

HAYING ON THE OLD FARM

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HAYING on The Old Farm begins about the first of July. There are some who hold that this is too early, and that the grass should be allowed longer to mature; but the wise farmer knows that there is more good fodder in hay cut before it is too ripe and well cured than in the biggest crop that has been left until the stalks are dry and wooden. There is a preliminary clipping around the yard, clearing away the grass from the thick rose bushes whereon the red roses now hang, and from the small flower beds with their carefully sodded edges. The practised hand spares the little flowers in these small beds, and some quiet blossoms now see the sun that could never before have peered through the surrounding herbage. Then, too, the rank, moist, sour grass from under the cherry trees is mown and raked out into the sunshine; to the occasional detriment of the razor edge of the scythe where it strikes hard upon a piece of dead limb half embedded in the earth, or upon a stone that was originally thrown at the too curious robins which perch upon the boughs and wait for the fruit to ripen. Perhaps an acre of land is thus cleared away around the buildings, so that when haying proper begins there may be nothing in the way of the driver as he manoeuvres the team into the big barn doors.

There is a sort of lull just before haying. It is not that work is not done regularly and all day long. The lull is psychological, and is accompanied by a thrill of expectation. Before haying, it is spring. Planting and hoeing have been going on since the brown earth first became dry and warm enough to turn with the plough; and indeed turnips may be planted or buckwheat sown on a piece of sod fresh turned after an early cutting of the grass. After haying, it is autumn. One goes on with no perceptible change to the harvesting of grain and roots and the picking of apples; until when the turnips are going into the cellar, snow may be drifting lazily beneath a gray sky, or driven swiftly before an east wind. From the time the snow melts, one looks forward to haying; after the hay is in, one looks forward to winter. Haying is the real turning point of the year; and though not to the philosopher the most interesting part of the year's work, it is to the public the most spectacular.

Haying is not now the epic adventure that it was before the advent of machinery. There is a subdued note about farming as the farmer changes into skilled operative—in the narrower sense—or merchant. Someone else—anyone else—may surpass him in these callings. It is only as he keeps close to the earth and rates her affection above gold, that he can really succeed. On the farm as elsewhere, the applications of science have increased comfort and diminished joy. A tool that a man can use by his own strength—a scythe or axe—becomes part of him and he is its master. The farm waggon is a simple thing that can be made in the nearest village and operated by a child. But the mowing machine is a fearsome monster, that comes from abroad, and is highly complicated and dangerous to the unskilled hand. This is not in praise or blame of the past, but in recognition of the facts.

On The Old Farm and in its neighbourhood the time when the haying was done by hand is easily within the memory of men who still do a full day's work. The preliminary clipping about the yard is finished. Tools are carefully examined. Teeth from the flexible ash are fitted into the delinquent rakes. Scythes are carefully ground. The old grindstone stands in a shady corner, and is turned by hand. A skilled workman holds the long curved blade solidly upon the surface of the stone, while his assistant turns wearily, steadily, more or less patiently, ever and anon deftly pouring water upon the complaining stone to prevent its growing hot. A clumsy workman might let the stone stop while applying water, but not one who knows his business. When the task is finished, the scythe is carefully fastened upon its strangely crooked snath. There is much character in scythes. A too ambitious and boastful mower may hang his scythe out so that it takes too large a bite of grass and makes a heavy demand upon his strength; but a prudent man hangs it so that it takes in a natural swing just what he can cut easily. Then one must consider the nature of the crop to be cut; for in light, thin grass one may take more than in that which is heavy and thick and perhaps lodged by wind and rain. Further, one employs a different stroke in cutting the short, tough salt grass of the marsh; but cutting the salt marsh is another story, as many a neophyte finds to his cost.

There is also the trick of whetting one's scythe properly; and this trick, while it may be labouriously acquired, or many men would never mow, is in its essence a natural gift like an ear for music or a head for mathematics. The deft, apposite touch of the stone that sharpens but does not turn the edge, the skill in detecting and treating each blunted spot, these are gifts given.

to some and withheld from others; and great is the difference. The mowers, too, have their well-known signals; and an expert will contrive to put a good edge upon a scythe and at the same time in ringing and harsh, though not unmusical, notes to whet a challenge signifying to all and sundry his willingness to race any man across the field.

