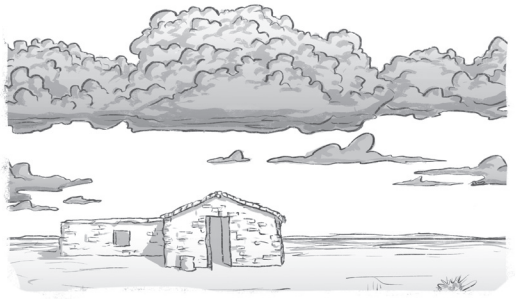
Adventures on the American Frontier

Pioneering on the Plains

Revised Edition



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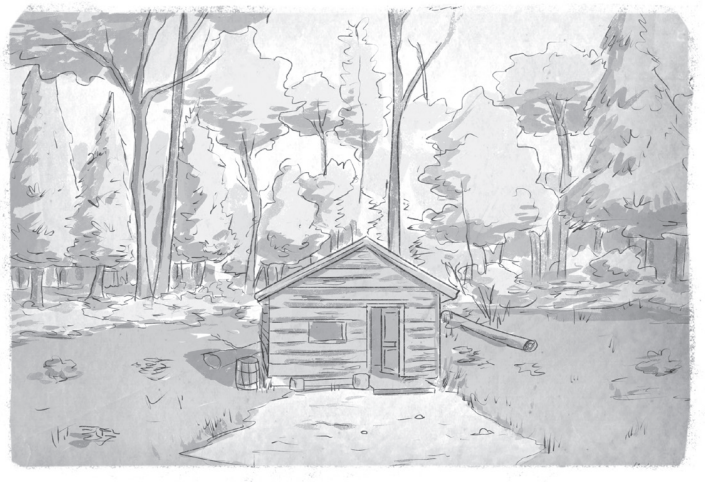

To young Hamlin Garland, home had always been a little frame house in a lovely green valley in western Wisconsin. His world reached a short way into the woods behind the house, but not far, for in the dark woods lived bobcats and wolves and sometimes even bears.

At the bottom of the valley below the house ran a brown road, dusty in summer and frozen into sharp-edged ruts in winter. Hamlin's world went as far up this road as the curve where it left the valley and as far down as the village where Grandfather Garland lived. But his world never went as far as the wonderful city of La Crosse, twelve miles away, where

the Mississippi River steamboats whistled hoarsely of their comings and goings.

Then, one fall day when Hamlin was eight years old, his father said, "I've sold the farm. We're moving west."

It didn't seem real that the Garland family could be leaving the valley, until the cold day in February, 1869, when his mother took the old wooden clock down from the kitchen shelf where it had ticked away every day of Hamlin's life. He watched as she wrapped it in towels and laid it in a packing box.

Outside, Mr. Garland pulled the draft horses, Doll and Queen, to a stop. The old farm wagon, made into a sleigh for the winter, stood just outside the door. Mr. Garland unhitched the team and took the horses back to the barn to be in out of the cold while the sleigh was being loaded. He was back in a few minutes.

"Is everything ready to go, Belle?" he asked. His eyes were bright, and his voice was tight with excitement.

Mrs. Garland was taking down the picture of General Grant from the place where it had hung since Mr. Garland had come home from the Civil War three years earlier. Hamlin saw the bare place left on the wall where the picture had hung. In that moment, he felt suddenly homeless.

His mother handed the picture to him. "Wrap it in that quilt, Hamlin," she said. "The chairs and chests are ready, Richard. Come, Harriet and Frank. Help me pack the dishes."

Ten-year-old Harriet and six-year-old Frank helped take dishes from the shelves and pack them carefully into a box of clothing and bedding. Into this box, too, went the two special treasures from the clock shelf. One was a shell that Mr. Garland had brought from a journey to the Gulf of Mexico. The other was his soldier's medal for bravery, which Hamlin thought meant that his father was the greatest man in the world. Its leather case was almost worn out from Hamlin's handling it so much.

"It will be yours someday, when you're older," his father had told him.

Now Hamlin helped his father take the chairs out to the sleigh. The room was growing chilly, for they had let the fire in the stove go out. With the door open, the winter cold swept inside.

When they had taken the table, only the stove was left. Hamlin came back into the house and closed the door to shut out the wind. It was strange to see the empty room. Things he had never noticed before glared at him now, as if in anger at having their coverings stripped away. There was a dark stain on the windowsill where a potted plant had always been, a crack in an upper pane of glass, and a pathway across the floor, worn bare of varnish.

Mr. Garland wasted no time looking around. He was taking the stove pipe apart, and black soot fell to the floor as he pulled the pipe loose from the ceiling. "We'll put these pipes on the load after the stove is in the sleigh," he said. "I'll need your help again in a moment, Hamlin."

Hamlin took one last look at his "nesting place" under the stove. The stove was a grand thing, with swelled-out, polished iron sides above high legs. The oven was on the top, and there was plenty of room underneath for a boy to curl up on the floor. Hamlin had spent many hours there, studying the pictures of fat hogs and wavy-haired cattle in the *Farmer's Annual* after he had read every printed word in the house, or sometimes just dreaming of adventures in far-off Arabia.

