WHY FARMING LACKS INTEREST TO THE AVERAGE FARMER

UNQUESTIONABLY the leading factor just now in the widespread effort to improve social and industrial conditions is the endeavor to solve the problem of getting people back from the cities to the farms, and in some way to make life in the country interesting and pleasurable enough to induce the sons and daughters of farmers to stay where they are and follow agriculture as a profession instead of flocking to the cities to swell the army of shop and factory workpeople. All sorts of expedients are suggested to relieve the emptiness and monotony of country life, and undoubtedly improved social and industrial conditions, such as will bring the farmer and his family into closer touch with the general progress of the age, would go far toward removing the prejudice against life in the country. Yet it seems to me, in the light of past and present experience, that these remedies will fail to accomplish the purpose for the reason that they do not go to the seat of the disease, and that merely adding to the complexity of life on the farm will not remove the deep-seated restlessness and discontent which drive the young people to seek the even more complex life in the cities.

From the viewpoint of the business man whose farm is his recreation and whose culture is sufficient to give him a keen appreciation of the natural beauties lying all around him, the insensibility of the average farmer to both the pleasure and the interest of life in the country is well-nigh inexplicable. The city man can conceive of no greater pleasure than planning and building his country home, laying out the grounds surrounding his house, experimenting with different kinds of crops and fertilizers on his land and trying his hand at raising chickens and cows and horses for his own use and for the market. But the farmer looks at it differently. His drudgery does not lie within the four bare walls of an office in the city, but out in the open fields and in doing the chores of the barnyard. There is no poetry for him in plowing, planting and reaping; none in the care of live stock; and his house, while it often stands for solid comfort, very seldom shows any perception of the qualities that make for interest and beauty. True, he could have all the pleasure out of farming that was ever experienced by the most ardent amateur farmer from Broadway. He has every advantage of long experience; he knows his ground; he knows his crops, and he generally knows how to handle chickens and horses and cows. The drought or the blight is no harder on his crops than on those of the fancy farm adjoining and his produce can usually be marketed to a much better advantage because it does not cost so much to raise.

Nevertheless, the average farmer here in the East gets very little pleasure out of his farm. His wife grows restless and discontented and his sons and daughters look forward eagerly to the time when they can get away to the city. What is the reason? I confess that it puzzled me until, for the
second time in my life, I took up farming myself. When I was a boy I worked on our own and neighboring farms out in Wisconsin. It was a new country, growing rapidly and full of interest in every way. The forests and plains, hills and rivers could not be surpassed for beauty anywhere in the farming regions of this country. I was a strong boy for my age and was expert in all kinds of farm work, so that there was no reason on earth why I should not have thoroughly enjoyed it and have been alive to the charm of everything around me. But I was not. I wanted to get away into a larger life; to do work that I felt would be more congenial and that would give me a chance to make a place for myself in the world. It never occurred to me that I could do this on the farm.

Now when in middle life I turn back to farming because of the interest and pleasure I find in it, I am beginning to realize why I was discontented as a boy and why so many other boys are restless and feel a sense of inadequacy and failure at the thought of being "only a farmer."

It is all in the mental attitude; but the mental attitude is not an affair of the individual. It never occurred to me when I was a boy to think of my work as being pleasant or interesting, because my parents, friends and neighbors did not regard work in that way. It was something that had to be done,—a result of the curse of Adam—but never to be thought of as allied in any way to pleasure. The natural beauty of the country appealed to me keenly even as a child, but I turned away from the sight and thought of that beauty to do my work never thinking it possible that I could make my work a part of the interest and pleasure of living. When we cleared land for a field we cleared a piece of land, generally square, that afterward lay like a patch or a blot upon the landscape, not in any sense fitting in with it and seeming a direct defiance to Nature rather than a taking advantage of her gifts. The first care was to obliterate everything Nature had done, to get at the bare ground and to use all the physical force that was in us to wring from it the harvest that we sought. When the task was done and we walked through the woods toward home, or perhaps snatched half an hour to go fishing, I was ready enough to see the beauty of the trees and the river, but the thought that it would have been just as easy to bring this sense of beauty and harmony into the day's work by working with Nature instead of against her never occurred to me any more than it did to any other of that farming population. The field might just as easily have been beautiful as ugly and have fallen in with the general plan of the landscape just as readily as a natural meadow or clearing among the trees. It would have been just as fertile and just as easy to work if we had taken account of the farm as a whole and had planned it as carefully with relation to the natural features around it as we would now plan a landscape garden; that the skill to do so would of course have been very limited does not enter into the case; the point is that the interest would have been there. It would have been a delight,—a piece of real creative work instead of drudgery to be done as soon as possible that there might be some little time left for the pleasure which was regarded as a separate thing.

The fact that pleasure is always considered a separate thing from work on the farm is the whole root of the matter. To the city man or the man who has gone back to the farm for peace and relief from other cares, the work in itself is the pleasure. If the interest of the farmer could once be roused to the point of finding that same pleasure for himself and teaching his children to find it, there would be no need of all this talk and effort to prevent the exodus from the country to the city. And if the agricultural schools could succeed in giving to the country boy sufficient knowledge of the interest and significance that really lies in every stroke of work he does; of the active mental effort that should go into farming as well as into any other form of business, we should no longer
have to complain of the falling off of our agriculture as compared with our manufactunes.

