THREE HUNDRED ACRES AND THREE: BY HANNA RION

WHEN I think of farmers—successful farmers, I always think first of Bunce, the illustrator. I am thinking of him particularly this morning because I have so recently seen with my own eyes what a man can do with the soil and still continue his artistic profession. Although Bunce has only three acres you would never suspect the limitations of space, especially if you happened to be a chance caller, for you enter through a tangle made by Nature in one of her subtlest moods, and left by Bunce as a barrier between his privacy and the high road; then you wind through some fine old pines past a clump of white and gray birch, poplars and cedars, until you descend by a group of boulders to find yourself in a maze of flowers—roses you generally associate only with hothouses and every annual and perennial a flower lover can induce to grow in the North,—a haphazard arrangement that makes you doubt the superior law of discipline and order. Then you continue your delighted way through orderly rows of vegetables with many backward glances until you find yourself under three old apple trees, and just as you begin to feel like the child searching for the end of the rainbow you bump into a porch curtained with Dorothy Perkins roses and see a doorknocker smiling you a glittering welcome.

You feel that you have surely walked miles and you determine to tell Bunce you know it’s all folderol about his famous three acres, and you do so as soon as he appears, corduroy-breeched and smiling, from behind the house.

“It’s a narrow bit of land,” he explains, “about the shape of a good piece of breakfast strip. When I bought it five years ago it was considered the most worthless piece of tangle hereabout, and consequently had never been built upon; also it was to be had very cheap—fifty dollars an acre. I spent several weeks making my entrance from various points on the road, trying to see by what longest route I could arrive at the extreme other end of my property. After various experiments, which I conducted like paper chases with myself, I decided on the route you have just traversed, and built my house here in the extreme toe of my land.

“I have all the delusion of being a landed English gentleman, when I enter my property, and my neighbor’s woods, beginning thirty-five feet from the rear of my house give me all the privacy of the wilderness, and his trees are more mine than his anyway, for I love them and he doesn’t. From my upstairs studio I have the additional advantage of a vista extending over almost my entire property. Come look about.”
He led the way past a long row of rhubarb, the most tropical I had ever seen, to the hotbeds, now resting.

"The first hotbeds in this countryside," he said with pride. "Now they supply all the neighboring farmers with early plants and my celery transplanted to very rich soil to mature, preparatory to its final setting in the trenches, brings two cents a plant; I can sell all the plants I care to dispose of and before my experiment celery had never been raised around here. I also make extra temporary hotbeds covered with cheese-cloth soaked in oil. "My tomatoes, seed imported from France, are the earliest in the market; when the market is glutted in mid-season, tomatoes selling at thirty-five cents a basket retail, I've none to sell—only enough for my own consumption."

We passed to the tomato domain, and I noticed the peculiar culture; the tomatoes were planted very close together in rows four feet apart, and the vines were trained to grow tree fashion tied to tall poles.

"It's the English mode of culture," explained Bunce. "I can grow twice as many plants to a given space by treating them that way; I pinch off all side shoots and nip out the tips of the leaves, keeping the plant to one stalk; the tomatoes form close to the stem and the sun can reach every one, bringing them to quicker perfection. See my burr artichokes."

We walked down a path bordered by the monster plants of blue-green fernlike leaves; they were as beautiful as any flower plant in his garden. "Everybody said they couldn't be raised here—too cold. It is hard to winter them but I cover the plants heavily with litter and place boxes over that. I copy the French in my culture of them; each spring I break off all side shoots with a wooden knife leaving only one center crown to each plant; these side shoots, taken off below the soil surface, I transplant and they more than take the place of any large plants lost by the winter freezing. It is only by keeping the artichoke to one stalk that burrs can be raised as large as both fists."

We climbed a rise and came upon his melon patch located on the highest ground. The vines were marvels of vigor and perfection. I noticed that the leaves were all dusted with a blackish something.

"Soot," he explained. "I beg all that my neighbors glean from their stovetubes during spring house-cleanings and store it away in barrels for my melons. Dusted on when the leaves are wet with dew it discourages all insects. When I started to raise melons, of course, all the neighbors said it couldn't be done, because it hadn't
been tried. Nobody else can raise them around here even now after I have succeeded because they won’t take the trouble I do. I excavate each hole two feet; fill in with rich loam, well-rotted manure and sand for drainage. The hole is not entirely filled until the vines are well started, then I fill in gradually giving them a deep root which protects against the hardships of possible drought.”

We now passed through a long arbor traversing the center of the vegetable garden running from north to south, ten grape-vines to a side.

“BoRE for the first time two seasons ago, this year they’ll be loaded—enough to supply myself and the old folks, make wine and a few dozen baskets over to sell at fancy prices. The most prodigious grower and bearer of the lot is the Banner. Then I have Delaware, Niagara and Campbell’s Early. I don’t raise Concord, because everybody else does.”

