

VARRO'S RERUM RUSTICARUM
LIBRI TRES
BOOK III

THE HUSBANDRY OF THE STEADING

Introduction: the antiquity of country life

I



HERE are two modes of human life, my dear Pinnius, which are manifestly as different in the time of their origin as they are in their habitat, that of the country and that of the town. Country life is much the more ancient, for time was when men lived altogether in the country and had no towns: indeed, the oldest town in Greece, according to the tradition, is the Bœotian Thebes, which was founded by King Ogyges, and in our own land that of Rome, founded by King Romulus (of which now it may be affirmed with confidence, as was not possible when Ennius wrote:

“’Tis seven hundred years, or more or less,
Since first illustrious Rome began her sway,
With hallowed augury.”)

Now, if it is admitted that Thebes was founded before the deluge, which is known by Ogyges' name, its age is not more than about twenty-one hundred years: and if that period is compared with the lapse of time since men began to cultivate the land and to

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live in huts and hovels, knowing naught of city walls and gates, it is evident that life in the country preceded life in town by a tale of immemorial years. Nor is this to be wondered at since 'God made the country and man made the town.'¹ While the tradition is that all the arts were invented in Greece within a thousand years, there never was a time when the earth could not be cultivated. And, as life in the country is the more ancient, so it is the better life: for it was not without good reason that our ancestors were wont to plant colonies of citizens in the country, because by them they were both fed in times of peace and protected in times of war: nor was it without significance that they called both the Earth and Ceres by the common name of Mother and esteemed that those who worshipped her lead a life at once pious and useful and were the sole representatives left on earth of the race of Saturn. A proof of this is that the mysteries peculiar to the cult of Ceres were called *Initia*, the very name indicating that they related to the beginning of things.

A further proof that country life was earlier than

¹ Cowper's verse in *The Task* seems to be all that is happy in the way of translation of Varro's text, "divina natura dedit agros, ars humana ædificavit urbes": but Cowley's "God the first garden made, and the first city Cain" was probably Cowper's source. Cowley was a reader of Varro, as his pleasant and sane essay *Of Agriculture* shows.

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that of town is found in the name of the town of Thebes, which was bestowed from the character of its situation rather than from the name of its founder: for in the ancient language, and among the Æolians who had their origin in Bœotia, a small hill is called *tebas* without the aspirate; and in the Sabine country, where Pelasgians from Greece settled, they still have the same locution: witness that hill called *Tebæ* which stands in the Sabine country on the *via Salaria* not far from the mile stone of *Reate*. At first agriculture was conducted on so small a scale that it had little distinction, since those who followed it, being sprung from shepherds, at once sowed their corn and pastured their flocks on the same land, but as later this art grew in importance the husbandry of live stock was separated, and it befel that some men were called farmers and others shepherds.

The art of feeding live stock should really be divided into two branches, as is not yet fully appreciated, one relating to the stock kept at the *steading*, the other to the stock pastured in the fields. The latter, which is designated by the name *pecuaria*, is well known and highly esteemed so that rich men, either lease or buy much pasture land in order to carry it on: the other, which is known as *villatice*, has, because it seemed to be of less importance, been treated by some as an incident of the husbandry of

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agriculture, when in fact it should be made a part of the husbandry of live stock: nor has it been described separately and at length by any one, so far as I know.

And so, as I think that there are three branches of farm management which are undertaken for profit, namely: agriculture, live stock and the industries peculiar to the steading, I have planned three books, of which I have already written two, the first concerning the husbandry of agriculture, which I dedicated to my wife Fundania, and the second concerning the husbandry of live stock to Turranius Niger: the third, relating to the profits of those industries which are carried on at the steading, I now send herewith to you; for the fact that we are neighbours and entertain a mutual affection seems to demand that it should be dedicated to you above all others.

