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HODGE AND THE HAYSTACK

D ID you think Hodge had gone off to a summer resort? Not at all. We've been waiting for the hay season. And that's late this year. Some of the hay is still going in.

The last we said about Hodge, the reformed stock-broker, he was getting in his spring crops on the farm that he reclaimed from his family connections. He had four hired men, you remember, all from the city, whom he broke in at manure-hauling, hoeing and seeding.

He has two of them left. They are both as hard in the muscles and as long in the wind as Hodge himself. And the way he put those city-bred reformees through the hay season was a revelation even to Hodge. He had so much hay that the surplus after jamming the hay-barns had to go into the stack pictured on this page. That stack, as you see, is well made. It's a real prize stack. Hodge built it. He studied that in his leisure hours. His idea was that hay should be conserved.

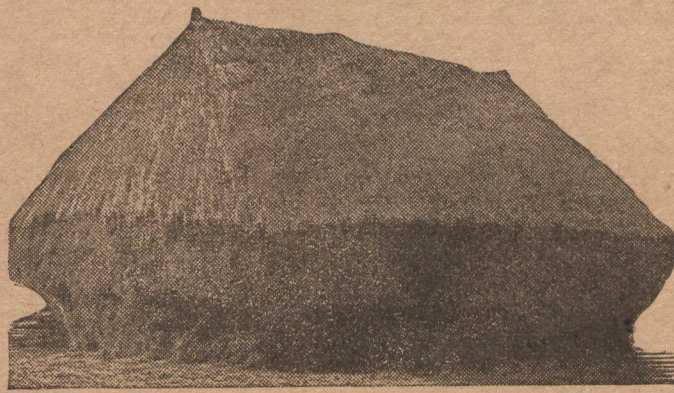
But while that hay was coming off neither Hodge nor either of his hirelings thought much about hay-conservation. They damned the hay. It was a terrific crop. Weeks of rain had made every hayfield a jungle. When the hot hay weather came, it was the law of the jungle against Hodge and his gang.

And for a while it looked as though the jungle would win. You are interested in this hay, because it is one of the few things that people are raising just now that you can't possibly eat; and because that haystack represents a large wad of money.

The average of Hodge's crop, mixed clover and timothy, was about two and a half tons to the acre. This may not mean much to you offhand. That's why we want to interest you. Imagine yourself one of these 90-odd Fahrenheit days in Hodge's boots, shirt and trousers, and cow-bite hat. You will suddenly become cool as a cucumber wherever you may be, thinking of the gigantic miseries of this sweat-gang.

We said that two of Hodge's city hirelings had left him. Yes, it was the vision of the hay that did it. They wilted at the idea and went back to the city to beat up food-saving conventions and talk to the women about thrift and the canning problem. They reverted to the linen collar, the concealed braces, and the panama. Their name is Anathema Maranatha. Hodge in his anger called them much worse before he paid their wages. They do not like Hodge. They never will again. He is to them a terrifying persistence in primeval energy.

With the two that were left—we'll call them Tom and Dave, without reference to their surnames—Hodge went at the hay. We pass over the mowing, tedding and raking. All these are little machine chores that can be done by any woman or boy. The real test to the Hodge gang came in the hauling. If we wanted to paint the miseries of the Hodge gang we should say that they pitched on the hay by hand, as most farmers do who can't afford the luxury of hay-loaders. But Hodge believed in machinery. He had about 80 tons of hay to harvest, and he had no desire to commit murder. So with the two men that were left he scrimmaged against time and weather to fill the barns, two men on a load in the field and



By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

one man to finish rolling it away in the mows as the wagon went back for the next load.

We pass over that. It was a strenuous business, but there was worse to come. Hodge foresaw it. There was at least twelve tons that no barn would hold. That twelve tons must be stacked. And there was no time to rig up a horse-fork on a derrick to unload that. The twelve tons must be unloaded in the old-fashioned way—by hand.

