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BOOK II

THE HUSBANDRY OF LIVE STOCK

Introduction: the decay of country life



THOSE great men our ancestors did well to esteem the Romans who lived in the country above those who dwelt in town. For as our peasants today contemn the tenant of a villa as an idler in comparison with the busy life of an agricultural labourer, so our ancestors regarded the sedentary occupations of the town as waste of time from their habitual rural pursuits: and in consequence they so divided their time that they might have to devote only one day of the week to their affairs in town, reserving the remaining seven for country life.¹

So long as they persisted in this practice they accomplished two things both that their farms were

¹ The Roman week (*nundinum*, or more properly *inter nundinum*) was of eight days, the last being the market day on which the citizens rested from agricultural labour and came into town to sell and buy and talk politics. Cf. Pliny, XVIII, 3. This custom which Varro regrets had fallen into desuetude so far as Rome was concerned was in his day still practised in the provinces. Thus the five tenants on Horace's Sabine farm were wont to go every *nundinum* to the market town of Varia (the modern Vicovara) to transact public business (*Epist.* I, 14, 2).

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fertile through good cultivation and that they themselves enjoyed the best of health: they felt no need of those Greek gymnasia which now every one of us must have in his town house, nor did they deem that in order to enjoy a house in the country one must give sounding Greek names to all its apartments, such as προκοιτών (antechamber) παλαίστρα (exercising room) ἀποδυτήριον (dressing room) περίστυλον (arcade) ὄρνιθών (poultry house) περιστερεών (dove cote) ὄπωροθήκη (fruitery) and the like.

Since now forsooth most of our gentry crowd into town, abandoning the sickle and the plough and prefer to exercise their hands in the theatre and the circus rather than in the corn field and the vineyard, it has resulted that we must fain buy the very corn that fills our bellies and have it hauled in for us, yea, out of Africa and Sardinia, while we bring home the vintage in ships from the islands of Cos and Chios!

And so it has happened that those lands which the shepherds who founded the city taught their children to cultivate are now, by their later descendants, converted again from corn fields back to pastures, thus in their greed of gain violating even the law, since they fail to distinguish the difference between agriculture and grazing.¹ For a shepherd is

¹ Varro here refers to the great economic change which was coming over Italian husbandry in the last days of the Republic,

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one thing and a ploughman another, nor for all that he may feed his stock on farm land is a drover the same as a teamster: herded cattle, indeed, do nothing to create what grows in the land, but destroy it with their teeth, while the yoked ox on the contrary conduces to the maturity of grain in the corn fields and forage in the fallow land. The practice and the art of the farmer is one thing, I say; that of the shepherd another; the farmer's object being that what ever may be produced by cultivating the land should yield a profit; that of the shepherd to make his profit from the increase of his flock; and yet the relation between them is intimate because it is much more desirable for a farmer to feed his forage on the land than to sell it, and a herd of cattle is the best source of supply of that which is the most available food of growing plants, namely, manure:¹ so it follows that whoever has a farm ought to practise both arts, that of agriculture and that of grazing cattle, indeed, also that of feeding game, as is done at our country

the disappearance of the small farms, the "septem jugera" which nurtured the early Roman heroes like Cincinnatus and Dentatus, and even the larger, but still comparatively small, farms which Cato describes, and the development of the *latifundia* given over to grazing.

¹The tradition is, says Pliny, that King Augeas was the first in Greece to use manure, and that Hercules introduced the practice into Italy. To the wise farmer the myth of the Augean stables is the genesis of good agriculture.

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houses, since no little profit may be derived from aviaries and rabbit warrens and fish ponds. And since I have written a book concerning the first of these occupations—that of the husbandry of agriculture—for my wife Fundania because of her interest in that subject, now, my dear Turranius Niger, I write this one on the husbandry of live stock for you, who are so keen a stock fancier that you are a frequent attendant at the cattle market at Macri Campi, where, by your fortunate speculations, you have found means to make provision for many crying expenses.

