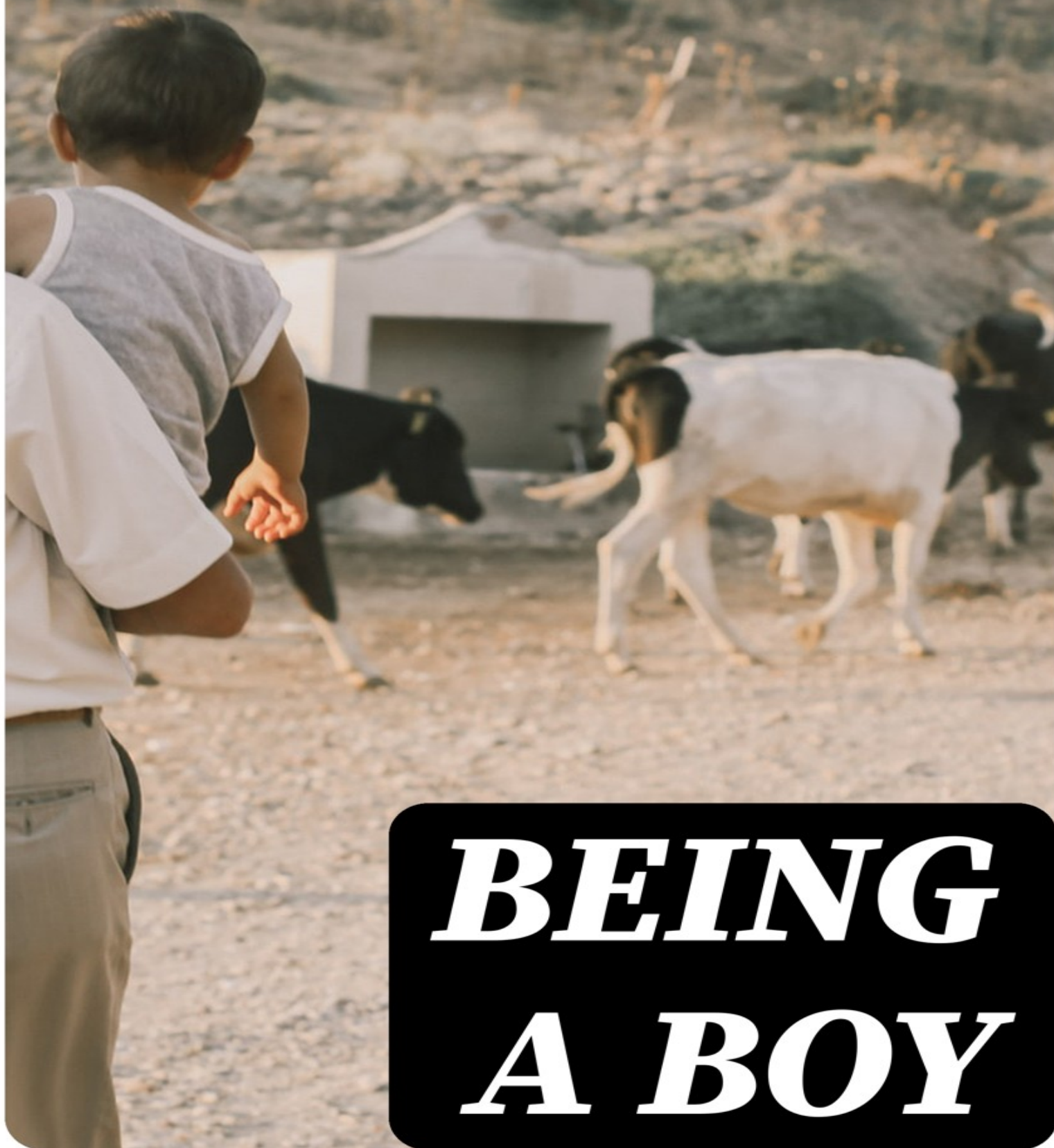


***CHARLES DUDLEY
WARNER***



***BEING
A BOY***

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Charles Dudley Warner

Being a Boy

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I
II
III
IV
V
VI
VII
VIII
IX
X
XI
XII
XIII
XIV
XV
XVI
XVII
XVIII
XIX