I noticed that along all the borders of his property he had planted gooseberries, raspberries, blackberries and currants, and I inquired about the most satisfactory varieties.

“Cardinal and Loudon raspberries, Eldorado blackberries, Carman and Houghton gooseberries and London Market currants. The gooseberries I propagate by burying ends of branches which take root, they are then cut from the parent bush in the fall; from four original plants I now have hundreds. I haven’t room for many fruit trees so I’ve planted quantities of dwarf ones about the edges of patches. I’m making a specialty of the Gold plum and apricots, and I have enough peaches and cherries for my own consumption and some mulberries for the birds.

“I found these few old apple trees here when I came and I built near them because of the birds they attract. The trees were sad old forgotten derelicts. I trimmed them, mended their cavities, and when I found they were Spies, I budded them with King David and Kings. Now see the result—reincarnated!”

“They’ve provided me a course in apple study. I now know enough to enable me to cope with an orchard if I ever get one. With my microscope I’ve investigated all their varieties of scale and tried all the different spraying preparations until I’ve conquered their diseases. You see a farmer should be like an artist—a student up to the hour of his death. The only cocksure, know-it-all farmers are the ones who are as poor as Job’s turkey.

“Fortunately I wasn’t hampered by theories; I’m always glad of advice and try most of it. A course of chemistry with a friend, enabled me to analyze my soil. I know the component parts of my
different sections of land and I don’t make the mistake of using pure nitrate where lime is needed, and I know where good old manure is necessary and where guano will bring the best results.”

We then walked down to the corn patch of Golden Bantam, white Mexican and Country Gentleman. Bunce plants his corn as he plants his peas, every two weeks, reaping a harvest up to frost.

“Do you know,” he said, “not a piece of meat comes into my kitchen from May until November. I’m becoming a vegetarian, not because of any eccentric conviction but because of natural selection.”

“Has the experiment paid financially?” I asked.

“Paid? Well, rather. I’ve more to eat than I ever had before in my life—all the choicest vegetables and small fruit, and the sale of the extra stuff is enough to keep me irrespective of my magazine work. But the bulliest part of it all is that I won’t have to look forward to a hungry old age, even if my eyes give out, and that’s a great comfort to an artist, I can tell you. I could have sold this place several times for triple what I paid for it and it’s not because it can raise the biggest head lettuce or the most perfect potatoes; it’s because I’ve made it beautiful. Beauty pays, and that’s a point the old-time farmer completely overlooked. Roses and bulbs are just as necessary as onions, and because I’ve realized that people are falling over themselves to buy what was formerly regarded as a disgraceful old worthless tangle. But why should I sell it? When a man gets what he wants and makes the spot beautiful, stamps it with his own personality, makes it the expression of his creed, it would be as criminal to sell it as to sell love.”

“And it doesn’t interfere with your profession?”

“Not a particle. I do better work than I ever did, because I’ve no nerves, to speak of, now. I can keep in touch with editors by infrequent trips to New York, and in two hours I can meet the summons of a telegram. Of course,” he continued, “I don’t need to go into the obvious details of the benefit of muscular work out of doors, the wholesomeness and sheer joy of the life, but I’ll tell you the great secret of my success—I didn’t attempt too much. The only friends I have who failed at this sort of experiment are the ones who tried to do it on the grand scale. The most truly successful farmers I know today are some editors, writers and artists. Why? Because they bring to bear on their soil culture the same intensity of purpose, analytical study, love of beauty and glamour of imagination that made the bone of success in their achievements in letters and arts. Who knows but perhaps it is this very class of intellectual men who are going to rescue farming from its old grooves of failure and sordidness
and make it a dignified calling and a profitable business proposition?

"The farm of the future is going to be twenty acres. Now there's my father—as 'sot in his ways' as the sun, and mortgaged up to his eyelids because he clings to his three hundred acres and old methods, and I don't believe he's ever known an irresponsible hour since his cradle. He's never had time to hear a bird sing; I couldn't make him look at a rose—it represents sentimental foolishness to him; he never noticed the wonder of lettuce green on brown earth or the miracle of beauty of a dew-spangled cabbage, and I'd be ashamed to mention it to him. All the beauty of farming and the country has been smothered by hard, futile toil. And he made me loathe the country as a boy, imbued me with a hatred of farming that took twenty years of New York to eradicate.

