

THE DOLE FOR BOGUS FARMERS

BY H. L. MENCKEN

IN THE late disputation between the *doctor mellifluus* from Hyde Park and the *doctor fundamentalis* from Topeka there was complete agreement on one point at least, to wit, that the succoring of the indigent husbandman should go on forever. No evidence was adduced by either high promising party that this succoring had ever done its target any good in the past; on the contrary, both proved and laid stress upon the fact that he was still suffering beyond endurance and still bawling for help. But both engaged solemnly to continue rescuing him *ad libitum*—of course, at the taxpayer's expense. This philanthropic but fruitless work is now, it appears, an integral part of the American system of government, as much so as carrying the mails or defending the national shores. There may come a day when Congress will be immured *en masse* on Alcatraz Island and the nine old villains of Capitol Hill butchered and stuffed, but there will never come a day when the one-crop clodhoppers of the

land will cease to howl and beat their breasts, or the politicians to salvage them out of the public till.

These mendicants call themselves farmers, and appear in statistics under that style, but they are actually no more farmers than a mud-scow is a man-o'-war. They are, in the Dust Bowl of the upper Middle West, simply land speculators who went out on the wrong limb and got skinned, and in the share-cropper regions of the South they are only perambulating test-tubes for the culture of hook-worms. A farmer is something else again, even at his worst. He may appear, to the city slicker, as an extremely unappetizing creature, what with the wrinkles on his neck and his naïve fear of Darwin, loose women, and rum; but all the same he is the practitioner of an arduous and not unsubtle art, and he meets the first specification for a good citizen—in fair times or foul he at least feeds his family. At the lowest point of the late Depression of blessed memory I made inquiry of a Pennsylvania

friend as to what had happened to the Pennsylvania Dutch, all of whom are true farmers from snout to tail. He replied by return mail that nothing whatever had happened to them. They were suffering, to be sure, a certain curtailment of their cash incomes—a universal complaint, save among professional Uplifters, in those glorious days—but otherwise they were carrying on precisely as usual, harvesting large crops, eating four or five hearty meals a day, employing their wives according to the mandate of Scripture, keeping a sharp lookout for *hexerei*, and investing every cent they could conceal from the tax-gatherer in the depreciated common stock of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

Such farmers never address any petitions to politicians, whom they regard, and on sound ground, as indistinguishable from common rogues. The only thing they ask for which politicians can give them is a reduction in taxes, and that is one thing, they are well aware, that they can never hope to get. So they go on tilling their fields, valeting their cattle, and keeping their houses, barns and fences in A1 repair. Their first concern is always to provide for their own subsistence. Though the heavens fall, they eat; and their wives, children and

live stock eat, too. If, after this eating, there is anything left over, and there usually is, they sell it at the highest prevailing prices in convenient markets, and use the money to care for and improve their plants. When there is a bad year their surplus is very little, and once in a blue moon there may even be a deficit, but taking one year with another they make good livings, and are free, independent, and self-respecting men. Among such farmers, the sturdy *kulaks* of this great Republic, running into debt is regarded as, at best, a humiliating misfortune, and as, at worst, a kind of skullduggery comparable to barn-burning or well-poisoning. They believe that an industrious man on good land can always get along, and they have been proving it year after year since the Indians first cleared the way for them by going on the dole.

All the bawling comes from frauds who masquerade under their honorable name. These frauds exist in appreciable numbers in all the States of the Union, but their relative number increases as one leaves the great centers of wealth and sin. There are very few in Pennsylvania, and not many in the Lakes region or the eastern half of the upper Mississippi valley, but as one crosses the ninety-

fourth meridian they begin to swarm, and by the time one comes to the Dakotas they outnumber the actual farmers by at least five to one. Here is the very Zion of the eternal but bogus Farm Problem. Here is the Holy Land of locusts, droughts, whirlwinds, and big freezes. Here the only sound ever heard to issue from human throats is the piteous wail of "Gimme!"; and here the one business of politicians, of whatever party, is to promise larger and larger hand-outs from the hard earnings of the rest of us. There is no other issue in politics, and there never will be unless and until the whole region is emptied of its present hopeless population, and turned back to the Indian and the buffalo.

