

A SON OF THE MIDDLE BORDER

by

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CHAPTER I

Home from the War

ALL of this universe known to me in the year 1864 was bounded by the wooded hills of a little Wisconsin coulee, and its center was the cottage in which my mother was living alone—my father was in the war. As I project myself back into that mystical age, half lights cover most of the valley. The road before our doorstone begins and ends in vague obscurity—and Granma Green's house at the fork of the trail stands on the very edge of the world in a sinister region peopled with bears and other menacing creatures. Beyond this point all is darkness and terror.

It is Sunday afternoon and my mother and her three children, Frank, Harriet and I (all in our best dresses) are visiting the Widow Green, our nearest neighbor, a plump, jolly woman whom we greatly love. The house swarms with stalwart men and buxom women and we

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are all sitting around the table heaped with the remains of a harvest feast. The women are "telling fortunes" by means of tea-grounds. Mrs. Green is the seeress. After shaking the cup with the grounds at the bottom, she turns it bottom side up in a saucer. Then whirling it three times to the right and three times to the left, she lifts it and silently studies the position of the leaves which cling to the sides of the cup, what time we all wait in breathless suspense for her first word.

"A soldier is coming to you!" she says to my mother. "See," and she points into the cup. We all crowd near, and I perceive a leaf with a stem sticking up from its body like a bayonet over a man's shoulder. "He is almost home," the widow goes on. Then with sudden dramatic turn she waves her hand toward the road, "Heavens and earth!" she cries. "There's Richard now!"

We all turn and look toward the road, and there, indeed, is a soldier with a musket on his back, wearily plodding his way up the low hill just north of the gate. He is too far away for mother to call, and besides I think she must have been a little uncertain, for he did not so much as turn his head toward the house. Trembling with excitement she hurries little Frank into his wagon and telling Hattie to bring me, sets off up the road as fast as she can draw the baby's cart. It all seems a dream to me and I move dumbly, almost stupidly like one in a mist. . . .

We did not overtake the soldier, that is evident, for my next vision is that of a blue-coated figure leaning upon the fence, studying with intent gaze our empty cottage. I cannot, even now, precisely divine why he stood thus, sadly contemplating his silent home,—but so it was. His knapsack lay at his feet, his musket was propped against a post on whose top a cat was dreaming, unmindful of the warrior and his folded hands.

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He did not hear us until we were close upon him, and even after he turned, my mother hesitated, so thin, so hollow-eyed, so changed was he. "Richard, is that you?" she quaveringly asked.

His worn face lighted up. His arms rose. "Yes, Belle! Here I am," he answered.

Nevertheless though he took my mother in his arms, I could not relate him to the father I had heard so much about. To me he was only a strange man with big eyes and care-worn face. I did not recognize in him anything I had ever known, but my sister, who was two years older than I, went to his bosom of her own motion. She knew him, whilst I submitted to his caresses rather for the reason that my mother urged me forward than because of any affection I felt for him. Frank, however, would not even permit a kiss. The gaunt and grizzled stranger terrified him.

"Come here, my little man," my father said.—"*My little man!*" Across the space of half-a-century I can still hear the sad reproach in his voice. "Won't you come and see your poor old father when he comes home from the war?"

"My little man!" How significant that phrase seems to me now! The war had in very truth come between this patriot and his sons. I had forgotten him—the baby had never known him.

Frank crept beneath the rail fence and stood there, well out of reach, like a cautious kitten warily surveying an alien dog. At last the soldier stooped and drawing from his knapsack a big red apple, held it toward the staring babe, confidently calling, "Now, I guess he'll come to his poor old pap home from the war."

The mother apologized. "He doesn't know you, Dick. How could he? He was only nine months old when you went away. He'll go to you by and by."

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The babe crept slowly toward the shining lure. My father caught him despite his kicking, and hugged him close. "Now I've got you," he exulted.

Then we all went into the little front room and the soldier laid off his heavy army shoes. My mother brought a pillow to put under his head, and so at last he stretched out on the floor the better to rest his tired, aching bones, and there I joined him.

"Oh, Belle!" he said, in tones of utter content. "This is what I've dreamed about a million times."

Frank and I grew each moment more friendly and soon began to tumble over him while mother hastened to cook something for him to eat. He asked for "hot biscuits and honey and plenty of coffee."

