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THE VERMONT FARMER

BACKGROUND

Clear in the minds of the oldest inhabitants are etched the vivid stories of the conquest of the wilderness. Many of these stories have been handed down from father to son for the three or four generations which have marched through time from the beginning of the Vermont adventure. These traditions form a firm and steadfast basis, a rock in the virgin soil, from which the sturdy, independent farmer views the antics of the world. Many farms

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have been in the same family since the clearing of the land. Tall tales, long tales, and true tales form the pastime of winter evenings by the pot-bellied black stove, glowing red with the fervor of its out making. A rich mind of narrative, run through with a wide vein of humor, is hidden behind the reticence and reserve of the tiller of the soil.

Until the coming of the radio and the automobile the farmer was chained to his toil through the necessity of making a living. Wood must be cut and split for heat, crops must be raised for food for man and beast, a surplus must be produced to give enough for clothing, and for the food which could not be raised. Standards of living were not high, socially or physically. The farmer was a lone wolf oftentimes self-sufficient and self-contained. Many farms were outfitted to produce all the farm families needed. The only contacts with the outside world were second or third hand. At this time 2 community life ranked high. Sociables, pound parties, quilting [bees?], barn-raising, church attendance and cracker barrel politics were the recreational activities.

The last ten years has seen the biggest change in farm life. The radio brought the world to the farm kitchen. The automobile and better roads brought the farmer to the neighboring community for his trading and social activities. Farm men and women began to read and study problems which before had been presented in their immediate conception only to the city dweller.

Through his heritage and environment, a heritage of pioneer activities and an environment of natural simplicity, the Vermont farmer has built a consistent character. Often he is described as possessing "rugged simplicity", "New England independence". "Yankee cussedness," which terms are often apt.

The rolling seasons have left their scars. The minor victories and major disasters of his perennial struggle with nature have bred a respect for the [inevitable?] which marks his every attitude. From earliest boyhood the farm youth has had his responsibilities. Life itself has depended upon the faithful carrying out of his share of the farm labor. Life is not

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a dizzy round, it is a long even swing, season to season, each one punctuated with its own duties and projects, each one complete in itself and inter-dependent on the rest. It is not lived by days, but by patterns which repeat themselves from year to year until living assumes a rhythm which steps 3 in time with the swing of the universe.

The true Vermont farmer was educated in the one room school house, where the teacher reigned over all the eight grades. There he learned "readin', 'ritin' and 'rithmetic" to the tune of the hick'ry stick. Learnin' was a business with no "trimmin's" except those applied with the foresaid hick'ry stick to palm or posterior of the offending pupil. Most of his real education for living was [assimilated?] in his contacts with the members of his community. It takes no mean intelligence to live in peace and harmony the same neighbors year after year. The man and women who could and did perfect the art are revered in each small hamlet. Some of them have gone forth and conquered the larger sphere, applying to advantage the things concerning human nature which they learned at home. 4 THE VERMONT FARMER

THE SWING OF THE SEASONS

Ezra David is ready for Town Meeting. His good cloth suit has been pressed to its natural creases by Ma. His string tie is correctly tied, his sparse hair brushed. Ma has seen to it that he has a clean bandanna and his shoes are shined. He tucks the much read Town Report in his pocket and glances out the kitchen window.

"D'you s'pose Ed will be along soon, Ma?"

"Yes, Ezra. He and Marthy will be up soon as they get the chores done. You set down and read the Report. You always get so het up over Town Meetin'."

Ed and Marthy are Ezra's son and his wife, also his next door neighbors. Ezra has been up and at it since four-thirty. Habit and anticipation would not let him sleep any later. It is still fairly early in the spring and some of the morning chores had to be done by electric light

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this first Tuesday morning in March. All hands go to Town Meeting. No one on the David farm is allowed to idle or even work at home on this important day. Ezra used to hitch up the pair and load the wagon down with friends and neighbors. Now things are changed. Everyone has a car. When Ed and Marthy call for the old folks they will crawl through mud to the state road and then whizz magically to the Town Hall. Well, Ezra thinks, no matter how they got there everyone will be to Town Meetin'. He is filled with impatience. Long habit of allowin' the horses plenty time to make the trip makes waiting a fretful business. Ma finds things to do in the time before Ed and Marthy come. She "reds up" the place so as it will be neat when she gets back. The cats are shooed down cellar. Shep is told to get to the shed. She fills the two stoves with wood and regulates the dampers. Bustling into the pantry she comes out with a big pot of beans, a couple loaves of brown bread and then goes back for a pie. These are her contributions to the dinner which the ladies will serve at twenty-five cents a piece, at noon.