Which is precisely all we want to describe here. The three men had a fairly easy time loading up with the carrier-machine. They found the climax when it came to getting the hay off the wagon on to the stack. The first few loads were not so bad. They rolled down hill on to the pole stack-bottom, and one man did it while the other hireling shoved it over to Hodge, who laid the stack.

By noon of that day the stack had got wagon-load high. And there were still six loads to haul. Hodge hid the thermometer. It was one of those 98-in-the-shade days. But Hodge's hay-stack was not in the shade. It had its place in the sun. And so far as can be estimated the temperature round the blunt ends of those fork-handles was something like 115 Fah.

Also there were suspicious signs of a thunderstorm creeping up from the West that made the hay-stack all the more interesting, and it cut the noon spell down to 50 minutes instead of an hour.

"Phew!" said Dave, as he stood in a cloud of grasshoppers.

"Second the motion," said Tom, not daring to fan himself with his hat for fear he would get sunstruck on the bald place.

"What motion?" asked Hodge, as he yanked up the neck-yoke of the team.

"That we can't finish that stack before the deluge," said one of them rebelliously.

HODGE pranced over to the two of them. He had tried their faithfulness and had not yet found them wanting in the heat. They had kept on their feed and stuck to the scrimmage day in and day out. Hodge was proud of them. His energy campaign had made men of these pot-waisted desk slaves. He had no desire to see them fail in the supreme test. That six loads sweltering in the windrows yonder and yet to be heaved up on the stack for the thatch to go

on, was the thing that could try them out.

"All I would say," spat Hodge in a conciliatory vein, "is—the hell we can't!"

"I quite agree," sighed Tom. "It's hell to try."

"Well, you can take turn-about pitching off," said Hodge. "It's the pitch-up that will bash you if anything does."

Then he offered to pitch off all the loads himself, if either of the two would finish the stack.

"It's only a case of drawing it in gradually," he said. "Anybody can do it. I'll see that you keep it right. We can unload on either side alternately. Is it a go?"

They said it was.

"It's up to you, Hodge," they agreed.

"And that won't bother me," said the man grimly. But you'll have to move lively on the top, and don't roll any hay back on the wagon." Away they went.

YOU who make a bee-line by habit for the shady side of a street or don't know what it is to get to a street-car without a canopy of soft maples over you, will never know just what Hodge went through that afternoon. He had a burdock leaf in his hat. The burdock wilted on top. He had a bandana in his hip pocket. It was soaked from the sweat that oozed through his trousers. He kept his shirt open in front. But rivers of sweat poured down from his hair, his forehead, his eyes, over his nose, round his mouth—down and down. His socks were dry cashmere. By the fourth load that afternoon they were soaked through and through. His shirt, which at noon had been a clean one, became a wet mass before the second load was off. Dark patches of ooze showed through the legs of his overalls.

Hodge was a palpitating mass of perspiration. The temperature of his face would have poached an egg. Even his hands sweated in the wind, and his sunburnt arms were wet at the joints.

The fork-handle he had was a good stick of white-ash. Hodge bent it at every upheaving forkful like a sapling in a gale. When he yanked a lift from one of those loads it left a hole in the hay, and rolled up on the sloping side of the sunbaked stock, whipped over against the wind and lay there till the man on the top slid it away.

He was fifty and over. He had whopped manure from sun to sun and followed the horses on the hump, but never in all his resurrecting farm energies had he found out what it was to be a boiling cauldron of sun energy, heaving that hay as though the war would be lost if he didn't beat out the storm; hoping to heaven the storm would break and wishing again that it wouldn't. Or if only some caretaking cloud would poke a hand over the face of that oven-sizzling sun; or some wind would sneak around from the far side of the stack.

The house gong called supper. Hodge paid no heed. Those other two renegades might suffer the pangs of famine if they had to. They had said it was up to him. He put the hay up to them—and he kept them on the hump until the sun went down and the cows came up, and the grasshoppers began to change off in the orchestra to the evening crickets.