

Evenings on the Farm

An Outlook on the Back-to-the-Land Movement

When we first planned to take up the farm, we looked forward with especial pleasure to our evenings. They were to be the quiet rounding in of our days, full of companionship, full of meditation. "We'll do lots of reading aloud," I said. "And we'll have long walks. There won't be much to do but walk and read. I can hardly wait." And I chose our summer books with especial reference to reading aloud.

"Of course," I said, as we fell to work at our packing, "we'll have to do all sorts of things first. But the days are so long up there, and the life is very simple. And in the evenings you'll help."

As it proved, there were indeed all sorts of things to be done, of which the very least was the unpacking. There were closets, and garrets—two garrets—and pantries—two pantries—and storerooms, all clamoring for more or less complete reconstruction. But in the evenings Jonathan certainly did help.

"It's strange how these odd jobs accumulate," I said one night, as I held the candle for him to set up a loose latch.

"They've been accumulating for a good many generations," said Jonathan.

"Yes, I suppose so. And the doors all stick, and the latches won't latch, and the shades are sulky or wild, and the pantry shelves—have you noticed?—they're all warped so they rock when you set a dish on them."

"And the chairs pull apart," he added.

"Yes. Let's not think about them all at once. Of course after we catch up we'll be all right."

"I wouldn't count too much on catching up—the farm has had a long start."

Yet even with this handicap we did seem to begin to catch up, and we could have done it a good deal faster if it had not been for the pump.

The pump was a clear case of new wine in an old bottle. It was large and very strong. The people who worked it were strong too. But the walls and floor to which it was attached were not strong at all. And so one night when Jonathan wanted a walk I was obliged instead to speak of the pump.

"What's the matter there?"

"Why, it seems to have pulled clear of its moorings. You look at it."

He looked, with that expression of meditative resourcefulness so peculiar to the true Yankee countenance. "Hm—needs new wood there, and there; that stuff'll never hold." And so the old bottle was patched with new skin at the points of strain, and in the zest of reconstruction Jonathan almost forgot to regret the walk. "We'll have it to-morrow night," he said. "The moon will be better."

The next evening I met him below the turn of the road. "Wonderful night it's going to be," he said, as he pushed his wheel up the last hill.

"Yes," I said, a little uneasily. I was thinking of the kitchen pump. Finally I brought myself to face it.

"There seems to be some trouble—with the pump," I said apologetically. I felt that it was my fault, though I knew it wasn't.

"More trouble? What sort of trouble?"

"Oh, it wheezes and makes funny sucking noises, and the water spits and spits, and then bursts out, and then doesn't come at all. It sounds a little like a cat with a bone in its throat."

"Probably just that," said Jonathan; "grain of sand in the valve very likely."

"Shall I get a plumber?"

"Plumber? I'll fix it myself in three shakes of a lamb's tail."

"Well," I said relieved, "you can do that after supper while I see that all the chickens are in, and those turkeys, and then we'll have our walk."

Accordingly I went off on my tour. When I returned, the pale moon shadows were already beginning to show in the lingering dusk of the fading daylight. Indoors seemed very dark, but on the kitchen floor two candles sat, flaring and dipping.

"Jonathan," I called, "I'm ready."

"Well, I'm not," said a voice at my feet.

"Why, where are you? Oh, there!" I bent down and peered under the sink at a shape crouched there.

"Haven't you finished?"

"Finished! I've just got the thing apart."

"I should say you had!" I regarded the various pieces of iron and leather and wood as they lay, more dismembered shapes, about the kitchen.

"It doesn't seem as if it would ever come together again—to be a pump," I said in some depression.

"Oh, that's easy! It's just a question of time."

"How much time?"

"Heaven knows."

"Was it the valve?"

"It was—several things." His tone had the vagueness born of concentration. I could see that this was no time to press for information. Besides, in the field of mechanics, as Jonathan has occasionally pointed out to me, I am rather like a traveler who has learned to ask questions in a foreign tongue, but not to understand the answers.

"Well, I'll bring my sewing out here—or would you rather have me read to you? There's something in the last number of—"

"No; get your sewing—blast that screw! Why doesn't it start?"

Evidently sewing was better than the last number of anything. I settled myself under a lamp, while Jonathan, in the twilight beneath the sink, continued his mystic rites, with an accompaniment of mildly vituperative or persuasive language, addressed sometimes to his tools, sometimes to the screws and nuts and other parts, sometimes against the men who made them or the plumbers who put them in. Now and then I held a candle or steadied some perverse bit of metal while he worked his will upon it. And at last the phoenix did indeed rise, the pump was again a pump—at least it looked like one.



Canadian Artillery Men Backing Up an Intensity Advance on the West Front

"Suppose it doesn't work?" I suggested.

"Suppose it does," said Jonathan. A long stroke of the pump-handle, and the water streamed.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Oh, fairly late; about ten—ten minutes past."

Instead of our walk, we stood for a moment under the trees before the house and looked out into a sea of moonlight. Is there anything more sweetly still than the stillness of moonlight? As we went out to the barn, even the little hen-coops looked poetic. Passing one of them, we half roused the feathered family within and heard muffled peepings and a smothered "ck-ck." Jonathan was by this time so serene that I felt I could ask him a question that had occurred to me.