[Ezra?] is the first to hear the car coming.

"Come on, Ma. Here they be. Let me help you with your coat."

He elevates Ma suddenly and expertly into her coat, struggles with his own, grabs the pie and dashes for the door.

"Now, Ezra, you be careful of that pie," Ma knows from past experience the catastrophic possibilities of Ezra's impatience. She loads up with the beans and brown bread, takes the key from the hook beside the back door, locks the door behind her and tucks the key under the mat, just in case someone might need to get in.

Before the women have had a chance to pass the time of day, Ezra has started in discussing the possibilities of several items in the warning with Ed. Ma and Marthy exchange understanding glances and content themselves with the thought that their turn will come later while the menfolks thrash out the problems which interest them. Ezra is pretty much excited ⁶ about the item which reads "Art. 7. To see what action the town

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will take in regard to paying for the services of fire-fighting apparatus from other towns." Plainville has no fire-fighting apparatus of their own outside the village proper and one of Ezra's neighbors had to watch his buildings burn while the neighboring village quibbled over who should pay the cost of their coming. Ezra is incensed and expresses his opinion strongly all the way to the Town Hall. He feels that some arrangement should be made before the emergency of fire arises rather than at the time.

"I hope he don't talk too much and make a fool of himself in meetin', " whispers Ma to Marthy as they juggle the food stuffs on the back seat, over the muddy March roads.

"If he talks it out now he won't say so much then," whispers Marthy back. "It don't do any hurt. Makes the meetin' more interesting. Anyhow I think he is right."

"Yes, so do I. About that," Ma smiles wisely.

Twenty-five or thirty cars of all makes and descriptions are parked around the Town Hall as the Davids drive in. They begin to name the cars they know.

"It used to be we could name 'em by their horses," says Ezra. "Now we know 'em by their cars."

"[Sakes?]" says Marthy, "Sakes, Pa. I couldn't tell horses one from another and I'm no better at cars."

"Ma can tell, can't you, Ma?"

"Lands, yes, Ezra! I could always tell whose horses they was just as far as I could see them, that is, providin' I'd 7 ever seen 'em before."

"Well, come on folks. Let's get in and see what's doin'."

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“No hurry, Ezra. Go long with you. We will tend to these things. You go find your cronies and got things all settled before meetin'.” Ma brushes Ezra off and gives him a pat. “Go long.”

“All right, Ma. I'll find you at dinner time. Comin' Ed?”

“Yeah, Pa. I'll be along.” Ed loads up to help Marthy and Ma take the food stuffs down to the basement of the hall. The big room is a-buzz with talk and laughter and soon Ma and Marthy are in the midst of the big annual visit.

[Ezra?] makes a bee line for the knot of menfolks at the front of the hall and is immediately absorbed in the issues of the day. These town folk will themselves settle questions pertaining to the management of their town for the ensuing year. To some it is an hilarious occasion, to others one of great importance. Gradually the hall becomes crowded and at ten-thirty promptly the officers take their places on the stage at the front of the hall and the [Moderator?] calls the meeting to order.

All questions have been posted in the warning and so the townsmen are ready to fight each issue according to the dictates of their own convictions. Everybody votes who has paid his taxes. The ballot box for voting on the liquor license question stands ready for ballots at any time during the day. Those who are strongly for and against keep anxious eyes upon it and try in subdued whispers to keep track of the votes according to what they know of the leanings of the persons voting.

The Moderator is a business-like and tactful person who speeds the work of the day with witty quips and subtle shortening of long-winded harangues. Officers are elected, money is appropriated compensation of town officers is fixed, and other business considered important to the welfare of the town is disposed of during the session.

Midway in the day's work comes the break while the dinner is served up. An excellent repast a result of the combined efforts of the town's best cooks. Baked beans, brown

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bread, rolls, scalloped dishes, coffee, and pie. Oh, such a variety of pies - mince, apple, pumpkin, squash, berry, custard, cream, lemon - After dinner is over the voting body settles with a sigh to the final round. They are beginning to think of home and chores. If everything goes smoothly they will be able to get done by half-past three or four. They wriggle uncomfortably, they have all eaten too much, and resign themselves to business.

When everything is over and all is settled for another year the meeting breaks up quickly. The womenfolks gather up the empty bean pots, dishes and plates while the men, now impatient to get home to chores, wait in restless groups outside the hall.

