

[Sugar Bush Farmer]

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THE VERMONT FARMER The Sugar Bush

The sugar season is about over. It has been short and sweet this year, but Ezra is satisfied. There have been three excellent runs when the ground has frozen at night and the cold frost fingers have clutched at the flow in the huge maple trees and stalled the rising sap; and the warm spring sun has loosened the paralyzing grasp and the sticky sweetness has risen to drop, drop, drop with tiny splashings making a chorus in the still reaches of the arched woods. One night a wild wind rose and brought with it marching myriads of sugar snow flakes in a plump white army. It thickened and clung, coating all with sticky flakes crystals . It was a good sign and was fulfilled by a fine run the next day. Ezra always chuckled when he thought of sugar snow. The first time they had mentioned it

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to Bobby, the child had been fascinated. A little later they had found him in the yard, head up-tilted and small mouth wide, catching the big flakes and savoring them with a puzzled expression on his round features. His disgust was deep and resentful when he found “it wasn't even sweet” and Ezra made it up to him with an extra sugar cake.

The women have their place in sugarin'. They prepare the extra meals and hearty lunches which must go to the sugar house when a run is on. Many nights Ed and Ezra have stayed there tending the fire and keeping up with the gathering sap. There is a couch where they took turns catching cat naps. Then, too, the women folk have full charge of the stirrin'-off and 18 making of the fancy sugar cakes. When the men think they have about the best run of sap, that which will make up the lightest sugar cakes, they pass the word along and Ma calls a “stirrin'-off bee.” All the women gather at the sugar house armed with huge spoons and milk pans. There is a long bench against one wall and there they stand in a busy row, tongues wagging against the clatter of spoon on pan, and beat, beat, beat; the heavy amber syrup smooths to creamy thick stuff which must be poured at exactly the right moment into the ranks of tin molds which are waiting ready. A little is stirred off earlier, before the syrup gets too thick, to make Ma some maple cream. She always celebrates the sugar season with a beautiful maple cake, frosted with maple cream and bursting with butternuts. The sugar cakes stand all night to cool and next morning Ma and Marthy spend a while wrapping and packing them in neat boxes.

Ezra, through the years, has worked up a personal market for both syrup and sugar cakes. He packs, boxes, or cans his products according to their individual needs and sends them direct to the customer. His products are good and his list grows as friend tells friend from year to year. Some years he has barely enough to fill his standing orders and other years, when the run is a record breaker, he has extra which he sells in bulk to the sugar-candy manufacturers. Ma always bottles up several gallons of syrup and saves a wooden pail of maple cream. If the kids get an urge that they want sugar cakes, Ma puts a pan of syrup on the stove and boils off a few for them.

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When the children were growing up, every year saw sugar parties when the young fry gathered in the sugar house and fed on syrup-on-snow, pickles, raised doughnuts and coffee. The boys would get great pans of snow from some leeward bank where the crystals were almost like little bits of ice. They would pack it down flat and when the syrup was the right consistency a clever artist made fancy figures, waving the great spoon in grandiose gestures. As the syrup hit the snow it congealed into a sticky chewy mass. When the boys and girls had eaten all they could, they chewed pickles to get the sweet out of their mouths and then began again. After everyone was saturated they played games. 'Twas a "sweet" party, so they played kissin' games to keep it consistent. The kissin' games are gone now. They live only in the memories of the older folks. There was "Copenhagen," "Through the Needle's Eye," and "Through the Cedar Swamp." Ezra can remember these and thoughts of them raise a nostalgia in his heart for the days long gone by, for his "folks" and the companions with whom he went to school—

Sugarin' is over. The last run is through the big evaporator and the fire has died down to burn no more until the call of spring again raised the tide of life in the sweet bush. The fat buds are burgeoned on the twigs of the trees and shy spring flowers are beginning to creep out of winter hiding. Ezra's sugar woods is a favorite haunt for the school children in their annual hunt for earliest wild flowers for the "contest." Hepaticas poke their fuzzy buds in a close cluster from the center of the sprawling circle of last year's leaves. Tight curls of pale lemon color unfurl into huge fronds of bracken from the dark brawn mold. Spring beauties, deer-tongued lilies, and the shy arbutus come forth to carpet the aisles of the woods-cathedral.

