

The Harvesting Time

Golden the sun as it rises in a cloudless sky, filling the spaces of earth and air with radiance, golden the stubble fields and golden the scattered shocks of grain, while in bordering fence rows and turn rows, golden red and sun flowers reflect the gleam; golden, too the straw which flows from the stacks, golden the grain which flows into the wagons and most gloriously golden of all the stream of money which flows into the farmer's pocket.

Early of an August morning, but the sun shines with a fervor which rapidly sucks up the dew and makes the air fairly quiver, no moist and enervating heat does it bring but a ripening and maturing glow which makes the labor of the harvest fields seem only one of the processes of nature. Roadside weeds and flowers are powdered with dust, and, as the threshers come, from the road, stirred by the troops of the heavy horses clouds of dust rise and, hanging in the still air, intensify its golden shimmer. The men are for the most part young, and trim and attractive in blue shirts and khaki trousers; their horses, plump and shining, are huge, square built creatures which haul the loads of grain or racks of bundles with slight effort.

They pass on to the field where the machine and engine are already in position, the bundle haulers go to

the various parts of the field and begin to pitch the bundles from the shocks on to their racks, while the accustomed teams wait. ~~soon~~ pass on when all the shocks within easy reach are loaded, with really human intelligence. Soon the first team reaches the machine and as the bundles are pitched into the carrier there rises the high pitched musical monotone of the steam threshers or the more subdued murmur of the Perrosne engine, mingled with the "clug, clug," as the engine grunts under a heavy load. Before many minutes the grain is pouring into the wagon while from the stacker comes a stream of brilliantly golden straw. As soon as the racks are emptied the bundle haulers go out again, and, as the shocks are picked up, to ever remoter parts of the field; enough men are used, however, so that not for an instant do the bundles stop, nor is there any cessation in the streams of grain. Wagon after wagon is filled and the men drive away to put the grain into the bins or to haul it to the nearest village if it is to be sold. Happy then is the farmer whose farm lies close to the market, since every additional mile of haul means additional helpers.

The matter of obtaining help for the threshing is one instance where the much discussed principle of co-operation seems to work beautifully. A certain number of farmers representing ten or twelve farmers

which lie conveniently close together, form themselves into a threshing ring; a machine is engaged, the farmers determine where the threshing shall commence and what course it shall follow. Beside the three men with the machine from thirteen to fifteen men are required, sometimes if the grain must be hauled to town from an outlying farm even more are needed. Usually six of the men haul grain and seven haul bundles, if the grain must be hauled far or unloaded under difficulties and without an elevator more grain haulers are needed. In some rings very careful accounts are kept, the exact number of hours which the men work at each place is noted and those who do a large amount of threshing pay over-time to those who have less; where the accounting is less carefully done, the farmer with a large acreage usually has an advantage since he seldom returns quite as much work as is given him by the men with less grain.

There is never any difficulty about obtaining help, the work is not excessively hard, the most unpleasant position, that is the straw stack, is usually taken by the owner of the farm; the grain haulers and the bundle haulers usually give variety to the work by changing places at intervals, but the two things which make threshing time one of the pleasantest in the

season are the enthusiasms which comes of working in combination with other men and the elaborate meals which are served.

The men discuss the food which they expect to get at the various places with appalling candor, this one is dirty, that one is clean but a poor cook, a third is stringy and three years ago there happened at that house a never-to-be-forgotten disaster - the potatoes gave out. The criticized places form a very small minority, most farmers live well at all times and by a sort of unexpressed convention these meals for the threshers are the best efforts of the house wife. The emphasis is not laid on dainty salads, insubstantial desserts or elaborate made dishes; the palate of the thresher has not been spoiled by over spiced and sauced viands and this half day of pitching or shoveling has given added stimulus to an appetite good under all circumstances.

