

# THE OLD FARM IN THE WOODS

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THE Old Farm lies south of the Annapolis Basin a mile or so as the crow flies, and within occasional hearing of the ground swell of the Bay of Fundy. It is surrounded on all sides by woods—not forest, or groves, or anything elaborate, but just woods. One can climb to the west window in the peak of the barn, and look out over the next neighbour's field and the fringe of woods, and see a corner of the Basin—a lake at high tide, at low water a waste of mud-flats. On the west the ground slopes downward to the brook, and beyond is a range of hills, and always woods, with just one neighbouring house. Eastward the road runs four miles to the nearest village on the highway; for to reach the county seat, two miles away in a straight line, one must drive six miles or—to save a mile—climb precipitous hills. South are woods and more woods; some miles back a road with its thin strip of inhabited country, and beyond woods and barrens, and again more woods, until one crosses the backbone of the province and approaches the south shore. To the east one or two houses are visible, for the road to the village runs through a settlement. Westward for a mile and a half there is only one neighbour, but beyond are several roads, especially one passing by the fine old mill where lumber is sawn, and grain is threshed and ground, and apples are crushed for cider, and leading up across the top of a steep ridge where stands an ancient, barnlike, wooden church. Barnlike it stood for three quarters of a century, bare and cold without, white painted, crowning the hill and surveying land and sea for miles to the eastward; dogmatic, rigid, puritan in appearance, having a dignity and severity all its own. It has since been changed, modernized, equipped with a bell and steeple, and its dignity and severity are departed. It was made by a generation that built ships and cleared their lands; and improved by people who raised garden truck for summer tourists.

Eastward lies the school and the Union Hall. The Union Hall was designed for purposes of general assemblage of all sorts; but it has been monopolized for religious objects, including pie socials and other devices for raising revenue. The schoolhouse stands a few rods farther along, on an eminence of its own, fenced

on three sides into its little sidehill of a yard with a large granite boulder enclosed, open toward the road, with a deep ditch crossed by a plank bridge. On the road from The Old Farm to the school one finds four separate farms with their houses and barns, though the distance is only a mile. One also passes a steep little hill which was once, as the tale comes to delighted children, the scene of a real murder. After all, the road is getting into its second century, and may be permitted at least one legend.

The brook on the west of The Old Farm has its legend too. On its course toward the sea it falls over a precipitous cliff into a sort of pot worn in the rocks, with steep banks well clad with evergreens, chiefly spruce. At the head of the fall the solid rock stands out from under a coat of earth and trees; and the mass at the top is said to have been thrown at or by Glooscap when pursuing or pursued by Indians or beavers. Glooscap presumably did not live before Agamemnon; but he lacked a bard that should define his achievements with precision for the instruction of posterity. At least the Glooscap of the fall is not quite clearly defined as to his deeds.

The Old Farm has been settled for a long time. The oldest frame house in the neighbourhood stands there, now merely a receptacle for carriages, firewood, and hens; the hens have one corner—the old pantry—walled off as their abode. The loft upstairs is used for apples before the weather gets too cold in the autumn, and as an all-year storehouse for grain. It is a pleasant place on crisp October afternoons, when the sun shines through the western window as the flies buzz valiantly against the panes in the warm rays. The odor of ripe fruit scents the air, and the clean grain, white and black oats, and rich gray buckwheat, and spikey barley, and sometimes even a little native wheat, wait to be carefully stored in bins and barrels, while the stealthy cat moves silently on her sleepless quest of the inevitable mouse. Such is the "old house" now, for that is its name. It has never become merely a "shop", as buildings which serve its several purposes generally do. Its builder was the son of a soldier who fought at Quebec in 1759; or so the tale goes. What became of him and his descendants, one is not told; but a certain Loyalist had a son who settled there early in the nineteenth century, and The Old Farm was held by one family for about a hundred years. The old house used to stand near the road, with its roof pointing north and south. When the new house was built in the seventies—the house *par excellence* without qualification—the old house was moved behind it to serve its present humble purposes; and its ridge pole now runs east and

west. The house is modern and reasonably convenient, well built. Perhaps the most interesting thing about it is the cellar, where in the fall and early winter great bins of vegetables occupy most of the space. There is often a barrel of beef, of pork, sometimes of fish; and in the old days, before improved methods of manufacture took all the sugar out of the molasses, there were occasional hogsheads from the depths of which one dug gallons of molasses sugar. And on the shelves stood, in serried row on row, the jars containing preserved fruits and berries.