I could do this on my own authority because I am myself a considerable owner of live stock with my flocks of sheep in Apulia and my stud of horses at Reate, but I will run through the subject, briefly and summarily rehearsing what I gathered from conversation with certain large stock feeders in Epirus at the time when, being in command of the fleet in Greece during the war with the pirates, I lay between Delos and Sicily.¹

¹ This was the "crowded hour" in Varro's life, and, as M. Boissier has pointed out, he loved to dwell upon its episodes. It will be recalled that Pompey divided the Mediterranean into thirteen districts for the war with the Pirates and put a responsible lieutenant in command of each, thus enabling him by concurrent action in all the districts to clear the seas in three months. Appian gives the list of officers and the limits of their commands, saying: "The coasts of Sicily and the Ionian sea

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Of the origin, the importance and the economy of live stock husbandry

I. ¹When Menates had gone, Cossinius said to me: "We shall not let you go until you have explained those three points which you began to discuss the other day when we were interrupted."

"What three points," said Murrius. "Are they those concerning feeding cattle, of which you spoke to me yesterday?"

"Yes," replied Cossinius, "they are the considerations of what was the origin, what the importance, as far as Acarnania were entrusted to Plotius and Varro." It is difficult to understand Varro's own reference to Delos, but Appian makes clear how it happened that Varro was stationed on the coast of Epirus and so fell in with the company of "half Greek shepherds" who are the *dramatis personæ* of the second book. As the scene of the first book was laid in a temple of Tellus, so this relating to live stock is cast in a temple of Pales, the goddess of shepherds, on the occasion of the festival of the Parilia, and the names of the characters have a punning reference to live stock.

¹The codices here contain an interpolation of the words "*HIC INTERMISIMUS*," to indicate that a part of the text is missing, with which judgment of some early student of the archetype Victorius, Scaliger and Ursinus, as well as their successors among the commentators on Varro, have all agreed. It is a pleasure to record the agreement on this point, because it is believed to be unique: but many precedents for plunging the reader *in medias res*, as does the surviving text, might be found in the modern short story of the artist in style. As M. Boissier points out Varro might have cited the beginning of the Odyssey as a precedent for this.

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and what the economy of the husbandry of live stock. Varro here had begun to discourse upon them while we were calling on Petus during his illness, when the arrival of the physician interrupted us.”

“Of the three divisions of the *ἱστορικόν* or interpretation of this subject, which you have mentioned, I will venture,” said I, “to speak only of the first two, of the origin and of the importance of this industry. The third division, of how it should be practised, Scrofa shall undertake for us, as one, if I may speak Greek to a company of half Greek shepherds *ὄς πέρ μου πολλὸν ἀμείνων* (who is better qualified than I am),¹ for Scrofa was the teacher of C. Lucilius Hirrus, your son-in-law, whose flocks and herds in Bruttii have such reputation.”

“But,” interrupted Scrofa, “you shall hear what we have to say only on condition that you, who come from Epirus and are masters of the art of feeding cattle, shall recompense us and shall give public testimony of what you know on the subject: for none of us knows it all.”

¹ This is a paraphrase of a favorite locution of Homer’s heroes, whose characteristic modesty does not, however, permit them to apply it to themselves, as Varro does. Thus in *Iliad*, VII, 114, Agamemnon advises Menelaos not to venture against Hector, whom “even Achilles dreadeth to meet in battle, wherein is the warrior’s glory, and Achilles is better far than thou.”

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Having thus assumed that my share of the discussion should be the first or theoretical part of the subject (which I did, although I have a stock farm in Italy, because, as the proverb is, not every one who owns a lyre is a musician), I began:

“Doubtless in the very order of nature both man and cattle have existed since the beginning of time, for whether we believe that there was a First Cause of the generation of animals, as Thales of Miletus and Zeno of Citium maintained, or that there was none as was the opinion of Pythagoras of Samos and Aristotle of Stagira, it is, as Dicæarchus points out, a necessity of human life to have descended gradually from the earliest time to the present day: thus in the beginning was the primitive age when man lived on whatever the virgin soil produced spontaneously; thence he descended to the second or pastoral age, when, as he had formerly gathered for his use acorns,¹ strawberries, mulberries and apples by picking them from trees and bushes, so now, to satisfy a like need, he captured in the woods such as he could of the wild beasts of the field, and, having enclosed, began to domesticate them. Among these it is considered

¹ Virgil (*Æn.* VII, 314) made a fine line out of this tradition, endowing the sturdy race of Fauns and Nymphs who inhabited the land of Saturn before the Golden Age, with the qualities of the trees on whose fruit they subsisted, “gensque virum truncis et duro robore nata.”

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