THE BOY ON THE FARM: AND LIFE AS HE SEES IT: BY SIDNEY MORSE

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies;—
Hold you here, root and all in my hand.

Little flower—if I could understand
What you are, root and all and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.—Tennyson.

ONE day, in early spring, years ago, I remember trudging along a cart path behind a heavily loaded farm wagon. The way led through a patch of woodland that had been recently cut off. The season was yet too young for the advancing foliage to hide the ugliness of rotting brush piles, newly sprouting stumps and scraggly underbrush. All about lay loose stone and drift,—a significant reminder of some bygone glacier, but suggesting to me at that time only thoughts of sterility and hard, unprofitable labor. Presently a loose stone in one of the ruts caused the farm wagon to lurch to one side against the yielding earth which, crumbling under the impact, brought down a miniature landslide, and with it a cluster of wood violets. It was early morning and the dew evaporating from their petals exhaled a subtle perfume. As I plodded along after the creaking wagon, holding in the hollow of my hand the tiny plant with its score of leaves, its dozen blossoms and its tangle of rootlets fresh with the fragrance of the soil, it filled for the moment both eye and mind. And the natural loveliness of the violets bred in my boyish mind a keen perception of ideal beauty. The familiar lines of Tennyson, “Little flower, if I could understand what you are * * * I should know what God and man is,” came into my mind and set me musing. What did the poet mean by that? To know “what God and man is,”—is that possible? Did Tennyson know? How did he find out? Clearly the flower had not told him. Could I ever expect to learn so much? Evidently not from the little cluster of violets. Thus they served in the end only to arouse a train of thoughts and longings that it seemed impossible for me to satisfy.

How many a farm boy in his solitary wanderings through woods and fields is similarly questioned by Nature, and stifles a heart hunger to get at the meaning of the things he sees, but cannot rightly understand! Where is there one who has not inspected an outcropping ledge of rock upon a hilltop with perceptions and interest keener, in their way, than those of the most highly trained scientific observer, but with a half-unconscious sense of baffling mystery? Every boy must have denuded the rocks of their great clinging sheets of moss and lichen and noted the patch of black soil, crumbling sand and

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rough gravel beneath its surface. How came they here? How does the plant sustain its existence upon the side of the barren stone? Every boy must have noticed after the summer showers the little pools of water that remain in depressions upon the surface of the rock. In winter the snows gather and alternately thaw and freeze. Year by year a little soil accumulates. Presently a few weeds, wild flowers and native grasses grow. In after times, the depression is covered with a rank-growing patch of turf. What is the meaning of all this? A boy seats himself upon a projecting boulder of sandstone, conglomerate or mica schist and idly crumbles portions of the stone between his hands. Crevices yawn here and there from which wild flowers and underbrush sprout forth. The boy pulls a root of sassafras from its bed and observes that portions of the rock come with it, and about them the plant roots are curiously entwined. Large fragments of broken stone, disintegrated by frosts, lie at his feet. His eye traveling down the plowed land on the hillside, perceives that the larger fragments are most numerous upon the upper half of the slope, and that the soil of the flats just here is finer and free from pebbles. But yonder the flats are stony. The spirit of inquiry is aroused, is puzzled, and falls to sleep again. Cattle are grazing in the pasture lands. Birds in the groves and thickets are mating, nesting and rearing their young. Crops are planted, cultivated, harvested and stored in barns and cellars, or dispatched to market. Farm animals are bred, tended, slaughtered and sold or cured for human food. Meanwhile at home and in the neighboring farmhouses, the round of human life and the satisfaction of human wants in the simplest and most direct fashion is daily and yearly going on. The farm boy is close to Nature, and as the dawn of adolescence approaches, the mystery of life within and about him knocks at the gates of consciousness with a summons that will not be denied. The spirit of inquiry grows until curiosity becomes a power that is all but suffocating in its intensity. But the interpretation of the meaning of life and of sex is withheld. There is something wanting; the boy is hardly conscious what. Perhaps it is something that only the outer world can give.