Ezra is not concerned with these things. A fever of accomplishment is upon him. The spring sun is melting the last hiding banks of snow, the brook is up over its banks. In warm sheltered places there is more than a hint of green tinting the faded sad reminders of a past season. He must hurry if he is to get the sugar buckets washed and dried and stacked neatly away in the bucket house. Ma may come over once more to "redd' up"

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the sugar house, but most of her contribution to the work of sugaring is over. The men will wash the buckets in brook water warmed from the cans of hot water brought down from the house. Sometimes Ezra has carried the buckets up to the house, but that means getting them back to the bucket-house and he has decided this is the easiest way.

Buckets washed and stacked, covers put away, sugar house straightened around, tank emptied and cleaned and covered, evaporator scrubbed out, fire box emptied of ashes. Ezra and Ed draw the door too and hasp it with a leather thong fastened with a wooden pin. The horses wait patiently there in the rutted path. The dray, with its big gathering tub, on runners made from the trunks of two medium sized trees, is loaded with the last minute pick-ups ready to go to the house. The blankets 21 and quilts from the cot bed, the paraphernalia which has gathered there during the several weeks.

“Been a good run, Ed.” Ezra smiles in satisfaction. “It has been hard work, but worth it. Haven't had such a good run in several years.”

“We'll get about two-fifty for the syrup, Pa?”

“Yup, I rec'on, about that.”

“Make better on it when we send straight to the customers. You goin' to let Cary have that six-seven milk cans of low grade stuff?”

“Might's well. You call 'em. Tell 'em they can have it. Have 'em send a container...” Ezra lifts his cap and sets it on the back of his head. He looks off across the tinted meadow. Spring is really almost here. Got to get a move on.

“Ma an' I got that corn all off the traces. Better get at the upper ten and harrow it 'fore long.”

“You goin' t' put all that into corn this year?”

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“Might put in same potatoes up there.”

“Well, I'll get the tractor over and start in on that right soon. Can get onto that before I can on the low piece.”

Ed and Ezra turn their backs on the deserted sugar house and follow the horses across the south meadow toward home and dinner. One phase of the year's work is behind them. They will not have to think of the sugar house again, unless, in the slack time between jobs, one of them comes over to do a little repair work. A bit of necessary patching or mending of equipment. In the fall and winter when they get the wood 22 up they will take several cords of low grade stuff, that they would have a hard time selling, over for sugar wood. Stacked in six-foot lengths against the sugar house, the long pile will have a temporary roof made over it to keep the weather off. The woodshed is already full of dry six-foot stuff. Ezra keeps a couple years ahead of the demand to be sure of dry wood. Wet or green wood won't do for sugarin' because a slow fire is bad in boiling down. The faster and more steadily the sap boils, the better syrup it makes.

Some of Ezra's neighbors have not been so fortunate in the location of their sugar bush. Along the side of the hills where they canted to the north or northwest, the hurricane of September 21 has ruined whole sugar orchards. Ezra has heard of places where the whole sugar woods was mowed right down. Like as though two giants had taken each an end of a great rope or chain and marched along topplin' everything over in their way. His sugar woods are high and on the north side of a pasture hump which deflected the wind and saved his trees. His wood lot suffered more and there have been men working there all winter to clean out the splintered twisted stuff. All that is good has been sold to the government and sent away to the mill. The rest is piled ready to saw and split. Ezra can sell that for fire wood, providin' there is any market for it. If not, he can put it under cover and let it wait. Later there'll be a market for good dry wood. Often-times Ezra takes an ax and goes out to split up some wood, just for recreation. It don't hurt so much doing it a little at a 23 time and you'd be surprised how fast it mounts up. Good way to get exercise and

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keep a man limber through the winter months. Sets a man back on his heels to think how much there can be to do come along springtime, though. 24 THE VERMONT FARMER

Sugarin' is long since past. Ezra spends every working moment on the land. The manure is out and spread on the broad fields. What land was broken up last fall has been harrowed thoroughly by Ed with the tractor. New pieces broken up this spring stand rich brown against the pale green of the woods, their even furrows and deep color make them look like neatly spread velvet corduroy.

