

[The Dignity and Comfort of the Farmer's Life – Lecture -- by Elihu Burritt, 1858]

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wind. Then there is another set of securities [underline in original], working higher in the scale [?] of reality, but based upon mutable values and subject to sudden and sweeping deterioration. They include shares in joint stock companies, and in [crossed out word] speculating enterprises, in which one stakes his money on a game of chance. In these two classes of reputed property we have the hay and stubble of wealth. Next comes the wood [underline in original] element, or the ownership and rentage of city buildings, [common] lots, “brown stone forests” and the like. This is so substantial and permanent in seeming, that it is called real [underline in original] estate . But it is not fairly entitled to that term. It may produce large income to the owner in times of reckless speculation, luxurious living and expensive show, but in times of depression and financial collapse, it may not produce the taxes upon it. The whole of it yields no positive or independent values to the occupant. The rentage is an outgo to him, a bill of expenses, to be charged over against the profits he may derive from his capital and labor invested in other species of property. The owner pockets money entered on the wrong, the unproductive, the debit side of the debtor's ledger. I repeat, therefore, that such property is not strictly entitled to the term real [underline in original] estate; because it is not positively and independently reproductive [underline in original]. It may be so much more substantial and safe, in the long run, than fancy stocks [underline in original], and paper bonds of moonshine companies, embellished with beautifully engraved vignettes [underline in original], as to be called real [underline in original] in comparison; but the only real [underline in original] property, in an absolute sense, is that represented by cultivated

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farms. It is in this intrinsic value of lands, plowed, sown, and reaped for generations that the farmer has the advantage over every other property owner in the community. All his hand-soiled acres are on the right side of the ledger. His revenues from them are positive [crossed out word] values to himself and to the world around him. They are food for man and beast; vital sustenance, without which money would have no value, and wealth no existence. The productions of his farm are real [underline in original], absolute and independent, in positive worth, of all the fluctuations to which mercantile property and stocks of every kind are subject.

His lands will not burn nor blow away; nor founder in the tempest. There they are forever; softened and moistened by the same rain and dew; warmed to green and exuberant life by the same sunbeams; ready to give back to the tiller's hand manifold rewards for his toil. If he and his descendants deal honestly with them, they never weary nor wane, but wax more abundant in production for a thousand years. Go to Old England; to the parts settled and cultivated by the rural Saxons ten centuries ago; from the time they first

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turned the virgin sod with their [indecipherable] wooden plows, to the present moment, those lands have become more and more productive in their revenues, until at this moment, they stand unrivalled on the globe. A thousand [crossed out word] consecutive harvests have not exhausted but enriched them. There is real [underline in original] estate for you. Go to that old Saxon farm in Essex, on which some followers of Hengist or Horsa squatted [underline in original] before the English language was born; reckon up the value of its thousand harvests, including that which has just been gathered, and compare the production value of those acres to mankind with the worth of fancy stocks [underline in original], or the rent of a brown stone front, or of a marble palace for the sale of calicoes! The only estate which Divine Providence ordained to be a real and everlasting value in the material world, it has entrusted, as the highest honor of human industry to the stewardship and occupancy of the farmer.

After all that has been said, felt and secretly murmured of the slow earnings and small properties of American farmers; after all the disparaging comparisons with merchants, manufacturers, and bankers which they have been in the habit of arraying against themselves, they constitute, if they did but realize it the great aristocratic democracy of the country. Please admit the term—aristocratic [underline in original] democracy—the [h]oi polloi [sic] [underline in original] of even fortune; the independent owners and tillers of nearly all the productive acres of this great continent—that fast-anchored yeomanry that mediate between

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Providence and all other classes of the community, and feed them daily with the productions of their industry. It is for this mission and position that I would say to them: cultivate and cherish a proper sense of your dignity. Give up the habit of dividing yourselves into individual atoms, and comparing yourselves, thus isolated, with men of city wealth and standing—with the Gerards, Astors [underline in original] and the merchant princes of commerce. You see what comes of

such comparisons—first, a depressing sense of disparity of fortune; then a sense of littleness and insignificance; which is all unworthy of you. Don't take off your hats in obsequious [indecipherable] to the Gerards, Astors, or any speculating capitalists of the country. Who were they, or who are the men that have succeeded them in the ranks of of [sic] wealth? They ~~the~~ [crossed out in original] are the oligarchy, are they that own, all the banks, warehouses, factories and shipping of the nation? Grant that. But why should this show of wealth impress you with a sense of inferiority as a class? Empty the vaults of all those banks into one great depository; and all the goods in these warehouses, and all the bales, wrought and unwrought, in those factories, and all the value of those ships, and the worth of all the city lots and edifices from one end of the union to the other; take an inventory of all the real and personal estate of all other classes in the land, and compare it all with the active, indestructible wealth of the [crossed out word] Farmers of America, and see how small it is in comparative value! Why, the whole