"FATHER farmed in the good old way of yesterday—does it still. He planted the things his father planted, corn, oats and wheat. The neglected fields furnished Nature's hay. He begrudged the small space Mother pilfered each year, near the house, for vegetables and refused to fence it in. She dug and planted it herself and shoed the chickens and pigs from it. A farmer's wife was supposed to supply the table and dress herself from what she could make out of the butter and eggs. The consequence was Mother didn't dress, she was merely clothed. In my boyhood my father represented to me the Lamentations of Jeremiah; he grumbled if the sun shone, he grumbled when it rained. Every year he bought new-fangled, flame-colored agricultural implements and used them a few times to dazzle the neighbors, then the implements were left where they fell asleep in the fields after some hard day's work, and there they stayed dozing in dew and rain until they became monuments of rust. He also believed in lightning rods—had one on the chicken house and a small one on the dog kennel.

"It was a matter of pride to keep just so many horses; with these horses he plowed in the spring sixty acres for corn, and sixty for oats, and in the fall sixty for wheat. Sometimes he barely got his seed out of the oats, and the wheat came so thinly, he practically only reaped a harvest from thirty acres. For lack of barn room the hay was stacked in the fields and much of it was injured by the weather.

"The scrawny cattle sheltered under the lee side of the stacks and nibbled it away. His few sheep gnawed under the hay until the stacks looked like mushrooms and had to be braced by poles. For want of proper care the sheep died better than they bred. The pigs generally ran wild in the orchard and Mother's vegetable garden when she was busy making butter. Their rooting in the orchard
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helped the neglected old nondescript trees and they did bear prodigally—bore enough to give us all the apples we could eat and hard cider which made us forget the weariness of life and preserved us from the perils of kidney trouble.

"Sometimes Father would become original and neglect to plant all his sixty acres in oats because it had only brought twenty-six cents a bushel the season before. Next season, sure pop, the price of oats would soar, and Father would groan as every farmer since Adam has groaned, 'Just my luck!'

"It was in this atmosphere of unscientific farming I spent my youth of chapped hands, tired back and disgusted heart. I plowed fields that seemed to reach to the brim of the horizon. The vast amount of corn to be husked kept me from school when school began and I husked week after week until the weather grew very bad when I was sent to school, but when the days were pleasant I was kept at home for husking, and just about the time we'd gotten rid of the last ears, it was time to begin the spring plowing of half-frozen ground with half-frozen hands.

"When I ran away from home at the age of twenty I felt I never wanted to hear the word 'crop' again. But New York has a wonderful way of turning the mind to the antithesis of hustle, commercialism and skyscrapers, and after many years I found myself plowing again at night in my dreams, but then I plowed fields of velvet with a gold-tipped plow, through a song-shaken atmosphere to a western sky gorgeous with the tints only dreamed of by eyes from which the sunset is hidden by smoke-plumed buildings.

"When spring came and I saw the boughs of fruit blossoms for sale on the city streets I became mad with longing and homesickness for the bees humming in the old orchard. After I had made my position firm enough professionally, I turned my back on the city and came back to the old home country.

"When a country boy goes to the city to make his mark he can only permanently return to the old home, with dignity and honor, in a hearse. Of course all the neighbors looked on my return as failure. I didn’t explain myself, even to Father and Mother; it would have necessitated an autobiography of over two hundred thousand words. When I bought this piece of supposed junk woodland, it stamped me as a fool. When I could actually pay cash for it the farmers wondered what rich guy was backing me and if he were going to put up a summer hotel.

"I have an Italian helper I rescued from the railroad track five
years ago. I pay him twenty-five dollars a month and give him twenty per cent. of all that is sold off the place. This gives him a sense of partnership and he takes the same interest I do. He hires any extra help we need during spring preparation and fall cleaning and berry picking, the rest of the time we manage alone. I only work early in the morning and after the light grows bad in the studio in the afternoon.

"I have no trouble with maids because I adapt myself to their standards. If it is a matter of pride to a country girl to enter only by the front door it doesn’t lessen my dignity to let her do so. She can even eat at the table with me if it makes her happier. Of course the major part of my income still comes from illustrating, but the point is this: if I should at any time want to chuck the whole art business because of ill health or insolence, I can do it and live decently, if modestly, and develop a handsome waist girth on an income derived from the sensible planting of these few acres.

"In short, my father has failed for forty years on three hundred acres, while I’m making money, finding contentment, and discovering life anew on three."

A GARDEN

I WILL have a garden, set beyond the reach of strife, where Nature will abide content and radiant. Her beauty undisturbed, I will be Her handmaiden and spread out a carpet of flowers, like a prayer rug whereon I will sing psalms of praise.

I will have a harp of pine trees, and the Winds will love to come and tenderly touch its sensitive strings.

Fountains will be there to laugh melodiously as little children. Flowers that exhale sweetness I will grow in this garden, and those that are bright and sunny. Those that are simple or stately or graceful, shall flourish, and those that hold dear memories.

There will I hold tryst with my soul and renew my strength.