

MEN OF EARTH

By Russell Lord



HANDS

SAM was my father's first hired man. He was a good farmer and he did his best to make a good farmer out of me. I was poor material. To become a good farmer is, more than anything else, a matter of biological adaptation. The process rarely takes hold of one in whose ears the earliest words and sounds are other than country words and sounds.

My father proved an exception to this generality. He was past thirty when he went to the land, yet in him the thing took, and for the past 25 years he has lived on earth of his own. He has built up one farm and sold it, and then built up another; and has seemed himself to draw strength from the sight of thick green crops made to grow on hills that used to be thin and rutted. Still a townsman in that he still earns most of his living there, he has none the less become a farmer at one with his land and all that it grows. In open weather, he will often be out over his fields until nearly bedtime, his lantern bobbing contentedly as he walks alone in the darkness.

My own elementary agricultural experiences started when his did. In 1907. I was eleven years old at the time. I do not remember clearly what I thought when they told me that we were to quit the refined suburb which had nurtured us and move way out into the country, two miles from a railroad station, into a big house without either a gas stove or a furnace.

The name of our farm was "Iona." The price was \$11,500, about \$200 an acre with improvements. The country gentleman from whom we bought had lost interest in maintaining the expensive but badly planned outbuildings he had erected and the rare shrubs and trees he had planted around the two-acre lawn.

That lawn expressed the fatal flaw in "Iona." It was the thing that made the farm fancy. To keep the premises presentable in summer took almost a day's labor out of the working week. If any city reader of these words considers buying a farm to help support his declining years, let him look out for too much lawn. Two acres is generally all of an acre and three-quarters too much.

Sam told me that, soon after we bought the place. A spare, soft-spoken weather-beaten man, he had managed the farm for the previous owner. We got him with the place. He said:

"There ain't any farm could support all this lawn. It ain't just so much the land you lose, or even the time; but it's just that it gives you too much to live up to. And the way this lawn lays, you can't put it into potatoes; it's too hilly. You can't even throw it into pasture; you don't want cows mousing up your doorstep."

Here he paused and stared at me absently; a way he had when he had reached the crux of his argument, and was ready to sum up:

"Let the lawn grow up and run ragged," he concluded, "knock all the walls out of the big house and store hay in it; live in one of the tenant houses; get yourself some good cows; and you could make a living here."

Sam had theories, and his theories, one found afterwards, were irrefutable. But he was a practical man as well, and when he saw that a perfect plan would not apply to the situation, he made his plan less perfect.

The four higher and more northern fields of the farm were not so rich. They had been "corned to death," said Sam, by a fellow who, around ten years back, had farmed

the place on shares. Cropped now in rotation, these four higher fields were rarely from year to year of stationary color. Corn would in four years make four removals from field to field. Wheat would follow in the same order on the same fields but would stay two years in each field between hops. Then, after the second crop of wheat, hay—timothy and clover.

One thing about our rotation Sam couldn't stand—"cornstalk wheat." He said it didn't look right to see, all summer long, those long bare strips of corn stubble across the field, where the harvested corn had stood in shocks the fall previous while wheat was being seeded. "The fellow who thought that out," Sam would say, "he was a cute one, all right, when it come to keeping out of the sun!"

The farther I followed him through the laborious cycle of seedtime and harvest, the more I esteemed farmers who could think of ways to sit in the shade, and the more heartily I wished that they had rejoined their researches. Slight for my age and physically indolent, I was learning my farming in a region where labor-saving machinery was neither heavily employed nor very respectfully regarded. A sustained capacity for heavy bodily labor was the governing measure of man or beast. Haying became, often a race, one side of the wagon taunting the other and daring them to keep up. In threshing, the game was to pass bundles so rapidly to the next man as to force him behind in his work. Then doubly at him, piling wheat around him faster than he can flick it along, bombarding him in his sweating confusion with more and more sheaves, shot at the face. Desperate obscenities from the man attacked. Shouts from all the rest. "Cover him up!"

Now he's groggy. Close in for your kill. See if with your pitchfork you can snatch his from his hand. If you do, "Half-pint!" Everybody yells this battlety of the harvest, and the man who has lost his fork is supposed next day to make good with a half-pint of some brand of rye whisky, from Wight and Hyland's store in those days; today, from the hills.

And so I was learning about farming—the heady physical joy that occasionally it instills; the toll of it, the dull ache; the numb and rather helpless wonder at those immense, intricate and still secret processes by which a great deal of air, a certain amount of water and a very little of earth combine into elaborate living structures for people to eat.

These processes proceed with a relentless and terrifying efficiency. God knows his business. It is only man who is the blunderer, trying to understand and to keep up. Until a man takes hold of land and tries to make growing do his bidding, there are never any serious questions as to soil fertility, plant diseases, insect control. In the natural order, all such things operate against one another toward the end desired—maintenance of fertility and the survival of the fit.

The minute a man takes hold of a piece of land he stirs up trouble. He plows. The rains smite upon his unprotected earth and risk away a particle at a time, tons of his best topsoil. His heaviest labors go to enrich a delta far away. Consider also gravitation—that guardian force of soil fertility, drawing back into the earth all that comes from the earth: Gravitation fights against the farmer all the time. When he bends to pick up the rocks from his field, it tugs at his arms. When he puts up his hay to the wagon, and then again up to the stock or left, he feels the earth pulling mightily against his shoulders. "The land wants its hay

back," Sam once said when he had upon a load three times, trying to get it across a ditch out of a hill-side field.)