That was a mystic hour—and yet how little I can recover of it! The afternoon glides into evening while the soldier talks, and at last we all go out to the barn to watch mother milk the cow. I hear him ask about the crops, the neighbors.—The sunlight passes. Mother leads the way back to the house. My father follows carrying little Frank in his arms.

He is a "strange man" no longer. Each moment his voice sinks deeper into my remembrance. He is my father—that I feel ringing through the dim halls of my consciousness. Harriet clings to his hand in perfect knowledge and confidence. We eat our bread and milk, the trundle-bed is pulled out, we children clamber in, and I go to sleep to the music of his resonant voice recounting the story of the battles he had seen, and the marches he had made.

The emergence of an individual consciousness from the void is, after all, the most amazing fact of human life and I should like to spend much of this first chapter in groping about in the luminous shadow of my infant world because, deeply considered, childish impressions are the

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fundamentals upon which an author's fictional out-pur is based; but to linger might weary my reader at the outset, although I count myself most fortunate in the fact that my boyhood was spent in the midst of a charming landscape and during a certain heroic era of western settlement.

The men and women of that far time loom large in my thinking for they possessed not only the spirit of adventurers but the courage of warriors. Aside from the natural distortion of a boy's imagination I am quite sure that the pioneers of 1860 still retained something broad and fine in their action, something a boy might honorably imitate.

The earliest dim scene in my memory is that of a soft warm evening. I am cradled in the lap of my sister Harriet who is sitting on the doorstep beneath a low roof. It is mid-summer and at our feet lies a mat of dark-green grass from which a frog is croaking. The stars are out, and above the high hills to the east a mysterious glow is glorifying the sky. The cry of the small animal at last conveys to my sister's mind a notion of distress, and rising she peers closely along the path. Starting back with a cry of alarm, she calls and my mother hurries out. She, too, examines the ground, and at last points out to me a long striped snake with a poor, shrieking little tree-toad in its mouth. The horror of this scene fixes it in my mind. My mother beats the serpent with a stick. The mangled victim hastens away, and the curtain falls.

I must have been about four years old at this time, although there is nothing to determine the precise date. Our house, a small frame cabin, stood on the eastern slope of a long ridge and faced across a valley which seemed very wide to me then, and in the middle of it lay a marsh filled with monsters, from which the Water

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People sang night by night. Beyond was a wooden mountain.

This doorstone must have been a favorite evening seat for my sister, for I remember many other delicious gloamings. Bats whirl and squeak in the odorous dusk. Night hawks whiz and boom, and over the dark forest wall a prodigious moon miraculously rolls. Fire-flies dart through the grass, and in a lone tree just outside the fence, a whippoorwill sounds his plaintive note. Sweet, very sweet, and wonderful are all these!

The marsh across the lane was a sinister menacing place even by day for there (so my sister Harriet warned me) serpents swarmed, eager to bite runaway boys. "And if you step in the mud between the tufts of grass," she said, "you will surely sink out of sight."—At night this teeming bog became a place of dank and horrid mystery. Bears and wolves and wildcats were reported as ruling the dark woods just beyond—only the doorway and the road seemed safe for little men—and even there I wished my mother to be within immediate call.

My father who had bought his farm "on time," just before the war, could not enlist among the first volunteers, though he was deeply moved to do so, till his land was paid for—but at last in 1863 on the very day that he made the last payment on the mortgage, he put his name down on the roll and went back to his wife, a soldier.

I have heard my mother say that this was one of the darkest moments of her life and if you think about it you will understand the reason why. My sister was only five years old, I was three and Frank was a babe in the cradle. Broken hearted at the thought of the long separation, and scared by visions of battle my mother begged the soldier not to go; but he was of the stern stuff which makes patriots—and besides his name was already on the roll, therefore he went away to join

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Grant's army at Vicksburg. "What sacrifice! What folly!" said his pacifist neighbors—"to leave your wife and children for an idea, a mere sentiment; to put your life in peril for a striped silken rag." But he went. For thirteen dollars a month he marched and fought while his plow rusted in the shed and his cattle called to him from their stalls.