Table of Contents

BEING A BOY

ONE of the best things in the world to be is a boy; it requires no experience, though it needs some practice to be a good one. The disadvantage of the position is that it does not last long enough; it is soon over; just as you get used to being a boy, you have to be something else, with a good deal more work to do and not half so much fun. And yet every boy is anxious to be a man, and is very uneasy with the restrictions that are put upon him as a boy. Good fun as it is to yoke up the calves and play work, there is not a boy on a farm but would rather drive a yoke of oxen at real work. What a glorious feeling it is, indeed, when a boy is for the first time given the long whip and permitted to drive the oxen, walking by their side, swinging the long lash, and shouting "Gee, Buck!" "Haw, Golden!" "Whoa, Bright!" and all the rest of that remarkable language, until he is red in the face, and all the neighbors for half a mile are aware that something unusual is going on. If I were a boy, I am not sure but I would rather drive the oxen than have a birthday.



BEING A BOY

The proudest day of my life was one day when I rode on the neap of the cart, and drove the oxen, all alone, with a load of apples to the cider-mill. I was so little, that it was a wonder that I didn't fall off, and get under the broad wheels. Nothing could make a boy, who cared anything for his appearance, feel flatter than to be run over by the broad tire of a cart-wheel. But I never heard of one who was, and I don't believe one ever will be. As I said, it was a great day for me, but I don't remember that the oxen cared much about it. They sagged along in their great clumsy way, switching their tails in my face occasionally, and now and then giving a lurch to this or that side of the road, attracted

by a choice tuft of grass. And then I "came the Julius Cæsar" over them, if you will allow me to use such a slang expression, a liberty I never should permit you. I don't know that Julius Cæsar ever drove cattle, though he must often have seen the peasants from the Campagna "haw" and "gee" them round the Forum (of course in Latin, a language that those cattle understood as well as ours do English); but what I mean is, that I stood up and "hollered" with all my might, as everybody does with oxen, as if they were born deaf, and whacked them with the long lash over the head, just as the big folks did when they drove. I think now that it was a cowardly thing to crack the patient old fellows over the face and eyes, and make them wink in their meek manner. If I am ever a boy again on a farm, I shall speak gently to the oxen, and not go screaming round the farm like a crazy man; and I shall not hit them a cruel cut with the lash every few minutes, because it looks big to do so and I cannot think of anything else to do. I never liked lickings myself, and I don't know why an ox should like them, especially as he cannot reason about the moral improvement he is to get out of them.



THE FARM OXEN

Speaking of Latin reminds me that I once taught my cows Latin. I don't mean that I taught them to read it, for it is very difficult to teach a cow to read Latin or any of the dead languages,—a cow cares more for her cud than she does for all the classics put together. But if you begin early you can teach a cow, or a calf (if you can teach a calf anything, which I doubt), Latin as well as English. There were ten cows, which I had to escort to and from pasture night and morning. To these cows I gave the names of the Roman numerals, beginning with Unus and Duo, and going up to Decem. Decem was of course the biggest cow of the party, or at least she was the ruler of the others, and had the place of honor in the stable and everywhere else. I admire cows, and especially the exactness with which they define their social position. In this case, Decem could "lick" Novem, and Novem could "lick" Octo, and so on down to Unus, who couldn't lick anybody, except her own calf. I suppose I ought

to have called the weakest cow Una instead of Unus, considering her sex; but I didn't care much to teach the cows the declensions of adjectives, in which I was not very well up myself; and besides it would be of little use to a cow. People who devote themselves too severely to study of the classics are apt to become dried up; and you should never do anything to dry up a cow. Well, these ten cows knew their names after a while, at least they appeared to, and would take their places as I called them. At least, if Octo attempted to get before Novem in going through the bars (I have heard people speak of a "pair of bars" when there were six or eight of them), or into the stable, the matter of precedence was settled then and there, and once settled there was no dispute about it afterwards. Novem either put her horns into Octo's ribs, and Octo shambled to one side, or else the two locked horns and tried the game of push and gore until one gave up. Nothing is stricter than the etiquette of a party of cows. There is nothing in royal courts equal to it; rank is exactly settled, and the same individuals always have the precedence. You know that at Windsor Castle, if the Royal Three-Ply Silver Stick should happen to get in front of the Most Royal Double-and-Twisted Golden Rod, when the court is going in to dinner, something so dreadful would happen that we don't dare to think of it. It is certain that the soup would get cold while the Golden Rod was pitching the Silver Stick out of the castle window into the moat, and perhaps the island of Great Britain itself would split in two. But the people are very careful that it never shall happen, so we shall probably never know what the effect would be. Among cows, as I say, the question is settled in short order,

