

MAKING A LIVING

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EVER since man was cast upon this rather precarious old planet, the question of bread has possessed him. To live, to have his being, to give expression to the physical urges of his nature, to take thought with himself, to look out on the vastness and glory of the heavens and feel the awe and emotions that linked him with a Supreme Design—all postulated that a bodily mechanism, of great complexity, should be kept working, through the energy generated by demand and supply. In other words, through hunger and food. His first tussles, therefore, with the resources of a stern, if honest nature, were economic. He had to swap the energies of his brawn and brain for the things he needed from the soil, lakes, sea, rivers and forests. If he failed in this strenuous bargaining, he died. There was no compromise. A hard school, it seems, we started our early training in, and it is little wonder this primitive precept of making a living still abides as the embryonic cell of all our economic creations. The pioneer cleared the forests and tilled the soil so that he could eat and so that he might insure this vital necessity for himself and his dependents against the contingencies of the future. The early missionaries braved the terrors of the unbroken forests and savage men to spread the light of the gospel; but, as they trimmed their lamps, they kept an eye on their food bags. The channels of the mind must be kept vitalized and healthy in order that the crystal currents of the spiritual and intellectual may flow unimpeded and find in sense their full powers of expression. Brain cells don't behave well unless they are properly fed; and whether they make our highest thoughts or give them currency only through an earthy mould matters not so far as does their dependence upon the fruits of the fields. It is bread, therefore, from start to finish. The one prayer Divinity formulated contains, as its first petition, a request for our daily bread.

The generation I grew up with seemed well charged with the basic economics of daily bread. Three generations remote from the pioneer, one heard little, outside of honest charity, of the subtle art of eating without corresponding labor, or of risking the important matter of bodily raiment to an increased production of such resources as clothe the birds of the air and the lilies of the fields. I think our third generation of boys and girls, of men and women, were a pretty practical lot. They

ad to be. Better off in many ways than our fathers and pioneer grandfathers, yet it needed the co-ordinated labor of every member of the family unit to keep things going well. Worked out on this plan, in which every one did his bit, the large family laid its way right through to adult life, and after that, if any selected to remain on the old homestead. If you are looking for resourceful individualism in guiding and controlling a system of co-operation, I suggest the pioneer and his family in those olden days in Nova Scotia; and I think I may add too, perhaps with some reservations, their two succeeding generations.

In my old neighborhood, getting some schooling was important, but it had to be fitted in so that the family resources might not suffer too much. Getting to school we understood to be a privilege graciously vouchsafed by parents, who naturally bore the heavier burden and who looked for what help we could give. And that was work in and out of school. In school, well, the teacher saw to that; and if reports from this source were bad for a testing period, the boy or girl concerned was likely to be withdrawn to full-time employment about the place or in the household. Wasting time anywhere was not in the scheme of things as we knew them in our growing years on the farm. "In school, all day—now get about your jobs and earn your schooling, else you will not be allowed to go to school tomorrow"—the dictum, I recall, of a real honest-to-god dictator of those days. He was the head of a family. His authority, it is true, stopped abruptly at his own line fence. With allowances for diverse personal foibles and the like, the fellow on the other side of the fence ruled his kingdom the same way. Between the two, perfect equality of status and good-neighbor relations were the rule. Reduced to other phrasing, it was a good-neighbor policy so long as each dictator minded his own business and devoted himself to moulding the habits and character of his own household. When he interfered in matters that, by the rule of form and substance, belonged to the other side of the line fence, there were likely to be "incidents"; and since diplomatic speech in my old neighborhood was as yet hardly an art, hostilities in some form were wont to super-vene. Social and business relations between the two houses could cease until time and more pleasant incidents dispelled the shadows. It did not take long, for the fierce old feuds of other times and places were not part of their belligerent technique. Even a real scrap, in which bare knuckles and real hay-

maker swings formed the *modus operandi*, often cleared the over-charged bosoms of the combatants, and left behind that sense of respectful satisfaction the Highland Chief, Roderick Dhu, is said to have felt on a certain memorable occasion.

