1. Introductory

Farmers come and farmers go, but the land goes on for ever. The details of farming change with the times, but the underlying principles remain the same, and the wise farmer’s creed, ‘I believe in keeping the land in good heart’, has not altered through the ages.

Father loved the land and everything to do with it; agriculture was in his blood, and he had the reputation of being one of the best farmers in his district. Grassland was his chief love and on it he lavished money and care, so that his Red Devons were well known and won numerous prizes at the local fat-stock shows, and butchers competed with each other to buy them.

He was a pioneer in many ways and used methods that were unique fifty years ago, but which now have become recognised as standard practice; he had not the advantages of modern implements and the new strains of grass seeds, but in spite of this his pastures were a picture and the admiration of all who came to see them.

There is a great difference in the attitude of mind of those who live off the soil and those who make their living on the soil. The former are well known in their district as land robbers, and are despised accordingly by all right-thinking countrymen. The latter would as soon rob the land as their mother, and when the time comes for them to give up their farm they do so happy in the knowledge that it is in better order than when they took it over.

On their broad shoulders lies the whole responsibility for keeping the land of Britain in good heart; so that fine cattle fatten in the pastures and good corn crops
ripen to harvest on the ploughlands, and this, only too often, with but little profit to themselves after much hard work.

These memories, of good farming fifty years ago, are a tribute to this gallant company, of which, in his day, Father was a shining light.

2. *A Very Little Geology*

It is often stated that geology is the real basis of all agriculture. This is probably true enough, but geologists and farmers are apt to look at the subject from very different viewpoints. The geologist is mainly interested in the rocks beneath the surface, but the farmer’s interest lies in the soil at the surface.

There may be a direct relationship between the two, but in those parts of Britain that were covered with ice sheets and glaciers in the Ice Age the surface soil often has little or no relation to the underlying rock. For here the surface soil is not made from the weathered rock below, but from a mixture of many rocks carried long distances, ground down under the glaciers, and deposited when the ice melted.

It is in this ground-up mixture of many rocks that the farmer grows his crops, and it is the composition of this mixture that settles what crops he can grow best.

If nature did the grinding and mixing well, the farmer may have a good loam soil that will grow almost anything. If, as often happened, nature ground up the rocks a little too finely, the soil may be a heavy clay difficult to cultivate and best suited to grass. Or the grinding process may have been cut too short, when a hungry gravelly or sandy soil may result.
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As soon as the ice sheets and glaciers melted streams began to run, and these carried with them the finer particles of the mixture and deposited them in the meadows near their banks. Subsequent winter floods increased the depth of these deposits, so that now many meadows have several feet of fertile alluvial soil on their surface.

Obviously the ground-up mixture deposited by the ice sheets and glaciers will be thickest on the lower ground and may hardly exist at all on the high ground. Here the soil will be directly related to the weathered underlying rock.

On the whole nature had been kind when the ice disappeared at Shutlanger at the end of the Ice Age. For, although the surface soil on the higher ground was thin and closely related to the sandstone and limestone underneath, yet, on the lower slopes and in the meadows, it was a deep fertile loam or good alluvial soil, which had no relation to the underlying rock as far as its composition was concerned.

But the underlying rock had a big effect on the drainage of the soil, and the behaviour of the good loam or alluvial soils was very different where it overlay clay or sandstone.

Father had taken the trouble to learn the geological history of his farm; he understood the reasons for the peculiarities of each of his fields, and was well rewarded in consequence. He certainly agreed that geology was a sound basis to agriculture.
3. The Country Scene

Closely allied to the geology of the district is the appearance of the country scene. With us it was a chequer board of fields of different colours enclosed by quickset hedges studded with oak, ash or elm. Here and there hazel woods broke up the regular pattern, and lazy streams bordered by willow and sallow bent and twisted across the board.

The wood was a delight in spring with its carpet of bluebells, anemones and primroses, and a feast in autumn when the nuts were ripe. It was the reputed home of a badger, the undoubted home of many rabbits and foxes. Sometimes after dark a fox would visit us from his earth in the wood, and then pandemonium reigned amongst the guinea-fowl and hens that roosted on the beams of the covered yards; but they wisely only swore at him from the safety of their lofty perches, and he had to retire supperless and discomfited.

Perhaps the brooks gave us all the most pleasure, for along them there was always something to see at all seasons of the year. There we could watch herons busy fishing, standing statuesquely knee deep in the water until an unwary fish came within reach. Kingfishers darted up and down or sat poised like a diver on a tree stump; coots and moorhen and wild duck nested there, and occasionally an otter would take to the water almost noiselessly from the reeds.

Rosebay willow herb, forget-me-not, marsh marigolds and reed mace lined the banks with a blaze of colour in the summer.

There were fish to catch in the brooks—roach, dace, perch, eels and an occasional pike—when cooked they
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tasted of little but mud, but seemed excellent to those who had caught them.

Whether we went out bird-nesting, or with a camera, fishing rod, or dog and gun, the brook always had a fascination that never palled.

We collected wild ducks’ eggs and hatched them under a hen and kept the young ducks in a wired-in enclosure in the orchard. Here they thrived and bred and became quite tame and had the run of a good-sized pond. We also kept young owls, taking them from their nests in hollow trees in the wood and risking the furious attacks of their parents. They too became quite tame and we fed them on rats and mice and moles. The rats and mice were mainly provided by our cat; she was a great ratter and always brought her catch to us to cash it for a piece of meat which she much preferred; the moles we caught ourselves from the fields shortly to be shut up for hay.

When the owls grew up we let them go, and they often returned in the evening bringing their friends with them for any food we had to give them; several owls sitting on the roof of the house hooting for their supper was a wonderful sight.