The women of the household have been active since early morning, at breakfast they have only the family, with possibly the men from the machine, if they have pulled down the previous evening, but the whole morning is more too long to prepare the dinner for sixteen men. Bread and cake have been baked the day before, if there is to be another dessert, such as pie or pudding, that is freshly baked during the

morning, potatoes are peeled, vegetables are prepared; the meat, perhaps a huge roast of beef or pork, a Kettle of boiled beef with fluffy dumplings and an abundance of gravy or even young fried chickens, is set to cook. The table is drawn out to its greatest length, there will scarcely be room for all to sit down at once but that matters less since some always come in earlier and are nearly through eating when the later comers arrive. In the hour just before twelve o'clock the tension is at the highest, the finishing touches are put to the table, the coffee is put on to boil, the pie is cut and set around at the various places, huge plates of bread and of cake, moulds of jelly, dishes of pickles, pitchers of milk and of lemonade form table decorations which appeal to the guests more than did ever "pink tea" or "yellow luncheon". Just at twelve o'clock, smallest Sister posted at the gate for this very purpose comes running to the house and cries that the men are coming, then follows a seething confusion, from which, at the proper moment, the most perfect order is evolved. With meat, potatoes, and other vegetable on the table, a clean apron on the mistress of the house, glasses filled, coffee ready to pour and butter cut.

The men wash with lavish use of soap and much splashing of water. The men from the machine, whose

sleeves are black with grease beg to have the table-cloth covered with newspapers, so that they may eat without worrying over a badly soiled cloth. Shortly the places are filled and the meal begins, the noise has ceased, the conversation is limited to requests to pass some distant dish, all are engrossed by the important business of the moment. The heaped-up plates are cleared with a celerity which seems amazing to the unaccustomed spectator, again they are heaped and again emptied; with the dessert comes some loosening of tongues, a remark as to the weather, the way the grain is threshing out and its probable price, but of real table talk there is none, silently they eat, silently they rise and leave the house. Outside the men lie about in the shade, joking and talking, until the hour of nooning is over and the horses must be hitched up for the afternoon.

When the men have departed the women eat their dinner, and then attack the heap of soiled dishes which confronts them. This work is perhaps less amusing and more monotonous than that of the men, it lacks too the stimulus that comes of working with a number of others. It is comparatively unusual for the women to help one another during the threshing time, but occasionally a neighbor comes in to help

with the sewing and with the washing of dishes. If the threshing is not finished before evening, the housewife has only a brief interval between the washing of the dinner dishes and the beginning of her preparations for supper. There will be fewer men at this meal since some prefer to go home directly they finish so as not to be so late with their evening chores, those who do come, do not arrive together, two or three of those who had the first loads come in early, at half past six perhaps, and the haulers continue to arrive at intervals until seven or later, last of all, when it is already quite dark, come the men from the machine. Again must the housewife face a mountain of soiled dishes, again do they vanish under her skilled onslaught, finding as if by magic their appointed places in the china closet or on painted shelves; late at night her labors are finished, she is unspeakably weary but the weariness is tempered with gratitude for the beneficent fact that threshing comes but once a year.

Thus matters go when August suns shine bright; but even in August there are days of rain and sometimes when all is ready, the bell at hand, the housewife bending expectant over her glowing stove, comes a sudden storm drenching the scattered

shocks and putting a period to the threshing for one day. There indeed does the farmer's wife lament, what heaps of cakes and pies, what mountains of bread must her family consume! and unfortunately these same quantities of food must be replaced with fresh for in a day or two those same travel hands with appetites undiminished will be with her again.

Ordinarily this month of August seems as if created for the special purpose of the threshers, but in an unusual year drenching rain succeeds drenching rain with no opportunity to thresh the grain, until sometimes the shocks beat and sometimes were swept again, so that the crop is utterly lost. Then, indeed, does the farmer envy his neighbor who has his grain conveniently in the stack and can attend patiently upon the vagaries of the weather.

This seldom occurs, Iowa recognizes the farmer as her favored son and the weather which she metes out to him is usually admirably adapted for his purposes. It is quite true that, like most favored children, he is seldom satisfied and complains quite continuously but at the end of the season when he measures his grain and counts his gains he realizes that the weather, after all, must have been just about what the crops wanted. So the golden maturity of the summer deepens

is the gleaming autumn, the song of the thrush is heard no more in the land; where the golden clover stood, the stubble is already growing green again, on the earth snow black and glistening where the plough-share has passed; this harvest has passed into history and our thought already turns to the promise of the coming year.