Although you have a villa, which is remarkable for the beauty of its workmanship within and without, and for the splendour of its mosaic pavements, still you deem it to be bare unless you have the walls decorated also with books: so in like manner that your villa may be more distinguished by the profits you derive from it than by the character of its construction, and that I may be of assistance to that end, so far as may be, I have sent you this book, which is a summary of some conversations which we

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have had on the subject of what makes the perfectly equipped villa: and so I begin as follows:

Of the definition of a Roman villa

II. The Senator Q. Axius, my fellow tribesman, and I had cast our votes at the comitia for the election of ædiles, and, although it was the heat of the day, we wished to be on hand when the candidate whom we were supporting should go home. So Axius said to me: "What would you think of taking shelter in the *villa publica*¹ while the votes are being sorted rather than in the booth of our candidate." "I hold," said I, "not only with the proverb that bad advice is worst for him who gives it, but that good advice is good for both the giver and the taker."

And so we made our way to the *villa publica*, where we found Appius Claudius,² the Augur, seated on a bench waiting for any call for his services by the Consul: on his left was Cornelius Merula (black-bird)

¹ Following the precedent of the first and second books in the matter of local colour, the scene of this third book, relating to villas and the "small deer," which were there reared, is laid in the *villa publica* at Rome, and the characters of the dialogue are selected for the suggestion which their names may make of the denizens of the aviary, the barn yard and the bee-stand.

² This Appius Claudius Pulcher served in Asia under his brother-in-law Lucullus, was Augur in B. C. 59, Consul in 54 and Censor in 50. He wrote a book on augural law and the habits of birds at which Cicero poked some rather mean fun. He fixes the date of the dialogue.

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of the Consular family of that name, and Fircellius Pavo (pea-cock) of Reate, and on his right Minutius Pica (mag-pie) and M. Petronius Passer (sparrow). When we had approached them Axius, smiling, said to Appius: "May we come into your aviary where you are sitting among the birds?"

"By all means," replied Appius, "and especially you who set before me such birds as still make my mouth water, when I was your guest a few days ago at your Reatine villa on my way to lake Velinus to settle the controversy between the people of Interamna and Reate.¹

¹ In Varro's time, as today, the river Velinus drained the fresh pastures of the Umbrian prairie of Rosea, "the nurse of Italy," which lay below the town of Reate (the modern Rieti), and was originally the bed of a lake. Its waters are so strongly impregnated with carbonate of lime that by their deposit of travertine they tend to block their own channel. The drainage of Rosea has, therefore, always been a matter of concern to the live stock industry of Reate, and in B. C. 272 M. Curius Dentatus opened the first of several successful artificial canals (the last dating from the sixteenth century, A. D.), which still serve to lead the Velinus into the Nar at the renowned Cascade delle Marmore. For two hundred years the people of Interamna (the modern Terni) had complained that their situation below the falls was endangered by Curius' canal, and finally in B. C. 54 the Roman Senate appointed the commission to which Appius Claudius refers in the text, to hear the controversy. Cicero was retained as counsel for the people of Reate, and during the hearing stopped, as Appius Claudius did, with our friend Axius at his Reatine villa, and wrote about the visit to the same Atticus whom we met in Varro's second book, as follows (*ad Atti-*

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But," he added, "is not this villa, which our ancestors constructed, simpler and so better than that elaborate one of yours at Reate: do you see any where here any furniture of citrus wood or ormolu, any decorations of vermillion or blue, any tessellations or mosaic work, all of which on the other hand were displayed in your house? And while this is open to the entire people, yours is available to you alone: this is the resort for the citizens after the comitia in the Campus Martius, and for all alike, while yours is reserved for mares and asses. And furthermore it should be considered that this building is useful in carrying on the public business, for here the consuls review the army on parade, here the arms are inspected, here the censors enumerate the people."

"Tell me," retorted Axius, "which is useful, this *cum*, IV, 15): "After this was over the people of Reate summoned me to their Tempe to plead their cause against the people of Interamna, before the Consul and ten commissioners, the question being concerning the Veline lake, which, drained by M. Curius by means of a channel cut through the mountain, now flows into the Nar: by this means the famous Rosea has been reclaimed from the swamp, though still fairly moist. I stopped with Axius, who took me also to visit the Seven Waters." What was once deemed a danger is a double source of profit to the modern folk of Interamna. Tourists today crowd to see the same waterfall which Cicero visited, taking a tram from the busy little industrial town of Terni: and the waters which flow from Velinus now serve to generate power with which armour plates are manufactured for the Italian navy on the site of the ancient Interamna.

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