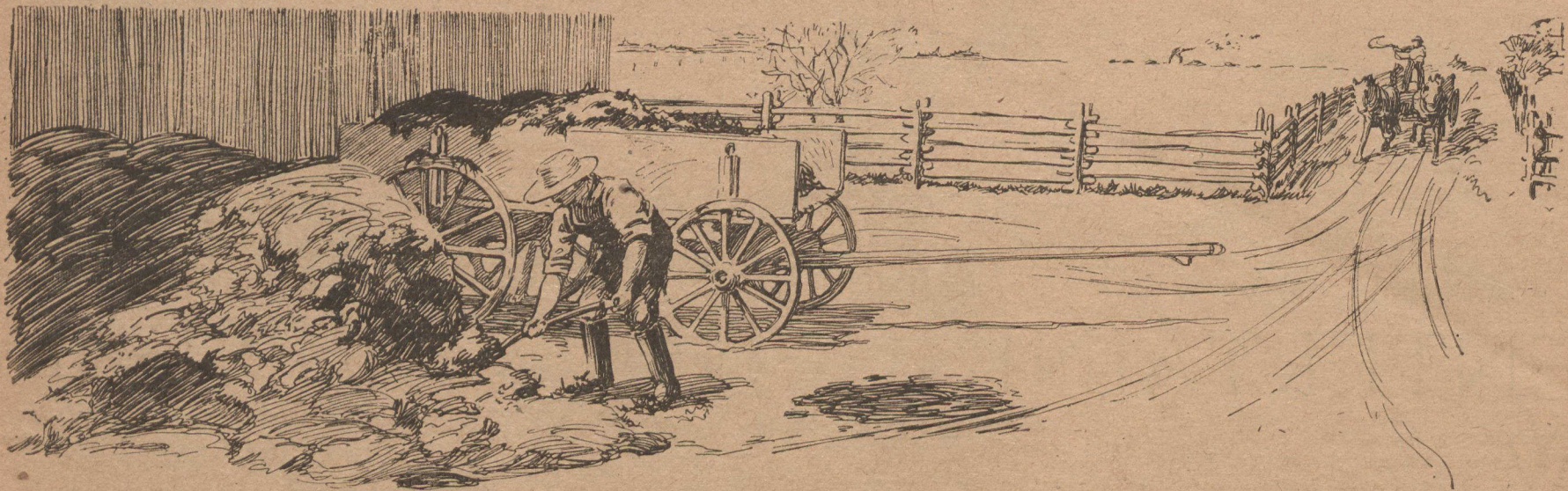


HODGE CALLS HIS OWN BLUFF



MOST of a Sabbath day Hodge argued with four business gentlemen to convert them into hired men for St. Hodge's by the Creek. His first in this acrostic was an insurance expert who did church ushering and had incipient arterial sclerosis on the side; his second an advertising agency manager with an \$8,000 income and a \$9,000 family; his third a lawyer with practical farm memories and a \$3,000 car; his fourth the G. M. of the Confederacy Trust Co. with 40,000 acres of mortgages, and rolling-rich Methodist connections.

They were a hard lot of Sadducees to get into overalls. They argued Hodge black in the face that, Their combined incomes for four months were four times the revenue of the Hodge farm at high gear;

They were indispensable to the town;

Their wives and families, etc.

Hodge countered with these:

If they stayed in stiff collars and \$10 boots they were as bad slackers as the pavement pets whose life ambition was to graft on somebody higher up;

Unless the half-idle town should help the undermanned country the whole four of them together wouldn't be worth \$5,000 a year;

They were all high-class degenerates in a young country;

Manure on their boots would be good for their souls.

Hodge offered to let any one of them manage the farm and hire him at \$45 a month. None of them wanted the job. The beast was so sardonically in earnest, he went so like a pup to a root at their pet conventional economics, he drew the lure of the manure heap and the harrow and the pitchfork so strong that they finally came to the scratch on the understanding that when the crops were all in—oats, barley, ensilage and roots—he would give two of them a holiday by turns from that until haytime. But from the day they took on the contract until the crops of St. Hodge's by the Creek were all threshed and silo'd, he expected them to take orders from him as implicitly as though he were C. O. of a regiment. The hours would be from seven a.m. until dark. Wet days there would be jobs to do in the barn—or they could write letters home. Every other Sunday two of them would be allowed to go to town for the week-end. But if they wanted to fetch their wives and families, Hodge would accommodate them even if he himself had to sleep in the haymow.

Having done thus much for his conscience, Hodge wrote a loving letter to his wife and daughters as follows:

Dear Family:

Take your choice between St. Andrew's by the Sea and St. Hodge's by the Creek. I've got a Chinaman, Yem Soon, to do the housework. Tell Julie that if she cares to get some real live sketches from life, in any medium she prefers, she might try St. Hodge's. Four of her father's friends are going into farm khaki (overalls, etc.) right away. Myself, I should make the best colour scheme of any I think. Imagine my dears—but how can you? No, it is beyond your chiaroscuro. At present the scenic accessory to myself for the next seven or eight days is peacefully blinking in the sun. It's a nice nibbly fag-end of a strawstack with a few indolent cattle—Oh, the dear things!—and a vast expanse of measureless m—my dears, you won't understand me until you come and see me standing in this primeval expanse of what one might call soil food, inhaling the

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rich ripe odors of spring in the barnyard, splashing to my boot-tops in a splatter of ooze that would make old porter look like amber beside it.

