

The Battle Royal

It is waged under odds such as the bravest of champions might decline, one against unnumbered hosts of the enemy; it is a relentless warfare without truce or ~~armistice~~ ^{from early spring to late mid-summer} waged increasingly night and day, and that champions of weedless fields, the farmers, must fight without allies for your cultivated crops, corn, oats, wheat and the like are dainty pampered fellows yielding without a struggle to the freebooting weeds which rob them of their food. Like others of their ilk these weeds are not wholly bad citizens and many of them would be liked well enough did they not persist in intruding themselves, unasked, in all societies. The golden dandelion, the deadly bane of all lovers of good greenward, has, in its early youth, the possibility of the tastiest of salads, plantains and lamb's-quarters, too, are not to be despised as "weeds", and even that most dreaded of all weeds, the quack grass, is an excellent pasture plant. one of

The very quality which makes the quack grass, the most difficult of all weeds to conquer is but the exaggeration of an excellent trait, the ability to maintain itself in plant society. It has invulnerable crafty defenses against the man who would exterminate it; the battle is long and the victory is to be gained only by constant struggle. It is insidious in its approaches, an unobtrusive grass, signalling its presence by no gaudy flower it is often well

established before the farmer realizes its presence. Plowing the ground avails little to destroy quack grass unless the land be left fallow and the cultivation repeated at short intervals during the summer, for as the plants are cut and scattered by the plow each bit of root-stock holds the possibility of a new plant and plowing has only dispersed the pest more widely. A small patch may be dug up by hand and every particle of the grass carefully burned, or it may be smothered under a thick covering of manure a large amount must necessarily be combated by plowing and cultivating the land repeatedly and the struggle is a long hard one. Other farmers, meanwhile, view the unfortunate possessor of the infested farm askance, using great care to avoid the possibility of transferring any of the seed to their own fields.

All of the enemies of the farmer are not so unobtrusive, many indeed are so pleasing to the eye that it is difficult for those who do not have to contend with them to lament their presence in the fields. Many a poet has glorified the scarlet poppies in the fields of English wheat but the voice of the English yeoman has not been heard in their praise. In such instances the farmer blinds his eyes to aesthetic considerations, and finds his field of grain most adorned when unadorned. Rarely, then, do we see in Iowa that sight which we must praise

for its beauty and lament as an indication of shiftlessness an oat field overgrown with mustard. The vivid yellow of the mustard blossoms against the bluish green of the oats, the delicate and graceful clusters bowing in the wind are indeed a delight to the eye and we must remind ourselves sternly of the pernicious nature of the plant, at least in ~~oat~~ fields, before we can feel the proper sympathy for the poor farmer. The mustard is more easily kept in subjection, a year or so of a cultivated crop such as corn or potatoes usually quite discourages it. Sometimes the children are sent into the field to pull the plant where it is in blossom, and waist deep in the waving grain they pull and tug at the intruding plants.

The wild rose, whose evanescent blossoms ranging in color from the palest to the deepest of rose tints, glorify our country roadsides in June, sometimes passes the barrier and luxuriates in the ^{by cultivation} mellow soil of the field, but it, too, is easily eradicated. Another plant which is sometimes particularly annoying in corn fields is the wild morning glory or as the farmer aptly calls it "bird-weed". Its delicate white trumpets, fully open and glistening with the dew of early morning, are the most impermanent of flowers but the twining stem has an amazing toughness and clings dogmatically to the shovel of the corn cultivator, so that the plowman is forced repeatedly to leave his seat and clear his shovel.

of the hampering vines.

It is in the corn field that the farmer can fight a pitched battle with his constant enemies, the flowering and harrowing necessary to prepare a seed bed for the corn and the four cultivations usually given to the growing crop prove highly discouraging to the weeds. To be sure they usually receive reinforcements after the corn is "laid-by" and a field which showed no trace of green save that of the corn rows will have a carpet of pigeon-grass and the like before fall. The fight is ^{then} most unequal, however, for the corn has grown so tall and sturdy that it over-shadows its erstwhile enemies and takes, by right of the strong hand, the food and moisture it requires. This is true in the ordinary season, an exceptionally wet year, however, tips the balance in favor of the weeds for they grow best when the ground is moist and that is the very time when the farmer with his cultivator cannot take the field. Then he must watch, raging at his inaction, while the corn grows yellow and sickly in the wet and the weeds, rejoicing at the abundant moisture, flourish exultantly.