The people in my old district were Highland extraction, with here and there enough Irish to make St. Patrick's day an event of importance. The "wandering Celt" in Nova Scotia, disjoined from his chief and clan, soon learned to fraternize on equal terms with all his countrymen, of whatever clan cleavage; so that in a third generation there seemed little trace left of the bitter old feuds of Highland days. It was the clan, not the individual adherent, that bred and fostered old spites. A new, free land where every real man could own his own ground and establish his own independence was no breeding place for the blind servility that goes with systems in which the soul and will have no voice of their own. Civilization was born the day man discovered he could make the soil yield him his daily bread. The old civilization grew up from the soil, and many of its great roots are still sending up sustaining purpose and stability to the dizzy superstructures of our own time. The ancient dictum stands as of old: "By the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat bread."—with some difference in its operation, however. Now a minority of the earth's people sweat and labor to produce bread for themselves; also, to feed the great masses and enable them to create the enormously complicated upgrowths of civilization, and to grow bread, too, for those who cannot work and for those that will not work. All of which is a good sized order for the man of the soil. Some of them think the giant superstructure they created is forgetting its origin and is running itself as if it had forgotten that upon their broad shoulders it rests and breathes. Democracy, like some of the units that compose it, sometimes forgets the degree from which it has sprung. Life is of the earth and the lower strata of the air. There is none, we are told, in the stratosphere. Maybe Democracy has been on cushions and wheels too long. It might be good for Old Man Democracy to copy what we used to do long ago in our country school days; namely, when the winter is past, that he should take off his boots and socks and walk barefoot in the earth for a while, to feel on the soles of his feet the cool, fresh soil which feeds him; to re-educate his reflexes with the touch of honest old Mother Earth; and perhaps, if he could be so humble, just to put his ear close to the ground to hear the awakening souffle of the pregnant soil, and from

afar off, to catch the muffled rumblings of discontent and possible danger. There are some who say that in our own country Democracy is not behaving as well as formerly, and that the old zest for the soil and farm, we knew so well in many of our forebears, is being lost. A good way to get our proper bearings is to think back to where we started, pick up our earlier blazing and rechart part of our present and future course.

Mixed farming was the kind I knew and served as a youth. A farmer might lean a bit more to one type of production than to another, but on the whole, the basic economic principle adopted by the most ambitious and discerning farmers was to produce all the family's requirements in food, clothing, leather for boots and shoes, and incidental things that entered into the life of the household. Surpluses in food, cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry were sold. Money was needed to buy what even the best distributed resources of the farm could not produce. The best laid plans could not foresee sickness, destructive droughts and the pricks and scorn of evil fortune. And so they laid up against such contingencies. It was a small reserve fund, of course, but it met as a rule the unappraisable obligations and kept unchecked the independence and economic sufficiency of the family. "So that we shall not have to depend on anybody"—how often I heard such a remark. There was much of give and take among our neighbors, but my recollection that borrowing was more a custom than business routine; a sort of social auxiliary, which widened the scope for interchange of visits between the houses. It would occur to Mrs. S. on a fine afternoon that she would borrow a few drams of tea from her neighbor, whom she had "not set eyes on" for some time—her own supply was getting low anyhow—and she would set off over the hills and across the level supported by a perfectly accepted motive for the visit. Tea borrowing had long been recognized as a popular medium for meeting small incidental obligations and exchanging social civilities. The borrower got the required portion, of course, and by the unwavering law of custom enjoyed a cup of the same beverage on the hospitality of the house. The same routine was repeated when the borrowed tea was returned. Reciprocal visits, after an identical technique, blended palates and social amenities into a product that would make Chase and Sanborne's radio talks sound like pretty average stuff. Or perhaps the man himself rattled the line fence and crossed the fields to borrow a fig or Pictou twist. The borrowing urge in his case came at night

after supper, the witching time of our lady Nicotine. At least, in my old neighborhood it was her gala hour. In Pictou twist she had a medium of expression which was potency itself. No emotion of love, or rage, or spiritual ecstasy could imperil the mechanism or disturb the rhythm by which it set thoughts on the wing and kept them flying about the hearth circle.

The day had been stormy, and the shop at the Cross Roads could not be reached without physical hardships which even a ravishing appetite for tobacco would gambol from. So the borrower spent the long hours of a necessarily inactive day without so much as a "pull at the pipe." Only smokers of the Pictou twist of a bygone day could understand how near to sainthood he was, if only such heroic self-denial were given qualifying recognition. For the smoking appetite, like some other much less worthy ones, grows by what it feeds on and the feeding here excelled, above any product, in keeping desire and satisfaction on the best of terms and running on in never ending sequence. No present day cigarette smoker could be expected to get my drift; but I am sure Alfred Tennyson, Carlyle and a few others could, though obliged to use a lesser tobacco than Pictou twist. How often great intellect and tobacco have sat it out together? A coincidence, perhaps, but it was back in the days of Pictou's educational ascendancy that its famous twist flourished most. Only an unthinking fellow, born and corrupted somewhere else, would dare suggest a relation of cause and effect. But we never know. Hard to tell what words of wisdom were spelled out by the thin blue-gray smoke of their pipes as the early thinkers of Pictou pondered a hope and a way to an intellectual goal.