The stove's warm sides felt good to Hamlin's hands as he helped his father ease it out to the sleigh. Now the house was empty. His father tied ropes around the load and then brought Doll and Queen back from the barn and backed them into place to pull the sleigh. He brought the little herd of milk cows from the barn, too. They followed freely after the family's best cow, Old Spot, whose halter rope Mr. Garland tied to the back of the sleigh. Behind the cows came their old horse Josh, pulling the small sleigh, called a cutter, in which Mrs. Garland, Harriet, and Frank were to ride.

Hamlin and his father climbed onto the seat of the sleigh. Without a backward look at the house, Mr. Garland cried out, "Forward, march!" and flipped the reins.

With a great pull and much slipping of hooves in the icy dooryard, Doll and Queen started the sleigh moving forward. The cows bellowed and followed after Old Spot, who had no choice but to walk along behind the sleigh. Last of all, Josh leaned into his harness. The little parade was on

its way, and the Garlands looked no more on their home in the lovely Wisconsin valley.

Two hours later, they saw the city of La Crosse spread out before them. It lay cupped in the low hills that edged the Mississippi River. It was a place of wonder to the children. Hamlin stood up in the sleigh, trying to see more.

"You should see it in summer, Hamlin," Mr. Garland said. "It's quiet now, for the lumbermen are all up in the woods cutting more pine trees for the mills you see over there at the edge of town. In summer, the town is full, and the steamboats are lined up at the riverfront."

The road led right into the frozen ruts of the main street, and from there to the edge of the Mississippi River. There could be no steamboats now, for the river was almost frozen over. Great sheets of ice reached out from each shore, but they didn't meet in the middle. A black, angry serpent of water kept them apart.

No bridge had been built over the river. In the summer, a ferryboat took people, their horses, and their wagons across to Minnesota and back again. Now that so much of the river was frozen, a small wooden bridge had been set onto the ice, crossing over the dark water.

Mrs. Garland looked at the flimsy bridge. "Will it hold under our heavy load?" she asked her husband.

Mr. Garland had stopped his team and had walked back to see that all was well. His eyes were sparkling. Just ahead was Minnesota, and then the land of his dreams: Iowa, where

the prairie stretched for miles, just waiting for a pioneer's plow. "It will hold," he said. "Let's be on our way."

Hamlin was out of the sleigh, too. His father spoke to him on the way back to the wagon. "You'll have to walk across the bridge, Hamlin. The cows may give us a little trouble. I need you to get them started on the bridge."

Hamlin looked at the rickety bridge. It was made of a few planks and poles nailed together, with a single handrail on one side. Hamlin was more frightened than his mother, but all he said was, "Yes, sir."

Mr. Garland, ever the soldier, called out again, "Forward, march!" With a slipping and sliding of hooves, the horses began their trip across the ice.

Old Spot and the other cows bawled nervously. Josh whinnied and stood still after the first time he slipped on the ice.

"Richard!" called Mrs. Garland above the bellowing of the cows.

Mr. Garland looked back. "We'll come back for you! Stay there!" he yelled. But he couldn't look back for long, for Doll and Queen were stepping onto the little swaying bridge. The end of the bridge reached only about three feet onto the ice.

"Easy there!" called Mr. Garland, and he pulled the reins to the left. One slip of hooves on the icy planks and the whole loaded sleigh could go into the Mississippi River.

One step at a time, Doll and Queen moved slowly forward, seeming to sense the danger. The bridge swayed up and down with each movement. Hamlin felt his heart turn as icy as the river as he thought of walking above and so near that black swirl of water.

It was time for Old Spot to step onto the bridge. For a moment she held back, letting the halter rope stretch out full length. Hamlin slapped her on the flank. "Get along there!" he said, making himself sound much braver than he felt.

Old Spot moved forward, and Hamlin's attention went to getting the other cows to follow her, one at a time, onto the swaying bridge. The bridge boards were making cracking sounds from all the weight on them. When the last cow stepped onto the bridge, Hamlin followed. He felt the swaying motion, and his knees began to shake. He looked down into the darkness below him and could almost feel himself falling into it.

"I won't look down," he thought. Looking straight ahead, he walked on, gripping the shaky rail all the way.

The bridge shuddered as the wagon left it on the far side. One of the cows slipped and went to her knees. Hamlin cried out in fear, but in a moment the cow was up again.

When the last cow was off the bridge, and Doll and Queen were almost to the other side of the river, Hamlin wiped his forehead with his sleeve. He was sweating, in spite of the cold, and so glad to be off that bridge that he could have run for joy, were it not for the slow-moving cows.

But he heard his father calling to him. "Hamlin! Go back for Josh! I'll mind the cows now."

The boy made himself turn around and walk back. The bridge was much steadier without the load on it, but the black serpent of a river still raced beneath it. Hamlin kept his eyes away from it until he reached the end of the bridge.