On a fine morning in the early part of the week—preferably on Monday morning—the mowers strike in at the serious haying on The Old Farm. The days are just beginning to shorten, a fact not obvious to dwellers in cities, but quickly noted by the farmer. Everyone is early astir. In the old days the eight hour rule never was observed at any time, and especially not in haying. The dew is heavy on the grass when it begins to fall before the scythe. Steadily the mowers sweep on with the prolonged swishing sound, and a sinuous glide of the body. Everyone is fresh, but also at the beginning of the season, stiff; and they all need to be limbered up before they try each other's skill. Some have mown in company before; and they, as old hands, are not interested in competition, since each knows the other's speed; but those who have not previously met on the field are always willing to test themselves against their rivals, even if the test be not obvious to the others. It is easy to tell when the man behind is crowding one, though he may not openly throw the grass on one's heels; and when the man in front is running away—or thinks he is. The Master of The Old Farm comes in the rear, and there are no laggards. He presses on without haste and without rest; his long experience knows to a hair what a reasonable man should do in the field; and he expects that, no more and no less. For a man has no right to pose as a good haymaker and receive a good haymaker's wage if he cannot do a good haymaker's work. There are four men in front of him: Joshua of the auburn hair, and Jim the tough and dark and wiry, and Frank, the young fellow just trying his hand, and very anxious to qualify at eighteen as a full grown man, and Bill from a distant region—five or six miles distant—who intends to show the natives how the thing is done, and whose tongue, like that of Odysseus, does not hesitate to state that he is Bill, the son of Tom, known to all men for his skill, and that his fame reaches heaven or the vicinity thereof. Joshua of the auburn locks is the only man to dispute with him; for Joshua, though tried and true, is not disinclined to mention his own merits, though his tongue is kept in check by his innate fear—never confessed—for the Master, who comes behind with that steady, powerful stroke, ever and anon throwing a genial question at the voluble Bill. Bill thinks that

he is making a vast impression, and Jim, the tough, dark man smiles his cynical smile. Jim is the best man of the lot, barring the Master, and knows it and knows that the boss knows it, and is very well content to let the braggart Bill and the simple Joshua waste language on that fine July morning. And Frank is a dour youth, who keeps silence because he knows his place and wants to prove himself a man.

There are many things good to look at while one mows on The Old Farm on a bright July morning, and the mowers see them all, but they do not talk about them. The *altitudo* of the unsophisticated townsman on tourist pleasure bent is alien to their nature. They assume the sky and the genial sun and the trees and the dark green potatoes and the shady orchard and the encircling woods with the birds in the trees and the flowers that fall before the scythe, as necessary parts of a well-regulated life and say no more about them. The conversation, as it moves away from Bill's achievements, turns to politics and business and the latest news from Wall St. that appeared in the St. John paper; and even Jim, who has worked in New York on his trial trip to the States, gets enthusiastic over the beauties and wickedness of stock manipulation. But the grass falls steadily, and at ten the Master calls a halt for lunch which appears forthwith. The lunch is light—just a few huge pieces of seductive and succulent gingerbread, and a small pail of sweetened oatmeal and water, or perhaps a gallon or two of buttermilk or cider. There is nothing heavy, and no great quantity, but the change is good, and there is a hearty gossip for a few minutes. After that Joshua and Frank shake out what hay has been cut, while the others resume the scythe until such time as they shall be caught by the shakers. Bill considers that his mowing is impressive, as it is; his swath is narrow, and not cut clean.

The sun is about at the turn—toward ox-losing time, as Homer puts it—when the strident roar of the conch shell from the house summons to dinner. Dinner is no time for loitering. The mid-day sun is a powerful ally in haying. After dinner, scythes are carefully examined and a little grinding is done; and everyone turns out to rake. The old hand-rake looks so easy to use—and is such a cruel deceit to the unwary. Teeth break without reason—vines, sticks and stones and impatient jerks will tear them out; and if a tooth gives way without due cause, one hears Jim's gentle, "Couldn't you break that up better with the axe?" Again the Master comes behind; and this time he has the heaviest work, for the windrow gets progressively bigger as each man draws it in.

The ground looks bare and queer where the grass is removed. Now and again a harmless green snake wriggles off to safer cover. One may find a mouse's nest, whose diminutive inmates betray themselves by shrill little squeaks. These cause hardly a ripple of comment, but the big brown snakes that occasionally appear are sometimes chased and killed; why, one hardly knows. They do no harm, but they look as if they meant mischief. And in spots the flora is much more interesting than the fauna. There are great stems of strawberries that wither and dry in the sun, and the fragrant clover exhales an odour beyond the perfumes of Araby.

This is a short day, as there is no hauling to be done. The hay stands neatly cocked before supper time. Well made haycocks must be clean around the bottom and firmly pressed together in the centre so as to afford the least possible hold for the water. One can prognosticate the weather with fair probability—but only fair; and a thunder storm may come up the Bay without much warning. This hay is not yet cured, but a few hours of sun tomorrow will complete the process.