The barn stands south-west of the house, and dominates the farm as it should. Though large, it is not enormous; but the land slopes away from it west and south, and it is prominent from all over the homefield.

Once in the course of history it was moved around, provided with a cellar, and remodelled; but the frame is that put up by one of the early settlers, and the huge hewn timbers show the marks of the adze. In front of the barn is a well, and water is pumped by means of a small trough through the fence into a large trough in the barnyard where in winter the cattle come out to drink. A pleasant thing it is to see them play. On very cold days they hastily swallow their modicum of cold water and run back to shelter; but when the snow melts under the warm sun on a pleasant afternoon in February or March, they will amuse themselves as long as they are permitted. The ordinary fence around the farm is a snake fence; but the fence of the barnyard is straight, thus preventing the large animals from driving the small ones into corners and maltreating them at leisure; for they have individuality as have human beings, and there are bullies and fools and gentlefolk and philosophers among them as among their owners. The horse lives in his stall by himself, and pays little attention to the cattle. He is an aristocrat, and associates chiefly with the family of his owner; though, between ourselves, he has not as much brain as the ox that he despises. He must be able to do many things—to carry people on his back, to draw a carriage, to do light work on the farm, and in haying time to pull the mower, which is not light work. But he is not overdriven, and keeps fat and well.

Near to the barn and in the direction of the old house stands the pigpen, whose loft is stored with clean dry rushes or straw—sometimes barley straw with beards, which can stick closer than anything else on earth. The pig, most maligned of beasts, is a cleanly creature, and delights in building for himself a neat and cosy nest whenever opportunity offers. It is unfortunate that the genius of Vergil and the exigencies of farm life have united to attach

to him an opprobrious epithet: *Immundi meminere sues iactare maniplos*. The genius of the hog, however, is that of steadfast opposition to all restraint, and his temper renders him obnoxious to abuse of some kind. In the field, when allowed to run at large, he is energetic and capable; in the pen his inertia becomes colossal, and he develops a gross materialism, like that of Balbus of grammatical fame. His owner boasts of his fat; leanness is a disgrace to him. So he grows fat and fatter, and at last dies for his friends. Peace to his mortal remains as they rest beneath the pickle of the pork barrel! One good farm hog, well fed on vegetables and cornmeal, well killed, and well cured, was worth a regiment of the lean and athletic beasts so popular with the modern butcher.

The farm itself includes two hundred and fifty acres, more or less. Like most farms in that part of the country, it was designed to be as nearly self-contained and independent as possible. The early tradition is much impaired by the development of commerce, the coming of cheaper flour from the West, and the exodus of the young. But the acres in the homefield yield most of the vegetable products that are needed, except wheat and sugar; and the beef and pork grow in the pastures and pens. The homefield may include thirty acres. Hay and grain and vegetables rotate around it, not perhaps in a strictly scientific manner, but so as to secure good crops in any reasonable year. The pastures lie east and west of the homefield, and meet behind it on the south. That on the west is sacred to the cows, and called the cow-pasture; that on the east is reserved for the other cattle, and known as the ox-pasture. There is a lot across the road fronting the homefield on the north and known as the Larsen field, from no especial reason except that the Larsens once owned it. In earlier times it was itself a little farm, and the cellar stands to this day, with apple trees around it. What happened to the early inhabitants is not fully known. They were men of deeds, one of whom disappeared in the West Indies, probably by violence. There used often to be a snakes' nest in the rocks somewhere near a little old well, and one tree of pumpkin sweets is still bearing. Between the old cellar and the road stands a tangled snarl of apple trees—apple bushes would be more correct—gnawed and trampled by many generations of young cattle; for the horse, who owns this lot for his regular summer residence, shares it often with calves and yearlings. There is a thick grove of spruces in the corner of the field which serves as a windbreak for the buildings across the road against the fierce northeaster; there on drowsy summer afternoons the horse sometimes stands motionless in the shade, lazily stamping at an oc-

casional fly; whether he stands in meditation over many things, or in placid vacuity, no man knows.

