day, both in the United States and England, had won a Pulitzer Prize, and had dined with presidents. He traveled among the Indians, learned sign language to communicate with them, and wrote some of the most sympathetic stories of his time about Native Americans. His wanderlust and productivity were such that during one two-year period he published four books, lectured throughout the United States, made repeated trips to the West to study conditions on the reservations, embarked on a five-month, thousand-mile trek through the Canadian wilderness to prospect for gold in the Klondike, sailed to Europe to arrange for the British publication of his books—and got married. He achieved considerable acclaim for his realistic stories of pioneer life, and he campaigned assiduously against romanticism and sensationalism in literature. As Walt Whitman noted, “Garland looks like a man who is bound to last—to go on from very good to very much better.”⁴

Garland’s first book, *Main-Travelled Roads*, occasioned controversy upon publication in 1891 because of its unabashed look at the hardships of farm life. Four years (and eight books) later, the controversy escalated with his frank depiction of sexuality in his novel of the “New Woman,” *Rose of Dutcher’s Coolly*. Garland published two volumes of poetry, a respected biography of Ulysses S. Grant, eleven novels about the mountain West, and eight volumes of autobiographical reminiscences. He wrote a number of plays and saw three of them produced; four of his novels were made into films; and for more than fifty years he lectured extensively throughout the United States. At the height of his critical acclaim he was the nation’s most outspoken advocate of realism, vigorously promoting a literature

that accurately represented the conditions of American life. In his later years, after William Dean Howells died, he assumed Howells's role as elder literary statesman and inherited his title, "The Dean of American Letters."

In recognition of his achievement in literature, Garland received four honorary doctorates, election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and frequent invitations to lecture at the nation's universities. He was a founder of many influential literary organizations that still exist, among them the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Authors' League of America, the Society of Midland Authors, the Cliff Dwellers' Club, and the MacDowell Colony. As he aged, literary historians such as Arthur Hobson Quinn, Fred Lewis Pattee, and Van Wyck Brooks probed his memories to write their books, and graduate students wrote theses about him. And today Garland is still celebrated, along with Laura Ingalls Wilder and Willa Cather, for the clarity with which his work illustrates prairie life, with its blend of the realistic delineation of its landscape and his social activism.

His accomplishments reveal his devotion to belles lettres, a genius for friendship, and a rare talent for organization, yet his temperament occasioned both admiration and ridicule. Although Garland was kind and generous (especially to young writers), his passionate commitment to his causes also elicited, at times, a patronizing dismissal—both from his contemporaries and from later critics. Booth Tarkington wrote, "It is impossible to think of Garland without thinking of his kindness, the greatness of heart that was in all of his work and in all of his life; and I believe that one next thinks of his integrity, his almost incorrigible intellectual probity." The critic Robert Morss Lovett praised his "strong humanitarian feeling" and his generosity "to those who need help, particularly younger authors." Henry James thought Garland's ability to saturate his stories with the detail of time and place "to have almost the value of genius." And William Dean Howells counseled, "Watch Garland, he is the most worthwhile of his generation." Yet to the Chicago journalist Robert Peattie, "Garland become so inflated with the praise of Howells . . . that he assumed the appearance of Jove and the finality

of judgment of Dr. Johnson”; and even Garland’s friend Theodore Roosevelt once noted that Garland “is a man with some power and with half an idea, but he is such a hopeless crank that nothing can be done with him.” His contentious personality sometimes provoked derision even amid recognition of his talent. “If Hamlin Garland sometimes makes one itch to pick up the first thing that comes handy to be thrown,” his friend Charles Lummis once remarked, “he has also a redeeming way of impelling one to choose a bouquet for a missile.”⁵

His life was, by anyone’s standards, successful, yet Garland was plagued with a lifelong sense of having failed to measure up to his own ambition. Even in 1899, one of his most productive years, he mourned to his diary, “I dont feel that the last five years has brought me very much. There is no feeling of having widened my reputation or made any considerable impression on the art and literature of my country.”⁶ In his later years he became bitter and cranky, obsessed with the rise of the modernism that had supplanted his own work, unable to set aside his Victorian sense of propriety when the intellectual currents shifted inward to probe the psychological and sexual motives for action. As other writers ascended to claim the public’s attention, he suffered a keen fear that he might not have achieved a lasting place in American letters. As his friend and Macmillan editor Harold Latham noted, Garland was “sensitive to a high degree, easily hurt, overgenerous toward others, firm in his convictions, he was a man deeply admired and respected by the editors who worked with him . . . [but] he was easily discouraged, and his publishing friends tried ever to stress the recognition which his work had aroused throughout the world.”⁷

