

We Farmers Are the True Rulers

MY DEAR JOHNNIE—Or perhaps I should say "My Poor Johnnie." I was both astonished and surprised to learn that your grandfather (whom I had always considered to be as tough and as durable and—to me—as unappetising as a piece of biltong) had died. But he had lived such a very long time that I looked upon him as an earnest of immortality. He is now, we may say, with God; and his leaving you his farm of Hardacres was, I imagine, prompted by malice rather than family affection or good-nature.

I am delighted to hear that you intend to turn farmer and wrestle with the recalcitrant and obdurate soil of Hardacres—a farm which would have broken your grandfather's heart if he had not been born noticeably deficient in that organ. But wonders can be achieved with modern methods, and Hardacres may yet rival (the Perfumed Garden of) a Persian Paradise. I think your decision does infinite credit to both your head and your heart. When I think of the number of dreary and equivocal callings you might have followed I am deeply flattered to think that, like me, you have made the Virgilian choice "Fortunatus et ille deos qui novit agrestes."

You might, for instance, have become a mining engineer like your Uncle Joe, or an undertaker like your Uncle Ted. They were both of them members of the Underground during the war—hence their subsequent rather subterranean activities; but you will be concerned with the Earth's bright surface rather than its bowels.

You might—though this is unlikely—have peddled cosmetics like your Aunt Louisa; you might have become a bank manager like your Uncle Sam, and have squeezed credit with the relish of a cook squeezing a lemon or of that old rip your Uncle Horace squeezing a pretty girl.

Any of these courses you might have chosen, but wisely, I think, you have rejected the lot. Henceforth Success and Health and Wealth and Hardacres will go hand in hand. I note that you ask me for advice. This is something I have always given copiously and cheerfully. The mantle of Polonius has ever sat easily upon my shoulders. If the garnered wisdom of 64 summers is of any use to you it is very much at your disposal.

First, I think, you must learn to impose yourself socially, cultivate a certain arrogance; it is only right you should do so. The day has long since past when the farmers were regarded as ignorant earth-turning hinds with minds as muddy as their own fields, were off-scourings of humanity, living precariously on the threshold of the workhouse and the gaol.

All this has changed. Enormous numbers of people who in the past age would have been expeditiously disposed of by smallpox or the plague now survive to infest this fair planet. Each year, millions of fresh eyes peer anxiously into the world's larder. The world is filled to bursting-point with policemen, politicians, pedagogues and pimps, and over them all hunger casts its lean shadow. Every man is uneasily aware of his neighbour's presence or, at any rate, of his neighbour's appetite.

Who is to keep them all alive? The answer is, of course, my poor Johnnie, you and I—namely, the farmers. So instead of being looked down on as a boor and a bore you will find yourself

courted with fawning adulation. Farming, from being the Cinderella, has become the aristocrat of the professions. People still do not realise this, but they will.

A short time ago I was visited by a leading member of New Zealand's intelligentsia. He was decent enough to stay for a few days in the simple squalor of my home, but when farming or indeed any rural topic was mentioned he closed his eyes, sighed, folded his hands across a stomach more ample than that of a pregnant hippopotamus and assumed the expression of a bilious Buddha. After enduring this martyrdom for a short time he would stump off to meditate, pray, or slumber.

How very wrong he was! You and I, my poor Johnnie, as we very well know, are the true rulers; for we control men's bellies, or at least see that they are full or empty; and as Dr Johnson said, many years ago, "Sir, if a man does not mind his own belly he will not mind anything else." If all these supercilious clerks are not careful they will soon find themselves starving in a garret like any 18th century poetaster. We shall take the place of the old time patrons, but instead of a purse of guineas the reward will be, appropriately enough, a bunch of carrots or a sack of potatoes.

Powerful as you will be, I am anxious that your conduct should be wisely regulated. On the one hand I do not wish you to cultivate to excess the aristocratic pleasure of being disagreeable; but equally I would warn you against what has been called "the horrible pleasure of pleasing inferior people." You should be aware of your worth, but ready to assume the responsibilities our profession carries with it. The modern scholar is only too apt to assume that he has earned the applause of contemporaries and the gratitude of posterity if he produces some meagre monograph on the Consumption of Beer

COTSFORD BURDEN'S contribution to the NZBS series "My Poor Boy . . ."

in Middlesex during the Black Death; or Use and Abuse of Oysters in the Cloisters under Charles the Bold—but you cannot afford such luxuries. You must, as it were, take all knowledge by the throat and force it to give up its secrets.

As well as a farmer—or rather, to be a farmer—you must be something of a scientist, a lawyer, an accountant and an apothecary besides being somehow aware of, and in sympathy with, all that secret silent life that goes on all round you. You must acquire the art of listening; keep your ears open as well as your eyes. An enormous amount of farming wisdom is oral wisdom. The average farmer is, generally speaking, only inarticulate pen in hand. He will talk; and saleyard gossip is often more instructive than the college lecture room. This will help you to keep up to date, for very often what Giles says today, Lincoln and Massey will be teaching tomorrow.

You must have endless patience. There is no royal road to wealth from the land unless quite literally you strike a gold mine on the place. You cannot play confidence tricks on nature. You must be prepared for setbacks. An 18th century nobleman, tiring of urban delights, thought he would try his hand at farming. This is what happened—in his own words.

"I made a fine haystack but quarrelled with my wife as to the manner of drying the hay and building the stack. The haystack took fire, by which I had the double mortification of losing my hay and finding my wife had more sense than myself. I fell to drain a piece of low ground behind the house,

but I hit upon the tail of the rock and drained the well of the house, by which I can get no water for my victuals.

"I bought two score of six-year-old wethers for my own table; but a butcher who rented one of the fields put my mark upon his own carrion sheep; by which I have been living on carrion all the summer. I brewed much beer; but the small turned sour and the servants drank all the strong.

"Loving butter much and cream more, I bought two Dutch cows and had plenty of both. I made my wife a present of two more. She learned the way to market for their produce and I have never got a bowl of cream since.

"In one thing only have I succeeded. I have quarrelled with all my neighbours, so that, with a dozen gentlemen's seats in my view, I stalk alone like a lion in a desert."

These—allowing for differences in time and place—are the sort of minor disasters you will have to face; but do not, like him, become the dupe of disappointment and retire to the town—they are but passing shadows. Remember your farm is quite literally your own small kingdom. There are problems for the ruler and penalties for misuse. There are enduring rewards if you will earn them, but your subjects must not be pillaged nor your coinage debased—namely, you must look after your stock and manure your fields.

One thing you will never have, and that is a dull moment. You will struggle with fire and flood, and wind and snow. You will endure disastrous visitations from hail and frost, monstrous reversals of the ordinary course of nature. Forces over which you have no control will suddenly decide to play a malignant part in your affairs; wool may fall to sixpence; your sheep may be the merest of all worth a few paltry shillings. But it will not always be like this; at other times wool—that most unpredictable article of commerce—will soar to dizzy and crazy heights while your sheep will sell as if they

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