So the homefield is encircled by pastures that are largely filled with woods, while the main road runs through on the north. The field is undulating, with no stretches of painfully level ground, and no unreasonably steep hills. There is one old orchard behind the barn that is often sown with buckwheat. Buckwheat is good for the trees, and thrives better than other grains in the orchard. There are the remains of an old orchard near where the old house used to stand, not far from the spring that supplies drinking water. This spring deserves more mention than it will receive. The water is gloriously clear, and flows near the surface of the ground. In it two trout used to reside, until the big one proved his acquaintance with literature by biting off the tail of the small one. But, to return to the old orchard—it contained not long ago one decrepit tree, now utterly vanished, that was known as the old "good sour". It grew from a seed planted by the original Loyalist; and one of its descendants stands in the corner near the lane that leads from the barnyard to the road. The trade name of the fruit is obscure, if it exists. There are no apples like them. There is a small new orchard with excellent Red Astrachans near the house on the east, and beyond these a fringe of decaying cherry trees of unknown antiquity. The big cherry tree stands before the house, and the spread of its limbs is forty-four feet. Across the lane toward the west is yet another small orchard of winter fruit, and a few more ancient cherry trees grow along the road against the ancient stone wall. Beyond these trees is a fertile knoll, and upon it grows a rosebush beside the wall; this is grandfather's rosebush, planted by the old Loyalist. He was a man of sentiment, apparently, and one of his sentiments was loyalty to the British Crown. There is a tale that so much of his movable property as he could not bring to Nova Scotia he threw overboard in Long Island Sound, beyond reach of the rebels. From grandfather's rosebush the road slopes down to the brook, passing the cow-pasture gate, for the custom of The Old Farm is to use not bars but a ladder-shaped gate with long rungs.

Within the enclosure of the homefield, and straying over into the ox-pasture behind it, is the fine grove of maple trees where in the spring maple sugar or syrup is made—for amusement, to keep up an old custom, to supply the house, a little for sale. There is a time in the spring when work in the woods is about over and work in the fields has not yet begun. That is the time for gathering the sap and boiling it down. The huge stone-paved fireplace

out among the maple trees has at either end a forked beech upright, and in these forks rests a stout beech pole upon which the kettles are slung, five or six big iron kettles that consume the sap so avidly as to appear like the pails of the Danaids. In time, however, comes syrup, and sugar if one pleases; but for home consumption syrup is preferred. Some kinds of food are a good in themselves; pancakes of home-raised buckwheat sweetened with syrup from one's own maples are included in this list.

The procession of the seasons is of primary importance on the farm, but their great ordained regularity is accompanied by so much irregularity within their appointed limits that there is always the pleasant entertainment of forecasting the weather and the time for planting, ploughing, or fencing. The ground must be at least moderately soft for fencing; for the pastures are fenced by miles—literally miles—of pole or brush fence; the pole fence is mostly of the snake pattern, but in the thick woods and where the brush is abundant there may be straight brush fence. When once the fence is in good shape, it is not a great task in the spring to look over it and make the required repairs. But the line fence is a perpetual source of woe. One man insists on having his share of it in good condition, while cattle walk easily through that portion of it which his neighbour so cheerfully neglects. Whatever private and peculiar causes of quarrel there may be in the district, three perennial sources of dispute are of universal application: religion, politics, and line fences. Worthy of praise is the man who raises good crops; more worthy, perhaps, he who promptly pays his bills; most worthy beyond a doubt he whose fences stand high and strong, and whose beasts never stray beyond their own boundaries. For there is the tragedy of the sudden rain soaking the half-dry hay; there is the worse tragedy of the sun parching the growing crops; but the worst tragedy is the field of grain as left after a nocturnal inundation of some careless neighbour's cattle. It is small comfort to drive them to the pound and make the culprit pay to take them out. Of late years there is much wire fence, and the problem is not so acute; but many destructive animals can escape through one small gap.