My conscious memory holds nothing of my mother's agony of waiting, nothing of the dark days when the baby was ill and the doctor far away—but into my sub-conscious ear her voice sank, and the words *Grant*, *Lincoln*, *Sherman*, "*furlough*," "*mustered out*," ring like bells, deep-toned and vibrant. I shared dimly in every emotional utterance of the neighbors who came to call and a large part of what I am is due to the impressions of these deeply passionate and poetic years.

Dim pictures come to me. I see my mother at the spinning wheel, I help her fill the candle molds. I hold in my hands the queer carding combs with their crinkly teeth, but my first definite connected recollection is the scene of my father's return at the close of the war.

I was not quite five years old, and the events of that day are so commingled with later impressions,—experiences which came long after—that I cannot be quite sure which are true and which imagined, but the picture as a whole is very vivid and very complete.

Thus it happened that my first impressions of life were martial, and my training military, for my father brought back from his two years' campaigning under Sherman and Thomas the temper and the habit of a soldier.

He became naturally the dominant figure in my horizon, and his scheme of discipline impressed itself almost at once upon his children.

I suspect that we had fallen into rather free and easy habits under mother's government, for she was too jolly,

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too tender-hearted, to engender fear in us even when she threatened us with a switch or a shingle. We soon learned, however, that the soldier's promise of punishment was swift and precise in its fulfillment. We seldom presumed a second time on his forgetfulness or tolerance. We knew he loved us, for he often took us to his knees of an evening and told us stories of marches and battles, or chanted war-songs for us, but the moments of his tenderness were few and his fondling did not prevent him from almost instant use of the rod if he thought either of us needed it.

His own boyhood had been both hard and short. Born of farmer folk in Oxford County, Maine, his early life had been spent on the soil in and about Lock's Mills with small chance of schooling. Later, as a teamster, and finally as shipping clerk for Amos Lawrence, he had enjoyed three mightily improving years in Boston. He loved to tell of his life there, and it is indicative of his character to say that he dwelt with special joy and pride on the actors and orators he had heard. He could describe some of the great scenes and repeat a few of the heroic lines of Shakespeare, and the roll of his deep voice as he declaimed, "Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this son of York," thrilled us--filled us with desire of something far off and wonderful. But best of all we loved to hear him tell of "Logan at Peach Tree Creek," and "Kilpatrick on the Granny White Turnpike."

He was a vivid and concise story-teller and his words brought to us (sometimes all too clearly), the tragic happenings of the battle-fields of Atlanta and Nashville. To him Grant, Lincoln, Sherman and Sheridan were among the noblest men of the world, and he would not tolerate any criticism of them.

Next to his stories of the war I think we loved best

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to have him picture "the pineries" of Wisconsin, for during his first years in the State he had been both lumberman and raftsmen, and his memory held delightful tales of wolves and bears and Indians.

He often imitated the howls and growls and actions of the wild animals with startling realism, and his river narratives were full of unforgettable phrases like "the Jinny Bull Falls," "Old Moosinee" and "running the rapids."

He also told us how his father and mother came west by way of the Erie Canal, and in a steamer on the Great Lakes, of how they landed in Milwaukee with Susan, their twelve-year-old daughter, sick with the smallpox; of how a farmer from Monticello carried them in his big farm wagon over the long road to their future home in Green county and it was with deep emotion that he described the bitter reception they encountered in the village.

It appears that some of the citizens in a panic of dread were all for driving the Garlands out of town—then uprose old Hugh McClintock, big and gray as a grizzly bear, and put himself between the leader of the mob and its victims, and said, "You shall not lay hands upon them. Shame on ye!" And such was the power of his mighty arm and such the menace of his flashing eyes that no one went further with the plan of casting the new comers into the wilderness.

Old Hugh established them in a lonely cabin on the edge of the village, and thereafter took care of them, nursing grandfather with his own hands until he was well. "And that's the way the McClintocks and the Garlands first joined forces," my father often said in ending the tale. "But the name of the man who carried your Aunt Susan in his wagon from Milwaukee to Monticello I never knew."

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I cannot understand why that sick girl did not die on that long journey over the rough roads of Wisconsin, and what it all must have seemed to my gentle New England grandmother I grieve to think about. Beautiful as the land undoubtedly was, such an experience should have shaken her faith in western men and western hospitality. But apparently it did not, for I never heard her allude to this experience with bitterness.