Everything comes at once. Corn to plant. Potatoes to get in. The vegetable garden to plow. Ezra has the traces down from the front of the corn barn where they have made a pretty red and yellow pattern against the weathered red paint all winter. The heavy grain has hung there on the cob, two traces of red one each side of the upper door, then three traces of yellow on each side of those, and at the end a trace each of yellow and red mixed, following the line of the gable. Then below, a solid row of yellow in a straight line. Made a pretty sight there out of reach of bird and rodent, where the passers-by could see it. Folks had commented on it, too, and Ezra passed their compliments off easily, only a twinkle in his eyes deep beneath the bushy brows telling of his appreciation that his handiwork should be noticed. The corn was good as well as its arrangement. Long, solid, heavy, ears set closely and evenly with pure gold or ruby kernels, the whole firmly braided and tied into four foot traces.

Ezra and Ma had separated kernel and cob, sitting by the 25 fire of an evening. Each evening they would do a stint until all the traces were down and the corn waited in sacks for the dose of crow repellent which it would receive before going into the corn planter. 'Taters could go into the ground before corn, so one warm day Ezra opens up the bulk-head and goes into the dim and dusty cellar. There by the bin he has spent many an afternoon sprouting the "[Tatoes?]" which persist in acting as though they couldn't wait to get into the ground at the first whiff of spring. Taties can smell spring comin' a long ways off it seems. There the long sprouts lay like ghostly white bits of cobweb. Same

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folks say the little taties that grow from these sprouts (if they are left on long enough to grow little taties) are poisonous to eat. But the pigs will enjoy the little taties, sprouts and all. Over in the barrel against the stone foundation of the house are Ezra's choice seed taties. He goes over and lifts the burlap sacks which cover them. He takes one out and holds it cradled in the palm of his gnarled hand. It fits; it becomes a part of that brown palm which gave it being. His fingers caress the smooth skin, unblemished by scar or scab, feeling faintly gritty. Ezra knows you must never wash taties before putting them away to the cellar for that would destroy their keeping properties, also you must never keep them in the light, for they will turn green, nor freeze them or they will be sweet to taste after they are cooked. He handles them over and then fills two pails and goes out to the bulk-head. There he sits on a box in the sun and cuts up taties. Each piece has an eye to 26 it. It has to have an eye, for that is where the sprouts came from which mean roots and growth. Ezra cuts and cuts, filling the wooden tubs with pieces. Later they will be soaked in formadehyde formaldehyde solution and then planted by band. Ezra will probably put in about eight-nine bushel. Enough for him and Ma and for Ed's folks too, with some over for the minister's folks and perhaps to sell if the market should come good, along in the spring when he could see how many more he was going to need. All the little ones would be cooked to go to the pigs and the hens.

Ezra goes to the cellar to shut things up. The sun has gone behind a cloud leaving a chill to the air. He aches. Maybe he shouldn't have set so long there in the yard. Joints all stiffen up on him. He turns the cellar lights on and looks about. The cellar is a huge place full of many divisions and dark mysterious corners. There are some apples left, carrots, beets and turnips In the earth cellar division. He goes through the furnace room. Ezra can remember when they didn't have a furnace, when all the rooms was het by stoves. Long the last of the children's growing up they'd not been satisfied with the way the folks had been getting along and they had insisted on a furnace. Lot of good it did now, thought Ezra. Him and Ma alone there, they didn't use it, hardly ever. Just when the youngsters came home or they had company or holidays or some'at like that. Frankly, Ezra couldn't be

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bothered with the thing. He'd rather have his heat comin' out of a pot-bellied black stove. On cold winter evenings the top would get hot and you'd feel a heat that would melt the frost out o' your marrow and stew you down so as you could go to bed and keep warm 'til mornin' with the help of a couple of soap-stones an' Ma at your side. What's the good o' tepid air comin' out of a hole in the wall? Ezra likes his heat hot and plenty of it, direct.