It would be idle, as it would be inhuman, to cry down the woes of these poor fish. They roast and boil in Summer and are frozen stiff in Winter, and even in their best years they make little more than their bare keep. Obviously, no farmer of any sense could ever have been tempted into that harsh wilderness, with its murderous climate, its thin and fugitive soil, and its remoteness from good markets. There was, despite the gabble to the contrary, plenty of better and more accessible land elsewhere; there is still plenty of it, in fact, to

this day. Why, then, did those unhappy herds of Ishmaelites flock into the desert, dragging their helpless wives and children with them? They did it because they were not farmers at all, but simply land speculators. The consideration that inspired them in the first place was the chance to get land for nothing, or next to nothing, and the consideration that came next was the dizzy promise that they could grow a crop of wheat in two months, and then loll at ease the other ten, waiting for the railroads to come, Wall Street to be scotched, and real farmers to arrive by the train-load, hungry for farms at top-notch prices. That, precisely, is what the last wave of heroic pioneering amounted to, and that is all it amounted to.

The fundamental process, of course, was not new. You will find it described at length in an essay by Dr. Benjamin Rush, written so long ago as 1798. The most remote and inhospitable land, in his day as in ours, was settled by "men who had outlived their credit in cultivated parts" — in other words, by misfits and failures, speculators and dead beats. They pushed their blundering way into the wilderness, scratched casual and meager livings from its unwilling soil, and gave over their plentiful leisure to

fishing, coon-hunting, and waiting for better men to come along and buy them out. In those days the better men always appeared, for the wilderness was still near, and civilization kept moving closer to it. But there came a time when it lay too far buried in primeval chaos for civilization ever to overtake it, and then the stream of buyers dried up. That is what happened in the Dust Bowl. What its godforsaken denizens suffer from today is only partly a lack of water; their main deficiency is a lack of suckers.

Even in fortunate years the resident yaps barely get enough to eat, for they are too stupid and too lazy for subsistence farming, and the one crop they condescend to grow is miles and miles from the nearest market, and the price they receive for it is always diminished by the cost of hauling it to that market. Encouraged by the political mountebanks who prey upon them, inspiring them to indolence and imbecility, they blame this cost upon the villainies of Wall Street, but it is really produced by the fact that railroad crews have to be paid and locomotives stoked with coal or oil. In bad years their intake is less than their outgo, and they have to clap mortgages on their miserable homesteads and new patches upon the seats of their pants. Anon

there comes a time when the sharks holding these mortgages demand payment, if not of the principal then at least of the interest. When that time rolls round there goes up a bellow that resounds from coast to coast, and the ancient process of succoring them at the public expense is begun all over again.

How many times it has been repeated since the politicians began to see the possibilities of the game I do not know, but certainly it has been a good many. The Hon. Mr. Roosevelt, during his famous "non-political" tour of the region last Summer, admitted with incautious frankness that the total cost to date had been "hundreds of millions of dollars". The net result is precisely nothing. The yaps are still as badly off as they were when the business of rescuing them was first undertaken. They are still buried in mortgages, their farms are still blowing away under their feet, and their families and cattle are still famished.

All sorts of fantastic schemes for saving them have been projected since the Brain Trust began to function at Washington. It has been proposed to protect them from the winds by shelter-belts of trees, to plant grass on what remains of their land and convert them into cattlemen and sheep-

herders, and/or to transport the whole kit and caboodle of them to some fairer place, with the cost of settling them there borne by the taxpayer. None of these schemes will ever work. Trees refuse to grow in that bleak country — that is, all trees of a size fit to cope with its high winds — and neither changing the trade of its inhabitants nor hauling them somewhere else will ever cure their congenital deficiency. They are simply, by God's inscrutable will, inferior men, and inferior they will remain until, by a stupendous miracle, He gives them equality among His angels. They lack the hard diligence and pertinacity that are needed to wring a living from the earth, either where they languish or elsewhere. They are not heroic conquerors of Nature, but puerile parasites upon its bounty. In parts of Western Kansas, and no doubt in other places too, they have given up all pretense to *bona fide* farming. Abandoning the land, they retreat to the ghastly villages, and thence issue forth every Spring to scratch the soil and plant a crop of wheat. While it grows they sponge on the store-keepers and listen to the politicians. The harvest, when there *is* a harvest, occupies them for a few weeks. Once it is over they go back to sponging and

politicking. They are eager customers of every quackery currently on tap, and whenever a new one is invented they embrace it instantly. They all owe money on mortgages, and none of it will ever be repaid.

