

THE RURAL PROBLEM AND THE COUNTRY MINISTER

BY JOSEPH WOODBURY STROUT

IN the great forward movement of the times, the country is far behind the city. Modern improvements have obtained slowly among the farmers. Machinery has taken the place of men everywhere, even to a certain extent on the farm; but apart from the necessities of his economic life, the farmer has been slow to introduce new things. The rural home is not yet comfortable. The great majority of farmers still go to the spring, or draw water from a well with the old oaken bucket. Hot and cold water, modern conveniences, sanitary surroundings, heat, light, and the rest, are easily within the reach of every rural householder, yet not one in a hundred has them.

An electric-lighting plant is possible in almost every rural district. Rarely is there a country town through which some stream of water is not flowing, and now, since the passing of the old woolen and grist mills, these streams are running entirely to waste. In the three communities where I have lived during the last twenty-five years, there are valuable waterways altogether unused. Each one of these streams offers good opportunity for damming, and with small outlay the power of a fifteen-foot fall might be had. In my present location, in the centre of the town is a fall of water amply sufficient in power to light the village, and run small machinery of various kinds. In the city such power would have been in use long ago. This loss and waste is seen and acknowledged by the men of the different communities, and yet no ef-

fort is made to turn the unused power to account.

For more than a century cities have been paving their streets, and for half a century, at least, they have been building macadam roads, while the roads in the country, where roads are vital to economic life, have been mainly left to nature. In fifty years, omitting possibly the last decade, the poor country road itself has robbed the farmer of half his profits. He has not been ignorant of the fact, but he has been too apathetic to attempt a remedy. Since the state began building roads and aiding the towns to do likewise, some improvements have come, but even now rural communities will not take any initiative. Only when the road commissioners say that they will pay one half the cost does the town make a movement. Within fifty years this town where I now live has sunk in bad roads enough money to have macadamized every piece of highway in town; yet, with one or two exceptions, the farmers still draw heavy loads to market through an ungraded way of mud and mire.

There is great wealth in these rural districts. The resources of land and wood and water have lain undeveloped for hundreds of years, while men have toiled for daily bread, and died with just enough ahead to bury them. And they are not much more awake to these things now than they were fifty years ago. Moreover, the farmer spends in the city the little wealth he does accumulate. If he sells his produce in the

city, he spends his extra dollars there also. He unwittingly helps the city to build good roads, to have electric lights, comfortable homes, and all the luxuries of modern times, but fails to help himself to any of them. He invests the little money he accumulates in the city. He votes for the city, at least the manufacturing city, every time. He stands pat on the tariff, and fights reciprocity, just as the great manufacturer wants him to, and is generally relied upon to hold everything down to the old-fashioned, worn-out, beggarly economics of twenty-five years ago. The riches of his own locality are passed over, and his energy is given, in large measure, to the exalting of cities. The diamonds at his own door he will not gather.

If the rural inhabitant thus remains apathetic in the things which immediately concern his economic welfare, one may expect to find a similar condition of apathy in other quarters. And he is not disappointed. The rural schools are far below their possibilities. 'What was good enough school for us is good enough for our children,' is still the great argument of the orator of the town meeting. And the men chosen for the school committee still exploit the old notion that their chief aim should be to save the town's money, instead of to educate the town's children. The boys and girls are measured in dollars and cents, and the dollar is big and the boy is small. The country schools are indeed better than they were one hundred years ago, but the advance has been along a line of training and development peculiarly calculated to fit the pupil for city life. The point of view of the farmer is taken from the city. In every sporadic attempt at improvement he invariably apes the city. No attempt is ever made to turn the educational forces toward developing the country genius

of the pupil. It is no wonder the young people go to the city. So far as they have any training in school, it is toward that end. They learn nothing about the farm life. Most country boys leave school at the end of the sixth grade, hardly able to read, write, or cipher. They have no knowledge of the grasses and the flowers, of the bugs and the worms, of the birds and the animals, save, perchance, that which is involved in the folk-lore of the community, generally wrong. Here, where the country-side should place its chief emphasis and train its boys and girls for the rural life, the time is taken up with imparting quite another sort of knowledge.

