CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Even before the war there were some who realized the difference between the process of “stealing from the land” and the operations of farming; and among this small minority there were many who saw that land kept under permanent grass was more suitable material for the thief than for the honest producer.

But since August, 1914, very many—perhaps the majority—have come to realize that their comfort in life is, to a very great extent, more dependent upon food than upon luxury; and that, without farming, the produce of this island-home of ours is not sufficient to keep the inhabitants decently fed even for a fairly large part of the year. So from both sides there has lately been a clamour for the plough; it has been maintained, quite rightly, that fields which are worked deeply, manured skilfully, and seeded properly are likely to yield food in greater abundance than land left to cover itself with a herbage whose quality varies with the natural fertility of the soil and with the bountifulness of our uncertain seasons. Further, some of the majority are now inclined to join a small section of the minority who never tired of insisting that, if the British farmer would but make an imaginary journey across the Channel or the North Sea and emulate the agriculturists of Eastern and Central Europe, many difficulties of his situation would vanish.

That those who insisted upon the good that might come of a study of the arable husbandry of Denmark, Holland, Belgium and Germany had much reason upon their side is obvious to all who have investigated the subject of food-production; but the fact that the conditions which favoured success on the continent were widely different from our own was not sufficiently kept in view. Many enthusiasts, indeed, spoilt a good case by exaggerating it, but their contentions, though somewhat extravagant, were especially valuable when expressed in the worst
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period of public apathy, and deserved at least to be treated with thoughtful criticism.

One of the subjects that seems to have been overlooked is that of beef production, and it is the object of this work to show how the continental practice must be very considerably varied if we are to maintain our supply of the “Roast Beef of Old England.”

I once happened to be waiting as an expert witness in court when one of His Majesty’s Justices gave a short dissertation on the nomenclature of various articles of food. He explained that to the expert there were differences of terminology which might be of subtle or of emphatic degree: “For instance,” said his Lordship, “to the grocer there are new-laid eggs, fresh eggs, and eggs!” Now, without presumption, I hope, I would follow his Lordship’s example, and point out that beef, to the Englishman, is quite different from that grown on the plough-lands of the continent. We have to recognize this factor more fully before we are in a position to reorganize our husbandry.

Let us for a moment review the cattle husbandry of the continent. Obviously, to do this briefly, one must generalize. To review the subject in detail would demand a very much larger volume than the present, but we must at least attempt to visualize our neighbours’ conditions if we are to measure home conditions by their standard.

Our neighbours use their cattle primarily with a view to the making of butter and cheese, to supply the milk-salesmen, and for draught purposes. Meat, though important, is quite secondary. Their cattle supply meat in the form of veal, cow-beef, and ox-beef; and also, strange though it may seem, as pig-meat. Whey and separated milk, the by-products of their most important industry, the dairy, are the means of manufacturing very large quantities of bacon and pork. During the war our farmers were urged to graze their pigs on our permanent grass-land—wise counsel for Englishmen no doubt at the moment, but a measure that would be looked upon as the strangest extravagance by continental farmers, who regard the pig as most valuable when used to consume stuff that cannot be used more profitably for anything else. When they keep land under permanent grass,
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which is not often the case, it is simply with a view to the cow directly producing human food, such as butter, cheese, new milk and veal; waste material is, in their view, quite good enough for the pig. Agricultural conditions which allow the products of the soil to be consumed by animals which, after a period of slow growth, will appear upon the table as meat, hardly enter into the continental view of farming. With us, on the other hand, beef is a most important product, perhaps the most important, as regards cattle, of all our grass-land products; and, before the war, much more than 50 per cent. of our land was permanently kept under grass. The only product of our cattlehusbandry to be compared with beef was the new milk, required by large residential districts; for our cheese-making industry, whilst still important, was, and is, very small, and our butter-making, except as an adjunct to calf-rearing, had disappeared in the majority even of the most rural districts. Certain parts of Ireland must be excepted from this last statement, but even in the case of Irish farmers, it is doubtful whether calf-rearing or butter-making is the more important. Amongst English farmers it is a common practice to devote about three acres of medium quality grass-land to their cows; in return they get, per annum, one well-reared calf and slightly increased bulk in the cow. It is this kind of pastoral husbandry, forced upon us by the economic conditions prevailing since about 1875, that is in people’s minds when they urge pig-grazing upon the notice of our grass-land farmers. The Dutch farmer might well be amazed at the idea of using some of his magnificent Polder pastures for pork production; he only knows of this land as being used for growing milk. An acre of his land will yield him approximately 300 gallons of milk, whereas our very best grass-land does well if it produces 280 lb. of prime bullock, equivalent to 160 lb. of meat. Though it may be possible to show that pigs fed upon grass-land will produce more pork than the bullock will produce beef, it cannot be claimed that, under the most favourable conditions, they will produce the same amount of human food as the milch cow.

