

DON'T SELL THE FARM

By Fr. Marie-Victorin

In the Public Domain

THE clear autumn day was becoming cool at its close. Slowly the cartload of oats moved along the grassy track which led from the back of the farm up to the house. Seated comfortably between the cart-racks, old Felix Delage enjoyed the serenity of the hour and, even more, the delightful tiredness which is the privileged lot of the toiler in the fields.

At his feet, his son Basil, pitchfork in hand, was driving the horse. As they turned the corner of the barn the father exclaimed:

“Look, Basil; he’s done it! Francois Millette has sold his farm!”

And with a changed voice the old man repeated:

“He’s sold it! He’s sold it!”

Over there, on the other side of the road, on a huge signboard silhouetted against the blue sky, the overlarge letters of a commonplace advertisement stretched across the sheet-iron, freshly painted in white. Workmen were still busy at the foot of it, fastening the flimsy structure to stakes set up among the golden-rods and red burdocks a hundred paces from the road where a motor-truck was standing.

“They’ve put that up this afternoon,” said Basil.

“Just so! There’s one more farm gone to waste. We’re hemmed in, my boy! Last year Jean-Baptiste Marcil sold his, then, this summer, Pierre Trudeau, then Joseph Charron! I always believed Francois would hold out.”

“It’s the children, probably. They always had a mind to sell. The two young ones in the city have brought their father around.”

The cart joltingly entered the barn, and, while unhitching, Delage continued:

“Well Basil, my boy, our Chambly road is done for! All our good land, the best around here, is lost for farming! No more farming!”

The cart-shafts dropped to the barn floor. Basil took hold of the horse and went into the stable. With weary steps the old man set off for the house.

A fine type of Canadian was Felix Delage! Of average height, somewhat stout, he resembled the two oaks planted before his door. With his vigorous countenance, a bit tanned, with his thick head of hair all white, like snow on ivory, it was astonishing to find, below his silver eyebrows, blue childlike eyes. His lips bore a fixed smile, a smile also childlike, spared by the storms of seventy years of life. It was a smile which took on all the significance of his life when he spoke with that strong somewhat deep voice which was characteristic of him.

Delage's farm was one of the oldest and richest in the district. It fronted on the old road which connects Chambly and Longueuil and which comes out again to the St. Lawrence at the exact spot where Charles LeMoyne built his house. Old people still call this well-known highway the "Boston road"; before the coming of railroads it was a trade route, and the route of invasions too. To write the history of the Chambly road would be to write a good half of the economic and military history of Canada.

During the French regime an ancestor of Delage, a cavalry officer discharged from service, took up a farm two miles and a half from the village of Longueuil. Apparently that Delage was of the lesser nobility, and truly those who were associated with old Felix discovered in him an obvious inheritance, a refinement of speech and manners little known among our farmers.

Felix Delage belonged to that old school of believers who have the wisdom to accept religion—even as life itself—in its entirety, and under the pulpit of the Longueuil church there was no finer family than his own. But love of the soil, enthusiasm for farming—real farming, intelligent, rational, and methodical—distinguished above everything else the man's fine nature. His octagonal stable, constructed from plans of his own, was a marvel of ingenuity known for twenty miles around. Founder and president of the agricultural society he had been for thirty years counsellor, adviser, and moving spirit among all the farmers on the Chambly road.

And now with this turn of events the old farmer saw collapsing his beautiful dream of the improvement of farming. The folly of real estate speculation, having ravaged the island of Montreal, was spreading at present along the south shore, overwhelming the surroundings of old Longueuil, and advancing into the country. Like unwholesome mushrooms, the real estate agents' little square shacks, hideously whitewashed, were springing up in the middle of the fields. Uncouth signs rose everywhere from the grass as monstrous epitaphs of a vast cemetery, even that of the fruitful and faithful earth. One after another his neighbours had sold their farms and Felix Delage now counted about him only his son Joseph whose land bordered his own on the south, Basil who worked the farm with him, and his old friend Francois Millette, who was coming that evening to sit on the verandah and talk over old times. And he, too, was going to desert him, to go away, to betray the soil and the implied compact which bound the two of them together. On Sunday, however, he had been over without saying a word. Shame, without a doubt, had closed his mouth. The conscience of age, like the conscience of childhood, trembles under shortcomings.

