

ON A CANADIAN FARM IN MIDWINTER.

BY W. BLACKBURN HARTE,

By decree of the inexorable *res angusta domi*, I left my native England in the last days of the year of grace 1886, for Canada, with the determination of becoming a farmer. I was a cockney to my backbone, and had not the slightest idea of farming, but still I was young and hopeful, and I imagined that this happy consummation would take but a very short time to accomplish. Many a night, while lying in my bunk during the passage across the Atlantic, I built *châteaux en Espagne* innumerable, and galloped over limitless acres of which I held the freehold. Alas! my castles have since been irretrievably mortgaged to Doubt and Despair, and if the reader will give me his kind attention while I relate my experiences, we will together watch these castles of cards topple to the ground.

Upon my arrival at Montreal I at once advertised for a situation on a farm, for I had more ambition than capital or collateral security, and consequently was unable to immediately blossom forth into a landed proprietor. To my great delight I received three or four answers from farmers in different parts of the country, each of whom represented that *his* farm was situated in the very heart of the garden of Canada, and desired me to come on without delay. Subsequent experience led me to the conclusion that Canada was one immense garden—of snow, and remarkably well ventilated. After a little thought, I decided to place myself and accompanying transcendent abilities at the disposal of a gentleman—evidently a public philanthropist—who, judging from the friendly warmth of his communication, appeared to have been anxiously looking forward to my arrival on this continent.

The next day I boarded a train going east, and after a two hours' journey arrived at my destination, which was only fifty miles from the metropolis. I had reason later to thank my stars that I had not decided to begin my career as a farm-hand in the neighborhood of the "Rockies," because in that case my return to civilization would have been well-nigh impossible, considering the state of my exchequer. The name of the village was Knowlton, in the province of Quebec,

Some of my readers are doubtless acquainted with the locality.

A negro conductor passed through the car and announced in stentorian tones, first in French-Canadian *patois*, and then in English, the name of the station, and looking out of the window I saw a noble edifice which appeared to have been blown together, "promiscuous-like," on a very windy day, and then tarred over. This was the waiting-room and station-master's sanctum combined; in fact, it was the station. There was not the ghost of a platform, but a low fence surrounded the rear of the shanty. The station-master, as I afterwards found out, was a man of exceedingly portly dimensions, and was greatly impressed with a sense of his own importance, so there was little room in the shanty for aught else beside himself and the stove.

The whole population of the place, about twenty-five or thirty persons all told, counting one or two of the canine genus, were assembled in the yard to witness the train come in. This appeared to be the only dissipation of which the villagers were at any time capable. They looked like so many badly packed bundles of cloth, and spoke a villainous gibberish, which would confound the natives of La Belle France. I fancy I was looked upon as a sort of natural curiosity. Certainly I was the "observed of all observers" upon that occasion, and caused no little diversion. I stood and watched the departing train until it was out of sight, and then sat down upon my chest. To confess the truth, I did not feel in the best of spirits. The prospect seemed less inviting now that I was, as it were, plumped down, out of all civilization, upon the scene of my new labors.

My benefactor, the farmer, now approached me, and introduced himself by suddenly bawling in my ear, "Now then, young feller, get up, and take hold of t' other end of this box. Great Scott! what a terror, anyway. What 'ev you got in it, anyhow?"

Mr. Wiman, for that was the gentleman's name, had never seen me before in his life, but he jumped to the conclusion that I was "his man," because, as he afterwards

explained to me, I looked "so English, you know." I guessed, too, that a stranger in those parts was rather a *rara avis*.

We carried the box to his sledge, which he had kindly brought down to drive me up to the farm. Taking a seat beside him, I inquired what distance his place was from the village.

"Well, I guess it's something over five miles—more or less," was his reply.

We drove on for a long time in silence, and I began to think that there was a considerable difference between a five-mile drive in the "old country" and a similar distance in Canada. I ventured to hint as much to Mr. Wiman. He burst into a hearty laugh.

"Bless yer! I should jist reckon there is a difference. That's all! We keep up with the times on this side 'ev the water. This 'ere is a live country, sir—a live country!"

