

# Pollen

BY SUSAN GLASPELL



IRA will do it his own way," Mrs. Mead used to say, and people believed her. They believed her because they knew Ira. "You have to let Ira alone," was another of the sayings of Ira's mother. And people did let him alone—again, because they knew Ira.

He had a way of not looking straight at you; not a sneaky way, but merely that, through some choice of his own, he didn't come into direct communication with you. When you spoke you had a feeling that what you had said hadn't come into direct communication with what he was thinking. Probably a man doesn't have to be communicated with if he does not want to be, and as most of the people Ira knew were farmers, with a lean to the taciturn, and a feeling that it would be better if other folks minded their own business more than they did, Ira was not as much disliked as it would seem he would be—or as indeed he would have been in another walk of life. He was, in fact, not a little respected for being so well able to get along without other people. "If you don't say anything to him, he won't say anything to you," was their way of summing up Ira Mead, and he was not infrequently summed up as a reflection on some other person who would say something to you when you had said nothing to him.

He always seemed too preoccupied with what he was doing to pay much attention to what you were doing. Even as a little boy, he was a good deal like that. When the boys dammed the creek that ran through the Mead orchard, Ira, after a little, would go up-stream and become much occupied with a dam of his own—a different sort of dam. He didn't tell you his plans—either about catching a chicken or doing an example. "You don't know what's in his mind," his mother said, and never really tried

to find out—it being more impressive to regard him as unfathomable. Every one, more or less, picked this up from her. Even Ira more or less picked it up.

When you are apart from others, what you do has to be superior to the works of others, else—why are you apart from them? Ira, going his own way, early acquired a proficiency in certain things. He could do amazing things by throwing his knife—so he threw his knife a great deal. He wasn't good at leap-frog, so when leap-frog was being leaped he would be deep in some consideration of his own—to which he did not give voice. He was good in arithmetic and very poor at compositions. So he did arithmetic as though he had some respect for it, and as to essays gave the impression, not so much that he failed in them as that he withdrew himself from them.

When he grew older, and all the other boys had girls, he did not have a girl. You are not likely to have a girl if you have that way of saying nothing to her unless she says something to you. At least in that Birch School-house part of the county you weren't likely to, for they were a bashful lot of girls, mostly patterning themselves after John Paxton's girls, who, as was said of the eldest when she died, were modest and retiring. It was to one of these Paxton girls Ira almost said something even though she had said nothing. This was at the county fair, and he was going to ask Bertha Paxton to ride home with him. While he was still thinking about it, and about ready to do it, up came Joe Dietz and said, "Want to ride home behind my old nag?"—Joe's old nag being a three-year-old that could go. Bertha pretended to be afraid, and said to Ira, "Where can I get my life insured?" which would have been Ira's chance to say, "Come with me; you don't need any insurance." But this, alas! was all too true—and, Joe having the better horse, Ira became deeply absorbed in

the activities of a certain machine—as one who had no concern with horses. And while he was still intently watching the machine, Bertha and Joe set out to find the charging “old nag.”

Bertha married Joe Dietz, and they bought the old Allen place to the north of the Meads'. Joe Dietz wasn't much of a farmer. It was about this time that Ira Mead became more of a farmer than he had been. He took to spraying his trees and trying rotation of crops and doing things to the soil that had never been done to Mead soil before. In just a few years there was a great difference in the look of the Mead place and the look of the Dietz place.

Old Mr. Mead died, Ira's sister married, his brother said he was going to get into a business the Lord didn't have so much to do with (alluding to droughts and insect pests), and this he proceeded to do by moving to town and getting himself a job at the court-house. So there remained on the farm Ira and his mother. Ira was the pride of her life—and the thing she was proudest of was that you couldn't reach him. Sometimes the Balches, whose place joined the Meads' at the south, would come and ask Ira to parties—they were a great family for parties. “Well, I'll *tell* him,” Mrs. Mead would say, and then to Ira: “Fred Balch was here, sayin' everybody was to come to their place Saturday night. I told him I'd *tell* you.” On Saturday night Ira would have his books out, all taken up with some new thing you were to do to the soil, and when his mother would say, “Folks are goin' by to the Balches',” he would be too deep in his own occupations to give thought to her, or the Balches. And so she would say, with a gratified sigh, “I knew you wouldn't go.”

When you don't have anything to do with the people around you there grows in your mind the idea that there is something the matter with those people. “It'll just bring them down on us,” was the way Ira and his mother disposed of every suggestion that entailed taking any matter up with the Balches. They even gave up the new fence because it might “bring them down on us.” More than likely, what the Balches would have come down with would have been

an invitation to supper, but the Meads had this growing distrust of all things outside themselves.