Thinking of all these things Felix, without greeting his grandchildren, entered the big kitchen where the women were moving to and fro. He sank down into a rocking-chair near the window.

“Well, my daughters! Another calamity! Francois Millette has sold out!”

The three women had been expecting this outburst. They looked at one another without saying anything.

“We’re all alone now on this three-mile stretch of the Chambly road! All alone!”

As he clung to the arms of the chair the old man’s eyes began to fill with tears. Basil’s young children, understanding from their grandfather’s sorrow that something was wrong, went and sat down on the bench behind the table. Silence fell upon the kitchen. After a little while Basil came in and placed on the table the water-jug wrapped in a white cloth. Without a word he hung his big straw hat on a wooden peg and turning up his sleeves he walked to the pump.

Nervously Felix got up from his chair and went out to the road. The sun was setting in glory in purple clouds against which stood out clearly the soft curve of Mount Royal and the slender steeple of Longueuil. The big elms here and there in the fields began their reign over the evening, and their idly waving branches were playing in the silence with something invisible. But as far as the old man was concerned, the peace of evening was destroyed by the big sign-board rudely interposed between himself and the sky, which he would have before his eyes ever afterward, day in and day out, always, in sunshine and in rain, defying for ever his deep faith and his love of the soil!

The workmen, their job over, got back into the truck, which jolted for a moment in starting, then got under way quickly, raising a cloud of white dust from the road. Felix Delage stayed there, leaning against the gate, between two clumps of lilacs, looking at the desecrated field over which still lingered waverings of roseate light.

Then a dear, unsteady little voice piped up behind him:

“Grandad! Come to supper!”

Suddenly snatched out of his dream and his misery, the old man took up little Joseph into his arms and went in.

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Sunday afternoon has an exquisite sweetness in the heart of autumn. The fiery heat of summer has gone, and the cold has not yet come to close the doors and to throw shawls about the shoulders of the women. All the rocking-chairs and armchairs had been brought out on the Delage verandah. Joseph, the eldest son, was there with his family. The children were playing hide-and-seek under the arbour and running on the grass as far as the road. At one end of the verandah the women were chatting briskly, while at the other end Basil and Joseph, on either side of their father, were talking over the autumn work. Motor-cars were following one another along the road, continuously surrounded by clouds of dust; little machines were carrying city families taking

advantage of the last fine Sunday; touring-cars and luxurious limousines were travelling at high speed towards the border. It was a monotonous, whirling line to which, nevertheless, the Delage family, like all the dwellers on the Chambly road, had become accustomed.

Suddenly a heavy car, which had honked several times, came abruptly through the gateway and stopped before the house. The driver lit a cigar, while two gentlemen got out of the back seat. One of them, a big man with a ruddy complexion, handed a business card to Felix, who had come out to meet them. He read it absent-mindedly.

“Are you Mr. Felix Delage? I am Stevenson, real estate agent. I have a considerable sum of money to invest in south shore property. I am told that your farm has not been sold and I have come to look at it in order to make you an offer. I really mean business and I can give you satisfactory references.”

“My dear sir,” replied Felix, “although your name is perfectly unknown to me, I can readily believe that you are serious, but I must tell you at once that my farm is not for sale.”

Stevenson did not seem to have heard. Lighting a cigar he went on, as a man to whom this way of beginning a business talk was familiar:

“I am in a position to give you the best possible terms, terms in which the down payment would come to a large part. Here is my solicitor, Mr. Forest, who is ready to close the deal at once. Do you mind if we look around a bit?”

“Not at all. I’ll be glad to go with you. But I tell you again that my farm is not for sale, as long as I am alive and my sons have their two arms.”

The three men took the footpath which went around behind the buildings. The view stretched across the newly-mown fields bristling with short golden stubble. Deep ditches, perfectly in line, ran toward the east, right to the edge of the wood where the light leaves of the little white birches were wavering.

“Splendid!” murmured the real estate agent between his teeth.

“Here’s a farm which has always been perfectly worked in past days, and which I try to keep up in the old way. You won’t find a low spot or a bit of waste ground. Two weeks ago that field would have shown you what the soil pays back to them who give it work and manure. You should have seen, last July, that piece of clover between the two elms; it was as white and thick as the wool on a sheep’s back!”