I did not quite understand how the advanced state of the country should so materially alter the mileage, but kept my own counsel. I could not help, however, reflecting that despite the fact that I was now in a land of enlightenment and progress, I had never seen such a dismal, dreary landscape in my life. Nature in her sterner aspects cannot so quell the soul of man as when she presents herself in merely bleak desolation. There was nothing but snow, which almost blinded me with its dazzling whiteness, and certainly added to the depression of my spirits.

At last Mr. Wiman drew rein at a wayside *auberge* and told me to wait a few minutes until he returned. This was comforting. The atmosphere was not 90° in the shade—it was 20° below zero! I jammed my hard felt hat down over my face, under the impression that by getting my head into it as far as possible I should keep my ears from dropping off. Foolishly enough, I had neglected to purchase a fur cap when in Montreal, and now bitterly repented my want of forethought.

The first quarter of an hour did not seem so very long, as my mind was occupied with hundreds of conflicting thoughts, and those inevitable "first impressions" which chill one's cherished hopes. But when a "few minutes" slowly dragged itself into a good half-hour, it struck me that the Canadian method of reckoning the flight of time must be conducted on the broad basis which characterized the mileage. I rubbed my hands with snow to keep them warm and prevent

them from freezing, and jumping off the sledge I paced rapidly up and down, under the veranda in front of the hostelry, to induce circulation. I had read something and heard more about the climate in this part of the world, and was afraid that unless I was extremely careful I should coagulate into one complete block of ice. At last my patience was exhausted, and I determined to go in quest of my employer. I found him, the centre of a small circle of *convives* assembled around the stove, discussing in broken French and English, thick with authority and liquor, the question of commercial union.

I nervously asked him when he intended to resume his journey. He replied by pointing to a vacant seat, and asking me to take "something hot." I was half frozen, and readily accepted the offer.

"Sorry—hic—sorry I forgot you," he said, with a cheerful smile.

"Don't mention it," I replied politely. "I'm still alive."

In another hour or so the party broke up, leaving Mr. Wiman decidedly none the better for his potatoes. In fact, he was wholly unfit to have charge of the horse.

He took my arm, and staggering out into the cold again, we found the horse lying down in the snow, almost stiff, and the sledge overturned. It was dark. In Canada there is no twilight. It is a sudden transition from day into night, and I began to wish myself back in Montreal. However, after many kicks and objurgatory coaxings, the poor beast was induced to stand up, and righting the sledge and replacing my belongings, we again took our seats. Mr. Wiman then handed the reins to me with instructions to drive "home," and fell fast asleep on my shoulder. I did not, of course, know the road in the least, but the horse did. He had been left for a "few minutes" on many occasions before. I could not refrain from inwardly making comparisons between the brute and his master, not altogether favorable to the intelligence of the latter. I also did not forget to thank God for the brute's endowment, as otherwise we should in all probability have been buried beneath the snow, which, in some places, was over ten feet in depth. As it was, the ride was not unattended with danger, as it was hard to see the track in the dark, and every now and again the poor animal slid up to his neck in the snow, and only extricated himself after

severe struggles. The farmer awoke at intervals, when the sledge was almost overturned, but he kept his seat wonderfully. This, of course, was the force of long habit. I have heard of tipsy sailors preserving their equilibrium in the same marvellous fashion. Wiman would then encourage the horse with a few sanguinary expressions, and again relapse into the land of Nod. As this may be getting wearisome to the reader, I will only mention one other incident of that memorable drive.

Just in front of the homestead we encountered a very large drift, and as the horse endeavored to scramble through it, the sledge upset and deposited both of us at least a couple of feet under the snow. I was the first to get my head above the surface, and began to search for my companion and my box. I found the son of Bacchus coiled up quite content. After sundry kicks he realized his position, and clutching the sledge with both hands, instructed me to let go the traces and free the horse. This I did, and, after many attempts, the unfortunate beast regained his feet.

In a few minutes more we were safe in the barn, and having watered and fed the horse, we made our way into the house, which, from what I could make of it, was simply another barn of somewhat greater pretensions. But even this looked very inviting after my late experience of the Canadian roads.