Safely on shore again, Hamlin hurried to the cutter and held onto Josh's bridle. "Come on, boy," he said.

Mrs. Garland flicked the whip over Josh's ears when the horse seemed unwilling to start. He gave in then and followed Hamlin.

Later, Hamlin couldn't remember how he got across that bridge, but he remembered how his knees shook as he climbed the bank on the Minnesota side of the river.

The rest of the trip that day was one icy hill after another, until they left the Mississippi Valley and came to the open, flat stretches beyond. At night they stopped at an inn that stood near a mill dam in a little river. Hamlin listened to the roar of the water over the dam until sleep came to him.

The next day the family headed southwest. It was farther and farther between patches of woods, with more and more open prairie. Just before dark, they reached another patch of woods.

"We're in Iowa now," Mr. Garland said. "Just after these woods, we'll see our new home."

It grew completely dark while they went through the woods. When they came out into the open again, Mr. Garland pointed to a tiny spot of light about a quarter of a mile away. "That's it!" he called back to his wife. "We're almost there, Belle!"

On they went, slowly now, for the horses were tired. Hamlin tried hard to see what the house looked like, but it was just a dark shape against the snow. He could see that a beautiful big tree spread its branches over it and that the light came from two small square windows.

Mr. Garland called out, "Halloo, house!"

A third shape of light appeared as the door opened. A man came out. "Is that you, Richard?"

"Yes, Mr. Barley!" Mr. Garland called out, and he explained to Hamlin that Mr. Barley lived nearby and was

staying at the house with his wife to make it ready for the family.

Hamlin was too sleepy to remember much about that evening. Mrs. Barley had good, warm food for them all, and there was a bed somewhere for him and Frank. He slept through all the unloading of the sleigh the next morning, through the taking away of the Barleys' furniture and the goodbyes.

When he awoke at last, he was covered with his own mother's quilts in the bed in which he had slept all his life. The friendly old wooden clock was ticking away on the shelf, just as it always had in their other kitchen, and the big stove was back at its work of keeping the Garlands warm and cooking their food. His mother stood before it, stirring something that smelled of home.

"Flapjacks!" Hamlin said, and he jumped out of bed.

A little later, he and Harriet and Frank went outdoors to explore their new world. The house was a log cabin, like those that Hamlin expected pioneers to live in. Beyond it, stretching for miles, were white-blanketed fields, with dry stubble sticking up here and there. Behind the house was the deep woods through which they had come the night before.

"Look, Harriet!" Hamlin called, pointing to the snowy yard. "Rabbit tracks!"

In a moment, the children were trying to follow the rabbit's tracks, laughing and happy in this, their new home—the frontier where the woods left off and the prairie began.

Each day the place seemed more wonderful to Hamlin, Harriet, and little Frank. The log cabin was the heart of adventure. Hamlin, sleeping under the roof peak, didn't even mind when there was a little drift of snow beside his bed in the morning. He hurried down to the warmth of the stove, where his mother had a hot breakfast cooking. Soon he was outdoors getting water for the animals and breathing deeply of the nippy air.

When the morning work was done and breakfast eaten, he and Harriet always studied the tracks of the rabbits in the frozen dooryard, guessing how many had been there and how large they were and trying to follow them to their daytime hideaways. The squirrels in the big oak tree that sheltered the cabin tried hard to chatter louder and faster than the children did.

"Here's a raccoon track!" Hamlin would call when they had checked on the rabbits, and he and Harriet would follow it as far as they could into the snowy aisles of the woods behind the house.

Once in a while they walked an hour through the woods to the town or visited at the home of their nearest neighbors, the Petersons, who had come to Iowa from Norway. Lars Peterson was twelve years old but seemed much older to Hamlin. Whatever Lars wanted to do, Hamlin was willing to try.

"Let's teach these oxen to pull the sled and give us a ride," Lars said one day. The oxen were only a year old and had never been taught to work. They kicked and bellowed,

but after a while, Lars got a yoke and harness onto them. After a few days, they even pulled a load of firewood to the house. But one day the oxen decided that they were too young to work and broke the yoke. The children were tired of working so hard for so little and turned to other things.

One day, Hamlin and Harriet heard a far-off sound that could mean only one thing. "Spring is here!" cried Hamlin. "See the wild geese?"

In a great V, the birds winged their way from the south to the north. From then on, each day brought more signs of spring. When Hamlin went down to the little rock ledge north of the house to fill the water bucket from the spring that pushed out between the rock layers, he found it running faster each day and bubbling gaily into the brook that had been icebound all winter.

Spring brought wildflowers and fresh green grass to the prairie to the south and the west, but it also brought plowing time.

"I can't break this sod alone, Belle," said Mr. Garland when he came in after a day in town. "I've found a couple of fellows who just got here from Norway. They can't speak English, but they can work. They'll be here in a day or two."

"Where will they sleep?" asked Mrs. Garland. "This tiny cabin is crowded with the five of us."

"They can bed down in the shed," Mr. Garland told her.

A few days later, the two big, blond men arrived. The children watched them push and pull at the big breaking