So every bit of Ira went into the farm. The Balches, who didn't care whether school kept or not, just so they had a good time, had a farm that was good enough if you didn't know what a farm might be. To the north of him, Joe Dietz had a place that was running down-hill, because Joe, as they said, didn't have it in his bones to be a farmer. One day Ira saw Bertha Dietz standing by her south line, looking from her potato-field over to his.

“Those are fine potatoes of yours, Ira,” she called, in a friendly way.

“Well — they're comin' along,” granted Ira.

“Ours don't seem to be doing much this year.”

For this Ira had no comment. He was not one to talk about a neighbor's potatoes—even to telling the neighbor what he knew about draining the soil. It was five years now since Bertha Paxton had married Joe Dietz, and to-day she stood at the fence and saw that Ira's potatoes were better than Joe's. Ira wasn't one to look an idea in the face any straighter than he looked a person. He didn't consider that for five years he had worked for some such satisfaction as this, and so didn't have to consider just how satisfying the moment was. Bertha's little boy came running out after her. On his way back to the barn Ira jerked the horses' mouths in a way not his wont. Thank Heaven *he* didn't have any children to run screaming around the place!

To make his own thing perfect seemed a way of showing he needed nothing from without. Not that he and his programme ever came face to face with each other. But more and more he let other folks alone, and he did his work better than the others did theirs. The thing he came to care most about was the corn. Corn was a thing to make a special appeal to a man who wanted to make his own thing perfect. It thanked you for what you did for it. It recorded your proficiency. He gave it the best soil there could be for it—rich, pulverized. He learned just when to put it out, just how deep to cultivate. He found out by

trying what it would do in rows and what it would do in hills. As he planted it, sometimes without knowing he was going to say them, he would repeat lines his father used to say, one of those verses which were the old way of handing down teaching about planting:

“Four seeds I drop in every hill;  
One for the worm to harm,  
One for the frost to kill,  
And two for the barn.”

His father had learned it, when a little boy, from his father; and when that other little boy—his father's father—came to this Middle Western country he found the maize which the Indians were cultivating. In planting his corn Ira would sometimes find himself thinking back to the Indians. As he did things over and over the movements made for themselves a sort of rhythm, and it was as if this rhythm swung him into all that was back of him. He was less awkward at such times; he seemed less a figure outside all other things. They had never been able to interest Ira Mead in politics, and certainly he wasn't one to sit around and talk about his country, but sometimes as he listened to his whispering field of corn he would think with a queer satisfaction that corn was American. It was here before we were; it was of the very soil of America—something bequeathed us which we carried along. He would think of all that corn did—things that could go on because of it. And then he would wonder, with a superiority in which there was a queer tinge of affection, what those Indians who had perhaps tended maize in this very field would say if they could see one of his ears of corn. Perhaps it was because he would like to have them see his corn that he sometimes had a feeling they were *there*. Such thoughts once in a while broke into his mind, things that said something to him even though he had said nothing to them. To the south of him, at the Balches', where there was so often a lively crowd of young folks, where they played the piano and danced, where girls and fellows wandered around when it was moonlight—and when it wasn't—they laughed about Ira Mead, and one gay, bold girl wondered what he'd do if she'd up and kiss him! If any-

body had hinted that he had his own substratum of romance—a romance of the race, a growth passion that seeped up under the walls which shut him in, they would have looked blank and said, “*Ira Mead?*” For more and more he touched that circle of life which was the Balches' at an angle which seemed to be sending him off by himself. There was Mary Balch, gay like the rest—and then something beside gay. She had a way of saying his name—no one had ever said his name like that before. Every one else said it all in one breath—which seemed to make it the name of a person who naturally would be by himself. But Mary Balch said it almost as if it were in a song. “Why, hello, I—ra!” she'd say, sliding down from the I to the ra in a way—well, in a way that didn't get right out of your mind. And it was because he didn't get it right out of his mind that he became the more preoccupied with the things he was doing by himself—just as he used to be all taken up with some other thing when leap-frog was going on. He excelled in social graces as little as he had excelled in hurdling other boys' backs, and there was this thing in him which kept him from appearing to want to do what he couldn't do well.

To the north of him, at the Dietzes', they'd say, when the children were bad, “Maybe you'd like us to give you to Mr. Mead?” and the children howled loudly and were good. Mr. Mead appeared all a child would not ask in a father. He did not talk to them; he did not look at them. If they said anything to him, he did not hear them. And when children speak and it is as if they hadn't spoken—yes, *indeed* they'd rather be good. They were afraid of him. He was always around alone, and he was always looking the other way.