and in a different manner from what it sometimes is in other society. It is said that in other society there is sometimes a great scramble for the first place, for the leadership as it is called, and that women, and men too, fight for what is called position; and in order to be first they will injure their neighbors by telling stories about them and by backbiting, which is the meanest kind of biting there is, not excepting the bite of fleas. But in cow society there is nothing of this detraction in order to get the first place at the crib, or the farther stall in the stable. If the question arises, the cows turn in, horns and all, and settle it with one square fight, and that ends it. I have often admired this trait in cows.

Besides Latin, I used to try to teach the cows a little poetry, and it is a very good plan. It does not benefit the cows much, but it is excellent exercise for a boy farmer. I used to commit to memory as many short poems as I could find (the cows liked to listen to *Thanatopsis* about as well as anything), and repeat them when I went to the pasture, and as I drove the cows home through the sweet ferns and down the rocky slopes. It improves a boy's elocution a great deal more than driving oxen.

It is a fact, also, that if a boy repeats *Thanatopsis* while he is milking, that operation acquires a certain dignity.



Table of Contents

THE BOY AS A FARMER



AT THE PASTURE BARS

Boys in general would be very good farmers if the current notions about farming were not so very different from those they entertain. What passes for laziness is very often an unwillingness to farm in a particular way. For instance, some morning in early summer John is told to catch the sorrel

mare, harness her into the spring wagon, and put in the buffalo and the best whip, for father is obliged to drive over to the "Corners, to see a man" about some cattle, or talk with the road commissioner, or go to the store for the "women folks," and to attend to other important business; and very likely he will not be back till sundown. It must be very pressing business, for the old gentleman drives off in this way somewhere almost every pleasant day, and appears to have a great deal on his mind. Meantime, he tells John that he can play ball after he has done up the chores. As if the chores could ever be "done up" on a farm. He is first to clean out the horse-stable; then to take a bill-hook and cut down the thistles and weeds from the fence-corners in the home mowing-lot and along the road towards the village; to dig up the docks round the garden patch; to weed out the beet-bed; to hoe the early potatoes; to rake the sticks and leaves out of the front yard; in short, there is work enough laid out for John to keep him busy, it seems to him, till he comes of age; and at half an hour to sundown he is to go for the cows, and, mind he don't run 'em!

"Yes, sir," says John, "is that all?"

"Well, if you get through in good season, you might pick over those potatoes in the cellar: they are sprouting; they ain't fit to eat."

John is obliged to his father, for if there is any sort of chore more cheerful to a boy than another, on a pleasant day, it is rubbing the sprouts off potatoes in a dark cellar. And the old gentleman mounts his wagon and drives away down the enticing road, with the dog bounding along beside the wagon, and refusing to come back at John's call. John

half wishes he were the dog. The dog knows the part of farming that suits him. He likes to run along the road and see all the dogs and other people, and he likes best of all to lie on the store steps at the Corners—while his master's horse is dozing at the post and his master is talking politics in the store—with the other dogs of his acquaintance, snapping at mutually annoying flies and indulging in that delightful dog gossip which is expressed by a wag of the tail and a sniff of the nose. Nobody knows how many dogs' characters are destroyed in this gossip; or how a dog may be able to insinuate suspicion by a wag of the tail as a man can by a shrug of the shoulders, or sniff a slander as a man can suggest one by raising his eyebrows.



IN THE CATTLE PASTURE

John looks after the old gentleman driving off in state, with the odorous buffalo-robe and the new whip, and he thinks that is the sort of farming he would like to do. And he cries after his departing parent,—

"Say, father, can't I go over to the farther pasture and salt the cattle?" John knows that he could spend half a day very pleasantly in going over to that pasture, looking for bird's-nests and shying at red squirrels on the way, and who knows but he might "see" a sucker in the meadow brook, and perhaps get a "jab" at him with a sharp stick. He knows a hole where there is a whopper; and one of his plans in life