Here and there the foreigner does grow some prime beef; it is not an unknown thing in his husbandry, but the process
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is so seldom favourable to intensive production of food from the land that the practice is almost negligible. The beef which the continental chef knows how to serve so well is practically all cow-beef, with an occasional joint off a good young bull, or meat from draught oxen, the oxen being fattened for slaughter after a long life at the yoke. Mutton, as travellers know, is a rare luxury on the table of any European country except our own. Even with sheep the foreigner is not negligent of the dairy, for much of the mutton he eats is the flesh of animals that have been milked. Ewes’ milk in our country is practically unknown for any other purpose than the rearing of the lamb. It is quite amusing to see the astonishment shown by some foreign agriculturists on hearing that we never milk sheep, and the corresponding amazement displayed by our farmers on hearing of such an anomaly.

But while the foreigner consents practically to abstain from good steer beef, he is not a little careful that his cow and bull beef is of uniform, and of fairly good, quality. The huge cow-market at Leeuwarden in the Friesland province of Holland is a wonderful example of this. At the great cow-market held at this great agricultural centre are to be seen vast quantities of fine cows ready for slaughter. What strikes the Englishman about the market when he visits it for the first time, is the wonderful uniformity of the stock; row upon row, each containing several dozen specimens of the cows of the country, are all more or less exactly turned to the same pattern. The cattle are all of the same type, not particularly good (the best cows in an English market are undoubtedly better), but there is practically never a bad one. The cows are all fairly young, being from seven to nine years old; a wastefully fat animal is never seen, and they are practically all in the same stage of “finish,”—what would be called “just good meat” in our home markets.

The bulls are remarkable to us in one particular respect. Practically all of them are about 30 months of age or a year younger. An old bull is an exception, being just the odd one who, by virtue of his breeding and appearance, has been selected by one of the Associations for the Improvement of Cattle as worth subsidizing; thus his services as a sire remain available.
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for four or five or even more years, the less perfect bull being slaughtered after one, or at most two, years' service.

On one visit to Leeuwarden, I remember seeing, at the abattoir belonging to a large firm of exporters, no less than six hundred "sides" from the carcases of young bulls that had been purchased on the market that same morning for shipment to London by one firm; and yet that very morning I had searched in vain for a veteran. For, of course, these old bulls are the choicest specimens of their race, and I was anxious to inspect any that happened to be on the market.

If one contrasts a market full of animals such as this with the good and the bad, the old and the young, the lean and the extravagantly fat found in any of our large sale-yards, one does not wonder at many of one's countrymen not knowing that cows and bulls yield wholesome food. On one occasion a young Englishman, of quite average intelligence and well-informed in many matters, asked me if I was allowed by law to sell my cows, once I had done milking them, for human food! I am not at all sure that he believed me when I told him that 80 per cent. of the beef he ate when travelling on the continent was the flesh of such animals, and I fancy that most of our English tourists are much in the same state of mind as my friend.

