

in praise of the old country *
Amy Franks

The scene stands out clearly in my mind. We are grouped in a circle—my sister and brother and I—seated about my grandmother. The labored ticking of the grandfather's clock eerily fills the silence. The lamp makes flickering shadows in dusty corners where cobwebs hang. The room is very quiet, for my grandmother is speaking of the Old Country. I listen, though I have heard her story many times, though Lithuania—the "Old Country"—filled my earliest dreams. Its hills and valleys mingle with childhood memories—with fairy tales and German restaurants and the quaint drawings in old piano books. Its smiling meadows, its black and brooding forests run in my blood, the blood of peasants. Now, as my grandmother speaks, I see once again the fields about Babesch, and I yearn once again to be there.

The village of Babesch is from a storybook. Its tall spires and steep, gabled rooftops were the same when marauding Teutons lay siege to the area. Heavily boxed and basketed women push and jostle to market as in the days of the Ivans. The villagers resemble my grandmother, being quick and bright and irrepressibly alive. They speak rapidly, weep copiously, and laugh heartily; they are both vibrant and fanciful. Part of their color touches, in turn, all they possess, charming the most commonplace object into something picturesque and quaint. Brightly-painted milk carts, drawn by beribboned oxen, rattle through the narrow, twisting streets. Gay orange and mauve and mulberry skirts skim the uneven cobblestones. It is as natural for these people to sing as to talk, to dance as to walk. An old man passes from corner to corner, making feverish assaults upon a violin. A wedding party whirls its breathless bands through the marketplace. Music and laughter fill the air. All is color, enchantment, romance. And against this festive tumult, golden meadows slumber in the sun, wearing a dreamlike spell.

* Freshman Writing.

Indeed, the entire countryside may be but a dream. Legend and lore have so entangled with the land that it is impossible to separate the two. The aura of magical, innocent days—days when princes roamed and bands of fairies danced by night—lingers yet upon these streams and meadows. Here the simple stories of childhood come to life. The little cottages with their thatched roofs and rows of circular cheeses are from the tales of Grimm. Jack and his mother might have lived in them or Hansel and Gretel or Goldilocks. Gloomy woodlands are enchanted by strange yet familiar forms. Trolls and gnomes scamper amid the crevices of tangled roots or peep from gnarled branches. Witches prowl the forests—forests that have called to me from the dark, carven doorways of German restaurants. Some myth, some fable touches every object. Nor would it seem strange, in this story-book land, if spirits still granted wishes to men and fairy tales still came true.

My grandmother speaks now of the farms that lie about the village. Listening to her I know I am a peasant, born of peasants. In my deepest of hearts, I yearn for the soil. I would feel the sensuous warmth of earth underfoot and the caress and perfume of high grasses. I would dream long, clover-scented hours—weave stories from slow-passing clouds. When summer had passed, then give me the blazing hearth, tables overspilling food and drink, and the wild, joyous tumult of a peasant dance. Nowhere else does life possess so idyllic and pagan a charm. In the cottages of the Old Country, in its legend-touched fields, man is delightfully at one with nature. The gay, colorful farm folk blend in picturesque harmony with their lush surroundings. Their quaintly-styled carts and conical beehives touch the countryside with color. Their songs and dances hint of the bacchanal. On the farm, even more than in the village, life abounds in color and force.

My grandmother has finished speaking, but I remain seated and silent. For all my yearning, I will never see the village of Babesch—it was destroyed in the war. Like so much that is picturesque and fanciful, it has passed away into the cupboards of yesterday. Yet the spirit of the Old Country cannot wholly die. It is my heritage and a part of me.