

THE COMMON SENSE OF JOHN THOMAS.

The boy, tall as a well-grown man, stood with one foot on the lower front step and with his hat off. The sun, just setting, shone on his reddish hair and lighted up his freckles. His red-brown eyes had a tired look in them, but they were open and frank.

"My name," he said, in answer to the inquiry of the farmer, who stood before him in the open doorway of the house, "is John Thomas."

"What's your last name?"

"That's all of it, first and last."

It was a July day in South Dakota, and the wheat, a golden sea, rolled from sky-line to sky-line. James Svendsen, a big man of Norwegian blood, was glad to see the boy. He had one hundred acres of wheat ready for cutting and labor was scarce.

"Come in! Come in!" he said. "Supper's near ready. I've caught three tramps, and I locked 'em up at night. That's the only way I can hold 'em until to-morrow's work. It's queer you have to jail men to get a chance to pay 'em two dollars a day and good board."

John Thomas had no baggage except a bundle carried on a stick. He had walked most of the miles from Indiana, and was, as he said, "flying light." There was no work at home, and he had decided to come West and "grow up with the country." He found a good deal of country to grow up with. He had made for a wheat-belt because he knew work was to be had there.

The farmer's wife, with sleeves rolled above her elbows and her arms white with flour, came to the door.

"Got another hand?" she asked. Svendsen nodded.

"Come back here," she said to John Thomas. She led him through the house to the kitchen.

"Supper won't be done for half an hour," she went on. "If you can't wait, you can have one of those pies." He said he could wait.

"You don't tell!" she exclaimed, in wonder. "Well, you're the first one that's ever waited a minute after getting here. Lots of times they eat, and when I go out after an armful of wood and come back they're gone. I can see 'em fifty yards down the road. Most men that come by here ain't afraid of anything in the world except work. You say 'Work!' to 'em right loud and sharp, and they jump as if you had thrown a plate at 'em."

Pleased by her own humor, Mrs. Svendsen went on with the supper. John Thomas found a little bench and a tin basin, a bar of yellow soap and a clean roller-towel, and took off the dust of travel. The three tramps, strangely clean, sat with their backs against an out-house and talked of things that had happened to them from Maine to California.

The supper was good, and the farmer and his wife did not seem to notice the strangeness of their company. For all appearances they might have been a party of old friends.

"Reaping begins tomorrow," said Svendsen, rising at last and stretching his long arms. "Breakfast at daylight. I don't want to have to come out and wake anybody up, I might pick up a hoe-handle on the way."

The beds in a loft over the stable were hard but smooth, and John Thomas, slept without a dream. He was awake when the eastern sky was turning gray, and was prompt at breakfast. A kerosene lamp burned in the centre of the table. One of the tramps was gone.

"There's two of you left," said Svendsen, looking hard at the remaining wanderers. "That's a good average, but I ought to have locked that door last night."

The sun had just cleared the horizon when they reached the golden field where the grain-stalks stood as solid as a wall. The wheat-heads made a level, beautiful floor, which swayed slightly under the pressure of the breeze.

"It's so pretty it seems a pity to cut it, doesn't it?" said Svendsen, looking at it lovingly. "There's a heap of dollars in there, though. Wads in, boys!"

They "waded in," the broad wales of the reaper whirring in destruction. There was something inspiring in the labor. Even the tramps, with unusual perspiration pouring down, were gay.

At nine o'clock a considerable space had been cleared, only the close-cropped stubble showing above the dark ground. The wind had freshened, and was now blowing a strong breeze from the south-west. Svendsen stopped and ran his shirt sleeve across his forehead, leaving a streak of white; the rest of his face was nearly black with dust. He looked at the sky steadily for a moment. Then a pallor showed under the grime.

"Look yonder!" he said, shortly.

John Thomas glanced southwestward in the direction of the pointing hand. He saw a dark line moving upward slowly. It stretched from one end of the horizon to the other. He had never seen a storm-cloud just like it, but he was not uneasy. He thought that the farmer was alarmed because the cut grain would be wet by rain.

"Going to have a shower, may be?" he said.

Svendsen scowled at him. "Shower! Don't you know what that is? But of course you don't; you're a tenderfoot! That's grasshoppers!"

The boy was impressed somewhat because he had read of the devastation sometimes caused by the pests but he was still far from realizing the import of the farmer's words.

"What'll they do?" he asked.

"Do?" Svendsen shouted, furiously tossing both arms up. "Do? They'll eat up every living green thing in a swath as wide as they are. They won't leave a grain of wheat in this field by night. Tomorrow there won't be a leaf in the country. It's a whole year's work gone and I'm in debt!"

He took to crying, his breast heaving hard—and the tears made white channels down his grimy cheeks. The tramp stood by in dull indifference.

The line of cloud had now assumed a light dun hue, and hid the sky from up from the earth-line. Borne on the breeze the insects were coming fast. It was a strange scene, the ill assorted men, the wide beautiful fruitful field the sun of summer shining on it, and that threatening, silent force of destruction bearing down on them swift and terrible, relentless as fate.

Once before the farmer had been through a thing like this, and the memory of it paralyzed him. He did not even turn towards the house, in which he knew his wife, too was crying. He simply stood and waited for disaster to fall and crush him.

