

The Biography of Old Broadhorns

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I WAS brought up on the farm. To me it was one of the most delightful places in all the world, and although many years have rolled by since the incident occurred which I am about to narrate, and while I have seen much of the best and worst of this continent, I still think that the valley of the Ouse, where I lived when a lad, is one of the prettiest spots I have seen.

The old school-house stood on a rocky knoll on the concession line which marked the limit of the farm, and it was the delight of the little ten-year-old boy to cut across the fields that not a minute might be lost of the time which was to be spent after the school was over for the day.

The farm was divided diagonally by one of the most accommodating brooks one could wish to have at hand. There were places where the small boys could wade from brink to brink. There were places where they could make believe they were swimming, while all the time they were resting on a submerged log; and there was the old-time "swimmin' hole," which James Whitcomb Riley has embalmed in his deathless poem.

This creek, as we called it, was the objective point of the boy at the close of the hot day in school, and associated with an evening spent on its grassy banks are memories which should live forever.

One of the things which stands out with distinctive vividness in connection with these evening rambles was the fact that I was charged with the duty of bringing home the cows to the milking yard *not later than six o'clock*. This was always the last command which was left in my ear as I sped

"Down the old dusty lane,
Where the tracks of our bare feet
Were all printed and plain.
You could tell by the dint
Of the heel and the sole,
There was lots of fun on hand
At the old 'Swimming Hole.'"

There were boys who were so situated that they could afford to ignore such a behest as the above, but such boys had no experience of the blessing, or otherwise, of being the happy, or unhappy, possessor of nine sisters, five of them before him and four after him—and not always in a chronological sense. But as to the matter in hand, there was no dodging the issue; were I to be a minute late with those cows.

How often I wondered why it was that it was so necessary for these milkmaids to have a fixed time for this dairying business. Could they not give a fellow a little latitude, especially when it was to be spent at the brook on a summer evening? But, when I came to the years of knowledge, I learned that young girls have other and more delightful occupation in the gloaming of a summer evening.

I was not long in learning from experience, which is a powerful and sometimes painful teacher, that if these cows were not home by the stroke of six, there would be a most touching time. It was a cruel law for a lad who was engaged in thrilling adventures at a river, but so it was, and who could help it!

Oh, those were glorious days, when the liberated lad could go forth to the meadows and navigate great ships on the rolling billows of a flowing stream which ran through his father's farm.

The poetry of youth was at its full flood tide in the soul of the child, and it is a delightful memory that the clouds were ships sailing across the waveless ocean of blue. How deep the mystery of the dark forest, which came down to the brink of the stream on the opposite side from where we lived! How far was it to the other side of that wood, and what kind of people live there; and where did the Indians come from

who emerged from the gloomy corridors of that wilderness! Then it was a cause of deep thought what the crows were doing as they met in the tall trees and cawed at one another, and seemed to be deciding that they would soon rally all their forces and drive me home.

They held caucuses and conventions, weddings and wakes, all at one time, or so it seemed to me.

I knew there were wild beasts in that wood, for Billy Brown said that he heard his father tell my father that he met a man on the road who said that some people who were coming home from the town one night heard something crying like a lost child, and they knew it was a wild cat or a wolf. I knew all this, but what did I care for all the wild beasts in the world if I could stay at the creek to the last minute and get home with those cows at six! There were worse terrors than being eaten up by wild beasts, and I knew it.

I think of the delight of catching the minnows with a bit of string and a bent pin, of how they "plumped" back into the water, and the joy of their escape, like a flash of steel through the ripple of the stream.

"And the snake-feeder's four gauzy wings fluttered by,
Like the ghost of a daisy dropped out of the sky."

Then the evening drew on and the clouds look strange, uncanny appearances. They seemed to be moving like flocks of



"OLD BROADHORNS," MASTER OF THE SITUATION

sheep on the upland pastures of the heavens. Then they would appear as if they were great battalions of soldiers, on some limitless parade ground, waving their banners, which now were white and then gold and crimson. As I lay on the grass, the sky was ever mottled with the flocks of birds which were winging their way to their lonely haunts in the forest. The hills to the east and south became great castles, and the windows of the farm-houses were all aflame with the light of the setting sun, and seemed to be watch-fires lighted for the soldiers of the skies.

This was the poetry of the farmer's boy, but it spoiled it all to think that it was drawing near six o'clock. All too soon came the time to make the start, and there was not a moment to lose, for the sun was low and the day well spent. In the soft grass of the river banks the bare feet of a boy were in their element, and it was a short job to gather the cattle and make the start for the farmyard. But the way lay through a field and then through the lane which has already been mentioned; and this field was a very wilderness of thistles. It was the one spot on the farm against which I ever had a spite, and there has been no friendliness in my heart from that day to this toward a Canada thistle, and for reasons which shall appear.

But through this ten-acre field there was a well-beaten