

HIRED MEN

BY MARY ALDEN HOPKINS

WHEN we New Englanders were an agricultural people, soon after pioneer days, our smartest young men went into agriculture. They hired themselves out to neighboring farmers, worked hard, and, if tradition may be trusted, saved their wages. Some of them used these savings to buy uncleared land. Others bought cattle. Others went to Andover to study for the ministry or to Bowdoin to become lawyers.

A pretty picture has been handed down to us of high hopes, hard work, and pleasant, deserved achievement. Jacob Abbott portrays in the "Rollo" books a marvelous hired man named Jonas, who absorbed wisdom like a sponge and gave it out like a fountain. I have, too, the shadowy memory of another hired man in Abbott literature who paused under a window to listen to the farmer's remarks on cautiousness, addressed to his young son, and went on his way murmuring, "Think, think, think; then act!"

Now that we New Englanders are no longer an agricultural people, better openings for our worthy youths offer themselves in commerce, industry and transportation. The Jonases of today go into the stores, factories and offices of the towns rather than on to the land. Their places have been taken by men from Italy, Russia and Czecho-Slovakia. These men save their wages and buy the farms which were supposed to be worn out. The ancient New England acres, our disturbed eyes inform us, are now green beneath the feet of immigrant owners. The Puritan farmer and his farmhand have almost disappeared.

A peculiar phase of this change is that

these Slavic and Latin farmers have taken over with the acres a residue of elderly farmhands, many from pioneer stock. The incongruous relationship interests me as I watch it in the section of Connecticut where I live. The patriarchal make-up of the immigrant household lends itself to the arrangement, absorbing any number of conflicting personalities. The pride of the native hired man is soothed by his belief in his Nordic superiority, and his ego is fed by his greater ease in the language and customs of the country. The immigrant employer, on the other hand, looks down on him from the vantage point of a man of property. Each feels superior to the other.

These unsuccessful old men, who have never attained land or families of their own, are all damaged in one way or another—mainly in the spirit. They have no families of their own. They are content to live in other men's households, shifting from one farm to another to evade the difficulties of even slight domestic adjustment. The existence of their forebears has become too hard for them. They have declined to assault life gallantly. Yet in their retreat from the struggle they have developed strange and variegated individualities.

These old men who plow other men's fields, eat at other men's tables, and cut willow whistles for other men's children, never face even their own failure. They retreat from reality into fantasy. Just as other men who cannot look at themselves as they really exist are prone to escape their chagrin in bustling activity, money making, philosophy, or the cultural cov-

erts of art, so these old men solace themselves with wild imaginings. The most bizarre love lyric I ever heard was related to me by a hired man named Sylvanus Keep. Sylvanus is indirectly responsible for my getting the house where I now live and for part of the furniture. On a home-hunting expedition in the Berkshires I stopped under a huge maple in front of a farmhouse, to escape a sudden shower. A man lurched around the corner of the house, flung open the front door and invited me to enter. Without a word of thanks or refusal, I put up the road as fast as I could leg it. The man was drunk; flirtatiously drunk.

Thanks to the long detour I was obliged to make to get back to the village without encountering him again, I discovered the house which is now my home and started bargaining without the disturbing presence of a real-estate agent. When I inquired later in the village about my unintentional benefactor, one who knew everyone and everything said, "That's Syl Keep. He ain't been drunk but once in his life."

"He's drunk now," I protested.

"That's what I'm tellin' you," was the reply. "He went on a spree twenty years ago and this is that same spree."

After we moved into our house, I became of necessity acquainted with Syl, still on that first spree which rose and ebbed but never wholly departed. In my nervousness I mentioned with elaborate casualness that I was going to get a dog. It was a bad play on my part, for after that Syl used to come frequently to find out if I had got the dog. Although I was never quite at ease with him, we did a bit of business about furniture. The old lady for whom he worked, a New Englander, was dying, and he assured me that he would arrange with the heirs to sell me a lot of old stuff when the poor soul had gone to her rest. I was vulturish, I admit, but we had only two cupboards and one table in our house, and were sitting on blocks of wood from the wood-pile.