In addition to his military character, Dick Garland also carried with him the odor of the pine forest and exhibited the skill and training of a forester, for in those early days even at the time when I began to remember the neighborhood talk, nearly every young man who could get away from the farm or the village went north, in November, into the pine woods which covered the entire upper part of the State, and my father, who had been a raftsman and timber cruiser and pilot ever since his coming west, was deeply skilled with axe and steering oars. The lumberman's life at that time was rough but not vicious, for the men were nearly all of native American stock, and my father was none the worse for his winters in camp.

His field of action as lumberman was for several years, in and around Big Bull Falls (as it was then called), near the present town of Wausau, and during that time he had charge of a crew of loggers in winter and in summer piloted rafts of lumber down to Dubuque and other points where saw mills were located. He was called at this time, "Yankee Dick, the Pilot."

As a result of all these experiences in the woods, he was almost as much woodsman as soldier in his talk, and the heroic life he had led made him very wonderful in my eyes. According to his account (and I have no reason to doubt it) he had been exceedingly expert in running a raft and could ride a canoe like a Chippewa.

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I remember hearing him very forcefully remark, "God forgot to make the man I could not follow."

He was deft with an axe, keen of perception, sure of hand and foot, and entirely capable of holding his own with any man of his weight. Amid much drinking he remained temperate, and strange to say never used tobacco in any form. While not a large man he was nearly six feet in height, deep-chested and sinewy, and of dauntless courage. The quality which defended him from attack was the spirit which flamed from his eagle-gray eyes. Terrifying eyes they were, at times, as I had many occasions to note.

As he gathered us all around his knee at night before the fire, he loved to tell us of riding the whirlpools of Big Bull Falls, or of how he lived for weeks on a raft with the water up to his knees (sleeping at night in his wet working clothes), sustained by the blood of youth and the spirit of adventure. His endurance even after his return from the war, was marvellous, although he walked a little bent and with a peculiar measured swinging stride—the stride of Sherman's veterans.

As I was born in the first smoke of the great conflict, so all of my early memories of Green's coulee are permeated with the haze of the passing war-cloud. My soldier dad taught me the manual of arms, and for a year Harriet and I carried broom-sticks, flourished lath sabers, and hammered on dishpans in imitation of officers and drummers. Canteens made excellent water-bottles for the men in the harvest fields, and the long blue overcoats which the soldiers brought back with them from the south lent many a vivid spot of color to that far-off landscape.

All the children of our valley inhaled with every breath this mingled air of romance and sorrow, history and song, and through those epic days runs a deep-laid con-

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sciousness of maternal pain. My mother's side of those long months of waiting was never fully delineated, for she was natively reticent and shy of expression. But piece by piece in later years I drew from her the tale of her long vigil, and obtained some hint of the bitter anguish of her suspense after each great battle.

It is very strange, but I cannot define her face as I peer back into those childish times, though I can feel her strong arms about me. She seemed large and quite middle-aged to me, although she was in fact a handsome girl of twenty-three. Only by reference to a rare daguerreotype of the time am I able to correct this childish impression.

Our farm lay well up in what is called Green's coulee, in a little valley just over the road which runs along the LaCrosse river in western Wisconsin. It contained one hundred and sixty acres of land which crumpled against the wooded hills on the east and lay well upon a ridge to the west. Only two families lived above us, and over the height to the north was the land of the red people, and small bands of their hunters used occasionally to come trailing down across our meadow on their way to and from LaCrosse, which was their immemorial trading point.

Sometimes they walked into our house, always without knocking—but then we understood their ways. No one knocks at the wigwam of a red neighbor, and we were not afraid of them, for they were friendly, and our mother often gave them bread and meat which they took (always without thanks) and ate with much relish while sitting beside our fire. All this seemed very curious to us, but as they were accustomed to share their food and lodging with one another so they accepted my mother's bounty in the same matter-of-fact fashion.

Once two old fellows, while sitting by the fire, watched

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Frank and me bringing in wood for the kitchen stove, and smiled and muttered between themselves thereat. At last one of them patted my brother on the head and called out admiringly, "Small pappoose, heap work—good!" and we were very proud of the old man's praise.