The absence of local or civic pride in these communities is sometimes striking. In the centre of our town, a cluster of houses forms a small village. Nature has been generous with us in planting trees and giving us a small lake, bordered with the wild honeysuckle, the pink azalea, the blueberry and the shad-bush, while along the streets grasses grow profusely, and in the centre, between cross-sections of the road, little malls and parks are cut out; but the grass is never mowed, the edges of the malls are never trimmed, the shores of the pond are never graded, the trees, except by the state, are never sprayed; bills are posted on the trees, the sheds, and the fences. The meeting-house stands here, but except that men outside of the town have taken it in hand, it would be as forlorn and neglected as the rest of the district. Pigmy political bosses, and little party machines, dominate the town. These say who shall be selectman, school committee, representative to the general council, and who shall sit in the jury-box. The rest of the town does not care enough to want a voice in the matter.

A landmark in all these communities is the meeting-house. The fathers

of the hamlet were men of vision. The meeting-houses are old. They would not be here otherwise. The modern farmer has not much use for a church; he is too apathetic, too penurious, too close to the physical side of life, to organize one. But, thanks to the old men, there is no rural district without at least its one meeting-house. But this is a cold affair, unattractive in general, and out of repair, about starved out. Its architecture is commonplace or fantastic, and its vestry usually underground. The singing is led by an old-fashioned reed-organ, and the hymn-books are at least forty years behind the time. Congregations are small, and one sometimes wonders why there are any, so unattractive and downright oppressive are the surroundings. The services in most of the churches are like those fifty years ago, except that, instead of the second sermon, there is now a Sunday school. The mid-week meeting is composed of a few old ladies, with an occasional old man sandwiched in, who say the same things, pray the same prayers, that they have been saying and praying for half a century. Sometimes the young people have an organization, but it is sure to be an exact copy of the old peoples' meeting. Yet this church has been a light and a life to the community for many years, and may contain the secret of the community's salvation.

Behind this array of facts are still sadder ones. Below the intellectual and moral laziness of these districts is an old past, dragged along like a whirl of dead water. The city has cut away from its past. It has left the dead to bury the dead. Not so the country. In the country the custom of inbreeding is still dominant. Not in the inter-marrying of relatives, perhaps; yet, what is quite as bad, in the marrying into each other's families. No new blood comes to change the old current

of life. The boys seek their wives at the house of the next-door neighbor, or possibly in the next school district; good romance, but bad eugenics. And the end is not yet. They have developed a kind of consciousness of inferiority. They feel inferior to the world. Individually they think of themselves as on a lower plane than the men and women of the city. The result is a lack of moral courage. The rural youth is bashful. He has not the courage to get away from his father and mother and seek a wife from a different environment. Sometimes this happens, but it is an accident; and the wife, if a woman of education and vision, is soon starved out, or, in the dogged persistence of dullness, falls a victim to environment and settles down to the common level.

But the sin of the rural community is not what it has done, or what it is; it is what it has not done, what it is not. Time was when the men of these communities were the leading men in our economic and political life. The countryside was once the strategic point in our civilization. The farmer carried his produce to market and named his price for it. But to-day he is not even asked his price. He must take what the buyer will give. In those old days he had a voice in choosing his representative, his governor, his president. The old farmer had to be reckoned with then, but to-day he is of no account. He has yielded his place to the man from the city. He has allowed the city to select his brightest boys and girls and train them for itself. He has allowed the city to get his money. He has watched the city ride in palace cars, build homes of comfort and refinement, educate its children in attractive schoolrooms, add the luxury of fine libraries, establish churches of rich architecture, and man them with efficient talent. He has watched the city merchant move from the small shop to the great market, the

manufacturer build new and magnificent mills, and the banker control millions of dollars weekly.

He may have thought, once in a while, that these men have simply taken the place that once was his, and may not be able to give a satisfactory reason why he should not hold it still. He may have noticed that the great prizes have gone to the city, while he toils from sun-up to sun-down for his daily bread. He may now and then think of these things, but the fact probably is that he is satisfied with things as they are, has all he deserves, and cannot take the trouble to turn things about. He has never tried to rise to his own natural place in the movements of the world.

