The Building of the Barn

BY ERNEST CROSBY

I.

There is a clamor of hammers striking nails into resounding wood, and of trowels clinking against stone, here where they are building the great stone barn.

It is the joyful noise of creation.

They are in haste to close it in, so that it may be launched in time to carry in its hold the ripening harvest of hay, and rye, and wheat, in another fortnight.

Though the carpenters are still at work within, and the masons finishing the east wall, yet the slaters have already half covered the long gable.

The roof-timbers stand out like the ribs of a ship, with keel turned skyward, destined, we hope, to sail down the years-to-come for a century or two, and to bear many an annual cargo of corn on its way from meadow to kitchen and manger.

Who knows but that under more brotherly skies it may become a communal barn, the centre of some better kind of great ranch-family.

The carpenters are flooring the main deck of the great farmship.

Half a dozen of them, on their knees, are driving long wire nails into the smooth white boards.

Their left hands are full of nails, and they thrust them into the pockets of their aprons for more.

It takes four or five strokes of the hammer to send the nail home, and each series of strokes forms a little musical motif of itself in the rising scale, with a dull thud at the end like a hand muffling the chords of an instrument.

The hollow roof, partly open to the sky, reverberates every note.

Two men are planing and sawing boards to proper dimensions on a pair of wooden horses, and the overseer is balancing himself on the bare beams and measuring the spaces with a footrule.
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The hoarse drone of the saw grows lower and lower, until the end of each board drops, splintered at the corner, on to the floor.

At the end of the barn we see the masons at work near the top of the narrowing wall, on a scaffold raised inside the building.

They stand in relief against the sky, like a frieze.

A cart, laden with rough stone, is backed up beneath them, and the teamster, standing on the load, lifts a stone with difficulty, and hands it up to two of the masons.

A workman brings mortar and cement by the hodful up an inclined plane.

There are two other masons engaged in laying stone:

One is a good-looking youngster just free from his apprenticeship, and evidently proud of his craft;

His cap is jauntily tipped over his curly hair, and he has stuck a geranium in the buttonhole of his waistcoat;

He looks as if he were thinking of the village girls, but not enough to interfere with his work, and he taps his trowel against the stone, harder and more frequently than is necessary, as he slashes the mortar into the crevices.

The master mason is setting a large stone at the corner, aligning it with the cord stretched along the wall above it, with blows from the handle of his tool; while he bends over and looks down the precipice outside, and then scrapes off the oozy, bulging line of mortar and deposits it on top of the stone, the back of his head nearly touching the eaves.

We must go outside to watch the slaters on the roof.

There are three of them up there, with their tools playing their own kind of music on the thin slate.

The little grey-bearded Scotchman moves up and down, sitting and kneeling, from gutter to ridge, like a kobold.
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Two boys bring the slate up a long ladder from the ground, piling it on their left shoulders, and mounting slowly round by round.

The old man takes it from them, weighs each slate in his hand; giving it a finishing touch at the edges with his slate-hammer, and then, knocking two holes in it with the sharp butt-end for the fastenings, he passes it on to his companions.

II.

There is much more here than a stone barn a-building, and a handful of workmen.

The fires are here that welded the clay into blue-stone and slate in Palaeozoïc ages.

The forests of yellow-pine of Georgia that furnished the timber are here, and the great primeval trees from whose cones those forests sprang.

The men are here who first deserted their mountain caverns and built the earliest stone-cave in the open.

The man is here, too, who shaped the first knife of flint, and he who laid it aside for iron, and the one who first imitated thorns in metal and dreamed of nails, and the original tamer of horses, and the framer of ladders and modeler of wheels.

Vulcan is here and Tubal-Cain and Thor and all the great artisans and inventors.

The new stone barn is indeed the workshop of gods and demi-gods, and their very temple.

It is rooted, nave, transept and choir, in the inmost heart of the first Creation.

Here converge all the forces of the past and the thoughts of every epoch.
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Our materials, tools, minds, bodies, instincts and aspirations are all a heritage, and heirship seems to be our chiefest function.

We are at the narrow neck to which all the sands of eternity are crowding and through which they are dropping.

And as all the past led down to our barn, so the future spreads out before it.

How many generations of horses and kine, brothers and benefactors of men, will be comfortably housed in the crypt of this temple!

How many animals of all kinds, two-legged and four-legged and with and without feathers, will it feed!

How it will sow life broadcast: life which will swell out forever widening in geometrical progression!

And when, sooner or later, its final voyage is over, what new creative forces will issue from every plank and seam!

The stones and slate, built into new buildings, or ground into busy roadways, the wood blazing in winter fireplaces, the smoke and dust absorbed again by new forests, and merged into new geological strata, and all surely saved forever in some strong-box of the world’s treasure-house, and forever bearing interest!

This is no mere stone barn.

It is a link in the chain of creation, offspring and ancestor of all the ages.

We have the whole universe with us to-day: for all the past is here working for all the future.