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REMINISCENCES OF

... FARM LIFE ...

SEVENTY YEARS AGO

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W. R. Freeman

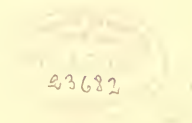
REMINISCENCES OF FARM LIFE . . .

In Western New York, Seventy Years Ago,

— BY —

W. R. FREEMAN.

ILLUSTRATED BY THE AUTHOR.



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. . . TO . . .

MRS. C. H. ALBERS,

My dear niece and true friend,

This book is affectionately dedicated by

. . . THE AUTHOR.

INTRODUCTORY INCIDENTS.

VISIT TO AN OLD AUNT.

When I look backward over seventy years
To the time I was a three years' old boy,
I remember how slight a thing caused me tears,
And how trifling a thing oft gave me joy.

One of the first things I remember, one day
I was sent alone, an old aunt to see.
The distance was only three miles away,
But 'twas a long walk for a boy of three.

Often with mother I had visited there,
But memory was dim concerning the place,
And at each house I passed I looked with a stare,
Hoping to see my dear old auntie's face.

The sun was getting low and the shadows long,
And I hastened my steps fast as I could,
I feared all the while I was going wrong
And night would overtake me in some dark wood.

I was getting tired, my eyes running o'er
With tears, which in vain I tried to repress,
When the sound of a voice I had heard before
Of one who had witnessed my sore distress;

My aunt called after in unfeigned surprise,
“Now, where are you going to, Willie, dear?”
Then I turned to go back, and with brimful eyes
I answered her thus, “I-I'm going here.”

Then she took me in hand and dried up my tears,
And washed me and made me tidy and clean;
Then all my grief vanished, and all anxious fears,
And a happier boy was never seen.



"NOW, WHERE ARE YOU GOING TO, WILLIE, DEAR?"

“Now, you are very tired and hungry, I know,
And you must have a good supper,” she said;
“Then I will take you with me and we will go
To the hall-room and I’ll put you to bed.”

Then my dear old aunt, with many loving words,
Brought me a supper quite fit for a king,
Of nice pie and doughnuts, of sweet cream and curds,
And I ate all I could of everything.

When at the hall-room, I was amazed to see
A bed so long, and so broad, and so high,
To hold such a very little chap as me—
And what if I should fall out by and by!

She helped me undress, and I said my short prayer,
She lifted me up on the fluffy bed,
Then she kissed me good night and so left me there.
“I’ll come for you in the morning,” she said.

I heard the tick of the old clock in the hall,
With a big round sun on its dial face,
Where it stood so high up there against the wall,
In rich old varnished mahogany case.

At the solemn tick of each pendulum swing
Strange childish fancies would run through my head;
It seemed so much like to some animate thing,
I wished I was home in my trundle-bed.

It made me feel lonesome, I could not sleep,
While listening to that weird, monotonous sound;
But strange fear at last ceased her vigils to keep,
And exhausted nature sought sleep profound.

GOING TO MILL.

My father oft sent me on horseback to mill,
The grain-bag was tied midway with a string
(When I think of this time it gives me a chill),
And to sit on and ride on was no easy thing.

We went over corduroy roads through the wood,
Along the dark stretches of lonesome shade,
And I kept to my seat as well as I could,
Tho' some fearful stumbles the old horse made.

At last we had come to the foot of a hill,
When the horse saw water, and wanting drink,
Where a creek crossed the road in sight of the mill,
He went down hurriedly over the brink.

The movement was rapid—he stopped very quick,
And ere I had time to consider or think,
He landed the grain-bag and me in the creek,
And I was submerged before I could wink.

I was then in hot water, though it was cool,
I got up quickly to think of some plan;
(Such a problem was hard to solve out of school)
I must get this grain to mill if I can.

Now a man came that way; I had to explain;
He saw at once the condition of things,
So he cheerfully helped me up with the grain,
And had the satisfaction kindness brings.

I took the wet grain-bag on up to the mill,
But the wheat was so damp it would not grind;
Then the good miller said, “My boy, if you will,
I’ll give a grist in exchange.” That was kind.



HE LANDED THE GRAIN-BAG AND ME IN THE CREEK.