The floor of the kitchen, sitting-room and drawing-room—a domestic combination, which we now entered—was almost covered with snow that had entered through the doors on either side. An enormous stove or range was placed in the centre of the room, and the walls were decorated with pictorial representations, mostly culled from the Christmas issues of various illustrated periodicals. A deal table, a kitchen dresser, sparsely laden with crockery of assorted patterns and culinary utensils, and a few rickety chairs, completed the inventory of furniture.

Mr. Wiman pointed to a plate of hash which stood upon the table—which, it is almost unnecessary to mention, was quite innocent of a cloth—and told me “to get outside of it.” I did not require a second invitation, but fell to like a hungry wolf.

Just then a female voice from an adjoining room shrieked out, “Is that you, Nathan?” to which the gentleman in question, who was tugging at his boots

in a fruitless endeavor to remove them, responded in the Canadian affirmative: “Yah.”

“H’ain’t you ’toxicated ?”

“Yah.”

“As usual,” resumed the voice, not angrily, but with a philosophical mixture of sadness and good-humor.

“Yah.” Wiman had a fondness for this peculiar monosyllable. “Come and take off these darned boots. They don’t mind me.”

At this frank confession I could not help laughing aloud. This brought Mrs. Wiman, for it was she, to the door, attired in a dilapidated dressing-gown and a pair of very masculine carpet slippers, with an old hussar undress uniform jacket thrown over her shoulders, the whole surmounted by a huge nightcap. Her strange appearance did not tend to decrease my mirth. The good woman, however, was not in the least indignant at my rude behavior, and, indeed, seemed to enter into the joke herself. I introduced myself, and was then asked a great many questions respecting the art of milking, etc., to which I replied with some diffidence, as my knowledge of such matters was not very extensive. As a boy, I remember gazing in at the entrance of a dairy in our street by the hour together, dreaming of green fields and babbling brooks, but I had never seen any cows there. The principal object that attracted my attention was—what? I won’t disclose. The joke is too ancient.

When I had finished my sumptuous repast it was nearly one o’clock in the morning, and Mrs. Wiman took up a candle, minus a candlestick, and showed me up to my room, which was on the next and top floor. I stuck the candle on the floor in the farther corner of the room, out of the wind and snow, which again made its appearance through the half-wrecked window. There was no furniture of any kind in the room, with the exception of a low truckle-bed.

I was then left alone, as I thought, but on looking towards the bed I noticed that it had already an occupant, who reminded me of what Robinson Crusoe must have looked like after having been deprived of his barber for a twelvemonth. I crept silently into bed, generously giving my companion the greater half of it, and laid awake, thinking over the events of the past few hours, until it was almost daylight, when I fell into a troubled sleep. I seemed to have been asleep only a few

minutes, however, when an alarm clock, which I had not noticed standing in the recess of the window before retiring, began to make its presence known in a very demonstrative manner. I sat up and rubbed my eyes, invoking anything but blessings upon the devoted head of the inventor of these execrable "utilities." My partner turned over and uttered a groan, and then becoming aware of my presence, he said, "Thank 'evin you've come at last." Somehow I could not find it in my heart to echo this sentiment.

"Why?" I asked.

"Cause, I'll be able to leave now."

"Oh. But how is it that you are going?"

"I guess you'll soon find out why. Anyway, there's no time for talking on this 'ere farm. Shove on yer things and foller me."

This was not very encouraging, but I did not hazard any further remarks, and was soon ready to follow my Job's comforter. I began to think that life on a Canadian farm was not all *couleur de rose*. When we reached the kitchen, he lit a couple of lanterns, and we stepped out into the yard, nearly up to our waists in snow. That fellow Thomson, who sang of the sluggard and enlarged upon the advantages of early rising, never put his theories into practice. If he had tried getting up at four A.M. in picturesque Canada, in the depth of winter, he would have tuned his lyre to a different strain.

We then went into the stable, and Jim (my partner) gave me a bucket to fetch some water for the horses, also a shovel with which I was to find the pump. This was not an unnecessary precaution. The pump was situated somewhere about one hundred yards from the barn. The wind had been very boisterous during the night, and the snow had drifted in deep reefs over a mile long, and the pump was completely buried. Finding that I was not very successful in my search, Jim joined me, and by our united efforts we at last discovered it. I am certain that no old-time Californian miner was ever more delighted at striking gold than I was when we found that pump. I thought I should lose my ears before we uncovered it.