Such a wet season is a time of triumph for the "swamp sunflower" or as the Iowa farmer mis calls it "ironweed". Along the damp road edges and in any part of a field too wet for cultivation it flourishes; sometimes following a swale quite across a field, dividing the green with a splash of splendid.

vivid yellow. The fence rows and roadsides are, in fact, a city of refuge for the weeds which cannot withstand the constant cultivation which the fields receive. The light plume of the foxtail, looking not unlike barley and like it when dry the most irritating of weeds to the luckless pedestrian, the burdock, spreading out leaves broad as rhubarb leaves and if unmolested producing great numbers of tenacious burrs, that poor relation of alfalfa, sweet clover, rag weed and nettles - these and a thousand more cluster like campfollowers about the edges of the fields. Where the soil is rich and damp they make an amazing growth, the sunflowers and rag weeds tower like trees, and the burdock leaves reach an astounding size.

There is a law in Iowa which provides for the cutting of the roadsides before the fifteenth of August under certain penalties. It is observed however, very much according to the farmer's good pleasure, if he has leisure, if, above all, the roadside is smooth so that his horse mower can be used to good advantage, the thing is likely to be done; the art of mowing with a scythe, however, is almost a lost art, some of the old men can swing one with a fair degree of deftness, the younger ones make attempts so laughable for their awkwardness.

In the garden certain weeds which are

negligible factors in the field assume much importance. Purslane and pig weed make the most rapid of growth. Their thick, gross stems seem to suck the nutriment so greedily from the garden soil. They are not difficult to destroy but they occur in successive crops throughout the season so that there is always need of a hoe in the garden. Lamb's quarters, too, loves the garden plot and every spot undisturbed for a time is quickly possessed by the figeweed grass. One can scarcely credit that the innocent black soil which comes so fresh from the plow in early spring contains the seeds of all these summer pests, but they appear in regular succession and in unexampled profusion, until the weary gardener loses heart and can only lament their tenacity and the delicacy of his own transplanted darlings.

The weeds which appear in annoying number in the pastures are those which can withstand constant trampling and which are, at the same time, unpalatable to the cattle. One of the most conspicuous of these is the blue vervain which grows particularly upon hill slopes where the masses of its dull blue flowers lie like morning mist. There are certain tough marshgrasses, too, which are left to flourish in green luxuriance when the rest of the pasture is nipped to the ground, for cattle are most fastidious and what displeases them is left untouched. Where, in the course

of crop rotation, the pasture is changed from year to year. The control of the weeds is comparatively a simple matter. Where some tillable ground or field too damp for cropping is kept as a permanent pasture, the up-springing weeds must be mown before they mature and else one's pasture soon becomes a perfect nursery for all the undesirables.

Bitter and irreconcilable as is the feud between the farmer and the weeds, yet he should not condemn them too absolutely. No farmer desires to possess a field where weeds will not grow, since the very luxuriance of their growth is a measure of the fertility of his soil. Were a field, robbed by constant cropping of its fertility to be left fallow for a time, the weeds by their growth and their decay would in time, a long time, be sure, for natural processes are his workhorses, restore the soil to its pristine richness. Not alone by the luxuriance of the weeds but by their character as well, is one able to judge the condition of the soil. There are some weeds which flourish in poor, depleted soil and others which require conditions as favorable as those demanded by the daintiest of field crops. So to the accustomed eyes the weeds proclaim as plainly as so many sign boards that the soil is too wet or too dry, too poor or just in condition for successful tillage. The man who declared that Iowa was the "weediest hoggiest land" he ever saw made no mistake in

the choice of his symbols of soil fertility.

Like all combats this ever recurring battle with the weeds has its periods of truce and armistice. From early spring to mid summer the conflict rages. Then of a sudden the farmer realizes that it is over for the year. The victory is lost or least, the crops are hopelessly choked or have outgrown all danger of competition from the weeds; mower and corn plow may be pushed into the farthest corner of the machine shed, the scythe may be hung on its nail, the surviving weeds may grow in peace.

The heat and drought of August stifles everything in corners untouched by the scythe even the sturdy rag weed and horse weed droop, powdered white by the road dust; here and there among the ranker growth appear the plumes of the earliest golden rod. Then comes a day when the air holds a prophetic coolness, the farmer forgets the summer fruiting time to look forward to the autumn harvest, and then he perceives that those dusty roadsides are suddenly a riot of purple and gold. The royal thrush with his purple crown, the clustering aster and the tossing golden rod - all these, which lately were but hateful weeds to him, are now the splendid bejeweled on the cloaks which the colorful autumn draws over roadside, field and fell, the forerunners of the flaming splendor of the early fall.