"She won't last long," Syl would tell me with an expression of dejection that became his lurching figure better than his usual ogling manner. "She can't bear to have me out of her sight. If I ain't in the room, she calls, 'Syl! Where's Syl?' till they have to hunt me up. The nurse got me to help her change her nightgown to-day; to lift her up so's to get a clean one on her. Her poor old body was just bones. It will be a relief, almost you might say, when she goes."

Finally he came to tell me how, the night before, she had died, holding his hands tightly to the last, unafraid so long as he was by her bedside. He cried a little and who could blame him?

Only—Sylvanus lied. He had never been in the old lady's bedroom. She was nursed by her daughter and her two sons. But he had told the truth about the furniture. The heirs were glad to sell the pine chests and seatless chairs, and a few days after the funeral I accompanied a wagonload down our lane.

II

It is hard for anyone to believe continuously in fantasies. Alcohol helps. The ancient hired men drink heavily to make their day-dreams lively and vivid. They drink to believe the lies they tell themselves; to escape from actuality; to re-enforce their belief in the unreal world in which they dream themselves powerful and desired.

Tim Lucky is a black Irishman, from stock long in America. His stout body balances on short legs and when he is sober he is a jolly man. He acquired in his youth every trade that could be learned in his neighborhood and took his wander-years. But with all the trades at the tips of his fingers, he came back to be a perennial hired man. Once he got hold of a black velvet tam which a girl left at the Summer boarding-house, and though he had surely never heard that men wear tams as well as smocks to help them paint pictures, he put it on his head and still

wears it with as much satisfaction as if he were a painter home from his first trip abroad.

The burden of being a jolly, good-natured man of all work occasionally becomes too heavy to be endured and then Tim goes on a long drunk. At such times his dream life becomes a reality to him. He rolls along the dusty road between the high green tangles of shrubbery, his tam pulled sidewise above his purple-plum face, his black eyes flashing with cosmic rage, and yells, "I am the mayor of the township! I am going to marry Miss—— who lives at the Summer boarding-house!"

Drinking, in general, is on the decrease in rural New England. Some think the fact is due to the passionate endeavors of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, while others hold that the telephone and flivver have broken the fierce monotony on the farms, and lessened the need of escape through alcohol. At any rate, the insane hospitals report that alcoholic insanity has almost disappeared among native New Englanders. But it is still going strong among the foreign-born, and the American-born children of foreign parents stand about halfway between. They seem to lose their heavy drinking habits along with their accent. Drinking is not so hard on the tough peasant physique and mentality as it is on the more sensitive American make-up.

Old Hickey, who works for Steve Dombrowski, must have been a fine figure of a man in his prime, but he is rather craggy now after sixty-odd years of heavy farm labor. He likes to cut himself a sapling staff, on which he leans and with which he lunges at the cows, swearing garrulously and absent-mindedly. His huge stiff muscles still employ themselves in accusatory motions. He can cut hazel bushes away from the roadside with a bush scythe that I can hardly lift.

A few Winters ago Hickey disappeared from the neighborhood, as he had frequently done before; but this time the affair was somehow mysterious and rumors

went up and down our road. Gossip asserted that he had started for the next town on an errand, but had stopped at Jablonski's on his way to the station. Jablonski was said to have something you put four drops of into a pail of water and serve in glasses. Hickey, we were told, had three glasses of it before he took the train. The conductor had him in charge by the time the four drops got in their work and at Hartford an ambulance received his huge lax body and raced him to a hospital. He was said to have spent the whole Winter recovering from Jablonski's hospitality. I tell it as it was told to me.

When he returned to our valley in the Spring, his usual explanation that he had been over in York State was not for some reason accepted. Our news correspondent to our county weekly reported under "News Tersely Told" that "C. Hickey has been wintering in Europe." As the editor records in his sheet the movements of Summer folk who go abroad frequently and of prosperous immigrants who make visits to their parents in Europe, he saw nothing strange in that and the jest slipped into print. Hickey gave me his version the following Fall. I was taking a short cut across the Dombrowski potato patch and stopped to pass the time of day with Mrs. Dombrowski. She wore a blue calico wrapper and a bib apron. Her hair lay in wet wisps against her face and her bare feet were firm in the warm dirt. She chanted her song of plenty to me as she raked the pinky potatoes out of the loose earth with her fingers: "Good potat! Beeg potat! Nobody good potat like we!"

