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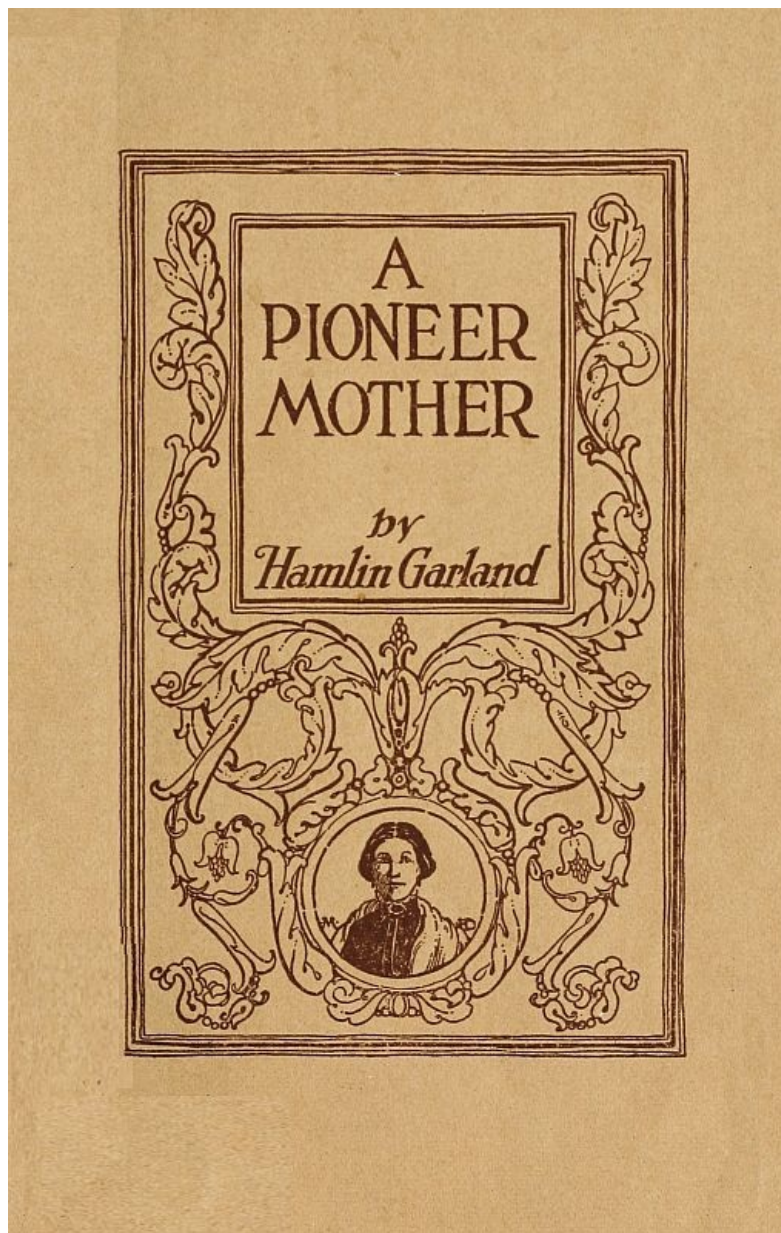
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A PIONEER MOTHER ***



For Mrs. M. Vanamee
just by way of a
Christmas Greeting
from
a son of

A Pioneer Mother

Hamlin Garland

A Pioneer Mother

[2]
[3]

By
Hamlin Garland



CHICAGO
THE BOOKFELLOWS
1922

Five hundred small paper and twenty-five tall paper copies of this monograph have been printed for THE BOOKFELLOWS in September, 1922. It is the first edition.

[4]

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by Hamlin Garland*

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HE was neither witty, nor learned in books, nor wise in the ways of the world, but I contend that her life was noble. There was something in her unconscious heroism which transcends wisdom and the deeds of those who dwell in the rose-golden light of romance. Now that her life is rounded into the silence whence it came, its significance appears.

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To me she was never young, for I am her son, and as I first remember her she was a large, handsome, smiling woman—deft and powerful of movement, sweet and cheery of smile and voice. She played the violin then, and I recall how she used to lull me to sleep at night with simple tunes like “Money Musk” and “Dan Tucker.” She sang, too, and I remember her clear soprano rising out of the singing of the Sunday congregation at the schoolhouse with thrilling sweetness and charm. Her hair was dark, her eyes brown, her skin fair and her lips rested in lines of laughter.