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Continent, with all its millions upon millions of cultivated acres, belongs to the farmers. See how the Plow is breaking up the measureless solitudes of the Western World! To watch the movement of one share, the process seems slow. To watch the growth of one family's estate, the accumulation seems slow. But unite farmer to farmer, and measure the furrows they turn, the harvests they reap, the homes they build, the wealth they win as a class, and you will have an approximate idea of their relative position in society. See how these noiseless, industrious hosts are subduing hill, valley, and prairie from ocean to ocean. I believe the farmer can still wield the axe who fell the first tree north of the Ohio. Middle aged men can remember when the whole population of Northern Illinois was gathered at night within one picket fort for protection against the Indians; when all the great fertile world west of the Mississippi was virtually all unexplored country. See how the farmer's plow has turned and nurtured, until millions have followed in its wake, and planted great and populous states, with cities, towns, and villages of almost fabulous growth. The plow moves on, in its God honored mission and might, turning back furrows [underline in original] against the Rocky Mountains on either side. All the vast space between these mountains, as the Mississippi, is but one land or stretch [underline in original] for the farmer yeomanry of America, all West of these mountains to the Pacific is but another. The child doubtless lives, who will see, ere his locks are grey, both these almost measureless intervals tamed by the farmer's share and reaped by his sickle. What chiefly gives power and position

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to the aristocracy of Great Britain? Why, the ownership of [crossed out words] the land of that island. Well, the farmers of America own a Continent containing the space and agricultural capacity of a hundred such islands; and they will own it to the end of time. Without any Laws of primogeniture, all the arable acres of the northern half of the New World will be their possession and heritage.

Class-feeling is un-American, undemocratic. Still, the Farmers of America, in justice to themselves, should be anointed with esprit de corps; [underline in original] with that sense of the dignity of their occupation and position, that shall raise them above all self-disparaging comparisons with other classes of the community, measured by any standard whatever.

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~~Let bygones be bygones, I thrice repeat. Whatever the Farmer may have been in the past, if the young generation of American agriculturalists, who will soon come to possess the landed estate of this continent, shall not be men taking the first rank in mental capacity, and cultivation; it will be for the reason that they have ignored or trampled underfoot their golden opportunities for attaining to such a standing in the world~~ [crossed out in original]

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dead.” Let the farmer put off the letters of its associations and measurements, as Sampson put from his limbs the hampering cords of the Philistines. Let him come forth and stand in the sunlight of this mighty Present that is dawning upon the world, and take his true position in its dignities and duties, as a man best qualified to fill them, by his large compass of practical and varied knowledge. Shall the cockney upstarts of fashion, luxury, and city life call him a clodhopper [underline in original] hereafter! him [underline in original], a prime landlord of this great and beautiful creation! On whom its Almighty architect has conferred such high trust, and such prominent means and motives of self-culture and elevation! He a “clodhopper,” [underline in original] whom God has put to the highest school of heart and mind education ever opened on earth! Let bygones be bygones, I say again, let the obsolete standards of the past be buried with it, as the tomahawk and scalping-knife of Indian warriors are buried with them. Look at the educating agencies and influences which the present has brought to the American farmer. We have glanced at the schooling which Nature gives him, in in [repeated in original] her three

quarters term of outdoor instruction from seed-time to the ingathering of his year's harvests. When his barns, cellar, and garret are filled with the produce of his fields, Nature looks abroad for a few days, with the ruddy smile of Indian summer, as if

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she said to the Earth "Well done; thou hast been faithful to man. Wrap thy white mantle around thee, and enter upon thy winter's rest; while man, whom thou hast so bountifully fed and clothed for his daily toil, shall enter upon his, and gather, until of spring, intellectual strength and enjoyment from the living world of thought which the [crossed out word] printed page of its varied literature shall bring to him at his fireside." To all men the God of Providence and grace, has given one day in Seven, for rest and religious devotion. To the Farmer, he has not only given this day with a peculiar relish for its enjoyment, but also the three winter months of the year, in which to store his mind from ~~these~~ those boundless sources of Knowledge which the Press has brought to his door. In the first place, the literature connected with his occupation, exceeds in extent and variety that of all other industrial professions in the world—a literature of which great and cultivated minds, in all civilized countries, are contributing their best thoughts and learning. Doubtless there have been more gifted pens and tongues employed upon the subject of Agriculture than there were, half a century ago, upon all the other [indecipherable], arts and occupations put together. Just glance at the contributions which these three autumnal months will bring to the store-house of this agricultural literature. Think of the thousands of town, country, state and national fairs, conventions and

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and [repeated in original] conversazioni [underlined in original] that have taken place in Europe and America since the first of [crossed out words] last September—of the thousands of eloquent ovations and elaborate essays these occasions have brought forth. And "a child was among them taking notes," and, "faith, he has printed them" too, for the farmers of the world. The "child" of the Printing Press—the man who with his alternating lists of inky pewter, gives ubiquitous immortality to human thoughts, was at them all, and he has printed [underline in original] them. He has printed for the Farmer's Library the grand ovation of William Ewart Gladstone, at Old England's Chester—the most splendid orator in Europe; the deep-thoughted and brilliant essay of Ralph Waldo Emerson, at Old Massachusetts Concord, and hundreds upon hundreds of other speeches on the same subject. Glance at the millions of these new pages contributed to the

Farmer's instruction and enjoyment. See how all the "Ologies, onomies and osophies" [underline in original] of the world of science pour their treasures into this annual offering to his mind. See with what gifts they do homage to the first human occupation inside and outside of Eden. See how these Sciences and Arts—these Oriental Magi of the intellectual world—bring their frankincense and myrrh to the cradle of the great primeval Industry in reverence for its mission on earth. See them come, with God's great Bible leading the procession and lighting the way. There is

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Chemistry with its crucible, Geology with its hammer, and Astronomy with its telescope, followed by all the ologies [underline in original] both great and small, each opening its cabinet of jewels for the general offering.

