

MUSINGS ON A DESERTED FARM

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THERE is a deserted farmhouse in your part of the country that stands starkly wretched against the peaceful and graceful horizon. It is an eyesore that people wish had been pulled down altogether. That shiftless farmer! Why do these fellows always fail to "make a go" of things and leave their wrecks to jar the eye!

I came upon one of these monuments to failure amid a gorgeous tapestry of autumn color about a hundred miles up the Gatineau. The mountains away back had tapered off to hills, and just where the hills became a curving slope some man with no thought for contour had left a crumpled house and the crazy chaos of a broken barn. Short yards away was the blue water of a lake, sparkling in the sun behind the twinkling of scarlet maple leaves and the orderly uprightness of a small stand of birch. But here—this drab unpainted skeleton, Man's blot on Nature's best!

The path to the lake led right beside the house. In the jagged pile of fallen timber lay the remnants of a baby's crib, painted a cheery white. And a few feet beyond the house, alone among long grass and spreading sumac, were some stray shoots of rhubarb.

It was too brisk a day to swim, but the warm sun and a friendly log provided a good place to sit down. Funny how a cigarette tastes better in the open like that. Two more days, two days of freedom to walk the trails or loaf on logs. Odd about that baby's bed! It had lost its original whiteness but seemed spotless in contrast, everything else being so old, so forlorn. Must have been fifteen years since anyone had lived there. How many in the family? Only one crib visible.

I went back to the old farmhouse, and somehow a trace of life had moved into the sprawling debris. There was an old stove, looking rather silly because of weeds growing up through the openings. It wasn't a big stove. Maybe just one child? the planks and boards had never been painted, but the door was once a pale blue with white sash. Probably French. The French go for blue doors.

I began to wonder how long they had lived here. For there was now a "they" who had lived here, to whom this was home. Today it is an eyesore, but it was once a little farm.

Yes, little. That was obvious. This never had been a big farm. The house stood in the centre of a fair sized field cleared of trees and rocks, and down the slope a bit was another field about the size of two tennis courts. That was all. Not enough to wrest a living from, but this is a good timber area and a man can make money in the camps during the winter months.

I examined the boards of the house, particularly the door. It was old but not worn. The handle hadn't that sought-after look that old farmhouse door-handles get. No dog had scratched away the paint at the bottom. No children had kicked at it or carved initials. So it was with the others, lying there with that abandoned look a board gets when its nails are turned to the sky. They were old, paintless, weatherbeaten. But they weren't life-marked, bore few signs of rubbing, hadn't magazine pictures and calendars all over them.

This home apparently, was lived in only a few years; by a French-Canadian couple who had a baby. He must have cleared his little handkerchiefs of land himself, for you could see around the larger stumps neat piles of rocks and stones, and smaller stumps lined the edge of the field to make a fence. She had started a kitchen garden, with rhubarb. An old plow with a home made cedar-bough handle told of his effort on the soil but the barn was a mean one and he must have relied on wood-cutting and fishing and hunting for what cash he could earn.

Yet farming must have been the object, else why these twelve miles from the nearest town, by these rolling fields that could be cleared of a light second growth! Yes, farming was the long view; and with what ambition and enterprise! The waggon trail from the concession road, a good mile in, had been tough breaking. Streams were bridged with tree trunks that had each to be chopped and drawn; boulders were moved where possible, or circled. Now that trail is overgrown with weeds and moss has grown on what looks to have been a sort of half-way bench. But the woods have not yet reclaimed his swath.

Nor have the woods reclaimed his fields. But to him, at any rate, they are lost. There's some certainty in the stillness around this old farmhouse that says they left and left for good. Maybe illness overtook them? Maybe there was to be another child and her burden of raising two children and sharing the work on that unyielding farm was too great? Or did the decision come suddenly only after a year or more of heartbreak and disillusion? [Was it just that hope and sweat and willingness to

try were not enough to make a farm out of this beautiful but unfruitful land?

I couldn't answer all my questions. Yet one thing was certain—this couple had worked hard at man's noblest task. They had tried to open up a piece of land, to push back the rock and the brush and the tree. They had carried their water (no sign of a well) a hundred yards, they had cleared their fields and opened their road, they had hewn and sown, they had invited the kind of unremitting hardship and discomfort that city folk can scarcely understand.

You can image the start of it all, the high hope of a young man and his bride determined that their hearts will beat down the odds of the back country, determined to win to happiness and comfort the hard way. Of course the rude remains of their one-roomed house breaks the loveliest line of the countryside! Why do you suppose they put it there? But it wouldn't be always there. No, this was merely a beginning. Once the farm got going and they could afford a well, the place to build a real home was on that little ridge overlooking this valley. That's why there are already a few trees felled up there; not enough to indicate any real beginnings but just the evidence of a young couple strolling up on a Sunday and playing at facing their house to the South and watching the sun go down off the end of the verandah.

Oh yes, you can imagine the beginning. It has about it the challenge and mystery of all beginnings. But can we fill in the details of what followed? Can we, do we appreciate the struggle? Not only the struggle with the land and the wind and the rain and the snow, not only the struggle against hunger and aloneness. But are we sensitive to their struggle with themselves, with the slow dawning of failure, with the first outspoken resentments against the earth and the world and—perhaps—each other? Will we let ourselves or make ourselves feel what deep cynicism and emptiness must spring up in a man's heart when he sees that to be willing to strive is not enough? Would any of us have liked to have been at the main road when that French-Canadian came out the last time? Would we have said, what we often say to ourselves in our comfort and smugness, "this is Canada, a land where any man may win his place if he has but the heart and the courage"?

The story of what followed their beginnings is not a story we can fill in unless we have lived it; and I have not lived it.

But, standing there by that old homesite, I think I learned a little about deserted farms and about people who curse the deserters. I couldn't begin to imagine all they had been through but I could imagine enough to feel humbler—and perhaps that is something. And—one more thing—I could imagine the end. The wagons pulling away for the last time, leaving half a cord of cut wood over in the little bush, leaving what we sometimes mockingly refer to as the best years of their lives, the dearest hopes, the deepest faiths. The last creak of that last wagon, I like to think, is a sound I shall never forget.