Her first home was in Greene’s Coolly, in La Crosse County, Wisconsin, and was only a rude little cabin with three rooms and a garret. The windows of the house overlooked a meadow and a low range of wooded hills to the east. In this house she lived alone during two years of the Civil War while my father went as a volunteer into the Army of the Tennessee. My memory of these times is vague but inset with charm. Though my mother worked hard she had time to visit with her neighbors and often took her children with her to quilting bees, which they enjoyed, for they could play beneath the quilt as if it were a tent, and run under it for shelter from imaginary storms. I feel again her strong, soft, warm arms as she shielded me at nightfall from menacing wolves and other terrible creatures. When the world grew mysterious and vast and thick-peopled with yawning monsters eager for little men and women, she gathered us to her bosom and sang us through the gates of sleep into a golden land of dreams. We never knew how she longed for the return of her blue-coated soldier.

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Our stove was a high-stepper, with long bent legs, and bore its oven on its back as a dromedary his hump. Under its arch I loved to lie watching my mother as she trod to and fro about her work in the kitchen. She taught me to read while working thus—for I was constantly interrupting her by asking the meaning of words in the newspaper which I had smuggled under the stove beneath me.



Y father’s return from the war brought solace and happiness, but increased her labors, for he set to work with new zeal to widen his acres of plow-land.

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I have the sweetest recollections of my mother’s desire to make us happy each Christmas-time, and to this end she planned jokes for herself and little surprises for us. We were desperately poor in those days, for my father was breaking the tough sod of the natural meadows and grubbing away trees from the hillside, “opening a farm,” as he called it, and there was hardly enough extra money to fill three stockings with presents. So it came about that mother’s stocking often held more rags and potatoes than silks or silverware. But she always laughed and we considered it all very good fun then. Its pathos makes my heart ache now.

She was a neighborly woman. She had no enemies. I don’t believe any one ever spoke an unkind word of Belle Garland as she was called—she was always sunny—her little petulances passed quickly like small summer showers and then she laughed—shook with laughter while the tears shone on her face. I can see now that she was only a big, handsome girl, but she was my mother, and as such seemed an “old person.”

Her physical strength was very great. I have heard my father say that at the time he went away to war she was his equal in many contests, and I know she was very deft and skillful in her work. She could cut and fit and finish the calico dress purchased in the morning of the same day. She cooked with the same adroitness, and though her means were meagre everything she made tasted good. She liked nothing better than to have her neighbors drop in to tea or dinner.

After all, I do not remember very much of her life while we lived in this Coolly—nor while in Winnesheik County, Iowa, whereto we moved in 1869. She remained of the same physical dignity to me, and though she grew rapidly heavier and older I did not realize it. My second sister Jessie came to us while living in an old log house in a beautiful wood just west of Hesper, and I now know that my mother never recovered from the travail of this birth—though she returned to her domestic duties as before and was to her children the jolly personality she had always been. While living on this farm smallpox came to our family and we were all smitten with this much-dreaded disease, but mother not only nursed her baby and took care of us all, but she also smiled down into our faces without apparent anxiety—though some of us lay at death’s door for weeks. Shortly after we recovered from this we moved again to the newer West.

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DON’T know what her feelings were about these constant removals to the border, but I suspect now that each new migration was a greater hardship than those which preceded it. My father’s adventurous and restless spirit was never satisfied. The sunset land always allured him, and my mother, being of those who follow their husbands’ feet without complaining word, seemed always ready to take up the trail. With the blindness of youth and the spirit of seeking which I inherited I saw no tear on my mother’s face. I inferred that she, too, was eager and exalted at the thought of “going West.” I now see that she must have suffered each time the

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bitter pangs of doubt and unrest which strike through the woman's heart when called upon to leave her snug, safe fire for a ruder cabin in strange lands.