This class of meat must, however, be held to be inferior to our prime joints, and though by good cooking the cow-beef of the continent may be brought very much nearer to the prime "Roast Beef of Old England," it will always be its inferior. To imagine ourselves a nation of cooks is difficult, but it is easier to do this than to imagine that our national standard of living should fall to the level of cow-beef served from the kitchen of the housewife who for the past generation has had nothing in her larder but good English meat. For myself, I am content to hope for the day when the average English cook will seldom, or never, spoil the prime article which the profligate state of our pre-war supplies had made super-abundant. If the continental meat supply were to be forced on our people as an immediate consequence of the war, their sufferings would be considerable, for it would take a generation, at least, to train a class of cooks that could be trusted to send it to table in a palatable form.
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Even then one has to assume that the Englishwoman could be persuaded, and trained, to take the infinite pains with the details of her household work that such cooking demands. One is inclined to doubt whether she has the instinct and capacity for such work.

In the absence of first-class cookery or prime meat, it is as easy, as it is unpleasant, to foresee a general fall in our national standard of life—at any rate as regards the food which serves to prolong our lives. Nobody with any knowledge of the well-paid labour class, will for a minute believe, if he has imagination enough to realize what such a change in the national food would mean, that our countrymen would tolerate such a condition of affairs under any circumstances but those of dire necessity. There is no doubt that, should the necessity unhappily arise, such a change would have a very pernicious effect on the efficiency of our race. The well-fed man is a contented man and vice versa, and the more contented a man is, the more likely is he to be the head of a useful family—and the State is but the reflection of the family. Yet this change, with all its consequences for evil, is the one that is urged upon our life by those who would import continental methods of agriculture to replace our own in toto.

These authorities are at one with all who are patriotic enough to deplore a return to the state of affairs prevailing in August 1914. The British public of those days dimly, if at all, realized that agriculture was connected with the people’s food. The U-boats, it is true, have taught us how dangerous it is to be dependent upon transport for food. The folly of relying upon lands on the other side of an ocean, while a large part of our own land was unproductive, has been demonstrated only too well. The rationing forced upon us by U-boats has done more, in a few months, to make people think of the fruits of their own land than writing, platform oratory, or argument had done in decades. Nevertheless, it is the height of folly to expect that the public will altogether forgo the best type of food as a result of such lessons. The ordinary man will get the best, particularly when he has been brought up to expect it, from overseas, if it cannot be produced for him at home. There
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is still plenty of land left on the earth’s surface from which to rob, and while this is so, our own good breeds of beef cattle, exported in considerable numbers for the purpose, may be relied on to convert the produce of the untilled plains into prime meat. At a price, the carcases of the descendants of our much-boasted pedigree stock will be returned to us in admirable condition in the freezers of ocean-going ships. Though the amount of soil awaiting the land-robber is limited, there is enough of it left to last even until Europe has recovered from this war. The dread of the next resort to arms will not be enough to prevent our people from sending money across the ocean in return for the produce of such lands for so long as the supply lasts. A nation accustomed to prime meat is more than likely to go on eating it while it can, even though it can be shown that its place of origin is insecure. That the people will have their meat in peace-time, whatever the cost, unless and until their patriotism is awakened by their country’s danger, seems to be the only assumption upon which an agriculturalist who is making plans for the future may work. This assumption demands that any reform of farming practice must combine intensive farming with the most economical production of prime beef.

The necessity of reform is obvious, if safety is to be considered worth attaining. The United Kingdom has, it will be admitted, not made herself safe from the tyranny of evil-minded and rival foreign countries in the past; she has left the satisfying of her people’s hunger to others, she has had no care for the produce of the land which has been entrusted to her. She was, in August 1914, as vulnerable to starvation as any uncivilized country; she has to thank the indomitable spirit of her people that her lack of foresight did not lead to her destruction for want of the necessities of life. She ran the risk so that she might boast of her food being cheap, so cheap that her people learnt to waste that which they have at last learnt, after forty years of profligacy, to value at something approaching its worth. That she does not wish to return to the unhappy conditions prevailing from 1875 to 1914 may be assumed; yet she has the right to demand that her foodstuffs should be as far as possible produced from her own soil, that the foundation of all life should be
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produced from the land of these islands with all the intensity and reasonable economy that good brains, sound training and hard work can supply. To do this involves some change in our cattle husbandry, but it involves, further, a reformation in the whole of our agricultural community.