Communities, like individuals, must be measured not by what they are, but by what they might be, — what they ought to be. The rural district ought to be a power in the life of the country to-day. It ought to be conscious of the fact that it is essential to the life of the nation. But it will never come into its own, or rise to the demand of the day, by aping the city. It does not want the city life. It has no call for the city ideal. It cannot use the city plans. It must follow its own deep dreams, perfect its own plans in its own way. It must find itself. The best of its life is lost in measuring everything in terms of dollars and cents. It has been too ready to ask alms of the city, — some library, school-building, hall, church, — and too unwilling to get things for itself. It may be true that the city, getting the country's money and its best energy, owes it, in return, some of its wealth. But neither the city, nor any other power outside, can redeem the rural community. The rural community must redeem itself. The deepest call to-day is for a rural consciousness; a sense of life in the fields and forests, a passion for the life of the country.

Until this is had the community will not come up to its possibilities.

Two conditions confront these communities: either, by continuing as now, they must sink into insignificance in the nation's life, or by stirring themselves, they may come forward and take a hand in the activities of the day. There are indications that the latter alternative will be chosen; but as yet there is no real awakening in the rural community itself. The city is waking up to this condition and call of the country town, but it receives little or no response from the countryside. The villages slumber on, indifferent to what they have been, or what they may be. Men of vision from the great centres, looking out upon these little hamlets scattered up and down the country, realize their native beauty, their rich possibilities, their strength of life, their unmeasured resources, and try to do something for them, but usually they are not well enough acquainted with the problem to accomplish results, or they offend the farmer with their patronage. Educators have taken up the problem, and have contributed an immense amount of information on the matter, but these, even, are too much on the outside to help. No solution of so great a problem can come from outside the rural life itself. Any amount of money poured into the country in the form of renovating abandoned farms, gifts of public libraries, churches, what not, can never save the country. No one is helped by conditions that impoverish him. That is equally true of communities. The country must find its own soul. It must think its own thoughts. It must renovate its own abandoned farms, build its own public libraries, churches, and all the rest. In a word, it must become responsible for its own life, or it is bound to lose that life utterly.

Such, in the main, are the conditions. Where lies the remedy? Primarily in a

new rural consciousness. The community must find its own soul in this great age. It must wake up and earn its own living. It must do it in its own way. It must train its boys and girls in those things that belong to the life they are in, or, better, must train them so to shape that life from within that it shall develop its own capacities. The curricula of the schools must be modified. New teachers, of better training and of larger vision, are needed. Libraries are called for in which the literature of the rural life shall be found. The countryside must learn to master and handle its waste lands, take up the abandoned farms, divide them among the boys.

The farmer has too much land: most of the farms in this town could be divided by two, some of them by three, and become at once more profitable. Men must develop the coöperative spirit. Farmers have much to learn from the old countries yet. They must get together. A little coöperation among them would easily call into use the water power running to waste, and light the houses and streets. A little working together and the farmer could soon put his roads in condition to save at least fifty per cent of waste in the wear and tear of his teams. One of the first lessons to be learned is economy. But that is not all. Negative efforts may count for much, but it is the outlook, the vision of possibilities, that counts most. It is the new vision, the new consciousness, that can save these communities.

Here the task of the rural minister seems outlined. He is best fitted and situated to solve the problem, or at least to lead the way. It might appear to the casual observer that, when the needs of the community turn on the making use of water-power, the building of good roads, the introducing of water into the homes, the intensifying of the production of crops, the estab-

lishing of libraries, and the putting of the schools on a true basis, a business man, some captain of industry, is needed. And that would be true, were it not that the secret of these shortcomings lies, not in economic conditions, but in the heart of a peculiar life. It lies chiefly in the fact that the rural community has lost its vision. It has lowered its self-respect. It does not seem to know that it has a soul of its own.