The life I have tried to sketch in this biography is of an extraordinarily ambitious and energetic man with a modest talent who, through sheer determination and strength of will, skyrocketed into international fame before he was forty. Ironically, even at the height of his fame and influence, doubts about the permanency of his achievement and the responsibilities of a growing family led Garland to putter away with a number of reform movements through which he hoped to attain more lasting recognition. His tunnel vision of

what American literature should be caused him to miss the significance of modernism, the century's most noteworthy literary movement. At the time of his death he had been eclipsed by writers more responsive to the times, thereby failing to live up to Whitman's and Howells's prophecy of his eventual greatness. Garland's life is a story of ironic contradictions: the radical whose early achievement thrust him to the forefront of literary innovation but whose evolutionary aesthetic principles could not themselves adapt to changing conditions; the self-styled "veritist" whose credo demanded that every "individual impression [be] corrected by reference to the fact" but whose credulity led him to spend a lifetime seeking to verify the existence of spirits. His need for recognition caused him to cultivate rewarding friendships with the leaders of literary culture, yet even when he attained it, for Garland the recognition was never enough, and his self-doubt subjected him to fits of black despair.

Hamlin Garland is an important figure in American literature, one whose achievements as an advocate of realism were matched, and perhaps surpassed, by his accomplishments in professionalizing the craft of writing. But he is also significant as a representative man of letters of his age. A nineteenth-century sensibility shaped his advocacy of and achievement in literature, but at the same time it determined his resistance to the advance of modernism. What follows is the story of his personal and professional struggle with that historic divide.



RETURN OF THE PRIVATE, 1860–68

The central fact of life for Hamlin Garland was a constant awareness that he was the son of a pioneer with a bad case of land fever who drifted ever westward in search of better opportunities, each time seeking to augment his landholdings but finding betrayal in the land or its crops. Before he was sixteen years old, Hamlin would move five times, often living under conditions of extreme hardship as his family faced the unknown. His pioneer background affected everything he did later in life, from the selection of subjects for his writing, to the organizations with which he became involved, to the shape he gave his own life when he wrote a series of memoirs. He would call the land of his family's emigration the "middle border," a phrase he coined to refer to the moving line between frontier and settlement from the 1860s to the 1890s, extending roughly along the upper Mississippi valley from eastern Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, and then from western Iowa along the upper Missouri River into Dakota Territory as the frontier expanded in the 1880s. When George Bernard Shaw once asked Garland what he meant by "the middle border," Garland explained, "In a sense it does not exist and never did. It was but a vaguely defined region even in my boyhood. It was the line drawn by the plow and, broadly speaking, ran parallel to the upper Mississippi when I was a lad. It lay between the land of the hunter and the harvester."¹

Hamlin Garland was born on the eve of the Civil War, on September 14, 1860, in a squatter's cabin on the outskirts of West Salem, Wisconsin. Hamlin's father, Richard Hayes Garland, with his wife, the former Isabelle McClintock, and two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Harriet, was then in the midst of building a cabin on

a parcel of land he had recently bought in the middle of Green's Coulee, near the village of Onalaska, just north of La Crosse and less than ten miles from present-day West Salem. *Coulee* is the French name for the wide, usually wooded valleys separating the high ridges of southwestern Wisconsin. When the glaciers scoured the land at the end of the last ice age, they missed a narrow section of about fifty miles east to west, abutting the Mississippi River and extending half the length of the state and down into northeastern Iowa and northwestern Illinois. In this "driftless" area, so called because of the absence of glacial debris, rivers and streams scored narrow valleys from the existing strata of the Minnesota plateau to the west and the Wisconsin uplands to the east. While the topography is rough, the land is fertile and, once cleared of trees, attractive to farmers, and it was the prospect of productive farmland that brought Garland's father to Wisconsin.