The landlord must realize that to lead his own class intellectually is his first duty, and that failure to do that work, whatever may be his services to the rest of the community, leaves his first and greatest obligation undischarged. The landlord’s clients—the farmers—have to forget their prejudices and learn that their profit alone is not all that is asked of them in their work for the State. They have to realize that the unfortunate past is to be forgotten, and that the future demands that they combine production with profit. The farmer’s colleagues—their labourers—have still more to forget. They must learn that in the future the State does not call for underpaid drudgery unwillingly given, but means to have intelligent labour willingly given for a living wage.
CHAPTER II

STORE CATTLE

The production of lean animals for the feeder to fatten is the work of the commercial breeder of horned stock. Sometimes the complete process of breeding, rearing, and fattening is carried on by the same person, but it is exceptional to find animals offered to the butcher that have spent their whole life as the property of one farmer. The history of an animal wanted for beef is generally much more varied. It is born on one farm and perhaps weaned there, though very many move during quite early infancy; then, after the period during which it is known as a calf, it becomes a “store,” and, as such, often has several homes in various parts of England. The importance of the store-stock trade is characteristic of our agriculture, and there is certainly no other country of Europe in which this class of live stock plays so prominent a part as it does with us. The large amount of traffic in this type of cattle is due almost entirely to the change which bad times brought about in our husbandry some forty years ago. Before then less than half of our land was under grass, the larger part being under corn and root and other fodder crops. The proportion under permanent, as distinguished from “temporary” or “rotation,” grass was confined very largely to two classes of soil. We had, first of all, the land which was so good in itself that it produced very well without the necessity of working, manuring and seeding it. Though there were not many such fields, they were enough to play an important part in our husbandry. Their produce, when well managed, was sufficient to justify the best husbandmen leaving them unploughed. Indeed it was only when corn should reach an indefensible figure, that it could be hoped to obtain any reward for the enterprise of breaking them up. If their produce while under grass, as pork or as milk or as beef, had been averaged, it would have yielded approximately the equivalent of 1500 lb. of grain, while under the plough possibly an
additional thousand pounds of cereals might have been obtained every other year. This increase, even allowing for the yield of straw, was not likely to be of enough value, nor was it desirable that it should be so costly as to pay for the outlay on horse and manual labour, manure and seed—to say nothing of the interest upon the extra building accommodation usually wanted for such cultivation. The very best of this land, which was supplied by nature with watering places, yielded the primest beef, or, in exceptional cases, mutton; acres not quite so perfect fed milk-giving cows; another class, generally because it was not watered, supplied hay for the wintering of farm stock and also for the large numbers of horses wanted for industrial purposes in our large cities. Land of the highest natural fertility was, then, one of the two classes of soil left unmoved by tillage implements.

Let us now consider the other class. This second class of land was left uncultivated because it did not pay, even when prices for agricultural produce were good, to move it with implements of tillage. It might be that the land was inaccessible, that it was not of such a nature as to yield plant food; it might be too dry or too wet—but, for one reason or another, it did not pay to work it. Prices of produce, which must always fluctuate to a greater or less extent, obviously make the degree of worthlessness, which constitutes uncultivatable conditions, a changeable factor.

Such land (and even the most worthless yields some produce), since it would not return anything to the good farmer who tilled it assiduously and with skill, was the justifiable prey of the land-robber; and husbandmen, good or bad, will always continue to steal from it.

Between these two classes of land, the best and the worst, lies the greater part of our food-producing soil; the fields which will yield abundantly when well worked and manured, but lack the inherent fertility to produce largely when uncultivated. Even of this land there was always a certain proportion under permanent grass; a small, but appreciable, proportion of grass, of course varying in extent with circumstances, has always been, and is always likely to be, found on most English farms. Our climate is so changeable, the formation of our