Here is the minister's opportunity. He alone seems to possess the key to their real life. But this is true only as he is in the heart of the rural life himself. He can speak *ex cathedra* only as he is one of these people. It may not follow that the rural minister must be country-born and bred, yet it is well, other things being equal, if such be true. But he must be on the inside of the rural life. He must be able to make a true estimate of the ability of his people and compel them to come up to that estimate. It will not do to take them at their own estimate. That is too low. They are overshadowed, unconsciously overawed, by the great city. The rural community seems afraid of the city. It apologizes for its own best thoughts. It speaks of its own life deprecatingly as if it could not be expected to measure up to the life of the great town. It has a kind of backstairs sensation that it is on a lower plane than the city. These rural communities, unwittingly, are falling into a condition analogous to that of the old English village with its lord and commons. Feudalism is among us to a greater extent than we dream or would admit.

There is a dim, unspoken feeling in these scattered communities that, as communities, they have all that they deserve. They have sufficient self-respect to maintain themselves in a narrow kind of economic life, but when it

comes to taking a part in the movements of the country, they are afraid. They are timid. This condition bears as heavily on the minister as on the rest. The minister who accepts a call to a rural church is discredited by that church because he accepts it. They think: 'If he were a strong man in every way, he would not come to us.' In the estimation of his own congregation, he is never on a par with the city minister, albeit sometimes he is the stronger man. In the long, dull drag of the years that he spends among these people, it will be strange indeed if he too does not get to thinking the same thing. To a certain extent, the rural minister must not know so much more than his people if he would really minister to their deepest needs.

The minister holds the key to the situation, but he must have a live church behind him, or he will accomplish nothing. This he has not. The rural church is living far below its possible life. From hand to mouth mostly. It has to struggle for existence. It is just able to keep its head above water. And this, not because these communities are poor, but because their dollar is so high-priced. The rural people are penurious. I can stand on our meeting-house steps and point out a half-dozen families that never go to church, and that contribute almost nothing to the support of the church, yet whose property, from an economic point of view, has been increased in value, by the mere proximity of the meeting-house, many hundreds of dollars. Interest on the unearned increment of these homesteads would amount to ten times as much as any of them ever give to the church, or to charity of any kind.

Taken man for man, the rural communities are as wealthy as the cities. But the farmer's money is all in the city. He even sends his children there to be educated. Country towns, now

that they are compelled by statute to pay the tuition of children in some high school, have sat down to a kind of helpless submission, and send the few boys and girls who want to go further, to the high school in the city; but they do it grudgingly, and in no way ever encouraging a large number of them to go higher. The country finds this cheaper than to establish high schools in town. In dollars and cents that is true, but in every other way it is false: this city education is one of the causes underlying the apathy, backwardness, illiteracy, indifference, of the rural community.

In the same way the rural church is allowed to half-starve, while the farmer makes it possible for the city church to have all it needs. The minister who would like to lead the people to a higher life in the small communities is handicapped by the struggle on the part of the church for mere existence. When the church should be a powerhouse for him, he finds himself the powerhouse for the church. There would be no rural church to-day were it not for the ministers who, loving the country with a passionate love, and seeing wide visions of possible service there, are sacrificing salaries and society to accomplish the needed reforms. The minister's first task, therefore, is to build himself a strong church.

The rural church must become a new church. She also must win her own soul. She must develop a consciousness of individuality. She must awaken to a deeper sense of her mission. She must put more lofty and comprehensive ideals before her own life, learn generosity, self-sacrifice, to make large plans, to live a life of service to the community and to the world. She must overtake her possibilities and become a fearless leader in the larger schemes of the day. Here is the great problem itself.

The weakest point in the rural

church is its poor estimate of itself. It has allowed itself to become half-pauperized by gifts from without. It has lost its self-respect, and now, on every occasion where anything of importance needs to be done, turns at once to the helpers from the cities. It goes to outside sources when its running expenses fail, instead of rising in its own strength and self-respect and meeting its own emergencies. This begging is the most suicidal of all the rural policies. For this comes of that low estimate of its own resources and its own faith, its simple short-circuiting of its own energy. It is not surprising that its minister 'is inferior, or he would not come to such a church.'