[Ezra?] is silent on the way home, commenting only once on the fact that the town voted to pay the fire-fighting expenses no matter who called the apparatus or what apparatus was called. 9 He seems strangely contented. Ma and Marthy converse intermittently and Ed cusses the mud when he gets on the back road and has to slow down. The chores are on their minds. Town Meeting is over and done with for another year and while its problems will be discussed around the stove of an evening and over the cracker barrel in the store at the four corners, more immediate concerns absorb their minds.

Once more at home Ezra changes into overalls and frock and goes to the barn. Ma puts on an apron and steps quickly around the kitchen getting a light snack on the table. Ezra shouldn't eat heavy again after such an excitin' day. After chores and supper they will sit around the stove, Ma with her knittin' and Ezra dozin' over the paper and talk it all over. [Maybe Ed and Marthy?] will be over to set for a spell——

Ezra comes up from the barn swinging a mild pail. He misses the friendly shadow dancing along on the show, the yellow lantern light [making?] spokes of his legs. There danged improvements, electric lights.

"I'd ruther have m' lantern," he thinks resentfully. "I've half a mine to light me one when I go for the wood. Can't do that, Ma'd think I'd gone daft. Oh, well, the lights look pretty good in

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the house. Can't have everything. [Maybe?] just as well. [Guess?] I'm tired. Been a hard day, ho-hum."

[When Ed married Marthy?] Ezra had given them the east forty where they had built a house near enough to keep an eye on the old folks and yet not be underfoot all the time. The arrangement worked very well for Ezra was not the kind of man who 10 could set back and watch someone else take over his place in the scheme of things. Ma, too, liked it though she had felt it more than Ezra when the children left home. At least that is what she used to accuse him of.

"Indifferent," she would, say, "that's what you are, Ezra. Indifferent!"

"[Maybe?] so, maybe not," says Ezra. "Maybe I don't let on the way you do. I got my work to do."

"Well, anyway, [Ed?] is stayin' near by." Ma consoled herself. "Even if the girls did have to go away t' the city."

Ezra never let on in so many words but he was inordinately proud of having his son choose to stay by the farm. It gives a man a secure feelin' to have his son carry on the work he has struggle and built up on the foundation laid by his forefathers.

Ed an' Marthy had two children. The boy was Ezra's favorite. Ma would scold him about the shameless way he spoiled the child and in small secret ways would make it up to the little granddaughter.

Every Sunday rain or shine the David family occupies the David pew in the white church overlooking the river valley. The only thing that keep them at home is serious illness. This is one of the things Ezra insists on. There are only a few, for times are changing so fast that he finds it hard to force his own convictions on his family. Start here [???] [??]

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Ed is at the door with the car. Down in the village the church bell throws its Sabbath morning clamor against the 11 mountains. The echo catches and is flung back making a mounting crescendo of bells upon bells. The two youngsters are bouncing around in the back seat with Marthy. Ezra and Ma come hurrying out. Ezra insists that young Robert sit between him and Ed on the front seat. Ma and Marthy exchange glances and Ma says to Betty, "Come on, chicken, we womenfolks can hold down the back seat, I guess."

Betty slips her hand in Ma's and sits very prim, feeling important in her Sunday best.

"You folks are coming over to the house for dinner." Marthy makes it as a statement for it is common custom for them to change about on Sunday and it is Ed and Marthy's turn to have the folks.

"[?] want you should stop on the way home and take a look at that heifer, Ed. She's about due and I don't like the look of her." Ezra does no work on Sabbath but the animals must have attention when they need it and this is one of the times.

There are only a few cars parked near the church. In the horse sheds, which are becoming dilapidated, one old nag is hitched.

Ezra eyes the sheds with distaste. They are an eyesore.

"Come next church meeting we will have to do something about the sheds."

"Look perty bad, don't they?" Ed thinks they should have been turned into kindling wood long ago.

As they file into the church the last bell begins to toll. The organist settles herself more firmly on the organ 12 stool and begins to pump. A slight wheeze accompanies the music as the old instrument gets under way. There are only a handful of people in the church, but the six Davids fill the family pew from center rail to aisle. Ezra gives Bobby his watch

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to play with and settles down to enjoy the preachin'. The children are quite accustomed to church and sit fairly quietly through the service. No one is bothered by the occasional whispers for the congregation is made up, more than half of children. The minister is a worried man with a large family of his own. He delivers a sincere and friendly discourse. One or two of the men go to sleep but Ezra stays wide awake and listens attentively to the sermon. Later at home he and Ma will go over it, with Bible in hand and form their own conclusions as to its merits.