All Dietzes would have opened wide their eyes at the idea that Ira Mead had that sense of what has been and what may be in which is rooted the instinct of fatherhood. “Some *joke!*” Dietzes would reply. “Why, all he cares about's *corn!*”

It did go to corn. He found he could create new varieties of corn. By carefully selecting the seed he could produce corn that was unlike the other corn.

This was more exciting than there might seem any reason for its being. To study his seed—compare, reject; choosing that which was best, or those kernels of new life which had in common interesting differences from the old life; then to give soil the care that would give seed every chance, to watch over it when it began to grow, guarding it from all that could hurt its health, giving it those things which would let it realize its possibilities to the utmost—to do this was something more than doing his work well—though it was also the incontrovertible testimony that he did do his work well. The corn proved Ira Mead's supremacy over Balches and Dietzes and all the other people around there. After he had been experimenting with corn for a couple of years he exhibited it at the state fair, where it made no little commotion, and was pronounced a new variety of corn, and called Mead corn.

The night after he got the letter giving an award to Mead corn he didn't seem to want to sit inside with his mother, and thought of things to do that took him out. He went down to the barn, to make sure that he had closed the door. He stood before a full corn-bin—corn bigger and better than any corn around. He wandered down into the field, where his late corn still grew. This was a starry night—still, except for a slight breeze that set the corn to talking. He stood still and listened to it. Why was it that it seemed to run such a long way back, and to take in so many things? He walked along between the corn until he had come to the place where his corn stopped and the Balches' corn began. And where his corn stopped and Balch corn began, big corn stopped and runty corn began. As he stood there remarking the difference he heard a laugh—not close at hand, but up by the Balches' house—a girl's laugh borne on the southwest wind that carried from Balches' to him. It came again, Mary Balch's laugh—like that little way she had in saying his name, a soft sliding from one thing to another thing. Then came a man's laugh.

The man at the dividing-line sharply turned toward home. He was thankful *he* didn't have to have anything to do with slack folks like the Balches. He

should think they'd be ashamed of such corn! His rancor at them mounted, and on the way back the whispering corn did not seem to be taking in so many things. . . . He didn't need neighbors—and he was glad he didn't, being such neighbors as they were! On the way back he had not that open, affectionate way of regarding his corn. It was a sort of sideways, a calculated, gloating way; the love for the thing he had created narrowed into the shrewd determination to make this thing do something more for *him*. Before he went in the house he looked over toward the Dietzes'. It would be a long day before Joe Dietz created a new variety of corn! Created a new variety? Why, he didn't know what to do with varieties that had been created for him! They said the Dietz place was mortgaged. No mortgage on *his* farm. He went to bed that night shut in with the resolve to make this corn *do* something for him. He'd bring it along and show what a man could do when he minded his own business and didn't fritter his time and his mind away on—on this and that—on nothing.

A few days later he met Fred Balch on the road. "Like to get some seed from you if I can," he called. "Think I'll try a little Mead corn myself."

The originator of Mead corn seemed to be considering things which this thing only remotely touched. "Guess it's all spoke for this year," he said, and drove on.

Suppose he *had* let him have some—he went over it to himself, more directly in touch with the thought than his manner had indicated. What would he make of it? What did he *know* about growing corn? And so with arguments he guarded jealously this chance to have a thing that was better than the thing around him, fought with himself for this way of showing every one—of showing himself—he needed nothing from without.

Ira Mead was now thirty years old. He seemed older than that. He himself was like an ear of corn that has fertilized itself too long and needs the golden dust from other corn to bring new life. The next year he threw all his energies into bringing Mead corn up to an even higher standard than it had had when he

showed it to the world. So he watched over it carefully, and there were things that worried him—things he seemed powerless to do anything about. The bulk of his ground he had of course planted for crop—there would be thirty-nine acres of Mead corn to sell in the fall. But there was an acre he kept for experiment—to see what Mead corn would go on doing, a plot for adventures in cross-fertilization. But the trouble was, the adventures were not all of his ordering. Corn was not at all like Ira Mead. It associated with other corn. You could fairly *see* it doing it. He stood one afternoon and watched the golden dust go through the air on a day of sunshine and wind—pollen from his standardized Mead corn blowing over and fertilizing his experiment corn, whose cross-fertilization he himself wanted to direct. There it came—procreate golden dust, the male flower that was in the tassel blowing over to the female flower hidden in the ear. From the depth of a bitter isolation Ira Mead hated this golden dust. Hated it and hated it impotently. For what could he do about it? Winds blew and carried seed. Winds blew and brought the life that changed other life. “Damn sociable stuff!” he said, with anger that a little astonished him.