SHE had four children at this time and I fear her boys gave her considerable trouble, but her eldest daughter was of growing service in working about the house as well as in tending the fair-haired baby, but work grew harder and harder. My father purchased some wild land in Mitchell County, Iowa, and we all set to work to break the sod for the third time. A large part of the hardship involved in this fell upon my mother, for the farm required a great many "hands," and these "hands" had enormous appetites, and the household duties grew more unrelenting from year to year. [10]

Our new house was a small one with but three rooms below and two above, but it had a little lean-to which served as a summer kitchen. It was a bare home, with no touch of grace other than that given by my mother's cheery presence. Her own room was small and crowded, but as she never found time to occupy it save to sleep I hope it did not trouble her as it does me now as I look back to it.

Each year, as our tilled acres grew, churning and washing and cooking became harder, until at last it was borne in upon my boyish mind that my mother was condemned to never-remitting labor. She was up in the morning before the light cooking breakfast for us all, and she seldom went to bed before my father. She was not always well and yet the work had to be done. We all worked in those days; even my little sister ran on errands, and perhaps this was the reason why we did not realize more fully the grinding weight of drudgery which fell on this pioneer's wife. But Harriet was growing into a big girl and began to materially aid my mother, though she brought an added expense in clothing and schooling. We had plenty of good wholesome things to eat in those days, but our furniture remained poor. Our little sitting-room was covered with a rag carpet which we children helped to make, tearing, sewing and winding rags during the winter nights. I remember helping mother to dye them also, and in the spring she made her own soap. This also I helped to do. [11]

Churning and milking we boys did for her, and the old up and down churn was a dreaded beast to us as it was to all the boys of the countryside; and yet I knew mother ought not to do such work, and I went to the dasher regularly but with a wry face. Father was not niggardly of labor-saving implements, and a clotheswringer and washer and a barrel churn came along and they helped a little, but work never "lets up" on a farm. There are always three meals to get and the dishes to wash, and each day is like another so far as duties are concerned. Sunday brings little rest for housewives even in winter.

BUT into those monotonous days some pleasure came. The neighbors dropped in of a summer evening, and each Sunday we drove away to church. In winter we attended all the "ly-ceums" and church "sociables," and took part in occasional "surprise parties." In all these neighborhood jollities my mother had a generous hand. Her coming always added to the fun. "Here comes Mrs. Garland!" some one would say, and every face shone brighter because of her smile. She was ever ready to help on the gayety in any way, and was always in voice to sing, provided some one else started the song to give her courage. She loved games, practical jokes and jesting of all kinds. Her natural gayety was almost unquenchable; not even unending work and poverty could entirely subdue her or embitter her. [12]

Death touching her eldest daughter threw the first enduring shadow over her life. She never entirely returned to the jollity of her former years, though she regained a cheerfulness inseparable from her life. She had been youthful to that moment; after that she was middle-aged—even to her sons.

Her two boys and her baby Jessie comforted her and she had no time for unavailing grief. As she had sent her daughter to school, so now she urged her sons to study, for though a woman of little schooling herself she had a firm belief in the value of learning. She took strong ground in my behalf, and I have many dear recollections of her quiet support of my plans for an education. In this I owe her much. My father felt the need of my services too keenly to instantly grant me leave of absence, but together they made sacrifices to send me to school as they had sent my sister before me, and as they were willing to send those who came after me. At sixteen I began to attend a seminary in the town, six miles away.

These were my happiest days, and I hope I carried something of my larger outlook back to my mother. I boarded myself for several terms in a fashion common among the boys of the school, and mother's pies and doughnuts and "self-rising" bread enabled me to sustain life joyously from Monday morning till Friday night. She never seemed to tire of doing little things for my comfort, and I took them, I fear, with the carelessness of youth, never thinking of the pain they cost. I did not even perceive how swiftly she was growing old. She still shook with laughter over my tales of school life and sent me away each week with the products of her loving labor. [13]

She heard my graduation address with how much of pride or interest I do not know, for she never expressed her deeper feelings. She seldom kissed her children, and after we grew to be

boys of twelve or fourteen, too large to snuggle in her arms, she never embraced us, though I think she liked to have us come and lay our heads in her lap. She still continued to threaten to “trounce” us, a menace which always provoked us to laughter. “Mother’s whippings don’t last long,” we used to say.