“Do you go right over to the bush?”

“Yes, over there to the right. And in length right to the Gentilly line. Do you see the telephone poles? That’s the end of it.”

“Good. I’ll give you twenty-five thousand cash. How does that suit you?”

“It’s worth more than that!”

“Now you’re making it hard. Do you know what the farms right next have brought?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to know.” “How much are you asking?”

“You don’t understand me.”

“Really?”

The financier flicked the ash from his cigar with his finger and began to examine more carefully this type of man new to him.

“Have you any children?” went on old man Delage.

“No! I am a bachelor and that just suits me!”

Felix puckered his white eyebrows and turned towards the solicitor who was idly fingering a blade of millet.

“What about you, sir?”

“I? I have six children!”

And the solicitor’s eyes met those of the questioner as if to say: “I am of your own race, we understand each other, go ahead!”

“Very well! These children have cost you—your wife and you—a great deal of work and caused you plenty of trouble. If somebody were to offer them—your children—twenty-five thousand dollars for their mother, what would they say?”

The solicitor smiled silently.

“As for me,” went on Felix, “I am the child of my land. You see, sirs, the soil is an ancestor whose care is bequeathed to us by the life and death of others. Like the very old, it is motionless and defenseless, but it knows how to smile with all its flowers and, in the early morning, to weep with all its blades of grass. It has a mysterious language, but it is as distinct as human speech for him who can hear it. . Probably at this instant, Mr. Stevenson, you hear nothing but the cries of the birds and the automobile horns on the highway. But for me a voice is rising from these great fields, from the short grass and from the hawthorn thickets, and this voice implores my pity and says to me, ‘I have always served you well! Do not sell me!’ And that is why I tell you that my farm is worth more than all you offer me.”

Stevenson threw away his cigar. His particular psychology lacked something. Was a man of this sort sincere? Or was he dealing with a country fellow pretty clever at knocking down a good round sum? At all events Stevenson resolved to employ the classic procedure of offering the temptation which never fails.

“Very well! That’s to be understood! I’ll give you thirty thousand with ten thousand down and the remainder payable in four annual installments. That’s my final price. When you have made up your mind call in at my solicitor’s; he has complete authority. You’ve got my card?”

They took their way back to the highroad. Stevenson went first, with his thumbs thrust into the armholes of his waistcoat. The solicitor loitered a little to be near Felix. He grasped his hand furtively, pressed it with feeling and said to him quite low,

“I approve of what you’re doing! Hold on! Don’t give up!”

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Three years passed during which death visited the Delage fireside. And the treacherous one chose his blows well! First it was Joseph, the eldest son, who fell, slashed by the blades of a mowing-machine. A week of horror of which one never speaks in that house! And then it was Basil, the only able-bodied man who was left. He lay in the great bedroom laid low with pneumonia, drifting slowly but inevitably toward death.

The women came and went silently. The children grouped around one of their aunts were telling their beads. Now and again the old man stood beside the dying son and spoke a few words to him, strange words with no bearing on the situation, the only ones which overwhelming sorrow can find.

Old Delage had, indeed, changed. An unknown sickness, the sickness of old age pressed upon his spirits. He no longer worked. It was only with difficulty that he was able to get, with slow steps, as far as the end of the pasture field. His life was restricted, hemmed in. It was moving perceptibly toward its centre, even to the earth which would soon take him to herself. And this last grief was bringing the end. All his sorrows, first, those of long ago, came back to him again while he warmed his chilly feet before the stove. Deep within his heart, always in mourning, he awakened the memory of his wife whom he had found one morning dead at his side. As if it had been yesterday, he saw himself coming out of the bedchamber to tell his children that they no longer had a mother. Then it was the departure of Hermenegilde for the community of the Christian Brothers Schools. Another year and the door of the old house opened to let pass out forever Marie-Angele who went away to put on the grey habit of the sisters of Charity. Finally the horrible tragedy of the summer before, the blood-stained mowing-machine, the bruised and wounded body lying on the great bed in there!

Now his last son was leaving him too; both priest and physician had given him up. It was all over! God is just, without a doubt! But his justice is sometimes beyond our understanding! Why did he seem bent upon destroying a family which had always served him in sincerity of heart?