Father had a great dislike for rabbits, for they destroyed his grass, ruined his hedges and ditches, barked his young trees and nibbled his root crops; it was our job when we were old enough to carry a gun to keep down the rabbits on the farm. We shot a good many lying out in the grass all through the summer, and in the winter we ferreted them and filled up their holes. The farm workers set snares and caught a good many, for they knew that to Father any way of catching a rabbit was a good way.
THE COUNTRY SCENE

We always had several coveys of partridges on the farm and usually got a bag of about ten brace at the first shoot in September. Our groom was a keen sportsman and always carried out what he called ‘beating the bounds’ in the early morning of the day of the first shoot. This consisted of going round the boundary fences cracking a whip to drive the partridges into the centre of the farm so that they could not so easily escape over the boundary before we had a shot at them. How much of our bag was due to his efforts we never knew, but we strongly suspected that in his zeal he beat the bounds well outside and not inside our boundary fences.

To find the wild flowers of the district the hedgerows and ditches had to be hunted; here, untouched by the plough or grazing animal, a process of natural selection had produced the flowers and weeds suited to the soil and which flourished best in competition with their neighbours.

High up in the hedgerow, vetches, goosegrass and bindweed climbed for a place in the sun. Lower down cow parsley, hemlock, mayweed, sow thistles, fat hen, burdock, knapweed and nettles struggled for the mastery with the ubiquitous couch grass. On the banks and ditch sides chickweed, speedwells, violets, primroses, cowslips and cuckoo-pints fought out their lowlier but just as intense battle for existence.

There was a large rookery on our neighbour’s land, and rooks, starlings, fieldfares, plovers, and larks were our commonest birds on the grass fields and arable. A few pigeons led a somewhat harried existence, for we waged war on them at all seasons.

Except at sowing time and harvest the rook was not so black as he was painted, and but for him and the
starling the arable fields would have suffered more from wireworms and leatherjackets than they did.

The eerie piping note of the plovers, the cawing of flights of rooks going home, and the noisy chattering of flocks of starlings going to bed in the trees, were familiar sounds to Father as he returned home in the twilight.

4. Father and his Farm

Father loved the land but he was by nature a grazier and not an arable farmer; grass was his abiding passion, and though he cultivated his arable land to the best of his ability, he did so as a means of providing the necessary winter food for his Red Devons, not for love of arable farming for itself.

He believed strongly that to get the best out of grassland it must be cultivated just as assiduously as the ploughlands, and he worked his grazing of it in rotation in much the same way as he arranged the rotation of crops on the arable. The upkeep of the fertility of the pastures was based on wise grazing by sheep and bullocks fed with cake, the use of farmyard manure, and supplementary dressings of lime and artificials when these were necessary. But he always contended that artificials must not be used without farmyard manure, and his version of an old saying ran:

Lime and artificial without manure
Will soon make farm and farmer poor.

Although he never doubted that a bag of artificial might produce an extra bag of wheat to the acre, he felt certain in his own mind that it was not the artificial, but the
manurial value it released in the soil that produced the extra bag of wheat. This manurial value had to be replaced unless one was a land robber.

He always told everyone who asked his opinion on this vexed question, that he thought those farmers who used artificials without manure were running up an overdraft on the bank of fertility. They might cut a fine dash for a year or two, but the overdraft would have to be paid back with high interest in the end in the form of very large quantities of farmyard manure.

That a farmer should try to build up a good reputation seemed to him essential, and he held that the reputation must cover good relations with his workers, good-quality produce from the farm, good condition of the buildings, gates, fences, hedges, etc., and most of all good heart in the land. It would please him mightily could he know that, forty years after he left Shutlanger, there are still old men in the village who speak of him as the ‘Master’, and butchers in the towns who still talk of the wonderful fat beast they bought from him out of the big meadow.

Father carried out many experiments on various subjects, such as the best time of year to sow grass and clover seed mixtures, the best manurial treatment for producing extra hay, making silage without a silo, defeating wireworm and turnip fly, and the flooding of one of the meadows for an ‘early bite’ or hay crop. Though he deplored the lack of enterprise of many farmers he realised that most of them had to keep a tight purse, since they had so often learnt that argument and specious advertisement were only a device to make them ‘buy a pup’. And he always remembered the incident, in the market-place at Northampton, of a seller
of hair restorer who was shouting, ‘This will grow hair on a pot pig, gentlemen, and only one shilling.’ Just then a gust of wind removed his wig and revealed a completely bald pate. Shouts of derision greeted this mischance, and with the parting thrust, ‘Try it on your own pot first, mister’, the crowd melted away.

Small wonder perhaps that farmers generally were chary of trying out new schemes; our neighbours much preferred that Father should do the experiments so that they could copy his lead the next season if the result was a success.

Shutlanger Grove, ten miles south of Northampton, lent itself admirably to all these purposes; for it lay on the border-line between the best arable land to the east and the best pastures to the west, and so combined most of the good qualities of both.

Here was a farm of about 500 acres with great possibilities; in the fields on the higher ground, where the soil was a somewhat sandy loam, stock could winter out on the grass until Christmas and the arable fields would grow splendid crops of barley, oats or potatoes. On the lower slopes, where the soil contained more clay, it was a fertile loam suitable for wheat, roots, and good grass; while the meadows of alluvial soil on clay never dried out in drought and would carry a bullock to the acre all summer.

All the meadows, watered by three different streams, were outstanding permanent pastures; two of the largest, making up about 100 acres between them, were considered some of the finest pastures in the district.

About 120 acres of the farm were arable and this provided all the winter feed for the stock as well as some corn to sell.