Hamlin's father was born in 1830 in the small town of Norway, Oxford County, Maine, on the border of New Hampshire, the son of Harriet and Richard Garland, a sometime carpenter and shopkeeper struggling to make ends meet in the town of Greenwood, ten miles from where Dick had been born. The young Dick Garland's life was marked by considerable hardship and continual westward movement as his family sought to wrest a living from the land. At age ten, Dick went to work for a neighboring farmer for five dollars per month and attended school for a few weeks during the winter months, where he picked up a smattering of an education. Working the steep and rocky Maine farmland soon led to dreams of flat, rockless lands of the Midwest which promised both opportunity and riches. By the time he was sixteen, he was working for a railroad, and at age eighteen Dick had drifted to Boston, where he worked as a driver of a dray team hauling stone from a quarry and, later, as the driver of an express wagon. For a time he clerked in a dry goods store, and later he was promoted to shipping agent.²

Back in Maine, Dick's father showed considerable interest in the booming of the new state of Wisconsin, which had entered the Union in May 1848. As Garland would later write of his grandfather, "The word 'prairie' held out to him, as it did to thousands

of his kind, a release from the stone walls and a promise of harvests such as the best acres of his home county could never produce. To be free of hills, to plough an unbroken furrow in a level field, had become an obsession with him.”³ Harriet Garland’s brother, John Bridges, immigrated in 1849 to the township of Spring Grove, in Green County, on the southern border of the state. On May 21, 1850, Richard, Harriet, and their fourteen-year-old daughter, Susan, left for Wisconsin to join her brother, settling in Monticello, Green County, where they bought a forty-acre farm for one hundred dollars. They left twenty-year-old Dick and his twenty-two-year-old brother, Addison, behind in Boston, working to save money to buy their own parcels of land. Dick left for Wisconsin the next year in time to help out with the harvest, but he seems not to have been ready to settle down, for he soon departed for the northern part of the state to seek employment as a lumberman. A new state with hordes of immigrants pouring in needed lumber, and Dick soon found work in a camp at Big Bull Falls, near Wausau. Hamlin later recalled that his father “bossed a crew of choppers” during the winter, “and in summer, he ran rafts of lumber down the river to Dubuque.” Known as “Yankee Dick, the Pilot,” Dick was curiously unlike most of his companions, for he did not smoke, did not particularly like to drink, and was not known to consort with the women who followed the camps. But he was a fearsome brawler. He gained a reputation as a daredevil who would undertake any challenge. “The thing which made him dangerous,” Garland remembered about his father, “was the spirit which flamed out of his big gray eyes. He literally knew nothing of fear. He loved to ride the whirlpools, and shoot the rapids, and he spent weeks in water up to his knees, and slept at night in wet clothing.”⁴

When the Garlands arrived in Monticello in 1850 they met the McClintock clan, who had settled there in 1846 after migrating from Virginia by way of Ohio, where several of the thirteen McClintock children were born. Headed by fierce Hugh, an Adventist who thundered about the coming end of the world, the McClintocks soon befriended the Garlands. A photograph reveals Hugh to be the incarnation of an Old Testament prophet, with piercing, deep-set eyes,

tangled white locks, and fringe beard. To the young Hamlin he was a distant, visionary presence: "He was both a mystic and poet. . . . He loved the Bible, especially that part of it which contained prophecies and lamentations. The poetry of Job's curses, the whirling visions of the Apocalypse, formed his emotional outlet, his world of imagination. Absent-minded, careless of dress, he was forever drumming on his chair (keeping time to some inaudible tune), or with faintly moving lips repeating for the hundredth time the impassioned lines of Hezekiah or John or Job."⁵ In 1875, Hugh McClintock would be one of the organizers of a local branch of the Sons of Temperance. His wife, Edith, was a warmer presence, but she was overshadowed by the dominance of her husband. Her photograph shows a stern-faced, ascetic woman in bonnet, her dour, unsmiling face lined from toil. Despite the grimness of her photograph, Hamlin remembered her as "cheerful in the midst of her discomfort. . . . I do not suppose she ever knew what it was to have a comfortable, well-aired bedroom even in childbirth, which came to her fourteen times. Her dresses were faded and poor. Her home was small, poorly furnished, without pictures, without art, save music."⁶ What he most remembered about the McClintocks was their innate sensitivity, all of them "bards and dreamers, inarticulate and moody," who "could be thrown into sudden melancholy by a melody, a line of poetry or a beautiful landscape." Their receptive sensitivity led naturally to music, and all of the sons and daughters played instruments, with his uncle David being especially proficient with the violin. His visits were always cheerful affairs, for Hamlin was spoiled by his aunts and uncles. He would always attribute his own artistic sensibilities to them: "They furnished much of the charm and poetic suggestion of my childhood," he later wrote. "Most of what I have in way of feeling for music, for rhythm, I derive from my mother's side of the house, for it was almost entirely Celt in every characteristic."⁷ From his father he would inherit a restless desire to seek new opportunities and a relentless drive to succeed.