Ezra's forebearers have always been pillars of the church and he is carrying on in their footsteps. Ed conforms because it is easier than fighting Ezra, and he has no strong convictions against religion. "Pa's pretty set," he thinks, "but maybe it don't do any hurt to be set. Maybe there aren't enough set folks nowadays." Ezra is clerk of the church and Ed is deacon and the welfare of the parish rests heavily on their shoulders.

Ezra does not often think of God and never speaks of Him. [The?] consciousness of divine guidance is so deep a part of his nature that he has no need to think or speak definitely of it. He does not put the things which mean the most to him into words. The things which are a part of him are his, so unified and accepted that he is unconscious of any need to put them into words. He is never demonstrative toward his wife or his children, but he is utterly dependent on her and deeply proud of his children. His one weakness is his grandson and his one defeat of which he never speaks is his daughter. Lucile was so like Ezra that they could never jibe. Life was a constant upheaval of friction for Ma until Lucile had her education and took a place teaching in another state. Ezra is proud of her, but he couldn't stand her almighty ways and uppity notions. He had to admit she was smart but she was a sight better smart away from him than near-hand. Mary, the oldest daughter, is married to a smart young doctor and lives down Boston way. They don't get home very often, only for the holidays and special occasions like weddin' and funerals.

[Come?] one mornin' along the last of February or the first of March and Ezra is on his way to the barn for the chores. He stops as he steps out of the shed door, squints at the sky

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just flushed with faint pink in the east, he licks his finger and holds it up slowly turning it to get the feel of the wind. Then he squints at the galloping gilded horse bravely defying the laws of gravity on top of the barn to verify his findings on the way of the wind. He nods and takes a deep breath of the clear sharp morning air. There's a feelin' to it, a haunting elusive promise of change. Come a week or so thinks Ezra an' it will be time to get started on sugarin'.

He steps back to the kitchen door. Ma is marching her morning paths from stove to sink, sink to pantry. She likes 14 to get a start on the mornin'. An hour in the mornin' is worth two in the afternoon as far as puttin' work off goes. You can get a sight more done and out of the way before breakfast if you fly round.

“Ma, you better plan for sugarin’,” Ezra's voice is full of satisfaction. Sugarin' in one of his favorite seasons. It marks the beginning of the year's work and to Ezra, whose sugar place is a model of up-to-date equipment and efficiency, the syrup and sugar are a fine gift from the gods. Coming when it does at the slack season when there is nothing much going on anyhow, a good run in just so much clear profit. There is that element of change too, a gamble with nature when all signs may fail and what looked like a good year may turn out ho be a loss and what looks like a poor year, may, by some sudden freak of the weather be turned into an amazing profit.

[As Ezra] returns to the barn. Ed chuggs up in the old Ford pick-up. The two men with only a brief exchange about the weather set about the morning chores. They make short work of the lone [rank?] of sleek black and white [Holsteins?]. The long cow stable, cement floored and white walled, is filled with a variety of odors. Until the stable is cleaned the acrid smell of urine and fresh manure predominates. As the carrier makes its many trips, and the barn becomes a clean and freshly bedded place, the warm animal smell emerges spiced with the summer flavored dusty hay, and the hearty sour tang of ensilage. Then as the milker chuggs its endless rounds 15 from patient cow to restless milker, the warm sweet smell of fresh milk comes over all and raises hunger in the empty stomachs of the

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men. The calves bawl for their breakfasts and the two old barn cats, followed by a retinue of half grown kittens, deep adroitly out from under foot. Old Cheeky takes her stand by Ezra as he strips after the milking machine and he squirts a small stream of milk into her mouth as she sits up and begs for it.

The chores are done and the full milk cans stand ranked by the barn door waiting for the milk truck. Ezra still has his mind on sugarin'.

“Ye'd better speak to the boys about comin' hadn't ye, Ed?”

“Well, it's a mite early yet, Pa. We won't be havin' any sugar weather for a couple of weeks.”

“You do as I tell ye. We're due for a thaw an' I aim to take the first run when it comes. We better be ready.” “All right, Pa. I'll speak to the boys. They'll be plannin' on it, likely.”

“Ye'd do well to make certain.”

“All right, I will.” Ed thinks it is foolish to start so soon, but if Ezra says to, he guesses it's 'all right'.

Ezra's prognostications about the weather proved right and about a week or ten days later the first run of sap was to hand. Due to his foresight Ezra's sugar lot was all ready. Paths broken out, sugar house made fit and buckets hung. The two neighbor boys were hired out to help, one to gather and one to help Ed fire. Ezra was everywhere at once seeing to 16 things and enjoying the activity after the long sedentary winter.