Old Felix got up and went out on the verandah. The air was raw and gentle soft snow was falling like a regret over the great empty fields. Out on the ploughed land the angular clods of earth were already becoming silvery. The earth, too, was dying and for the one, as for the other, the pitying heaven was weaving a winding-sheet.

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Springtime has come again and with it the gladness of the warm sun, the throbbing of sap in the buds, and at the roots of the grass the lusty awakening of life.

Old Delage has aged still more. In the house are heard only the light steps of the women and the prattle of Alfred and Joseph, Basil's bereaved children. Without a man to work it, the Delage farm, for the first time in two hundred years, lies untilled. The furrows opened by Basil will not be closed. The banished weeds will come back to take their revenge and soon in the beautiful fields, instead of golden wheat and waving oats, there will be nothing but mustard, coarse grass and chicory.

There is but one solution, a painful one! To auction off the stock and implements, to put up the farm for sale, and to go away to the village of Longueuil as the others have done—the traitors! The final ordeal, and at the hand of God!

It is the morning of the final farewell. On the grey stone gable the dew clings in drops upon the dismal words, "Farm for Sale". The doors of the buildings are already padlocked and the windows boarded over. After men pass away, pass away too their possessions! No more the lowing of cattle, no more the clucking of fowl. Not hearing as usual the awakening call of the cocks, the sun remains hidden behind a heavy screen of clouds. The wagon stands all ready before the door. Most of the household stuff has been moved and to-morrow some hired man will come to take the last odds and ends; some chairs, a lamp, and the old ancestral bed which will leave the house last of all.

This leave-taking is torture for old Felix. He strolls about aimlessly before the door listening for the last time to the murmur of the wind in the big willow while his daughters and the two children close the shutters. This morning he wears his cloth coat and his black felt hat. He looks about everywhere; he takes a good look at the arbour where the vine is growing green again, at the old grindstone which used to make the scythes glitter and which nobody wanted to buy, at the octagonal barn, at everything which he will not see again and which he does not wish to see again.

Basil's widow is already in the wagon. With a quick step the man walks to the end of the yard and takes a long look at the unploughed acres which stretch away in close order toward Gentilly. He sees the two great straw-stacks far off on the skyline and Bois du Lac with its scattered group of great black pines.

All is indeed over! The simple tightly-held dream of identifying himself with his native soil, of taking root there forever has come to an end. And now his vision becomes clouded. He seems to see all the Delage ancestors pressing about him and among them the founder of the family, the cavalry officer whose pistols and sabre he possesses; Jean, the ancestor whose curved profile and leathern apron, which he always wore, haunt his distant memories; his

father, Alexis, who, when returning from the fields, always sang an old love song doubtless brought out from France, the song of a cavalry officer in his saddle;

“From the moment of day dawning
Have I ever heard love singing!”

In the grip of these apparitions old Delage leans over on the fence and begins to weep! His broad chest heaves forcefully with restrained sobbing; tears stream from his eyes. About him birds sing gaily and the dumb earth smiles even as it does sometimes in a graveyard while children watch their mother’s body being lowered into the grave.

All at once Felix feels someone tugging at his coat. He turns around. Alfred and Joseph are there, in tears, too, from seeing their grandfather cry. For a moment the three of them are silent and then Alfred, taking the old man’s hand, says to him,

“Grandad! We have something to ask you.”

“Well, my lads, what is it?”

“When we get older we want to work the farm . . . like Daddy and you! Will you let us do that, Grandad? Don’t sell the farm!”

For a moment Felix stands dumbfounded. The little boys understand. *They understand.* At the last moment the love of the soil which is in the Delage blood is awakened in them and it speaks out. The torch, almost flickering out, flares up again with the gentle breeze blowing from over the fields; the dried-up spring begins to flow once more. . . .

Without taking the trouble to dry his tears, and, indeed, he no longer knows why he is crying, the old man draws his two grandchildren to him and embraces them without a word. Then with firm steps he goes back to the house, seizes a pole and tears down the sign, Farm for Sale. It falls out of sight with a dull thud among the tall stalks of St. John’s wort!

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And that is why on the Charnbly road not far from Longueuil there is an abandoned farm, which is not for sale!