When Dick Garland rejoined his parents in 1851, he was particularly attracted to thirteen-year-old Isabelle McClintock, christened Charlotte Isabelle but often called Belle, and visits to his parents

during her adolescence only confirmed the attraction. Family tradition has it that he was singularly captivated by her melancholy voice, shy smile, and large brown eyes, in marked contrast to the vivacity of her siblings. In 1854 the McClintock clan relocated to La Crosse County, where Dick continued his visits to Isabelle.

After six years of lumbering and piloting, Dick Garland had risen to supervise some twenty-five men under the employ of one Ben Cooper, but his long hours in frigid water began to affect his health. Advised by a doctor to mind his health and dry out, in 1856 he piloted his last lumber raft to Dubuque, where he boarded a steamer up the Mississippi River bound for Trempealeau, Wisconsin, just across the river and a dozen miles southeast of Winona, Minnesota. There he debarked and began traipsing across country looking for affordable land, with the intention of settling down and marrying Isabelle. In the spring of 1856 he rented a farm near the tiny village of Neshonoc, established the year before on the La Crosse River about a mile north of West Salem. Platted in November 1856, West Salem soon engaged in a bidding war with Neshonoc over right-of-way for the Milwaukee–La Crosse Railroad, then under construction. Neshonoc's citizens offered the rights for forty thousand dollars; West Salem countered by offering a gift of ten acres and no charge for right-of-way—and the railroad, no fool, established its tracks in West Salem, and the village of Neshonoc soon died, with most of its inhabitants moving to West Salem.⁸

In March 1856, with the intention of joining their son, the elder Garlands sold their farm in Monticello and moved to Burns, a few miles northeast of West Salem. On August 3, 1856, Dick and Isabelle were married in Neshonoc, with Dick not yet twenty-six and his bride eighteen. Having found that desirable farms cost more than he had saved, to increase his savings during the winters Dick returned to the lumber camps with Isabelle, who cooked for the lumberjacks, and in the summers worked his rented farm. To them a daughter, Harriet Edith, named for both of their mothers, was born on April 15, 1858.

But a new family and especially a rented farm did not quell Dick's restlessness and hunger for a farm of his own. In May 1858,

Minnesota was granted statehood, and Dick, leaving his infant daughter and wife behind, set out in the company of eleven others to establish homesteads in the new state. As Hamlin later wrote, “He drove a yoke of oxen, and in his wagons was a year’s provisions. They got far away from civilization, a long distance north west of St. Paul, where Fergus Falls now stands [twenty-six miles from the North Dakota border].”⁹ Hamlin was never able to extract from his father a clear reason why he had journeyed so far: after all, he had crossed much farmable land—what was the attraction of this particular spot, where the nearest neighbor was fifty miles away and the soil not as good as that of a dozen other valleys that they had crossed? “The grass was no sweeter,” Hamlin concluded, “the river no brighter, the woodlands no more attractive than in many other localities they had surveyed, and yet they halted, satiated, I suspect, with surveying.”¹⁰

But they weren’t there long. The invading settlers had encroached upon Sioux land, and soon a troop of cavalry appeared, “rounded them up, and headed them eastward, saying that the Sioux were on the warpath, and the sooner they got back to Wisconsin, the better.”¹¹ When Dick returned to West Salem in July, he again rented a farm, collected Isabelle and Harriet from her parents, and set to work to buy land, rather than homestead. In 1859 he bought a parcel from his old employer, Ben Cooper, in Green’s Coulee. To clear the mortgage, Dick worked for a sawmill during the day and, “having secured permission of the boss to run the mill nights, sawed the lumber for his own house and afterwards, freighted it to his farm.”¹²

It was in the midst of building this house while living in the cabin on the outskirts of West Salem that one September evening in 1860 Dick Garland rushed out into the night in search of Dr. William H. Stanley. “Late one night,” Stanley’s son recalled, “there was a heavy knocking on our West Salem door and an excited young man urged my father to hurry—his wife was about to have a baby. His name was Garland. Father dressed and was driven several miles into the country, where he ushered into the world a baby boy.”¹³ Named for Maine senator Hannibal Hamlin, who was then campaigning for the vice-president slot under Lincoln, young Hannibal Hamlin Garland pos-

sessed as his earliest memory his father's return from the Civil War, a memory he would later use as the basis of one of his best-known stories, "The Return of the Private," and which provided the opening scene of his autobiography, *A Son of the Middle Border*.