Our neighbor from over the line fished from the depths of a coat pocket a well seasoned clay pipe as he took the visitor's place before the fire. It had a large thick bowl and a stem that seemed to have grown out from the bottom, leaving a sort of calcified bud to mark its setting forth. In its original state the stem was too long for pocket transportation, and so was broken to meet this requirement. The short stem drew the smoker close to the smouldering source of his comfort, and called for a careful technique in lighting the fragrant weed. For these were the days of whiskers; great, bushy, untamed outgrowths which pretty well concealed the mouth and lips even before the added smoke screen of the burning twist began to emerge into the open spaces. There were no movie thrills for youngsters of our generation, and we caught some excitement watching

our evening visitor balancing a big red coal on his pipe, or applying a blazing kindling to the freshly filled bowl of cut tobacco, while the close area of his operations was profusely draped with inflammable whiskers. No accident ever happened. I don't know why.

The men folk on such occasions did practically all the talking, and it was never long before the economics of their respective farms and households were under review. The long winter evenings drew into the conversation more of the lighter gossip of the neighborhood than other seasons, because, of course, subject matter was not so impressive as in times of seeding and harvesting. Mixed farming meant a variety of crops. Speculation was, therefore, rife on the kinds of soil and manure best suited for the desired crop. There were no government analysts about; literature on crop rotation, or indeed on any phase of agriculture, was as rare as ten-dollar bills; no study clubs at which experiences in techniques of production could be swapped and discussed; just incidental talks during which visiting neighbors sat with their pipes, and talked wisely, or otherwise, on the things nearest their thoughts, hopes and experiences. The gallery listeners on such occasions were the growing members of the new generation. We were modernists, of course, with a measure of cynicism for some at least of the theories and methods of our elders. Every group of youngsters know how much better they could do than their forebears, and the impulse being a perfectly healthy one, deserves a receptive and generous hearing. Juveniles, however, were not included in such conversations. The ethics were the dictatorial brand, and the elders were dictators. So we cocked an ear to pick up tidings of any new jobs for after school hours the next day, and with our remaining wits wrestled with the coast waters, capes and mountains of Asia in order to meet the geography lesson the next day, and to escape the school's penalty for an elusive mountain peak hiding itself away in the clouds of an over-charged memory.

The kitchen in the farm houses of my old neighborhood was always the best heated and lighted, and in many instances was the largest room in the house. Many vagaries of wealth and the pursuit of change and comfort have robbed the kitchen of much of its traditional status; but it remains still the ancient, vitalizing centre of the home. It means bread, and bread means life, and without life—oblivion. Perhaps we are nearer the facts of life when we are nearest their origin. The routine of cooking

on the kitchen stove added, rather than lessened, the zest of conversation. The steam from the capacious old black kettle had as many moods and as much constancy as Tennyson's *Brook*. The well browned earthenware teapot looked down from the top of the oven, where it kept its plump body comfortably warm and ready for the tea making, which, when neighbors called, was a sort of ritual. The dog, Snoozer, having spent the day charging his shaggy coat to capacity with the insect life congenial to such habitat and transport, shook himself vigorously behind the stove, and stretched to his evening repose with a comforting yawn, as if one hoarder, at least, of primary products had solved the problem of equitable distribution.

There was, therefore, a smack of utility in all things, visible and invisible, of the old-fashioned kitchen. Split hardwood of birch and beech kept the well groomed cooking range blazing, and kerosene lamps did the rest. In such environment problems of household and farm were discussed by the elders of the home; and, as often happened, with visiting neighbors who were anxious for what help they might get on their own ways and efforts of making a living. An appraisal of the returns of the last grist from the mill; how a spreading rot in potatoes stored in the cellar could be cured; why the mare went lame, and the litter of little pigs was numerically disappointing; and sundry matters that touched intimately their basic economics—all were on the evening agenda. It is well, therefore, in the fitness of things, when you think of what Tennyson called the common sense of most, to spare a passing nod for the pooled wisdom of those kitchen conferences.