Supper is a more leisurely time, though a few days later with a lot of hay to come in it will not be so. And after supper Jack and Frank and the wily Jim go off to mow for an hour or two in the early evening—the best time for mowing, when the grass stands straight and tall and clean, as if asking to be cut. Bill goes into the barn answering the summons of the Master, who gently asks him his price per day, pays him, and tells him that he will not again be needed on The Old Farm. Bill has made his impression, and no harsh words have been spoken; but he has opportunity for meditation on the ethics of reliable advertising.

In the nature of things the regular routine cannot start before the second day when there will be hay to haul in. So on the second morning mowing begins as usual, though now there are only four mowers; and as soon as the dew is off, two men go to open and shake out all the hay that is down, while two spend an hour or so in the turnip field thinning and weeding. By the careful use of odd hours the growing crops may all be kept in good shape through the haying season. The casual hired man, who usually picks the jobs that call for unencumbered action and not for drudgery, is likely to scorn the hours of weeding and thinning and tending small plants; but the owner of the farm neglects this task at his own risk, and to the detriment of food for his barn and cellar and cash for his pocket. Good farming is not possible where weeds abound.

After an early dinner, the hauling in begins. Many farms prefer the capacious and shapely Dutch rack for this purpose; but on the Old Farm an ordinary "wood body" with long stakes is used. This rig requires extra care at the beginning of the loading; but as soon as the stakes are solidly filled with well tramped hay, there is space whereon the load may be developed to any size consistent with the limitations of the barn floor. But only a silly man tries to bring in too large a load from his home field. Results are achieved more quickly by repeated loads of moderate size. In the same way one mark of a good pitcher is his preference for small forkfuls; it is a new hand or a boastful man that overloads himself or his team.

Before the actual loading there is a quick trip over the field to turn the opened hay. Sun and air do the more indispensable part of the work in haying, and as in most of the major activities of the world men can only seize their proper opportunities. Light and fragrant, the hay responds to the touch of the fork. There is a gleeful rustle at the touch in properly cured grass, and the "feel" of it as it flies up lightly from the fork is an important bit of evidence as to its fitness to go into the barn. When the hay is turned, the team is brought on and the business of hauling begins.

By an easy figure of speech, the man who stands on the waggon and arranges the hay as it comes to him is said to load. He is also said to "build the load" or sometimes simply to "build." Loading requires skill, pitching, strength; and raking after, agility—especially on a windy day when the vagrant wisps may fly in any direction over the field. Yet raking after the cart is a job for boys or women, and a man does not admire himself for skill in this art as he does if he is expert at mowing or loading. Nowadays one lets the scatterings go, and gets them afterwards with the horse-rake; and here and there a big loading machine trails behind the waggon and astride the windrow, gobbles up the hay, and spews it out upon the perspiring loaders; but there was a superior neatness and accuracy about the old system. So Josh pursues his faithful and undistinguished career with the lithe hand-rake and conscious rectitude, the wiry Jim pitches on and the Master loads, while Frank is sent ahead to rake together the cocks for convenience.

The loading does not take very long, and the team is headed for the barn. If there were far to go, or if the burntland hay were being gathered among cradlehills and stumps, the load would be bound. A withy pole of spruce or hackmatack would be laid on top lengthwise of the load, caught in front with rope or chain,

hauled down behind as tight as one can conveniently haul it, and so secured. Thus fastened, a load of hay might be hauled to Timbuctoo with safety. It may be overturned, but otherwise cannot be hurt. But in the smooth home field nothing of the sort is considered.

When the barn is reached, the oxen stand in patient rumination while the load is thrown off. The swallows pursue their unimpeded flight around without molestation. They are so used to the big barn and all the cattle and men that dwell in and around it that they may consider themselves as lawful inhabitants, as indeed they are, since law is only crystallized custom. As many as thirty of their nests have been counted under the deep eaves of the Big Barn; and even within the edifice they have been known to build near the ridgepole, a region in which they are not welcome. And beyond a few inquisitive twitters they take no interest in the work on hand.