He steps on into Ma's preserve cellar. This cellar is bricked up against the intrusion of frost, clear to the ceiling. Against the walls stand long rows of shelves and there, even this late in the season, stand rank upon rank of jars. In the fall Ma pickled and jelled, preserved and canned, vegetables, fruits, and berries. Later, soon after Christmas, Ezra had butchered a beef and a hog. Ma had canned meat, soup stock, and sausage. Great hand, Ma, to do the most by what she could get. Ezra could remember the time, when they were first startin' out and they'd had a couple of hard years, that they would have been glad of a cellar stocked up with even these few hundred jars. Ma wouldn't think she had enough there, now, to say so. She considered this the slack season and that the preserve cellar shelves were getting rather deserted.

It gives a man a good safe feeling to have provisions stocked up like that. Even if he doesn't have much ready cash to fling about he doesn't need to worry as to where the next meal is coming from. Come to figure it all out, they could get along pretty well for food stuff for quite a while. About all they bought from the store at the four-corners was flour, sugar and maybe a few extras once in a while, like oranges or 28 dried fruits and a bit of coffee or tea. Part of the year they bought butter but when they separated and sold cream instead of whole milk they made their own butter. Usually this happened during the season when they were raising pigs and calves. Then the young stuff got the skimmed milk. It made them grow better. Then, too, you could do a bit more with what you could get for cream than what you could get for milk with the price so low and all, to say nothin' of what you had to pay for cartage. While back when the village creamery was going, it was only a step to deliver the milk each morning. Now they carted it by truck clear into town to

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the creamery and there it was to be loaded into trucks and milk cars and taken way down country.

Ezra went on back through the furnace cellar, closing the door carefully behind him. He shut the bulk-head doors and fastened them on the inside with a hasp. Then he shut the cellar door below and started for the cellar stairs.

"You 'bout done, Ezra?" Ma had heard him wandering around in the cellar.

"I be. What you want?"

"Bring up a can of that corn, Ezra, and half a dozen potatoes. Get me a chunk of that salt pork too, while you're about it. I want to make a corn chowder for supper."

"Pass me down a pan to lug 'em up in. I can't be carryin' all that order in my two hands."

"Heavenly day!" sputters Ma. "I might just as well go for it myself!"

"Well, be ye goin't get that pan?" 29 "Hold your hosses. Here 'tis!"

Ezra collects the things and carries them all up the stairs and dumps them in a jumbled heap on the kitchen table.

"Ed come over for chores yet?"

"I haven't seen him."

"Kind of late about your supper, be'n't you?"

"Yes, I got delayed. I wanted to finish puttin' that quilt linin' together so that we could get a good start on it when Marthy an' Mis' Holden comes over tomorrow to help me tie it."

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“Well, you'll be havin' time enough while we do the chores. If Ed ain't over yet we will be all night at it.”

Ezra collects his milking paraphernalia and starts for the barn. He never seems to hurry, but he is always busy. Experience has taught him that nature will take her time about things and it is like fighting winds to try to hurry anything. It's the everlasting keeping at it that counts. Seems like some seasons rush him more than others do, but there is always something waiting, always something to be done. When chores come in sight at the end of the day and Ed comes swinging down the road behind the herd of black and white placid beasts, with Bobby on his shoulders, shouting and brandishing a stick and Betty trailing along behind, Ezra feels his years. They fill him with a contentment, a consciousness of well being. His hands are workworn and gnarled, his shoulders stooped, his legs crooked, his hair white, his face wrinkled. But there in Bobby is the human part of him that will live and carry on. His mark is there too on the rolling hills and level meadows. His mark, which he has carried out over the marks of the generations before him and which will be carried out still farther by the generations to come. Good land, good works and good people!