THE farm boy even in summer has many hours of idleness, occurring, it may be, from weariness, from idleness, from stormy weather, on Sundays and on holidays. The winter season approaches. The life of the farm seems bound up like the frozen streams. The days are a monotonous round of rising and dressing, of breakfast, chores, idleness, dinner, more idleness, chores, supper, and to bed again. Little more, the farm boy feels, than eating and
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sleeping, with all the world to conquer and the mystery of God and man still to solve.

Evidently, so the farm boy concludes, the life of the farm is incomplete. It does not afford a key to the solution of this mystery. Perhaps the village, with its little group of more cultured, better educated and hence doubtless wiser men and women, will be found to have a larger meaning. The boy seeks employment in the local store or factory. Not only are his associates no wiser; not only are they baffled like himself by the mystery of life, but they suggest half-truths, false and partial meanings. And curiously enough, the boy finds himself shut off from contact with the few whom he imagines to be wiser than himself. The law of caste enters in. The boy who is well-read in the poets and has mused deeply over the mystery of life finds himself unwelcome in circles where such things are supposed to be understood, because of the clothes that he wears and the manners that he lacks. Evidently, he concludes, one must conquer these things. The path lies still abroad and the watchword is higher education. To these ends money must be had, and to have money one must abandon the farm for the paths of business and money-making ways. If one fails, then maybe the farm, with its narrow round of labor and of common things which bring a man so close to the mystery of life without affording its solution, may serve as an asylum of retreat. But the boy does not mean to fail. The ways of business are harder than he had supposed. It turns out that some men are unfair, even hypocritical, and a boy is expected, at all hazards, to further his employer’s interests; that to lie, to cheat and to deceive are condoned if done skilfully in an employer’s service. The boy learns to stifle conscience and to harden the heart. He prospers, gets money,—perhaps gets education. The life of the village becomes as narrow to him as the life of the farm. He moves to the nearest town, to a provincial city, to the metropolis. The same human wants that he first learned how to satisfy on the farm persist, though the forms and agencies for their satisfaction have become so complicated as to almost choke the springs of natural desire. Once hunger prompted appetite and a simple meal was a feast. The sweat of hard labor prompted thirst, and the tin cup of cold water was like the fabled nectar of the gods. The elaborate machinery of a banquet of a dozen courses provokes no such appetite and yields only the pains of indigestion. Wines and liquors arouse no similar thirst and afford no faintest trace of similar satisfaction. The farm boy, lulled to sleep by the “peepers” in neighboring meadows, wakened by the rising sun and the song of the birds, slept peacefully, though his bed was but a tick of meadow hay upon an old-fashioned cord
bedstead in an attic. The successful man of affairs gets little relief from the weight and tension of his complicated business, social, political or other interests. His exhaustion brings no natural weariness, and his nights no refreshing sleep.

HUMAN life, the simplest elements of which he pondered as a boy, is now writ large before him. The stars are no longer a nightly mystery but related to the science of navigation. The moon no longer radiates the glamour of romance. It controls the tides and affects the interests of shipping, the coming and going of yachts, steamships and merchandise. The daily aspects of the weather and of the changing seasons occur to him in terms of crop reports covering vast areas of wheat or corn at home and abroad. The disintegration of the rocks suggests the activities of mines in terms of the world’s production of the metals, of coal and like commodities. The farm crops and the breeding of farm animals now stand for agriculture, the feeding of populations and the transportation, manufacture and distribution of food products, whereof an abundance spells increase of luxury, and a scarcity possible ruin of far-reaching schemes. The daily round of the life of a farmer’s family has become an alphabet of which the chief utility is the interpretation of the grammar of economics, and the literature of politics and of trade.

How many a farm boy, now grown up, and may be growing old in the business mechanism which contemplates the luxuries and superfluities of life, recalls wistfully the farm life of his boyhood and wonders whether, after all, it might not have been possible to acquire in that environment all that is best worth having of human culture,—whether his “acres of diamonds” were not to be found rather at the beginning than at the end of his search. And the answer is at hand. The dawn of a new light is already breaking about the daily pathway of the farmer’s boy. The tendency of present-day science is to dignify the labor of production whereby Nature coöperates with man in the satisfaction of his normal wants. Is there no significance in the fact that the soil is now treated as a great laboratory in which the secrets of Nature can best be studied and understood; that the culture of plants and the breeding of domestic animals are regarded as throwing light upon the most pregnant aspects of the great central problem of evolution; that the beauty of Nature is apprehended as never before; and that the tide is setting from centers of population back once more toward the suburban residence, the rural home and the summer home or camp?