"Jonathan, how long, is three shakes of a lamb's tail?"

"Apparently, my dear; it is the whole evening," he answered, unruffled.

The next night was drizzly. Well, we would have books instead of a walk. We lighted a fire, May though it was, and settled down before it. "What shall we read?" I asked, feeling very cozy. Jonathan was filling his pipe with a leisurely deliberation good to look upon. With the match in his hand he paused. "Oh, I meant to tell you—those young turkeys of yours—they were still out when I came through the yard. I wonder if they went in all right."

I have always noticed that if the turkeys grow up very fat and strutting and suggestive of Thanksgiving, Jonathan calls them "our turkeys"; but in the spring, when they are committing all the naughtinesses of wild and silly youth, he is apt to allude to them as "those young turkeys of yours."

I rose wearily. "No. They never go in all right when they get out at this time—especially on wet nights. I'll have to find them and stow them."

Jonathan got up too, and laid down his pipe. "You'll need the lantern," he said.

We went out together into the drizzle—a good thing to be out in, too, if you are out for the fun of it. But when you are hunting silly little turkeys who literally don't know enough to go in when it rains, and when you expected and wanted to be doing something else, then it seems different—the drizzle seems peculiarly drizzly, the silliness of the turkeys seems particularly and unendurably silly.

We waded through the drenched grass and the tall, dripping weeds, listening for the faint, foolish peeping

of the wanderers. Some we found under piled fence rails, some under burdock leaves, some under nothing more protective than a plantain leaf. By ones and twos we collected them, half drowned yet shrilly remonstrant, and dropped them into the dry shed where they belonged. Then we returned to the house, very wet, feeling the kind of discouragement that usually besets those who are forced to furnish prudence to fools. It might be said that, having undertaken to raise turkeys, we had to expect them to act like turkeys.

These things—tinkering of latches and chairs, pump-mending, rescue work among the poultry—filled our evenings fairly full. Yet these are only samples, and not particularly representative samples at that. They were the sort of things that happened oftenest, the more common emergencies incidental to the life. But there were also the uncommon emergencies, each occurring seldom, but each adding its own touch of variety to the tale of our evenings.

For instance, there was the time of the great drought, when Jonathan had to dig out a spring hole for the thirsty cattle, while I held a lantern and beat back the eager creatures till the work was done. Some-

times the emergency was in the barn—a broken halter and trouble among the horses, or perhaps a sick cow. Sometimes a stray creature—cow or horse—grazing along the roadside got into our yard and threatened our corn and squashes and my poor, struggling flower-beds. Once it was a break in the wire fence around Jonathan's muskmelon patch in the barn meadow. The cows had just been turned in there, and if the break was not mended that evening it meant no melons that season—also melon-tainted cream for days.

Once or twice each year it was the drainpipe from the sink. The drain like the pump, was an innovation. Our ancestors had always carried out whatever they couldn't use or burn and dumped it on the far edge of the orchard. In a thinly settled community there is much to be said for this method. You know just where you are. But we had the drain, and occasionally we didn't know just where we were.

"Coffee grounds," Jonathan would suggest, with a touch of sternness.

"No," I would reply, firmly, "coffee grounds are always burned."

"What, then?"

"Don't know. I've poked and poked." A gleam in the corner of Jonathan's eye. "What with?"

"Oh, everything."

"Yes, I suppose so. For instance, what?"

"Why, hairpin first, of course, and then awl, and then button-book—you needn't smile—button-books are wonderful for cleaning out pipes. And then I took a nail handle and straightened it out"—Jonathan was laughing by this time—"well, I have to use what I have, don't I?"

"Yes, of course. And after the nail handle?"

"After that—oh, yes; I tried your cleaning rod."

"You did?"

"Not at all. It wasn't hurt a bit. It just wouldn't go down, that's all. So then I thought I'd wait for you."

"And now what do you expect?"

"I expect you to fix it."

Of course after that there was nothing for Jonathan to do but fix it. Usually it did not take long. Sometimes it did. Once it took a whole evening and required the services of a young tree, which Jonathan went out and cut and trimmed and forced through a section of the pipe which he had taken up and laid out for the operation on the kitchen floor. It was a warm evening, too, and friends had driven over to visit us. We received them warmly in the kitchen. We explained that we believed in making them members of the family, and that members of the family always helped in whatever was being done. So they helped. They took turns gripping the pipe while Jonathan and I persuaded the young tree through it. It required great strength and some skill, because it was necessary to make the tree and the pipe perform spirally rotatory movements each antagonistic and complementary to the other. We were all rather tired and very hot before anything began to happen. Then it happened all at once: the tree burst through—and not alone. A good deal came with it. The kitchen floor was a sight, and there was—undoubtedly there was—a strong smell of coffee. Jonathan smiled. Then he went down cellar and restored the pipe to its position, while the rest of us cleared up the kitchen—it's astonishing what a little job like that can make a kitchen look like—and as our friends started to go a voice from beneath us, like the ghost in Hamlet, shouted,

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