THE VERMONT FARMER Funeral Out

The middle of the week and Ezra is dressed in his Sunday clothes! Ma, too, looks as though something unusual was about to happen. She looks tired. For the last week or more she has been settin' up by old Mrs. Brooks. The old lady was mortal sick and two nights ago in the deep reaches of the dawning her spirit fled and Ma had managed things for her distraught daughter. Old Lady Brooks was what was called a “character.” Strong of will and tart of tongue she ruled the roost and her daughter was a middle-aged, dependent, child. Ma wondered what was to become of the woman, now that her source of motivation had been taken from her. Ma had cooked for the funeral, too. All the relatives would be there to eat before and afterward. Something about gettin' together that is a stimulation to the appetite even if the occasion was a funeral. Ezra was a mite put out

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about Ma's devoting so much of her time to helpless, hapless Lizzie. He felt neglected. Of course it's the right thing to help out and do for your neighbors as you would be done by, but there could be a limit and Ma had spent practically day and night down to Brooks' ever since the old lady was took so bad. He drew a sigh of relief. It would soon be all over. He wondered if there would be a big turnout for the services.....

They walked the short distance to the little white house set beneath the old hack-ma-tac, and joined the lingering procession, which made its way to the side door. Mis' Brooks 32 lay in state surrounded by beautiful flowers across the bay window in the living room. Nobody felt comfortable to use the front door, it didn't seem neighborly somehow, even at this special time. The kitchen was full of farmers uncomfortably pressed, combed and shined. The butcher was there, the storekeeper (the store at the four corners was closed during the hour of the funeral), the postmaster, all took their places in the quiet subdued rooms. The undertaker's bald head shone above dark thatches and gray locks. Folks liked Mr. Bainbury to do their services for them. He invested even the simplest task with a quiet dignity and reverence which gave it that touch of mysticism and final peace which helped to bring a surcease to the troubled hearts of the next-of-kin.

Ma went quickly through the kitchen with a little something more for poor Lizzie, left it in the buttery, hung her coat over the broom handle behind the kitchen door, and slipped with a nod to Mr. Bainbury, into a chair back against the wall. The smell of flowers was everywhere, carnations, snapdragons, roses, lilies. The flowers were lovely, thought Ma, such a raft of 'em. Well, Mis' Brooks had a snag o' kin and they all had come that could, bringing their tributes, and then there was some that couldn't come, and they'd sent theirs. Too bad, Ma communed with herself, too bad, the old lady hadn't had some of the flowers before she died. She might have liked 'em. Then again she might have thought they was a mess o' foolishness. She was funny like that, but maybe she didn't always mean things as bad as they sounded. Ma liked to feel that 33 way about it.

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The minister rose to his feet from his place near the front of the room, just to one side of the bay window. He cleared his throat and the faint murmur and rustling ceased. During his prayer and scripture reading it was very quiet. The little yellow canary in the cage twittered and hopped about from perch to perch. His bright eyes roved restlessly about over the crowd, he didn't quite like so many folks around. It was unusual. When May Brigham and her Pa rose up to sing the two old hymns, the canary became a vibrating ball of yellow and lent a torrent of liquid melody to the harmony of the two voices. Lizzie had bore-up pretty well 'til then and there was a tear in more than one eye before the services were over.

Ezra had been asked to be bearer with four others all about his age. Lizzie had wanted menfolk who had been neighbor to her mother about the longest. Ezra and Mis' Brooks had gone to the little white school house together when it was red, and Mis' Brooks had been peppery, pretty Mary Annis, and as far as neighborin' goes, he should have been first-bearer.

The long line of cars crawled over the road between fields and meadows, church and hall, through the village and up the hill to the "buryin' ground" which covered the knoll behind the church. Some of the folks footed it over through the fields and a little group of bareheaded men and quiet women gathered there for the short commitment service. Ma stood quite close to Lizzie and kept a restraining hand on her arm. 34 Ma fully made up her mind that if Lizzie showed signs of losing all self-control, she would really take hold of her hard. It is all right to be sad about such things, but it is considered weak of anyone to lose control.