Should you be coming, any of you, let me know by postcard as it is only five minutes walk from the station. I shall be delighted to see you.

Rejuvenatedly Yours,

Mrs. Hodge looked searchingly at her daughters. They all shook their heads in mute amazement not unakin to tears.

"Such a husband!" sighed Madam Hodge.

"Such a father," echoed Julie and Anna.

They agreed that they would go to St. Andrew's by the Sea for three weeks. The town house should not be rented for the summer. They would attend to the garden. They quite defied Mr. Hodge. He had outlawed himself. Until he should recover from his insanity he was no longer the real head of the family. It was really a pity to have to take money from such a misguided man for the household expenses. They would eliminate him from their thoughts until he came back home in the fall a wiser and better man. Mr. Hodge should be boycotted. If he wanted to be so independent let him. Women could be independent, too.

Hodge made sure of three available teams and sets of harness, whiffletrees and neckyoke before his quartette of henchmen—combined incomes \$24,000 a year—arrived from the station; and they walked, carrying own luggage.

That first evening before the first day's work there was a general unpackage in the large kitchen, while Yem Soon, the Chinaman, hovered about like a large

genial lot of fluffy junk they had fetched in eight suitcases and club bags.

"No, gentlemen," he said, courteously, "this is not a honeymoon. You are on the wrong train. Wait a bit."

He sent the Chinaman upstairs for a large, miscellaneous bundle, which he laid on the long table.

"Just as I imagined," he said, "you people figure on being sort of second-rate gentlemen in clothes that cost originally anywhere from \$40 to \$55. No go. We'll can those togs. Let 'em go to somebody that wants to cut a dash on a second-hand street. What we want is these."

Solemnly as though it had been Christmas morning, he gave to each man,

One set union-made overalls;

One pair cowhide boots;

One print shirt (buttons behind);

One cheap felt hat;

One pair thick braces.

"I got your sizes several days ago from examining your clothes when you were asleep in this house," he said, naively. "If there are any changes necessary, let me know. But that's the kind of rig-out we need on this farm. This isn't a back-yard garden."

"What's the idea of the shirt buttons behind, Hodgey?" queried Advty. Mgr., who had never seen such shirts in an ad.

"Because hugging work in front the way you're going to do here scuffs off the buttons."

They lighted cigars and looked at Hodge somewhat uneasily. They had never known him to be such a master of detail before.

"Now," he went on like a large god of direction, as he lighted an old pipe, "there are a few general directions we give to all hired men.

"No smoking in the barns.

"No cigars except on Sundays.

"No cigarettes whatever—after present stock is exhausted. Bath only once a week. Wash your feet every night—but not in the family basin, as we used to in my father's day; there's a common bathroom upstairs over the kitchen; other quarters you can use week-ends, when you tog up for town.

"No time for shaving in the morning. Each man has his own bed. This is an extra feature. In my boyhood days I had to sleep with the hired man.

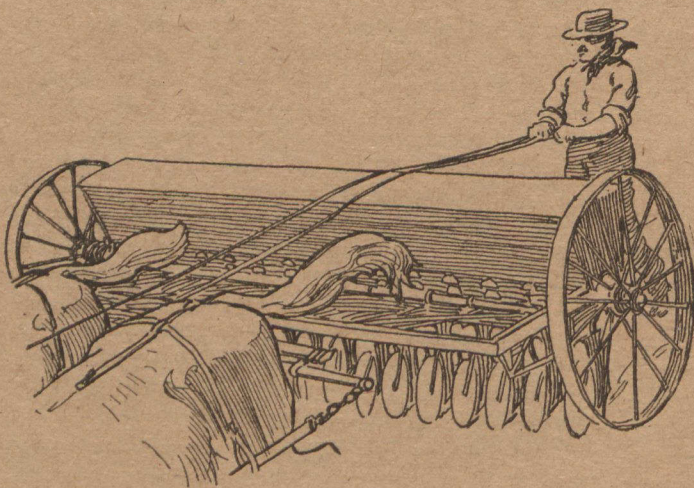
"It's the custom to pull off your boots on the stoop or in the kitchen, so as not to dirty up the bed-rooms. And as a rule hired men don't wear slippers. Yem Soon!"

The Chinaman loomed up from behind the stove.

"Are these gentlemen's rooms ready?"

"Rah-yah Mist Hodge."

"Is there a lamp for each, or do they go to bed in the dark? I may say, gentlemen, that taking lamps to bedrooms was never tolerated among my father's hired men. But in this case it seems there are two lamps for four rooms. If you are real hired men you will not need pyjamas—though I see you've all brought them along. And I may as well remind



bat in the half gloom of a single oil lamp. Hodge, somewhat gnarled by this time, smiled at the tender physiognomies and somewhat dainty actions of these good citizens whom he was to transform into real men of affairs. He had never seen them look so much like a pack of children out for an unknown picnic. Poor dear things; they would find out that operating a real farm was no picnic. What they did not know or care to remember about farming was one of the vastest ignorances Hodge knew. But he admired them for being game enough to admit it and to take instructions from him. He smiled at the