When the sun has sufficiently warmed and dried the ground in favoured spots, and while the snow still lies in the woods and melts against the fences, planting begins. Oats may be sown, and peas and potatoes planted; for oats and peas are hardy, and potatoes take their own time in coming up, so that they will not appear in time to be injured by any frosts except the late June frosts, which cannot be avoided if they come. It is of great im-

portance to get started early. "For it is thus with farming," says old Cato: "if you do one thing too late, you will do all your work too late." *Nam res rustica sic est, si unum rem sero feceris, omnia opera sero facies.*" So potatoes sometimes go into the ground while snow is flying. Other things follow, last of all turnips and buckwheat which are sometimes planted on sod turned after the hay has been cut.

Ploughing is one of the great arts. On large farms it is now in many countries done by tractors; a good horse or pair of horses will do very well; but the true and proper beast for ploughing is the ox. On such farms as The Old Farm he is a profitable beast, and a pair of oxen can easily do what ploughing needs to be done. Their slowness is exaggerated; their strength and steadiness are splendid. The plough runs smoothly on an even keel, so that the labour of guiding it is slight. The only thing on the farm that is pleasanter than ploughing in the spring is ploughing in the fall. All good farmers despise bad ploughing. "Is this a graveyard?" one such asked his careless neighbour, of a carelessly turned piece of sod.

Soon comes the endless round of hoeing and weeding. Hoeing is a respectable occupation, and requires dexterity; but it is related to ploughing as building fences to building cathedrals. Of weeding, the half has never been told. It is a great producer of virtue, for it consists in destroying the original sin of the earth. Consider a field of young and tender turnips, just springing from the soil. The cultivator has been drawn between the rows, but only the human hand can separate the little turnip from the neighbouring mass of weeds. One may crawl on one's knees at this occupation, or bend one's back to misery. The sun's rays beat fiercely upon the lonely weeder, undefended by any neighbouring shade; or the thick fog invests turnips and weeds and fingers with crawling, crumbling mud. The battle must be fought with pertinacious patience, and with no hope of glory; but the heart and temper may be purified thereby. Of the varieties and vices of weeds no account will be given here; on The Old Farm, at a certain season after haying, the fields were carefully examined for any traces of the pernicious wild carrot, which was gathered into baskets and carefully burned. Now the train travels a large part of its journey from Halifax to New York through fields strewn with wild carrot.

Spring gives place to summer; strawberries ripen in the hay-fields and the gardens; cherries hang upon the trees for birds and men, and haying runs its course—swift in good weather, or slower than death when pestilent rains continually soak the earth. There

are simple souls who regard dexterity in the hayfield as equivalent to skill with the plough. The former is a mere spectacular performance, the latter a philosophic education. On The Old Farm a couple of hands usually assisted the natives in haying, and the most interesting part of the performance was getting the hay from the burntland. The burntland is now probably turned out to pasture; but once it was a ten-acre field of new stumps carefully burned over and sown to timothy. In spite of the stumps, it turned off a fair crop of good hay; and before haying it yielded wild strawberries to those who cared to gather them. The road to the burntland is a very good road leading through the cow-pasture. But in the burntland itself there is no road to mention, and hay must be very carefully loaded in order to avoid an overturn among the cradle hills. Here is where the sagacious stolidity of the ox shows its value under the guidance of an expert driver. When the team has passed into the road through the pasture, everyone but the driver is privileged to ride. It is a pleasant thing on a calm evening to drive home to the barn fragrant with its new wealth; and after work is over, and chores are done, and night is falling, it is pleasant to sit in the door of the old house and smoke an evening pipe. Sometimes on a still night the earth has a faint dull jar and the air a sullen throb, and everyone knows that the ground swell is running in the Bay of Fundy and fine weather will not last long.