On returning from this voyage of discovery we were met by Mr. Wiman, who told me to follow him and "milk." The cow-barn was at the far end of the yard, and housed over fifty head of cattle. Another tramp through the snow! I noticed

that this place was far warmer even than the house, which I rightly attributed to the animal life within its walls. This "milk-ing" was a practical test of my abilities which I had not been looking forward to with any great eagerness. I will pass over this experience, which even after this lapse of time makes a cold sweat start out upon my brow. Suffice it to say, that after one hour of pulling and tugging, with great beads of perspiration rolling down my cheeks, to the utter disgust of the cow, and at great personal risk, I succeeded in obtaining sufficient lacteal fluid for, at least, one cup of tea. By this time breakfast was ready for me; I was ready for breakfast, and the meeting was adjourned.

The *pièce de résistance* was the hash of the previous evening, re-hashed; but farm work does not foster one's epicureanism, and I ate like an alderman. When I had finished my meal I drew my chair up to the stove and produced a pipe, thinking that an hour was allowed for each meal. I was soon informed to the contrary, however, by Mr. Wiman, who burst into a hearty laugh.

"Ah that's English, don't cher know? It won't wash out 'ere. I'd advise you to follow Jim, and larn 'ow to 'itch on a team for drawing bark. We don't di-gest our food in this country, yer know. It's got ter take its chance."

The next thing to be done was to water the cattle, which was no easy task. The spring, or watering-place, was in the centre of the field adjoining the yard, at a distance of half a mile, and was only distinguishable by a tree which stood close to it. We procured a shovel and hatchet, and after a great deal of shoveling we came upon the trough, which was filled with solid ice at least a foot in thickness. I suggested that a little dynamite kept upon the premises would be a handy article in winter, at which witticism Jim surrendered all the smile that was left in him after a protracted spell of farm-labor. At last we broke the ice sufficiently for two cows to drink at once, and Jim told me to run up as fast as my legs would carry me and turn out six cows, as otherwise the water would freeze again. The reader may think that this verges upon exaggeration, but I can assure him, or her, that on more than one subsequent occasion I had to break the ice a second time within the space of a quarter of an hour.

When all the cows had been watered, there was "clearing-out" to be done.

This was not a particularly clean occupation, but it was, at all events, far warmer. Then came feeding, which with our careful management took a great deal of time and a surprising amount of hay. Jim was always thinking of his master's best interests. He explained this carelessness by confiding to me that he had worked for twelve months for "glory," that is, without remuneration, beyond bed and board. He said that this was the only way in which he could get a portion of his arrears from his respected employer. I had also agreed to come upon the same terms during my novitiate, and had indeed paid a small premium, but I had not anticipated such a lengthy term of apprenticeship.

Wiman now entered and announced dinner, a call to which we quickly responded. Mrs. Wiman appeared to have quite a genius for making hashes; indeed, she was a rustic Soyer. As I had by this time learned to expect, the chief dish was a resurrection of the morning's meal, with sundry vegetable additions. I was very hungry, but I must confess indulged in irritants (*i. e.*, pepper and salt) to an extent which would have put to shame an Anglo-Indian with a cast-iron interior. Pastry was a sybaritic innovation which had not then found its way into this part of the Dominion.

We passed the afternoon in much the same way as the morning, and worked until 7.30 P.M., when we supped on bread and cheese and went to bed.

The next day was Sunday, a day which in the dear "old country" is usually kept holy, with an exemption from all toil not absolutely necessary. My first Sabbath on the farm had almost slipped away before I remembered what the day was. Thinking that the farmer had also made a mistake, I mentioned the matter to him. He seemed quite surprised at my religious scruples, which he regarded as another evidence of British insular retrogression, and remarked that all days were alike to him. And so it proved, for we spent the whole of that afternoon ploughing snow, which drifted again almost as quickly as it was furrowed.

In the evening Jim broached the subject of his resignation to the "boss," who blankly refused to accept it, and informed him that if he wanted to go he must walk to the station, as he would see him—ahem'd—before he would allow him the use of a horse and sleigh. As I have said before, the village was considerably over five miles from the farm, and to walk there through

the snow was out of the question. It meant almost certain death.