Thus the professional [underline in original] literature provided for the Farmer, or that pertaining to his occupation, embraces a vast range of varied and elevating Knowledge. But all this is mainly[?] the literature of his manual [underline in original], of his handbook, which he may consult daily in seedtime and harvest, just as the mariner consults his chart and navigation manual, while guiding his vessel across the sea. The farmer need not give his winter months with their long evenings to this agricultural, this professional reading, but to every department of general literature that can interest, cultivate and expand his mind. In this respect, he has an advantage over all who are called professional [underline in original] men. The Lawyer, Physician, the [crossed out word] College Professor, and even the Minister, must each confine himself mainly to professional [crossed out word] reading, in order to fit himself for the position he fills. Not so with the Farmer. The rainy days and [indecipherable]-moments of the Spring, Summer, and Autumn months will suffice generally for the perusal of these books and periodicals, containing the principles and suggestions he is to apply to his occupation; leaving his winter for the enjoyment of works of History, Poetry, [Bellis Sethos] and General Literature. It is for this peculiar advantage, that the Farmer of the present and the future day ought to be the best-read man in the Community—the best fitted, by a wide range of practical knowledge for the civil posts and duties to which such knowledge is indispensable.

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Then there is another circumstance which enhances the value of this advantage. No man in the community can establish and maintain such a regular routine of reading as the farmer. He

generally resides at some distance from the thickly-settled town or village, and is less subject to those interruptions to which men of the town are exposed. His books and periodicals are profitable and enjoyable substitutes for the social life and entertainments which occupy so [crossed out word] many evening hours in [crossed out word] the cities. Evening after evening for consecutive months, he can sit down to the companionship of these books, and commune with the most brilliant minds of all ages, and feel his own illumined and enlarged by every evening's fellowship with their thoughts.

I would earnestly press this regular system of reading upon the farmer as that source of enjoyment which flows more freely for him than for men of other occupations. I would say to him, regulate your business so as to take full advantage of this enjoyment. Do not let late nights work on the field or on the road rob you of these reading hours. Make them rank among the first values of your life. Let the thoughts you harvest from the printed pages, rank in duty and worth, next to the golden sheaves of wheat you garner into your barns. Take a lesson of life from the old adage; "It

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is the last ounce that breaks the camel's back." It is the late hour that breaks the farmer's, and makes the drudgery of his occupation. It is the extra effort and the extra time that bend his constitution, and seals the science of his life. It is the last, extra acquisition of property he cannot enjoy that virtually enslaves him to unrequited toil.

One word in regard to the acquisition of books, and I have done. Every body is familiar with the saying of the poor cottage renter in Ireland, "The pig pays the rent." The poorest occupant of a mudwalled cabin in that country manages to buy a young pig and to feed it to the value of fifteen or twenty dollars, without feeling very sensibly the little daily expenditure. I would say to every farmer, adopt the same economy in regard to the ownership or rentage of useful literature for yourself and family. Do for the God-built temple of your mind what the poor Irish peasant does for his mud-walled cottage. Set apart something that shall yield a certain [crossed out word] revenue every year for books. Adopt his source of income, for nothing could be more easy, convenient and sure. Take a young pig [crossed out words] early in March or April, of every year, and say what this shall bring in the market next Christmas [crossed out words], shall go for books [underline in original]. With honest feeding, it will buy at Christmas twenty volumes of useful and entertaining reading for your

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winter evenings. In a few years, you will have a library for your home that would do honor to any profession or literary man at the nation's capital. Take in your children as partners with you in all the enjoyments and anticipations which that library pig will purchase, and you may be certain that they will feed it with extra care, to make [crossed out words] it buy at Christmas a thousand extra leaves of literature for their enlightenment and profit. Is there any young farmer or farming son present, just entering upon agricultural life for himself[?] Let me urge him to adopt this simple plan at the outset, and watch the process and result, and see if he does not realize all I have predicted. Come, now! Just try it once; try it this year; commence this very month, and what a library you will have at Christmas for the evenings of next winter!

In conclusion, let bygones be bygones, I thrice repeat. Whatever the farmer may have been in the past, if the young generation of North American agriculturalists, who will soon come to possess the lauded estate of this continent, shall not be men taking the first rank in mental capacity and cultivation, it will be for the reasons that they have ignored or trampled under foot their golden opportunities for attaining to such a standing in the world.