Rural religion is not without a crude kind of vitality, but it is not of a high type. The church does not lead the community's aspirations, or the individual's—it follows. The community has no real appreciation of the church service. The church is no more sacred than the town hall. Sunday morning conversation goes on until the doxology is sung. Fifty per cent of the people are late. And unless the service is a sort of entertainment, most of the people do not come at all. The real dignity of a religious service, the long vision, the stirring of deep faiths, the presence of an infinite life, these are not there. There is also a surprising lack of loyalty to the church. I have been left,

not once, or twice, of a Sunday evening, without a congregation because a neighboring church had a Sunday-school concert that evening.

The rural minister has been called inferior, but he has an inferior church to back him. He is in a community of long apathy, low religious life, crude ideals of service, small ways of giving and living; and unless he is a mighty man, he will be hampered and hindered and discouraged and belittled by his environment.

No braver task, however, has ever been set for man than that outlined for the rural minister. For, while he must fight to keep himself from falling to a lower plane of thought and life, and to keep his church from losing its faith altogether, he may look forward to the end when, from a patient and persistent service, he shall see the reward of his toil, in better and brighter things. The rural districts yet contain an immense amount of vitality. Stored away in the apathetic lives of these slow people is a great reserve of energy. Here are strong men, and here is health, and here is independence. Here, in embryo, are long visions, great plans, sturdy life, the hope of the nation. But the deep notes of life must be sounded. The deep faiths must be constantly under call. This is the rural minister's opportunity, and it is no mean one.

TWO ITALIAN GARDENS

BY MARTIN D. ARMSTRONG

A GARDEN is the attempt of Man and Nature to materialize their dreams of the original Paradise. Man is its father and Nature its mother, so that all gardens which deserve the name are half-human, and appeal to us with a personality of their own.

Of the two gardens which are the subject of this reminiscence, one stands eleven hundred feet above the Tyrrhenian Sea, looking across the Gulf of Salerno toward the blue plain of Pæstum; the other adorns a lonely promontory in the Lake of Garda, where its grove of spiring cypresses and walls of black yew throw a fringe of dark, broken reflections into the deep water under its rocky banks. It is essentially a cultured garden in the human and literary sense of the word. It must have been imagined and made by a scholar who loved and absorbed the Classics so thoroughly that he lived in their dead poetries rather than in the world in which he found himself; and so in his chosen corner he made himself this private paradise out of a dead ideal, where he could pace among his statues and cypresses and marble tablets with their neo-classic inscriptions, or look across the lake at the distant promontory of Sirmione, where the Roman Catullus once lived and wrote.

In the middle of the garden stands a wide circle of cypress trees, and between each two trees a stucco shrine containing an antique marble bust, whose silent presence gives a hush and secrecy to the shady space. At the margins of the straight walks which intersect the

square grass-plots, a marble well or a quaint garden statue breaks the monotony of the lines. Except for two long hedges of rose-flowered oleanders, the garden has few flowers: its restrained, classic charm springs from the alternation of light and shade on grass-plots and on the cool, dead white of stuccoed walls; the contrast between the weathered marble of its statues and inscribed tablets and the heavy green and sables of its yews and cypresses.

A long flight of steps leads down into a smaller garden — a high-walled square, green and damp like an empty well — in a corner of which stands an old lemon-house. Tall white columns support a skeleton timber roof, and amongst the curdy white of their stucco shafts the great lemon trees receive the sunlight among their leaves, sifting it into a hundred soft tones of shade and transparency. The waxy, primrose-colored fruit shows coolly amid the dark, glazed foliage, and the pale blossom fills the air with its exotic sweetness. Against the wall a marble well is set, still full and clear, though its whiteness has been stained and weathered to orange and greened with moss. A neo-Latin stanza is carved upon it, — a 'quaint conceit' packed into four lines, — and above it, in an alcove in the wall, stands a broken baroque statue, seeming by its wistful pose and slow gesture to be listening to some far-vanishing sound.

Toward the lake, where the square white villa stands with its cool loggia, terraces of clipped yew descend in steps