I realize this the more vividly now that I am turning all of my old knowledge of farming to the arranging and bringing under cultivation of the Craftsman Farms. There is one tract of about one hundred and fifty acres that has not been under cultivation for twenty years. It is all woods and hills and low-lying meadowlands with little streams running through it and springs here and there. The first thought that came to me when I saw it was a grateful realization of the kindly way in which Nature had covered over all the scars left there years ago by the sort of farming which took no heed of Nature’s ways. Stone fences had fallen down and had been overrun by vines, so that in some places they appeared to be mere loose heaps of rock. The hard lines that marked off the fields without any relation to the contour of hill and valley had been obliterated and the land had fallen into its old natural divisions. As a farm under cultivation, it could not have been particularly attractive; but after twenty years of lying fallow, it was one of the most exquisite bits of landscape it has ever been my good fortune to see.

Now, in bringing that land back under cultivation, I purpose to work with Nature instead of opposing her ways. The beautifying of the place is no concern of mine. All that is needed is that I shall not spoil it by plowing and filling in what is the natural place for a meadow; by cutting down trees where they ought to be left standing, in order to make clear spaces for fields larger than is necessary, and by putting straight hard lines of road and fence irrespective of the natural lines of the place. And in planning thus, to help Nature and at the same time to turn all the skill of which I am possessed to make the place productive and a good business proposition, I find that I have before me about as interesting a problem as I ever encountered. Talk about creative work! If there is not a sense of triumph in lead-

ing a road around natural rises and curves so cunningly that it does not appear to have been made there at all, but gives the impression of a track that naturally follows the line of the least resistance; in turning a natural creek into a trout stream with little ponds here and there that will not only add to the beauty of the place but will furnish an adequate water supply that can be piped to the top of the highest hill; in finding that the right place for the peach orchard, where it will be sunny and sheltered, is also just the place where a grove of peach trees will add the last touch of beauty to the surroundings,—all these are things which bring into play every creative power of which I am capable.

It is hard to teach an old farmer new ways of doing things, and particularly hard to induce him to take what he will consider a most absurd and romantic attitude toward farm work. But the boys and girls growing up on the farm, with their alert young minds reaching out in every direction for interest, for beauty, for something that is worth while, need only the right kind of instruction,—and need only a glimpse of the right viewpoint toward all of life and work—to show them that they need not seek in strange places for the happiness that they crave. It lies all around them. Every farm in the country presents its own problem and has its own possibilities. It offers a good field for the exercise of all the energy a boy has to spare, and if he could once learn to look at farming as he would at any other profession and to get out of it all the interest and pleasure that naturally belongs to it, he would have no temptation to become a salesman in a store, a workman in a factory, or even a struggling doctor, lawyer, or minister, who finds it hard to make both ends meet.

DIRECTLY in line with what we have been saying comes another thought that is brought out by the pictures and description, printed in this issue, of the Farmers National Bank at Owatonna. Those bankers have a clearer understand-
ing of the situation than all the theorists. They have recognized the fact that they live in a farming country and that, like all country bankers, they occupy a position in relation to the farmer that is peculiarly intimate. The farmer relies very closely upon his bank,—relies upon it not only to take care of his money, but to carry him through a hard season; relies on his banker for advice as to investments and enterprises, as well as for aid in difficulties. A farmer rarely goes to town that he does not have some business to transact at his bank, so that it is more or less the central place in the town.

Realizing this, these farsighted bank officials have given the thought and taken the trouble to make this country bank a building so beautiful that it would be a show place in any one of the large cities of America. They have taken pains that not only luxury but the best art which they could command shall be at the disposal of their friends the farmers when they come into town to look after their business. Instead of following precedent and making a handsome, showy, commonplace building with plenty of plate-glass and marble and brass fretwork about it, they called in Louis Sullivan, of all men in America the most fitted to grapple with a problem such as they offered, and under his guidance they spared no time, expense or pains in the putting up of a building that stands as an object lesson of beauty and fitness to every man and woman that enters its doors. It is none the less a sound and well managed bank for being housed in a building that it is a joy to see, any more than a farm is less productive and profitable for being beautiful. These bankers have put into stone what I have just tried to say in words,—the conviction that the one thing needed to make farm life interesting in this rich country of ours is the presence of beauty, and the belief that, if a man approaches farming as he would any other business in the world, there is no other that can be made more absorbingly interesting or more conducive to the healthy growth of mind and body.

NOTES

WHEN Mr. Barrie wrote “Sentimental Tommy” he gave to the world a character so typical that neither one’s friends nor oneself could hope to escape its application. When Mr. Hubert Henry Davies wrote “The Mollusc” he came very close to doing the same thing, so that, like Mr. Barrie, he may be said to have brought to notice a type so universal that no one can see the play and afterward escape a slight feeling of uneasiness under even a jesting imputation of “molluscry.”

Thomas Sundys was undoubtedly the pivot of his own particular universe because of his inborn aptitude for living and uttering the truth as it ought to be, rather than the truth as it is; but Mrs. Baxter, “the mollusc” of Mr. Davies’ play, occupies the central position in her domestic and social world because of her aptitude for absorbing the time, attention, and energy of every person around her, by reason of her genius for mastery inaction and for passive resistance to anything that threatens the smooth comfort of her daily life.

Mrs. Baxter never loses her temper; she is too well bred for that, too indolent, and has too much of the temperament of the placid pussy cat. Her manifold requirements are uttered in a sweet, plaintive, childish way which would make refusal, or even impatience, seem simply brutal. Taken separately, they do not seem to be large requirements, but in the mass they produce a state of affairs that amounts almost to white slavery for her husband and the pretty girl who fills the combined offices of governess and companion in her home, and whose life is being absorbed by the exactions of a mistress who is never aggressive, never disagreeable, but who nevertheless is a tyrant almost impossible to resist or escape from, as her mastery of every situation depends entirely upon her sweet impene-

trable obtuseness and delicate evasion of vexed questions. She is a combination of