In my old neighborhood making a living tapped resources other than those of mixed farming. Trees, once the enemy of the pioneer, took on increasing value with the development of the lumber industry. People in the settlement found it profitable, besides cutting and hauling the year's firewood, to do some lumbering as well. Apart from providing poles for the spring fencing, and putting carts, ploughs, harrows, and the like in repair, the winter season was barren of any real farming activity. The industrious ones found, however, plenty of useful work. Others favoured the bear's somniferous detachment during the winter months: they gave what livestock they had in their cold barns enough feed and attention to enable them barely to survive until the haven of springtime and green pastures, and otherwise did little useful labor. I think there were few of these, but without some it would hardly

re been a normal community. There was always the fellow who would not provide firewood in advance of his immediate needs; so, when a big snow storm made the woods inaccessible at a time, he met the emergency by burning for fuel the dried ends of fences he had built with much labor the previous spring. In the community his utter lack of economic planning was pointed out by the more industrious ones as the thing to avoid, and perhaps in this way his easy going habits served some purpose. He would work day or night to help a neighbor in distress, but on his own side of the line there were few emergencies that could quicken his pace or urge him afar from a long practised and reposeful routine. He would tell his neighbors the latest techniques for destroying the potato beetle, but in his own field he treated the pests with indifference and, perhaps, some generosity. Detail was hateful to him, for he was a philosopher at heart. He lived and died poor. The soil was a jealous mother. She permits her offspring the glories of a starry firmament, but he must stand by her own side; she claims the strength of his arm, his undivided will, even his life, in return for the sustaining things of life, which she alone, for all the world, has power to bestow.

He that by the plough would thrive,
Himself must either hold or drive.

Frames for all projected buildings were made during the winter months. Trees of suitable length and thickness were selected with the axe, measured to the requirements of sills, beams, rafters and studding for the proposed new house or barn, and then hewed with the broad-axe. When finished, each unit presented four rectangular surfaces and two squared ends. It was then called a piece of scantling. Tall, smooth black spruce was the usual choice, although hemlock was often used when available, and an older generation of builders hewed their scantling from the primeval pines, which, herded with the lesser kinds of softwood, were then plentiful in the forest parts of most of the farms. To the man with the broad-axe pine was a delight; soft and knotless, light and durable, it found its way into many of the old time frame houses and barns, and none of the parish churches could stand with becoming dignity on their respective rocks without the additional stability rendered by the strength and constancy of this good old saint of the Nova Scotia woods.

Not all choppers were good hewers. A certain technique

and much practice were needed for a proper job. He was probably a genius who fashioned the first ploughshare. I think the man who, with a rough, woodsman's broad axe, hews four equal perfectly smooth surfaces on the trunk of a forest giant is a good deal of an artist. I recall one such hewer in my old neighborhood. He was often sought for very particular jobs. He wielded his broad axe with an unerring precision that might arouse the interest, if not the envy, of a skilful surgeon. A man of few words, which filtered through a great beard, he assumed a mood of strong silence while he hewed, and showed irritation if conversation was pressed upon him. He bore a good Highland name, and as I was learning a little history then in the old school I used to think, as I watched him wield the broad axe, that it was just such a stroke Robert Bruce had employed at Bannockburn when he notched DeBoune's rash head and proceeded to hew red surfaces on every side of the English army. The tiny streamlets of heredity and race may change their form as they spread out on the shoals of time, but probably never their substance.

Other structural requirements for the new buildings had to come from the woods, and the farmer with the elder boys of the family changed over to lumbering. Boards, planks and shingles were next, and rigid economics decreed they should all be provided by the labor of the family unit. Any cash outlay involved was reserved for the more technical work of framing, and in the case of a residence, for the simple designing and finishing required. Apart from the mason, who did the chimney and walled the cellar with field stone and mortar of his own making, a carpenter of the neighborhood, assisted by the handy ones of the family corps, did all the rest. A carpenter was then architect, framer, painter, sash maker, glazier and all other artisans required in building. He spent three years with a master carpenter learning his trade, during which time he received no wages, it being an accepted principle that the training was an equitable compensation. The graduate of this three-year course was no specialist, but he was a resourceful craftsman in all manner of woodwork, and that wonderful tool chest of his spoke with the tongues of saws and planes and augers to the inevitable groups of youngsters that hung about in the odor of the pine and spruce sawdust and shavings.