The change which must come in the mental attitude of the farmer’s boy and girl, momentous and significant as its influence will
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be, is after all essentially a little one. What is needed is no more than a kind of leadership that will bring to the farm boy insight into the essential qualities and relations that afford the interpretation of human life. That the stars in their courses hold the earth in its fixed relation to the sun and produce the phenomena of day and night and of the changing seasons; that these affect the weather; that the moon controls the tide; that the disintegration of the earth by natural forces produces the soil; that water runs down hill and carries the flatness of the earth into the river valleys; that the soil in proportion to its flatness produces the plant; that the plant feeds the animal, and that together they feed men; that like other animals, men pair, mate and breed children, that of these elements the round of daily life is made, are all patent things to the farmer’s boy. His own observation, hearsay and the district school afford a knowledge of these facts, and a very little guidance will establish for him their relationship in series to one another and himself. But that the family and rural neighborhood is an epitome of human society and all natural beauty a revelation of the Divine—hence that all of life is here, and every normal satisfaction of human wants at their simplest and their best, is a lesson which the farmer’s boy is not taught. That the round of the daily life and processes of the farm through the seasons give direct perception of an alphabet in which all life and all literature, if it be real, must be written; that these facts linked in due relation afford the one possible interpretation of life; that to face them frankly and directly in the close embrace of physical labor is the true way to their solution; that the abundant leisure of farm life can, by the use of present-day scientific methods, be made more abundant; that these hours of leisure which no other normal human occupation can afford may suffice for the mastery and comprehension of the total culture of mankind in its adaptation of the real needs of life; that the interrelation of scientific thought and intellectual culture with the physical contact of Nature robs the latter of its monotony and instils into it the supremest joy: all of these are lessons which the farmer’s boy of our day and his children are to learn.

MANY agencies are working in the direction of dignifying the life and labor of the farm; the common and natural life of man. Perhaps the influence most fundamental and farthest reaching is the attitude of modern science in tacitly accepting the viewpoint of the evolutionary theory, in beginning to think in terms of the physical facts of life and in thus frankly investigating “what God and man is.” Doubtless the general adoption of this way of thought in relation to rural life as exemplified in the State agricultural
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colleges, and in the experiments conducted by the Department of Agriculture at Washington, has produced a definite effect and is destined to be yet more influential. Through bulletins and students, through the press and through the efforts of their so-called Departments of Extension, these institutions are an undisputed force for the promotion of a more intelligent rural life. The movement from centers of population back to the land in the development of suburban homes and like, has been alluded to. Various efforts for the teaching of agriculture in the public schools, the promotion of school gardens and the creation of literature along these lines are significant. These and many other things that might be cited at once register the trend of public opinion and by their momentum, like the rolling snowball, tend to increase its force.

What remains is chiefly to develop a concrete form of institution that shall afford an environment in all respects similar to that of the farmer’s life, with the addition of those features which it lacks today, and the want of which prevents the farm from affording the farmer’s boys and girls complete satisfaction. These are chiefly, better and more profitable methods of farming, better housing, with home furnishings and decorations that are at once simple, useful, and therefore artistic, and a mode of education that shall admit of the acquisition by every individual, under proper leadership and guidance, and in the intervals of physical toil, of real and substantial culture.

The objects of the proposed experiments at Craftsman Farms will be to afford such an environment and to create such an institution. Once seen to be adequate to the solution of these problems, there is no reason why such an institution could not be duplicated everywhere. The Craftsman house affords a type of housing and domestic environment that will at once simplify and make attractive the farmer’s dwelling. The association of handicrafts with agriculture, as advocated by the editor of The Craftsman, will develop the perception of beauty, quicken intelligence and afford an agreeable and profitable occupation for leisure hours that might otherwise hang heavily on the farm boy’s hands. And the interpretation of the meaning of life on the farm by means of the insight of master craftsmen and artists who will live and labor among their fellows as common men, will afford the needful leadership and guidance. Thus the farm can be made a laboratory in which the fundamental lessons of life can be investigated and brought to a solution by the processes of life itself.
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