It is marvellous to these peasants from lands where everyone lives scantily to have at last so much. So much land, so much live stock, so much produce—even so much work! They revel in plenty. They never get used to the feeling of abundance. Mrs. Dombrowski gives us the most delightful presents: luscious salt pork coming out of its brine as pink and white as a clean baby, a squawking broiler gorged with

corn, or a handful of ducks' eggs. This time it was a kettleful of potatoes, warm from the soil. She added two heads of white cabbage, crisp as lettuce and weighing, my arms said, half a ton apiece. She called Hickey from his potato digging to carry the load across the field for me. He walked slowly, with his arms and legs held a little away from his body to balance the weight. As soon as we had rounded the corner of the high corn patch, he began without preface:

"The reason I went away last Winter was because Steve Dombrowski was jealous of me. I heard him outside on the steps one night when I was in the parlor. He says to her:

"'Yer won't do anything fer me, but yer'll do everything fer Hickey,' says he. 'Yer like Hickey better nor yer like me,' says he.

"That didn't set good with me. I went right outer doors.

"'Now none er that,' says I. 'I know when it's time for me to leave,' says I.

"I walked right out of that house. I know when it is time ter leave."

In his blue overalls, high boots and big hat, the old chap walked along beside me, falling heavily forward on each advancing foot, and I reflected how fancy solaces us when reality is dreary. As we neared the house, my husband came out to relieve Hickey of his load of gifts.

"Here comes yer man," cried Hickey with a delighted chuckle. "He's jealous!" And to him, "Seen me sparking yer woman, eh? And come out ter stop it!"

In his romantic old heart, Hickey is a devil with us skirts!

III

The fantasies of these dependents are all of receiving favor, love, or social recognition from women; not of conferring it. Always receiving, never giving. Theirs are the day-dreams of infantile natures. The hired man's romance is to marry a woman who owns or will be heir to a

farm. Sometimes they do it. I know of two cases where hired men followed the women of their dreams to the city to press their suits in extraordinary ways. The older man, ponderous and serious, thought that he was called by Providence to save the woman, who was a college professor, from the pitfalls of the wicked city. The other followed his beloved along the city streets wherever she went and stood outside doors waiting for her reappearance. Both men appeared insane, but they were simply acting in the real world in conformity with the laws of their dream world. The solitary life of the countryside encourages confusion between fact and imagination.

Some of the old farmhouses in my section of Connecticut are built with no door on the second floor between the main chambers and the ell chambers. The women of the family in the old days slept in the front of the second story and the hired man in the rear, with a solid wall between them. There was no way of reaching the front bedroom, where the daughters slept, except by descending the back stairs, traversing the length of the house on the ground floor and ascending the front stairs. Hired men, in those days, were famous for loving and running away.

The pitifully inadequate emotional expression of these men today comes not from stern repression but simply from lack of vehement affections. I am reminded of the discovery made by a social worker who lived for a time among the down-and-outers in the lodging houses of a great city. His object was to discover from their confidences what social forces had dragged them down. He naturally assumed that women had functioned largely in their drunkenness and final pauperism. But he learned that very few of them had ever had any sex life at all. Their emotional development was so retarded that it had expressed itself only in various banal forms of obscenity. The country counterparts of these city derelicts find release in lewd talk, and occasionally in degenerate, idiotic acts. Their acts are never the outbreaks of vig-

orous, unbridled natures, but rather of weaklings.

The world has moved on and left Hickey and Sylvanus and Lucky behind, but the little section by which they are enclosed has also stood still. It is about one generation behind the rest of the country. The immigrants who have moved on to the New England farms are just about where our grandfathers were. The newcomers work and live the way that was common when the older hired men were boys, and so the men remain in the old familiar environment. The immigrants' homes are substitutes for their fathers' homes to these elderly children. As the immigrants often buy the furniture with the houses, the hired man is sometimes surrounded by the old Connecticut pine upon which his baby eyes rested sixty years ago.