Our home remained unchanged. The expense of opening a farm, of buying machinery and building barns, made it seem necessary to live in the same little story-and-a-half house. The furniture grew shabbier, but was not replaced. My mother’s dresses were always cheap and badly made, but so were the coats my father wore. Money seemed hard to hold, even when the crops were good. I cannot recall a single beautiful thing about our house, not one. The sunlight and the songs of birds, the flame of winter snow, the blaze of snow-crystals, I clearly call to mind, but the house I remember only as a warm shelter, where my mother strove to feed and clothe us. But as nearly all other homes of the neighborhood were of like character I don’t suppose she realized her own poverty.

AT last a great change came to us all. The country was fairly filled with settlers and my father’s pioneer heart began to stir again, and once more he planned a flight into the wilder West, and in the fall of 1881, when I was twenty-one years of age, we parted company. My parents and my sister and brother journeyed westward into South Dakota and settled in the little town of Ordway, on a treeless plain, while I turned eastward, intent on further education. [14]

I mention this going especially because, when it became certain that my people were leaving never to return, the neighbors thronged about the house one August day to say good-by, and with appropriate speeches presented mother with some silver and glassware. These were the first nice dishes she had ever owned and she was too deeply touched to speak a word of thanks. But the givers did not take so much virtue to themselves. Some of them were women who had known the touch of my mother’s hand in sickness and travail. Others had seen her close the eyes of their dead—for she had come to be a mother to every one who suffered. Those who brought the richest gifts considered them a poor return for her own unstinting helpfulness.

I shall always remember that day. I was about to “go forth into the world,” as our graduating orations had declared we should do. My people were again adventuring into strange lands—leaving the house they had built, the trees they had planted and the friends they had drawn around them. The vivid autumnal sun was shining over all the lanes we had learned to love and sifting through the leaves of the trees that had grown up around us. The familiar faces of the bronzed and wrinkled old farmers were tremulous with emotion. The women frankly wept on each other’s bosoms—and in the hush of that golden day I heard the sound of wings—the wings of the death-angel whose other name is Time. I knew we would never return to this place: that the separation of friends there beginning would last forever. The future was luminous before me, but its forms were too vague to be delineated. I turned my face eastward with a thought in my brain beating like the clock of the ages. In such moments the past becomes beautiful, the future a menace. [15]

THIS story does not concern itself with my wanderings, but with the life of my mother. When I saw her again she was living in a small house beside my father’s store in Ordway, South Dakota. She had not changed perceptibly, and she had won a new and wide circle of friends. She was “Mrs. Garland” now, and not Belle—but she was the life of every social, and her voice was still marvelously clear and vibrant in song. She was a little heavier, a little older, but her face had the same sweet curves about the mouth and chin. Life was a little easier for her, too. She was clear of the farm and its terrible drudgery at last. She could sleep like a human being till daylight came, for she had no one to cook for save her own small family. She saw and was a part of the village life, which was exceedingly jolly and of good report. Her son Franklin and her little daughter were still with her, and she did not much miss her eldest—who had gone far seeking fair cities in intellectual seas. The home was still poor and shabby of furniture, but it was not lonely. Mother missed, but no longer mourned, her vanished friends. [16]

I did not see her again for nearly four years, and my heart contracted with a sudden pain at sight of her. She was growing old. Her hair was gray, and as she spoke, her voice was weak and tremulous. She was again on the farm and working as of old—like one on a treadmill. My father, too, was old. He had not prospered. A drought had swept over the fair valley and men on all sides were dropping away into despair. Jessie was at home—the only one of all the children. The house was a little better than any my mother had owned before, but it was a poor, barren place for all that.

Old as she was, and suffering constantly from pain in her feet and ankles, she was still mother to every one who suffered. Even while I was there she got up on two demands in the middle of the night and rode away across the plain in answer to some suffering woman’s call for help. She knew death intimately. She had closed the eyes of many a world-weary wife or suffering child, and more than once a poor outcast woman of the town, sick and alone, felt the pitying touch of her lips. [17]

I SAW with greater clearness than ever before the lack of beauty in her life. She had a few new things, but they were all cheap and poor. She now had one silk dress—which her son had sent her. All else was calico. But worse than all was the bleak, burning, wind-swept plain—treeless, scorched and silent save for the song of the prairie lark. I felt the monotony of her surroundings with greater keenness than ever before.