When the final words were said, Ma hustled round and spoke to Marthy. Then she saw the next-o'-kin to Lizzie and it was arranged that Lizzie should go home with Marthy for a while and give Ma and the next-o'-kin a chance to straighten out the house.

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“You an' Lizzie walk down'long about five and we will have things all back in place. Do Lizzie good to get away, she's been shut in too long.” Ma hustled them off and went back to the house to finish up her self appointed task.

Ezra stood round with some of the men folks and talked about the weather and the crops, about politics and the “state of the country.” The store at the four-corners opened and the folks who had been at the funeral wandered in and out, passing the time of day and buying some little trifle. Ezra found his way there while he was waiting for Ma. The storekeeper is hustling around waiting on trade. He is still dressed in his good clothes and he has tied on a huge white apron lettered in red across the front.

Ma comes down from the house and she and Ezra go up the hill toward home. They don't say much. Ma and Ezra have come to the place where they don't need to talk much. They think their thoughts and a half-smile or a glance will tell the other that their minds are running in the same channels. They 35 are both thinking now of Lizzie and the community problem she presents. Some of the kin folk may take her to work out her board and then again, who among the city people would have house room or heart room for a countrified old maid? They know that Lizzie would never be happy anywhere else. Now if she only wasn't so dependent and helpless she might stay on in the old place and take boarders and work out for the farmers' wives in the busy seasons. Well, now that she is thrown on her own she may perk up and amount to something.

“Member what old Cyrus told Mary when he died?” Ezra is thinking back. Trying to trace out in his mind some of the causes of Lizzie's predicament.

“He was an old tarter,” Ma thinks back too, to the time of Cyrus' demise. He had called Mary and Lizzie to him and told them what was what in his most impressive manner. Lizzie, then a pale repressed girl of fifteen, had never forgotten it. Through the subtle osmosis of grapevine neighborly interchange, the story bad became common talk.

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Cyrus, lying there propped up on his pillows had, between wheezes, laid down the law to the two women. Lizzie was to stay by her mother and take care of her as long as she was needed. All the others had left home for various reasons and Cyrus was determined-that this last child should not escape him.

“If ye don't stay by yer Maw, I'll come back an' I'll ha'nt ye!” He raised himself on a bony elbow and shook his finger in the face of the frightened girl. “I'll ha'nt ye 'til ye go out o' yer mind.” He sank back among the pillows and glared at her, his eyes like glassy marbles under his bushy brows. Lizzie had 36 never been allowed to forget. Even her sharp-tongued mother had treated Cyrus' ultimatum with respectful silence.

Up the hill and home once more Ma and Ezra return with a sigh of relief to the stability of accustomed ways. Funerals are events, but each one hits closer and closer. Sometimes each wonders, privately, which will be the one to go first. 'Course they have Ed and Marthy right there, but it would be hard for the one that was left. Privately, Ma hopes she will be the one who will have to wait on the call of the golden trumpet. It's a little easier on a woman to make adjustments' to a change than it is for a man. Ezra too, hopes he will get through first. Not that he wants to leave Ma, but 'twould be easier waiting the other side of the pearly gates in a new and strange environment than here among the things that would ever remind him. But they both agree, they will cross that bridge when they come to it!

Meantime there are chores to be done and supper to get. The harness of daily life drops again over their shoulders. They settle gratefully into the accustomed routine and these disturbing thoughts sink into the limbo of their subconsciousness. Like the soapstone in the bed, the knowledge of death is there, a tangible, hard fact, covered over with many layers of habit and custom, blankets of thought and fancy quilts of bravado. At times like this it becomes a stone again and is warmed at the fires of sympathy lit by the match of common lot. Then alone in the dark of night, when life ebbs and the still reaches swing wide, it is a cold weight to carry there at the 37 back of a man's being.

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Ezra does not fear death. Too often he sees the resurrection, and the triumph of life. Death, in itself is no stranger. The cycle is there in its completeness before him through the seasons. He has learned to say and mean, "Thy will, not mine, be done." The fundamental elements of man's existence are always with him, Life and Birth and Death.