Of course, certain things he could do. Next year he would give his corn for experiment a place farther away from other corn. He selected a place up near the house where this corn would have no neighbors. But there were other things that worried him all through this year of careful watching of his corn. There was not that year a perfect crop of Mead corn. Part of it was inferior. That part of it which was inferior was the part which grew nearest the Balches’ corn.

He tried not to know this. It was too *thwarting* a thing for a man like Ira Mead to recognize if there was any way of keeping from recognizing it. He’d say, “Now I wonder what’s the matter with this soil?” and under his plans for the further enrichment of the soil he’d bury what it foiled his life to know.

It was from the other side of the fence, speaking both literally and not so literally, that the truth came as if blown by wind. One day, in husking-time, he was at work over near the Dietzes’. The

Dietzes were in their field. And he heard a pleased, excited voice call:

“Why, Joe! Just look at this ear of corn! Down at this end the corn’s *fine*.”

Truth came as if borne by wind. He stood quite still, as if knowing now there was nothing he could do, and into his sterile mind it came—it came! As if it were the golden dust that brought new life, it came. It was Bertha Dietz who cried, “Down at this end the corn’s fine!”—Bertha Paxton, who had married Joe Dietz. He had wanted to make his thing perfect that he might have what she couldn’t have. And now, because he had it, she had it, too. And he couldn’t *help* this. As the wind goes on blowing, it came—it came! The Balches were south of him, and a little to the west. The prevailing wind was southwest. Pollen from the Balches’ corn blew over and hurt his corn. The Dietzes were north of him, and this end of the field, to the east. Pollen from the Mead corn went over and enriched the Dietz corn. And he couldn’t *help* this.

He stood there within his corn—corn which was changed by the corn around it, corn which impressed itself upon the corn around it. And suddenly, not knowing he was going to do it, he had twisted a stalk of corn until it snapped. Without knowing it was coming, there was suddenly that anger which makes men kill. He wanted to be let *alone*. He wanted to keep to *himself*. Hadn’t a man a *right* to do that? He dug his boot into the ground where corn was rooted, wanting to *hurt*—hurt the corn, the earth, those things that wouldn’t let him be what he wanted to be! His closed-in years fought for what closed-in years had made him as only a trapped thing will fight.

But the wind moved the corn and the corn responded—swayed, spoke. The torn stalk he clenched dropped from his hand. When you *fight things* larger than you you only know that you are small. Because they *were* so much larger than he, he could let himself go with them—only a fool will fight the winds that blow. He thought. For the first time in his whole life, without trying to limit his thinking, he thought. The corn . . . men . . . nations. . . . And he couldn’t *help* this. It was that



released him as wind releases life for other life.

That evening he put some seed corn in a basket. He took up his hat.

"Why, where you goin'?" asked his mother.

"To the Balches'."

"To the *Balches'*?"

"To the Balches'."

"But—what you goin' to the Balches' for?"

"To take them seed and tell them what I know about raising corn."

The old woman looked at her son—he who never said anything to you unless you said something to him.

"Why—what you goin' to do *that* for?" she asked, weakly.

"Because I can't have good corn while their corn's poor."

It was not, after all, easy to go to the Balches'. His whole life made it hard for him to go, and tried to turn him back. But what he had last said to his mother was saying itself to him, "I can't have good corn while their corn's poor." He found himself stepping to the swing of it, and that somehow kept him from turning back. He moved to this now as he used to move to the old verses his father had taught him about planting. A new rhythm. . . . His own creation.

It took him right up to the door. He knocked. The door opened and took him into a circle of light. And, after her first astonished moment, Mary Balch was saying, in her voice like sunshine and wind:

"Why, *hel-lo*, I-ra!"

## "I Have Loved Hours at Sea"

BY SARA TEASDALE

I HAVE loved hours at sea, gray cities,  
The fragile secrets of a flower,  
Music, the making of a poem  
That gave me heaven for an hour;

First stars above a snowy hill,  
Voices of people kindly and wise,  
And the great look of love, long hidden,  
Found at last in meeting eyes.

I have loved much and been loved deeply—  
Oh, when my spirit's fire burns low,  
Leave me the darkness and the stillness,  
I shall be tired and glad to go.