We started back homeward with much greater speed ;
The old horse wanted his feed, I suppose,
And to get home again, I was glad indeed,
For I felt chilly and wanted dry clothes.



THE PACKET BOAT.

'Twas about this time the canal waterway
Was finished all through the State of New York,
From the great Western lakes to the Eastern bay,
And all were rejoicing over the work.

Rejoicing, the people from afar would come,
On foot and on horseback, to celebrate
(In procession with music of fife and drum)
The great achievement of the Empire State.

Now, this great waterway ran near to our farm,
And I used to run down to the towpath inn
(Although I was so little I feared no harm
In going to see the packet come in.)



ON A BRISK TROT A THREE-HORSE TANDEM TEAM.

As I stood there waiting for the packet boat,
Looking into the wood so dense and dark,
From out came the sound of a clear bugle note,
And out flashed the form of the little barque.

On came the bright pageant with uncommon speed,
On a brisk trot—a three-horse tandem team;
The bugler was mounted on the hindmost steed
As they came rushing down the sluggish stream.

The people, all curious, came far to see
The wonderful new rapid-transit boat,
And though how strange it could possible be
To ride from the lakes to New York afloat.

To travel in this way became all the rage,
To glide on all day and sleep through the night—
Such an improvement on the old jolting stage.
This mode of travel was hailed with delight.

CLEARING UP THE FARM IN 1825.

Then Niagara County, New York, was "out West,"

The primeval forest on every side,
And my father moved out there with all the rest,
Among those towering big trees to reside.

But his muscular arm soon felled the great oaks,
The black walnuts, beeches, maples and all,
And I listened all day to his sturdy strokes,
And saw with delight the old monarchs fall.

And little by little he cleared up his land;
He plowed among roots to put in his grain,
And he found very rough work on every hand,
Yet I never heard my father complain.

But at last the hard task of clearing was done,
And most of the stumps and roots disappeared;
Then the real comforts of farm life begun,
And thoughts of the future encouraged and cheered.

We built a frame house and commodious barn;
The farm was all nicely fenced into fields
For meadow and orchard, and pasture and corn,
And everything else that a rich soil yields.

Our stock was not large, but enough for our needs,
Of horses and oxen, and cows and sheep.
Father was particular about the breeds,
And said he never would a mongrel keep.

We were all industrious, out doors and in;
My father and I were out plowing corn,
And my mother, she would sew, or knit, or spin,
Until the time came for the dinner horn.

We did not then have machine factories there,
And my mother spun both the wool and the flax,
And she made our clothes in all seasons to wear,
And we never paid a protection tax.

The protective tariff did not then receive
The notice which politics gives to it now,
For in every farm home they could spin and weave,
And no corporation to kick up a row.

My father had reserved for the household use
A part of the grand old forest for wood;
Some trees were maple, from whose sacharine juice
We made our sugar and syrup so good.

With the first warm breath of spring on the breeze,
Before the sweet songs of the birds began,
We would go out and tap the tall maple trees,
And gather the sap in troughs as it ran.



THUS WE MADE OUR SUGAR DAY AFTER DAY.

Then on a brisk fire, in our big kettles two,
We boiled it all day, and oft' into night ;
If we failed in the day all our task to do,
We finished it up by the fire's light.

And thus we made our sugar, day after day,
Freely uncontrolled by a sugar trust ;
There was no one to say we must work or play—
We only stopped work when God said we must.

And then at the end of the frosts and the snow,
The season for making our sugar o'er,
We would take our sweet treasure and homeward go,
And add more comfort to the household store.

The true farmer's life must be one of much toil,
And with plow and harrow, spade and the hoe,
And our muscular hands we mellowed the soil
For the planting of corn and grain to sow.

Our harvest tools were of the primitive kind,
Being cradle and scythe, cycle and rake ;
One had to use cradle, another to bind,
And thus round the fields their circuits they make.

Labor-saving machinery was not then known,
But each brawny arm tried to do its best,
And after each day's work, at set of the sun,
We were glad to go and take a night's rest.

We used to get up by the crow of the cock,
E'er the sky crimsoned from the rising sun,
And go out and feed all the hungry stock
Before the work of the day had begun.