There is an ancient convention that, like many of its kind, is not a rule of universal application but a guide in cases of uncertainty, "Who pitches on, pitches off." But that means only, "do this if you can think of nothing better." There is justice in it; for pitching on and pitching off are of nearly equal difficulty. A good loader has light work in the field, and it is only fair that he should sweat in the mow—the most unpleasant job of the season. But while the barn is empty and cool, no one need suffer in unloading; so Josh climbs upon the load with Jim, and they soon throw the hay upon the mow where the Master stows it about. Later on, when the barn is crammed, the mow will be a place for reducing exercises. The process continues until all the hay that was left cocked the night before is safe in the barn. It is cured, and a few handfuls of salt are thrown here and there as a sort of general preservative. Then the early evening meal, raking again, the evening chores, the last smoke, and rest.

These are the old customs and in fine weather. There are tragic interruptions of thunderstorms soaking the hay when half dry, and the long depressing days of fog sometimes strike in when least wanted. And now in the new style there are the swift machines and fewer hired men. The mowing machine requires care and skill, but it never becomes part of one's personality as does the scythe of a good mower or the axe of a good chopper. One must watch that the curved iron run just a few inches outside the standing grass in the open space prepared by the board between that and the fallen swath; if it goes too far to the right, there is a thin streak of standing grass left; if too far to the left, the machine cuts a

narrow swath and does not do its full work, and may further collect grass enough upon the guards to clog the knives. One must watch, too, that the edges of the sections be not caught by loose stones. Large rocks can be seen without watching, and will not come between the guards; the knife passes safely over them. And there is the occasional ant-hill that may treat the sharp points to a bath of gravel. Sometimes, too, the passage of the horse and mower arouses the ire of a nest of hornets from the neighboring tree. They suddenly goad the faithful horse to fury; and an angry horse intent upon flight, and attached to a mower with its knife of razor edge moving at lightening speed, is an animal to be handled with prudence and firmness. It is amazing how many opportunities there are on the farm for accidents, if we care to embrace them; but in almost every case they glide harmlessly by. There is a strange fascination, too, in watching the grass fall over the knife, to the accompaniment of the steady hum which must not be allowed to change to a rattle. The grass falls not with the languid motion of the "flower severed by the plough"; but with a swift leap. One seems to be rowing up against an endless cataract of grass, and now and then one strikes a snag if the grass is moist and twisted clover. One may need to dismount and remove the obstruction by hand, to the no small comfort and amusement of the horse.

The rake, too, has its interest of a lighter sort. It needs the dexterous touch of hand or foot or both upon the lever to deliver its burden at the appointed place on the windrow. The click of the teeth is like the rapid fire of diminutive guns—perhaps the guns of the fairies. And in the lull or at a pause may come from a neighboring fence rail—or so it seems—the strong vibrant buzzing cry of *Tithonus*. Raking is done mostly in the afternoon. The shadows lengthen as the sun moves on; "the longer shadows fall", in this case, "from the little hills", and the "neighboring houses smoke", as they did for *Tityrus* and *Meliboeus*, and invite us to supper.

After supper the cows know as they come to the barn that something new and pleasant has happened, and it may be they appreciate the labour of getting their winter food. From the stable door one may look over the wide expanse of orchard and hay-field, forest and garden. One may dwell on the beauties of evening; and one may see, too, just outside the barnyard fence a garden spot of incredible richness where once the old barn stood. Now the young squash vines begin to push out the tiny tendrils among diminutive stalks of corn that usually accompany them. And one may, in contemplating this scene of Eden, be drawn to pursue

one of the lesser serpents,—the elusive squash-bug—with maledictions and prepared poison. And so the sun goes down.

When chores are over, the men gather around the door of The Old House for a last good smoke. Little they reckon of Calverly, but like him they know that the gracious weed is “at close of day possibly sweetest.” The night is still, and the smoke gratefully perfumes the crisp evening air that almost never in Nova Scotia loses its cool tang. The scythes have been touched up for their morning task. Gossip flows lazily on. In the pasture nearby, the oxen graze to the cheerful accompaniment of their bells. The twilight grows deeper, and the party separate until morning.

As the last sound of human action dies away, the night settles into that restful harmony of quiet noises never known to towns. The dew falls thick, and, in the dim light, the dark line of the standing grass in the field looks like an army of miniature grenadiers. From his pen the pig snores comfortably his thanks for life and food. The tinkle of the bell from the barn emphasizes the chewing of the meditative cow. The purl of the brook, as it runs its diminished course over the broken cliff by Glooscap’s rock, comes pleasant to the ear. Somewhere in the gathering darkness a nighthawk calls, and the hoot of a distant owl starts an uneasy shiver among the fowls upon their neighboring perch. And, after a little, the belated moon peers placidly above the dark green spruce of the ox-pasture, and sheds its candid light over the sentinel haycocks below the orchard and all the works of men and cattle that lie beyond.