Harvesting is a smaller affair than haying—that is, the harvesting of grain. When grain was reaped with the sickle, it was different. Then the cradle was popular, and then the bare scythe. Now there are reapers, any of which can easily perambulate a neighbourhood and cut what grain there is. One loads one's grain on a hayrack and drives it to a mill. Formerly, it used to be the fine old mill at the foot of the hill near the church; but portable mills driven by horse-power or motor came into fashion, and sometimes became stationary. Wherever one goes with a load of grain, someone else is ahead. Sometimes twenty loads stand waiting their turn, and a sudden squall of rain evokes violent language. For a short season the threshing mill is the farmers' club. Acquaintanceships are formed, and renewed stories of various magnitudes exchanged, and illimitable tobacco consumed. But before the grain is all threshed, summer passes into autumn, and people look ahead to impending winter:

*Frigora mitescunt zephyris, ver proterit aestas,  
Interitura simul  
Pomifer Autumnus fruges effuderit et mox  
Bruma recurrit iners.*



With the long evenings in the autumn comes the season of merrymaking. At other times, to be sure, the women gather over their mat-hooking or quilting, and tongues and mat-hooks fly; the sewing circle, which is a religious activity, is a fruitful source of gossip and good works. The boys occasionally play ball. Trials of strength and skill are common. Wrestling is a noble art, and fighting not unknown. "Science" unqualified means knowledge of the principles and skill in the practice of boxing. But exercise is not a necessity of recreation for men who swing the axe or scythe or guide the plough all day. There is further the puritanical assumption that there is something improper in simple amusement; it should be under the aegis of useful labour. For example, an apple-paring.

In the autumn on The Old Farm the apples are scattered far and wide over the fields and in the woods. For apple trees of some sort grow in all manner of strange places; the maple grove, in particular, is rather freely interspersed with them whenever an opening in the thick shade occurs. They furnish food for the partridges that frequent the uncultivated portions of the farm. Rough apples are gathered into bags, and sold by the cartload for a few cents per bushel to manufacturers of cider who sometimes come to the wharves for them in small schooners. Apples better than these, but not quite desirable for the regular market, are reserved for paring.

At an early hour in the evening the guests assemble. The apples appear from cellar or shed in capacious baskets. One practitioner pares steadily, another quarters and cores, a third strings the quarters upon a stout cord by means of a sail needle. The first apple is tied upon the string, and an end of string left for future use. When the last quarter is in its place, the two ends of the string are tied together, and the finished work suspended across a rod above the kitchen stove. When the paring is over, a large area of the ceiling appears to be decorated with strings of apples. They will dry, and shrink to a fraction of their original size, and be stored in crocks for the manufacture of "sass" in those barren spring months when the bounties of autumn have been dissipated by the hunger of winter. When the requirements of labour have been satisfied, the feasting begins. There is a dire slaughter of pies and cakes; not because pies and cakes are more to the taste than other food, but because they are part of the ritual of the occasion. All good housewives keep vast quantities of cake always on hand or in preparation; and the health and pursuits of the people are such that they can endure it.

Winter is not now what it used to be. So say all the old men. But nothing is what it was, according to these Solons. In the matter of winter, however, they are right. The chief winter occupation is, for many men throughout the country, working in the woods; and the woods are not what they were before careless cutting and fire depleted them. Still, everybody has a woodlot, and The Old Farm is well timbered. Not much timber is cut for sale; though not long ago The Old Farm would load a vessel with cord-wood for the Boston market, and nobody thought it unusual. The necessary stock of fencing and firewood takes time and toil to acquire. But the epic of the axe is not for us; we praise the plough. An older generation, whose chief business was taking timber from the land, may regard us all as effeminate weaklings. There is beside the road a vast pile of wood cut for the stove, which grows in winter or spring and melts away all the year; and the old house must be kept well stored with dry fuel. There are endless chores to be done, and there is the long evening for reading and smoking. We can still, on The Old Farm, pass our time in "the practice of virtue and the pursuit of knowledge", if we will.

Perhaps if all the farms in a district were under the direction of a competent head, and everybody obeyed his orders or followed his suggestions, crops would be larger and labour lighter; but the glory of the countryside would have departed. Hard the life of the independent small farmer may be, but not mean. Full it is of satisfaction for work well done, and instinct with a sense of wonder and mystery; for a man environed always with the works of Nature, and dependent for his daily bread upon some knowledge of them, cannot easily acquire a superior indifference to ultimate problems nor a contempt for what he does not understand. What another generation may do with The Old Farm one may not foretell, but one may hope that a good sour tree will always stand in the corner by the lane, and that someone will care for grandfather's rose-bush beside the stone wall.