Before the bright, warm sun had scattered the dew,
While it was early, we went to the fields,
Our dutiful every-day task to renew,
And breathe the fresh air a crisp morning yields.

THE FARMER'S SONG.

This is the song the farmer sings:
Both toil and care each season brings,
Yet gives him joy in many things.

He feels Spring when the South wind blows
Which chased away the ice and snows.
'Tis coming then, the farmer knows.

He feels it in the balmy air,
He sees it in the rainbow fair,
And knows it's coming everywhere.

The sun is warming up the earth,
The Spring has had a welcome birth.
He hears the distant sounds of mirth.

So to his needful toil he goes,
And now his early seed he sows,
For Spring has come, the farmer knows

He hears the mower's clinking whet
On scythe a keener edge to set
For grass with dew all reeking wet.

He sees the lark poised on the wing,
Above the meadow hears him sing
His joyous song to welcome Spring.



AND NOW HIS EARLY SEED HE SOWS.

He can't describe sweet sounds with words,
The melody of singing birds—
The tinkling bells of grazing herds.

He can't describe the beauties seen,
In tender meadow grasses green,
With wild flowers peeping out between.

And all the meadow's perfumes sweet,
That come the sense of smell to greet,
And make the joys of Spring complete.

Slight doubts or fears his soul harass,
His troubles light, they quickly pass,
As cloud shadows o'er sunny grass.

As each deft stroke with scythe he wields
He knows the earth his mother shields
Those soins from want who work her fields.

He rests awhile in shade of trees
And bares his head to cooling breeze,
Observes the butterflies and bees,

And twittering swallows flitting by,
Now glancing upward toward the sky,
Now down to chase some wandering fly.

All life is active everywhere,
Upon the earth and in the air,
All ceaseless motion, toil and care.



HE HEARS THE MOWER'S CLINKING WHET.

And he must now his work renew,
And so he goes his task to do,
And cuts a swath the long field through.

His heart is blythe, as day by day
He mows the meadow, sweet with hay,
In Spring's last sunny month of May.

When summer comes, he'll reap his grain,
And sing his harvest song again
With hearty, loud and long refrain.

When Autumn comes, he'll shock his corn;
He'll husk it in the night or morn,
A happy man as e'er was born.

When Winter comes and snows appear,
He'll greet his friends from far and near,
And give them all a hearty cheer.

He has enough in garnered store
For all his needs, and something more.
The compensation labor brings.
This is the song the farmer sings.





WHEN SUMMER COMES HE'LL REAP HIS GRAIN.

SELLING THE FARM.

We had lived on our farm for many years
And enjoyed the fruits of industrious life,
Had all the good things that enlivens and cheers,
Away from all wrangling and bitter strife.

We had very few dreams of fame or wealth
As we went on our quiet, peaceful way,
With nature's wants supplied, content and health,
We bore the burthen of our toil each day.

With frugal thoughts of life, our chief desire
Was that the soil would yield an ample store,
To give us what our daily needs require,
And hoping at the year's end something more.

As neighbors, we lived not for self alone,
But oft' to others needful help we gave.
He could not reap the crop which he had sown;
Infirm or ill, his neighbors helped him save.

The young were taught frugality and thrift,
Morality, and industrious ways;
Taught self-reliance, better far than gift
Of fortune left, as in these modern days.

We had no dissensions about the creeds,
All went to worship in the house for school;
Every one was judged by his daily deeds,
His conduct measured by the Golden Rule.

When the Sabbath-day came, that welcome rest,
We would all get ready for church, and go,
Arrayed in our home-spun, looking our best,
To sing our old hymns, in sun, rain or snow.

We were conscientious in politics,
And at town meeting, on election day,
Unmindful of ignoble party tricks,
We voted straight for Jackson, or for Clay.

Our law-makers aimed to be true and just
(We had faith in our chosen leaders then),
Men loyal to the sovereign people's trust.
The money power did not control those men.

Our amusements were few and far between,
We had no theatre or opera play,
But we all went down to the village green
On the Fourth of July and training day.

In Autumn, when the crops were gathered in,
We would sometimes meet for frolic and dance;
Although good Christians, we thought it no sin,
When some call fiddler would give us a chance.



WHEN AUTUMN COMES HE'LL SHOCK HIS CORN.