But Jim avowed his intention of performing this feat, and very early on the following morning he rose, packed up his scanty wardrobe, and departed.

Just before daybreak, about two hours after Jim's exit, the infernal clock rang out my doom. Upon reaching the barn I hung my lantern upon a hook in the beam above, and sitting down upon my milkstool, commenced operations upon one of the cows.

Suddenly I heard a voice at my elbow, "I can't go through that wood—it's haunted." A little bit scared myself, I turned round abruptly, and in the dim light encountered the white face of the adventurous Jim. Pulling myself together, I rather hastily demanded what uneasy spirit could find pleasure in being out in such beastly weather.

"Well, you come with me, and see if there ain't a ghost."

Curious to know what had frightened the fellow, I took down the lantern, and together we sallied forth into the snow. We had hardly reached the middle of the meadow when a dark object came rushing towards us, and a sepulchral "bur-bur" sent Jim flying back in the direction of the barn.

"There it is!" he cried, in a voice full of terror.

I held the lantern aloft and shouted, "Who's there?"

"Bur-bur," was the reply. Then I ascertained the name and condition of this perturbed spirit. It was a *calf*! It suddenly dawned upon me that I had noticed the barn door was open when I first came down, and I immediately came to the conclusion that Jim had let the ghost out himself when he went in to put on his boots, which he was in the habit of leaving in the barn when his day's work was over.

When Jim received a personal introduction to his ghost, he grew as courageous as Bob Acres before he came into actual contact with pistols and cold lead, and shouldering his bundle again he started forth, just as daylight was dawning in the east. I gave him my pouch of tobacco to render his journey less irksome, and that was the last I ever saw or heard of poor Jim.

The weather for the next three weeks was comparatively fine, and I got along far better, and sometimes managed to find time to indulge in the luxury of a "farmer's holiday," *viz.*, chopping wood. Mr. Wiman

seemed to be, on the whole, very well satisfied with me, and encouragingly informed me that he had no doubt but that I should get into working order by the time mark commenced, which, in his opinion, was not until the spring, when ploughing, etc., began. This was something of a revelation to me. In my intense ignorance of farm matters I had imagined that there was already plenty to do.

It now became forcibly evident to me that I was not intended for a farmer. A daily communion with nature appeared every day less like the celestial "all beers and skittles" I had previously conceived it to be. The smoky London I had left became by comparison with my present surroundings a very seventh heaven of felicity. I began to long once more to relapse into a unit in one of the world's great loveless hives. I communicated my desire to Mr. Wiman. He would not hear of my leaving him until the expiration of three months, vowing that I had agreed to stay for that term, and threatening that if I attempted to leave without his sanction, he would "have the law of me." I had made no such agreement, but I saw that it would not help me to make a disturbance, and so restrained my natural indignation at such treatment. However, I determined to seek pastures new, and prepared my traps for flight at the first opportunity which offered itself.

I had not long to wait. A few days after my skirmish with the "boss," he had to attend to some very important business at a neighbor's farm about two miles farther east. Now or never was the time to escape. I immediately began my preparations by harnessing the best horse in the stable to a sledge. Everything was packed, so there was only the transfer of my chest from my room to the sledge. But how should I accomplish this without arousing her ladyship's suspicions? The fates were propitious. I had barely finished harnessing the horse, when Mrs. Wiman's stately form emerged from the house, with a hatchet in her hand.

"Where are you off to?" she inquired.

"Oh, I'm going to the wood to draw bark," I replied, leisurely surveying the straps to disarm suspicion.

"S'pose you'll be back in time for dinner," she said, picking her way across the yard and entering the corn-bin, where a plentiful supply of killed cow was always kept.

"Oh, yes," I answered. "And I guess

when I return I'll be jolly hungry, so please cut off a double dose for me," I added, venturing upon a little joke as a kind of farewell. Then I darted across the yard, and went up to my room—I don't know how many stairs at a time—and, by a herculean effort, shouldered my box, hurried down again, almost breaking my neck in my haste, and had it on the sledge before I had breath enough to say "Jack Robinson." I was just in the act of covering it over with some sacks when Mrs. Wiman reappeared with a huge piece of raw flesh in her hand. She comprehended the situation in a flash.