This was horrible to John Thomas. He wanted to do something, to be moving, to fight. Supine inertness did not belong to him. His red hair and red brown eyes were against it. He had a quick brain, and it was working fast. Words fell from him slowly:

"My mother—we had a big peach orchard back in Indiana—father was away—there was a big frost coming that night to kill the blooms—my mother built fires north of the trees, and the breeze blew the heat through them—everybody lost their peaches but us Mosquitoes and gnats hate smoke, maybe grasshoppers—Say," turned excitedly to Svendsen, "build fires along the edge of that field!"

"What for? 'Twont do any good!"

"Fight them with smoke! Try it! Try it!"

He grasped the farmer by the arm and shook him. The horde of insects was plainly in sight now, a vast fog of them.

"All right!" said Svendsen. "All right! But there aint anything to it. You can't fight the plague of Egypt—the plague of Egypt."

Fifty yards away was a big haystack, fresh made. The boy assumed command instinctively, and led the way to it. He knew just what he wanted to do.

The men grasped great armfuls of the hay, and returning to the southern edge of the field piled it up. Then they made another pile on the edge, fifty yards distant, and another and another, and so on until there was a pile of hay as high as a man's head, and ten feet through, for each fifty yards of that hundred-acre field—fifteen piles in all. They picked up water-buckets and ran to the creek, and coming back drenched the piles one after another.

It was hard, desperate panting work to build those piles along a line of seven hundred yards, and then dampen them, but it was done in an hour, and at no minute

of it did the pace of the men decrease to a walk. The tramps without protest did their best.

The grasshoppers were almost above them now. Some had fallen upon the field, coming down singly, just like the first drops of a shower.

The men and the boy taking matches, hurried from heap to heap and touched the flame to them. The piles caught fire, but the water made them burn slowly. At once columns of thick smoke rose, and widening as they soared, blended into a great arch. The men could not see the sky for it, but they could see the advance guard of the insects darting through it. Then they could see no more insects.

Svendsen had his wagon and horses by this time. He put a full barrel of water on the wagon, and taking one of the tramps, went to the stack and got a load of hay. Then he drove from pile to pile, throwing off the wet hay; so the great columns of smoke were kept up.

Left to himself, John Thomas saw a sight he will never forget. A half mile to the southward the wall of grasshoppers, glinting white in the sunshine, rose at a sharp angle. They went up until they reached an altitude where the smoke was thin, and passed on. A mile to the northward the insects sought and found their proper level. Some of them came down through the smoke, but these were few; not enough, in fact, to do any damage that could be seen.

The flight lasted for two hours, and during that time the farmer and the tramps burned hay but the wheat was saved. Mrs. Svendsen had come to them and worked hard, moaning now and then about the fate of her orchard and garden, and when it was over she kissed John Thomas with a red face, and told him he must never leave them.

"We've done enough for to-day," said Svendsen, laughing heartily. "We've beat the plague of Egypt. We're the only folks that ever did it. We'll eat now."

They went home and ate a cold dinner. It was past two o'clock in the afternoon.

John Thomas borrowed a horse and rode through the countryside. Into his boyish mind came a knowledge of what the plague of locusts meant to the agricultural people of the Nile Valley thousands of years ago. He had passed on foot only yesterday down a road which ran between smiling farms that spoke of peace and plenty. Now he saw only desolation. Sad, weeping women looked at him from the doors of houses that had been white, but were now dull brown from roof to lintel with grasshoppers. The children were crying; the men stood about with arms hanging dejectedly. They were trying to understand this incredible destruction of a year's labor.

Poultry and swine and cattle, all of which had sought refuge from the storm, were still much disturbed, and fluttered and grunted and moaned according to their natures. Horses had been driven almost mad with fear; staunch househogs had crept under the floors like beaten curs.

The fields were black with the swarms, and the ground, covered in many places to a depth of a foot, seemed to shift and writhe. Against fences and trees and buildings the grasshoppers had drifted and piled like a dark snow. As they crawled, the millions of them buzzing, and the sound of their wings clicking against each other was like the tinkling of little bits of brass. All the waving wheat had been eaten flat with the ground; even the shocks were being gnawed to powder.

Some men were driving about, looking at the ruin, and the wheels stirred up such clouds of insects that the spectators were forced to keep their faces covered. The insects were crunched sickeningly in the ruts. Their bodies clung to the tires, and it seemed as if the horses were pulling through heavy mud.

The big horses plowed along doggedly, although frightened. Their hoofs sank into grasshoppers in the middle of the road clear to the fetlocks. Every tree of every orchard, every lawn, every garden had been eaten to the last sprig. The insects, thirsty from long flight and heat, sought water. They ate clothes hanging on lines; they ate the curbs from old wells. They perched

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in layers five and six thick on the steel rails of the transcontinental roads, making them more slippery than ice. No locomotive could carry sand enough to overcome them.

John Thomas went back to the Svendsen home saddened, and as he came in sight of it the standing wheat struck him with a sense of oddness. Surrounded on every side for miles with desolation, it seemed a miracle. Tears came to his eyes.

"I am glad I thought of the smoke," he said. "I am glad."

He stayed on the Svendsen farm all that winter and the next spring and summer, because there was a daughter of the house, with the flaxen hair and blue eyes of the Norse people. Since then he has invented two machines for burning grasshoppers, one for cutting up the pests and one for burying them, and has made much money.

All of these machines are full of common-sense, but his father-in-law tells him that wet hay was the greatest invention of all, and that was due to the loving and proud woman back in Indiana, who once saved the peach-blooms from the frost.—H. S. Canfield in the Youth's Companion.

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