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I was living in Boston at that time, and having heard many of the great singers I was eager to test my mother's voice with the added knowledge I had of such things. Even then, weakened as she was and without training or practice, she still possessed a compass of three octaves and one note, and was able to sing one complete octave above the ordinary soprano voice with every note sweet and musical. I have always believed that a great singer was lost to the world in this pioneer's wife.

One day as I sat writing in the sitting-room I heard a strange cry outside—a cry for help. I rushed out into the yard, and there just outside the door in the vivid sunlight stood my mother, unable to move—a look of fear and horror on her face. The black-winged angel had sent her his first warning. She was paralyzed in the lower limbs. I carried her to her bed with a feeling that her life was ended there on the lonely plain, and my heart was bitter and rebellious and my mind filled with self-accusations. If she died now—here—what would she know of the great world outside? Her life had been always on the border—she knew nothing of civilization's splendor of song and story. She would go away from the feast without a crumb. All her toilsome, monotonous days rushed through my mind with a roar, like a file of gray birds in the night—how little—how tragically small her joys, and how black her sorrows, her toil, her tedium.

It chanced that a physician friend was visiting us at the time and his skill reassured me a little. The bursting of a minute blood-vessel in the brain had done the mischief. A small clot had formed, he said, which must either grow or be re-absorbed. He thought it would be re-absorbed and that she would slowly recover.

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This diagnosis proved to be correct and in a few days she was able to sit up, and before I returned to Boston she could walk a little, though she could not lift her feet from the floor.

HER parting at this time was the most painful moment of my life. I had my work to do in Boston. I could earn nothing out on the plain, so I must go, but I promised it would not be for long. In my heart I determined that the remainder of her life should be freer from care and fuller of joy. I resolved to make a home for her in some more hospitable land, but the cling of her arms to my neck remained with me many days.

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She gained slowly, and a year later was able to revisit the scenes of her girlhood in Wisconsin. In two years she was able to go to California with me. She visited the World's Fair in Chicago, and her sons wheeled her about the grounds as if to say: "Mother, you have pioneered enough; henceforth fold your hands and rest and be happy."

She entered now upon another joy—the quiet joy of reminiscence, for the old hard days of pioneering on the Iowa prairie grew mellow with remembered sunshine—the storms grew faint and vague. She loved to sit and dream of the past. She loved to recall old faces, and to hear us tell of old times and old neighbors. Beside the glow of her fire she had a keen delight in the souging of the winds in the grim pines of Wisconsin, the flame of lightning in the cyclonic nights in Iowa, and the howling blasts of stern blizzards on the wide Dakota sod. She came back to old friends in "the Coolly Country of Wisconsin," and there her sons built a roomy house about her. They put nice rugs under her feet and new silver on her table. It was all on a very humble scale, but it made her eyes misty with happy tears. For eleven years after her first stroke she lived with us in this way—or we with her. And my father, was glad of the shelter and the comfort, for he, too, admitted growing age and joined with his sons in making the wife happy.

I HAVE a purpose in this frank disclosure of my mother's life. It is not from any self-complacency, God knows, for I did so little and it came so late—I write in the hope of making some other work-weary mother happy. There is nothing more appealing to me than neglected age. To see an old father or mother sitting in loneliness and poverty dreaming of an absent son who never comes, of a daughter who never writes, is to me more moving than Hamlet or Othello. If we are false to those who gave us birth we are false indeed.

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Most of us in America are the children of working people, and the toil-worn hands of our parents should be heaped to overflowing with whatever good things success brings to us. They bent to the plow and the washboard when we were helpless. They clothed us when clothing was bought with blood, and we should be glad to return this warmth, this protection, an hundredfold. Fill their rooms with sunshine and the odor of flowers—you sons and daughters of the pioneers of America. Gather them around you, let them share in your success, and when some one looks askance at them stand beside them and say: "These gray old heads, these gnarled limbs, sheltered me in days when I was weak and life was stern."

Then will the debt be lessened—for in such coin alone can the wistful hearts be paid.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A PIONEER MOTHER ***

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