"So you are a-going to draw bark, are yer? Not to-day, my beauty!" I cannot lay much claim to this distinction, and so remained modestly silent. Men cannot receive flattery with the same brazen effrontery which characterizes the least beautiful members of the softer sex.

"Now just take that 'orse out, afore I come and 'elp yer," she continued. "And be lively about it, my fine feller."

I was now fairly seated ready to start, and catching up the reins I lashed the horse, and we plunged out of the yard.

"Stand away, there, ma'am. Look out, or there'll be a circus on this farm!"

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What a drive that was! The snow began falling in heavy flakes, and I had only a very slight acquaintance with the road, but we went like the wind. Here me go through a drift! Capsized?—no, another miracle in our favor. The horse stumbles—he's down? No, Providence again! Shall I be too late for a train? I have not the least idea of the time-table, but drive as if a whole legion of excited women in old huzzar jackets, with streaming hair and vengeance in their hearts, were after me.

Ah! there's the lake, and over yonder is the railway station. The wind blows in my teeth; my blood tingles with excitement, and the horse, entering into the spirit of the affair—bolts! Yes, I have lost all control over him. He throws up his head, sniffs the keen air, and taking the bit between his teeth, tears through the snow, scattering it in clouds on either side, like a thing possessed. Here is another dilemma. Supposing he should take it into his head to gallop on right past the station, and return home by a short cut known only to himself. I hardly know now whether I should accentuate this period with a mark of interrogation or exclamation. I think a very large ? would be the most suitable, as

somewhat expressive of the chaos of horrors presented to my mind as the possibility of such a contingency arose. I cannot express what my feelings were at that moment; I leave the reader to draw his own inferences from the — ?

The station at last! Thank Heaven! The runaway tears into the yard, but not deeming himself capable of clearing either the fence or the shanty, he comes to a dead standstill. I'm saved! I rush into the shanty, where I find the station-master fast asleep in his chair. My hurried entrance awakes him, and he starts up red in the face with anger and surprise, at such a display of energetic impatience in his private domain.

"What do you want, young man?" he asks, severely.

"I want a ticket for Montreal. When does the next train start?"

"Is that all ye disturbed me for? Well, I guess," he replied, with provoking deliberateness, again settling himself comfortably in his chair, "I guess you're afraid of being late, ain't you? I likes punctual young men, that I do ?"

"When does the train start ?" I cried angrily.

"Well, I rather think she's got to get here first. *But*, if all's well, she'll start from this 'ere dee-pôt in three hours" time."

Three hours!—three mortal hours to wait. Horrors! Why, that gave time for Wiman to return home and start in pursuit. I paced up and down the yard like a caged lion, glancing every few minutes in the direction of the lake. At length the train came in sight, and almost simultaneously I noticed a team galloping with incontinent haste through the blinding snow, half-way across the lake.

It was a race between the iron horse and thews and sinews. On they come. Which will be the first in? With breathless interest I glance from one to the other.

Hurrah! the train is in. My baggage is checked and in the van.

"All aboard there! Right away !"

Here comes Wiman through, puffing and blowing like a grampus; and standing with easy grace upon the platform of the hindmost car, there goes "yours truly."

A NIGHT PADDLE.

AMID the lilies in the marsh
The frogs in solemn chorus croak;
The owl's hooting, weird and harsh,
Is sounding from the hollow oak.
And far upon the hillside dark
I faintly hear the foxes bark.

Across my face the bat's light wing
Just brushes with a strange dismay;
And from the shores some frightened thing
Slips softly down and swims away.
A fish leaps up—a silver flash,
'Mid widening ripples—and a splash!

A thin, wan spectre of the moon
Is rising late behind the hill;
The strange mad laughter of the loon
Peals o'er the lake—then all is still,
Amid, the reeds, a gleaming spark—
A fire-fly dancing in the dark.

I hear the heart of Nature beat!
The world of men is far away.
O Soul, thy tameless brothers greet!
Thou art, to-night, as wild as they.
The savage blood is coursing fleet!
My heart with Nature's heart doth beat!

M. E. Gorham.