When war broke out, Dick Garland, like many others of his generation, was eager to volunteer, but he could not do so until he had paid off the mortgage on his farm and ensured the provision of his wife and three small children, for another son, Franklin McClintock, had been born on March 11, 1863. On December 23 of that year Dick made his last payment, and on Christmas Eve he promptly enlisted in La Crosse, joining Company D, Fourteenth Regiment of the Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry.¹⁴ He was thirty-three years old. Hamlin (who early on dropped the unwieldy "Hannibal") later reflected, "Consider what this means. He now had three children. Harriet five, Hamlin three, and Franklin, nine months of age. His farm was only partly under cultivation, his house was a rude shanty, and yet, responding to the call of his country, he left his young wife and three children, to go into military service, from which he was almost sure never to return."¹⁵ But Dick was not to join the fighting until April 1864, for illness intervened, sufficiently serious to prevent his immediate transportation, and instead he was put in charge of the barracks.¹⁶ With a son's natural pride in his father's accomplishments, Hamlin noted that his father could have remained in that position until the end of the war. "But I couldn't do that," Dick told him. "I couldn't stand to have all my friends sneering at me and saying 'He'll never smell powder!'"¹⁷ He left to rejoin his regiment in April in Tennessee, serving in May and June on detached service (likely as a teamster) at Kennesaw Mountain, Georgia, and then in July and August at the battle of Atlanta, which led to Sherman's siege of the city. By January 1865 Dick was driving wagons for the Quartermaster Department, Third Division, in New Orleans, Mobile, and Montgomery. Somehow, in the midst of his service in the war, he found the means to increase his landholdings in Green's Coulee, adding 118 acres in December 1864 and another 20 in May 1865.¹⁸

Back home in Wisconsin, things weren't going well with the farm.

Prior to leaving for service, Dick had sent his family to live with the McClintocks, leased his acreage, and arranged for his tenant to manage the farm and bring in the harvest. Upon learning that his tenant had planted the fields but then robbed his house and absconded with the goods, Dick arranged for a furlough, on July 25, 1865, so that he could return home and arrange for the immediate needs of his family. The long journey home led to an extended illness, referred to variously as “southern fever,” intermittent fever,” and “ague,” and on August 11 his physician requested a one-month extension of the furlough, which was due to expire on August 24. Dick received a certificate of disability, which his physician forwarded to his regiment in Mobile, and on October 9 his regiment was mustered out.¹⁹ Hamlin would later alter the sequence and some of the events of his father’s service for dramatic effect in “The Return of the Private,” where the father returns after the end of the war. In *Trail-Makers of the Middle Border* he would depict his father as Richard Graham, who serves undercover as a spy for General Grant before contracting typhoid and returning home to reenact the scene of “The Return of the Private.”

Dick Garland soon put his farm in order, and that fall he supplemented the income from crops by running a threshing machine, a huge horse-powered device that separated the grain from the stalks. His two years’ service greatly influenced his disposition, forever shaping his attitude toward child rearing. Hamlin’s earliest memories of his father involved work and discipline: “He was always at work, and always in command of things around him. He was a soldier in his manner of speech, his walk, and in his insistence upon instant obedience.”²⁰ At five feet, eight and a half inches tall, Dick did not have a looming presence, but most memorable to the young Hamlin was his “keen eagle-gray terrifying eyes,” eyes that never missed a boyish prank or lapse of household duty.²¹ Later, when he came to write his autobiography, Hamlin would characterize his father as a stern disciplinarian who engendered fear in his sons at the slightest infraction. Upon his return from the war, “his scheme of discipline impressed itself almost at once upon his children.” When the Garland boys misbehaved, “we soon learned . . . that the soldier’s promise of punish-