II

Of their colleagues in the share-cropper areas of the South it is impossible, without descending to flattery, to say even so much. These white and black ex-Confederates serve as convenient stooges for the Uplifters who rove the trans-Potomac country, seeking recruits for Utopia, and so they are commonly depicted and thought of as pathetic victims of the Money Power. But in truth they are only idiots, and there is no magic known on this earth, whether political or economic, material or spiritual, that will ever cure their idiocy. They were born to live and have their being on the very fringes of the melancholy human race, and there they will continue until, in the course of nature, they are obliterated altogether.

Some years ago, in the great State of Arkansas, a herd of them, getting into motion, began invading the county towns and looting the grocery stores. It appeared that

they were starving. That anyone should be starving in so luxuriant a farming region, where everything edible grows freely, seemed strange to the rest of the country, but a little investigation was enough to show the reason. There was nothing to eat in all that lush Mesopotamia for the sole and obvious reason that the resident anthropoids had neglected to grow it. Their one crop was cotton, and to it they devoted perhaps a third of their lazy year. The rest of the time they basked in the sun, scratching themselves idly and meditating upon the evangels of their prophets spiritual and temporal. When, being transiently in funds, they wanted a plate of ham and eggs, they bought both ham and eggs at the store. At the same place they bought potatoes, cabbages, corn-meal, side-meat, onions, yams — even, indeed, the feed for their mules, when their mules got any. There was not a chicken for miles around, or a kitchen garden, or any hog save the wild razor-backs, or a cow, or an apple tree.

That human beings presumably more or less civilized should be so shiftless was a shocking discovery even to the more enlightened Arkansawyers, who had looked at them for years without really seeing them. They were succored by

passing the hat, for that was before the days of the More Abundant Life as a political racket, and steps were at once taken to teach them the elements of farming. A few of them showed a fairish aptitude for the science, and in a year or two they were eating their own hog and hominy, and washing the mixture down with their own moonshine. Some went to the length of planting orchards, and a small number even began to keep cows. But the rest, after one or two dismal trials, went back to the imbecile one-crop system of their kind, growing cotton year after year, and cotton only. By the time the Brain Trust set up business in Washington they were starving again, and ever since that dawn of Social Justice they have been on its rolls. Their woes fill the reports and fulminations of the young professors today, and they also occupy a high place in the menagerie of the Communists. The theory is that they are the innocent victims of landlords lurking in Little Rock, Fort Smith, and other such Sodoms, and that the millions they earn by the sweat of their brows are all sucked, eventually, into Wall Street.

This, of course, is hooey pure and unadulterated. They actually earn no millions; they do not even earn their own keep. It is only in years of

extraordinary good luck that they can so much as pay their store bills. The rest of the time they live on their debts, like the miserable dullards and incompetents they are. Their landlords, far from robbing them, have to help them two years out of three, and all the while they torture and ruin the land that, with a little industry, might support them opulently. No such hind ever repairs a roof, or fixes a fence, or clears the woods of undergrowth, or pulls a weed. The houses they live in, after a few years of their abuse and neglect, are only leaky sheds, and the barns and fences that they find on the land they profess to till all disappear, soon or late, into firewood. They are a curse to the country they infest, and a disgrace to the human race. Anywhere else on earth they would be dispossessed at once, and turned loose to starve in earnest. But in this great land, with New Deals always raging, they are regarded with a peculiar tenderness, and the theory is maintained that they must and shall be kept at ease out of the pockets of the rest of us.