The food is much the same. Every cellar contains mountains of cabbages, bins of potatoes, bags of onions, slabs of salty, delicious bacon, crocks of pickles, barrels of Winter apples, heaps of carrots, beets and rock turnips. This is the hearty food our ancestors ate before the farm bureaus turned quilting bees into canning clubs.

The work habits are old style, too. The immigrants have brought with them customs long abandoned by our own farmers.

Old Hickey, with rhythmic flail, beats out wheat on the threshing floor for Dombrowski just as he used to for his grandfather. We have few tractors in our neighborhood, no milking machines, and not very many gasoline engines for sawing wood. All the elasticity of the immigrant seems to be used up in making the great change from one country to another. After that convulsive alteration in his life, he holds closely to the ways of his fathers. He lacks the passion for time-saving and labor-saving which has driven American men into making and using machinery. But the American-born sons of these conservatives take up new notions rapidly and the old picturesque back-breaking methods will not last much longer.

Very likely the old hired men are happier in these strangers' homes than they would be with their own up-and-coming kinsfolk. The unheated, unplumbed houses, the heavy labor and the coarse food are what they knew as children. They probably get more satisfaction out of food that coats the stomach well with grease than they would from a modern balanced diet. They have less sense of inferiority where intricate machinery is absent and all that is required of them is accustomed hand-work and slow muscular toil.

MUZZLING EDITORS IN HAITI

BY ARTHUR RUHI

AMONG the subjects of criticism of our present régime in Haiti is the part we play, or are supposed to play, in muzzling a patriotic native press. Vitriolic letters of protest, from the skillful hand of M. Georges Sylvain or some other engaged in the congenial avocation of putting tacks in front of the Occupation's tires, appear in this country from time to time and are read by serious Americans with more or less sympathy, bewilderment and indignation.

Nor are these complaints without basis in fact. Newspapers *have* been shut up in Haiti and their editors put in jail and permitted to languish there indefinitely. In the prison at Port au Prince, during my recent visit, there were enough journalists, including the much-talked-of M. Pouget, to have added a school of journalism to the wood-working classes which the Americans have established there.

The sight is not pleasant, and no American relishes it. But after looking into the matter with some thoroughness on the spot, I am struck by the fact that in this, as in many other Haitian questions, it is difficult to see clearly at a distance of fifteen hundred miles, and easy to be misled by giving one's own connotation to phrases which have quite other meanings in Haiti.

In the first place, the Occupation is not directly responsible for the arrest and imprisonment of M. Pouget and his colleagues. He was put where he is by the Haitian government, and the matter is something with which the Treaty officials, as such, have nothing to do. When the Haitian authorities are asked why imprisoned newspaper men are not brought

sooner to trial, their reply is that their cases are in the hands of the proper authorities—that evidence is being collected and will come into court in due course. It is the sort of reply usually made by Foreign Offices in similar cases.

The inside explanation, according to common Port au Prince gossip, is that inasmuch as any government, under present conditions of coöperation with the Treaty officials, is *ipso facto* "pro-American" and a target for "patriotic" criticism, no journalist, however unjust and inflammatory his attacks, is likely to be held by the lower courts before which his case would naturally come. The government therefore takes the somewhat unconventional method of punishing the offender first and trying him afterward. When he has been in jail long enough, his case comes into court and he is released. This seems odd to most Americans, but not so odd, perhaps, as the good old-fashioned Haitian method of shooting the critic first.

Some of M. Pouget's friends, while readily admitting that newspaper critics of the Government had short shrift in the old days, make the point that things are different now. The Americans have taken away their old weapon of revolution. They are now supposed to be enjoying the blessings of true liberty, and it is an anomaly, and a blot on our 'scutcheon, that such high-handed treatment of the press should go on under our wing. The point seems to me to be well-taken. The answer appears to be that the Treaty officials have no legal jurisdiction in the matter, and that while extra-legal pressure might be brought, it has evidently not been thought expedient,