Sometimes in chill November's nights of gloom,
When the outside world looked sombre and sad,
We would meet in some neighbor's fire-lit room
With our hearts all warm and cheerful and glad.

We met to pare apples, and have some fun,
And enjoy the housewife's bountiful spread;
And when our helpful evening's task was done
We went home pleased and contented to bed.

In Winter, when Christmas and New Year came,
Behind sleigh bells we would drive far away,
For visit and cheer, or some old-time game.
Sad memories now, I'm old and gray.

'Twas about this time that the "Westward Ho!"
Was shouted and echoed over the land,
And well-to-do farmers sold out to go
"Away out West" with their money in hand.

My father was seized with a strange unrest
I never had noticed in him before,
And he sold his nice farm and moved out West,
And we never saw our home any more.



AFTER THOUGHTS.

Now, when I think of this picture of life,
 Drawn from those long-ago memories sweet,
And contrast it all with this modern strife,
 When all seem trying each other to beat

In a fierce race for wealth, led on by greed,
 And only the ego thought of the while,
Trying to get fortune with railroad speed,
 And millions on millions wanting to pile,

The heart throbs sick, and we think of old times,
 When more were happy, contented and good ;
When few were hungry, and fewer the crimes ;
 I would change all back again if I could.

We used to thresh grain spread on the barn floor,
The machine used was the old-fashioned flail,
We winnowed the chaff all out at the door,
Then hung our machine up on peg or nail.

We threshed few bushels, then took it away
To the grist mill or wherever, in gags;
But machines would now do all in a day,
And carry and put it all into bags.

Machines cannot be the laboring man's friends,
For they do the work which Dame Nature intends
For man, on which happiness and life depends.

And the machine which does the work in a day
Of five men is only a robber, I say,
For it robs the men of legitimate pay.



HE'LL HUSK IT IN THE NIGHT OR MORN.

All machines invented which rob men of work,
Called modern improvements, like fiends in the dark,
Approach men by stealth and they ne'er miss their mark.

But these modern inventions have come to stay,
To do all the work and rob men of their pay,
And all combined efforts can't drive them away.

The only way out of the trouble I see
Is to change occupation, whate'er that be,
And to good mother earth for succor to flee.

There is plenty of land in the world's domain
To give each man some, and he cannot complain
If he will not work it his life to sustain.

Get out of the deep ruts which machines have made,
Take hold on the plow, and the hoe, and the spade,
And learn the industrious old farmer's trade.



THE ADVENT OF STEAM.

Now, on comes loud, screeching, the powerful steam,
Iron harnessed to wheel of steamer and rail,
And we flash past the mile posts as in a dream,
We no more have patience to ride behind sail.

The stage coach or packet went ten miles an hour
(Quite a long distance in the course of a day),
But now, with the push of the mighty steam power,
A mile in a minute we speed on our way.

But what are we gaining by this fearful rush?
Are we happier, or better, in any way?
And when life goes on with such hurry and crush
Will the debt of nature be easier to pay?

And what are we gaining by saving an hour
In traveling to Egypt to see a Turk?
You say time is money and money is power;
To save time and make money is modern work.

But what do you wish to do with your power?
How would you use it when you get it, we ask?
Possessed of a million, would you endower
Some great charity and assist in the task

Of looking after the starving, helpless poor
Whom these modern onrushing machinery times
Have brought in ten thousands forlorn to your door,
And try to keep some of these poor ones from crimes?

Or would you pass by, with contemptuous sneer,
A better by nature though less lucky man,
Double on your investments year after year,
Get something for nothing whenever you can?



ALL WENT TO CHURCH IN THE HOUSE FOR SCHOOL.

Would you build up great trusts and throttle the law,
And sacrifice nature's good instincts to greed,
And grasp at all things with your powerful paw,
And care not if others in the world have need?

Would you have all the wealth possessed by the few,
Treat merit and honor with neglect and scorn,
Do all the work with machines which man should do,
Leave him idle and hungry, hopeless, forlorn?

Then the law of sustainment, God's law supreme,
Would be asserted at necessity's call,
And a fierce uprising, like a horrid dream,
Would drive the old god Mammon against the wall.







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