III

How long will this nonsense go on? It will go on so long as it is profitable for political mountebanks

to keep it going — so long, that is, as they can hang on to their jobs by robbing the industrious and thrifty to support hordes of the indolent and incompetent. It will go on so long as habitual and incurable mendicants are allowed to vote. The cure is not to throw one gang of quacks out and put another in; it is to take away the vast advantage which now goes with quackery. There are plenty of men in Arkansas and the other share-cropper jungles who know the truth; there are even men who have stated it clearly. But there will be no release from the present burden until the unavoidable implications of that truth are met squarely, and elections cease to be merely auction-sales of stolen goods. So long as political racketeers can hold their places at the trough by promising to secure A against the need of work by looting B who works, just so long will the politics of the country hold to its present fraudulent level.

The problem, of course, is fundamentally much more than political or economic; it is biological. The settlement and organization of this continent was a stupendous job, and it left the race full of strains. There are millions of Americans who are palpably inferior to their fathers, and there are

other millions whose fathers were themselves inferior. As the standard of living has advanced these defectives have been gradually left behind—not by the brutality of Economic Royalists, Princes of Pelf, and other such fantastic hobgoblins of the demagogic imagination, but by their own incapacity to survive in civilization. Instead of coming along with the procession, they have dropped out and straggled to the rear. Their movement is backward toward the stage of the first pioneers, of desert nomads just come to the grasslands. They are on their way to the Stone Age.

What is to be accomplished by hitching them to their betters, and then urging those betters to give them a new start ahead by pulling them along? Hardly more than would follow outfitting baboons with saxophones, theologies, and debts. They are incurably incapable of anything rationally describable as progress. When, as in Arkansas, they are taught the elements of civilized living, nine-tenths of them revert almost instantly to their natural barbarism. If, in the Northwest, they were taken off their shifting sands and bare rocks and put on farms as good as those of the Pennsylvania Dutch, they would only provide massive proof that even on the

farms of the Pennsylvania Dutch it is possible to starve. And if, in the Southern uplands, they were thrust into romantic cottages furnished by the taxpayer, and outfitted with electric wash-wringers, egg-beaters, and mayonnaise mixers, they would only convert the cottages, in a few years, into the hovels that are closer to their taste and aspiration, and the wringers, beaters, and mixers into junk.

The job of dealing with these congenital and incurable unfortunates is not one for politicians or Uplifters; it is, as I have hinted, one for biologists. Nothing is ever going to be accomplished by encouraging them to go on multiplying as they multiply today, with only the jack-rabbit to offer them serious competition; there is enough of them now, and to spare. The problem will be solved, if ever it is solved at all, by diminishing their rate of increase as fast as possible, and at the same time protecting them in their inalienable conubial rights, guaranteed to them by both the Constitution and Holy Writ. Certainly I am not one to speak against the exercise of those rights by the lowly; they have little else that they may really call their own. But I see no reason why fecundation should necessarily or inevitably follow the exercise

thereof. Sterilization on a whole-sale scale would greatly augment the solid happiness of all the economically, physically and mentally underprivileged, and at the same time save many a million for the taxpayer. Inflicting it by fiat, of course, would outrage the prevailing *mores*, which stand firmly against almost everything that is reasonable. But why should it not

be promoted by the old and tried device of bribery? How many bogus farmers, East, West, North, or South, could resist coming to the slaughterhouse if the ante were put, say, at \$1000 a head? And wouldn't it be immensely cheaper, in the long run, to buy and scrap their biological potency than to support forever their hopeless and innumerable progeny?



SHAPE OF WINTER

BY ROBERT TROY HERRIDGE

Now it is Winter shaping slow at the roots
That breaks in the blood's breath: the smell of death
In the secret places; the voice from the iron land;
The tall collapse of trees; the hollow wreath

Of the wind coiled about the bone, the bone
Stiffening. There are things like the quicker turning
Of days and the light sharper in stars; the world
Blown with a northerly wind running and the dull burning.

These are the obvious things like the scatter of crows
In the short days before snow when the days are charred
By dry fires and reeking with twisted brush
In the swamps and branches brash in a sky grown hard.

No, it is not this fumble of leaves that matters,
Nor the black shaking of night, nor the snow's violence:
It is the dark words spoken in darkness at the hills' edge;
It is the hearts of men gone under in silence.