Five years passed. Sam went to a place of his own. I was fifteen years old now, and in the third year of an agricultural high school that had been opened five miles up the road, near Sparks. We had a new man—Ernie. Ernie hated cows. Cows were the one thing in the world that could, even for a moment, sour him on life and quench his zest for living. In any other company he moved cheerfully, his tongue prattling, his mind disporting itself in considerations far afield.

I had talked and worked with him nearly a year before I found out that he could not read. The Baltimore Sun came to him daily in our R. F. D. box, and he was forever leading me "as he worked" into long discussions of the more romantic features of the news. It was John Tawney (the gently sardonic one-legged man who scrupulously kept house for his three motherless children, in the cottage by our west gate); it was John who pointed out to me that Ernie's discussions of the news always took start from something one could make out from the pictures. After that, he just led you along until he knew as much about the thing as if he had read it all. Then he would start in to do a little talking. Ernie was always ready to listen first and impart afterwards; and he never cared much what the talk was about, just so it continued.

We rarely talked farming; only agriculture, or something even more general. As for farming, Ernie was neither for nor against it; it was simply something you did, offhand, for the things you needed at the store. But he would draw me dry of the last long scientific word and theory that I was acquiring up there at that agricultural high school.

That was easy. There was good teaching under way at that small high school; and I was amazed at all that I knew. There had been a night, for instance, when I had sat up to see the wheat blossom; the flowers open and fade all in an hour, and only at night. . . . Then there had been the discovery that if you toss a penny a thousand times you get five hundred heads and five hundred tails, and that the same "laws of chance" govern everything from the interpollination of corn to horse racing. And still other discoveries; that people really do not take cold walking in the rain; that you can look in a stream and watch the hills swirl into utter fatness; that it is not unmanly to feel that quaint lift to one's insides which comes when a hush settles upon the valleys, and the stars come out, and fireflies light their lanterns in the wheat; that a speck of pollen dust must poise upon and fuse with the tip of every strand of corn silk before there can be a full ear; that man is made of the same stuff as mud and manure, except for a touch of stardust, or something, in the veins. . . .

It was never admitted between us that he could not read; he learned readily enough, and with pride in his learning that "O" meant carbon, which was like hard coal; that "O" meant oxygen, the gas in the air that people had to draw in their lungs to live. Also: That if you burned coal you turned the carbon part of it, which was most of it, into CO₂, carbon dioxide, a gas that formed whenever two parts of carbon "met up with" one part of the oxygen which is in the air. The same thing happened when you burned weeds or corn-cobs or anything that would burn. And also when people breathed out they breathed out CO₂, because people were always slowly burning up inside.

But about as fast as people breathed out CO₂, plants breathed it in; and made starch out of it, which people ate and burned in their bodies, and breathed out more CO₂ for the plants to breathe it again. And the net of such was CH₂O—carbohydrates—starch.

Only a plant could do that. The dry matter of potatoes is four-fifths starch; rice, wheat, corn, nearly that. Peas and beans are half starch, half air and water mixed. "What's the land good for?" asked Ernie, sarcastically. "To set on?"

Well, the land supplied the ash—minerals. How much of an ear of corn, or a cow, or a human being would be left when burnt to a crisp? That would be the part that had come out of the land; the part that had come out of the thin air would have all gone into the thin air again.

This was nuts for Ernie. He knew the answer; he had once known a fellow whose sister had been cremated, and he had seen the urn. "In the parlor."

Shortly after, he left us, and we never heard of him again. I should like to see him now and hear how things have worked out for him. He had gifts; among them, courage. He was a thoroughly careless and unprincipled person but a good friend of mine and, as far as I know, the only living being who ever regarded me as an authority.

But an aunt of his had died, "out near California," and had "drobly left a good bit of money," so he sold about everything he had, bought a \$50 car and passed gallantly over the western ridges of our valley, out of our ken.

OUR COMIC SECTION

Events in the Lives of Little Men



FINNEY OF THE FORCE

By Ted O'Loughlin
© Western Newspaper Union

Sympathetic



THE FEATHERHEADS

By Osborne
© Western Newspaper Union

Sold



Use of Color in Food
In addition to the...
other important...
need to color...
bees, carbon...
things. Then...
artificial food...
agents for some...
American liquor...
at least, rival...
that Europe can...
important use...
certain eyes...
which have in...
has enabled it...
the invisible.

The Pauper's Oath
The pauper's oath...
permitted in...
handwritten...
cases, whereby...
statement supported...
the person is...
assets, either...
or in expectation...
from the payment...
obligations and...
himself on a...
foundation free...
from debt.

Can't See in Total Darkness
Neither dog nor...
total darkness...
popular belief...
Because of...
negotiating dark...
have been so...
credited. This...
accomplished...
not through...
through the...
aid which their...
whiskers give...
them in feeling...
their way.

Ceylon Is Old
Ceylon is one of...
the oldest settled...
areas of the earth...
No other...
important...
subdivision of...
Asia has been...
so long under...
European...
influence. The...
Portuguese...
controlled it...
for more than...
a century and...
a half. The...
Dutch for 150...
years and since...
1798 it has...
been a British...
colony.

The House of Rothschild
The original...
stamp of the...
Rothschild family...
was Bauer, the...
founder of the...
house being...
Mayer Amsel...
Bauer (1748-1812)...
He set up as...
a money lender...
at the Sign of...
the Red Shield...
(Rothschild)...
It was from...
this sign that...
the family took...
its name of...
Rothschild.

Hunting of Nobles in 1066
After 1066...
hunting in...
England became...
the sole...
privilege of...
the nobles and...
the common...
people were...
prohibited...
under severe...
penalties...
from hunting...
game. Under...
the Conqueror...
it was as...
great a crime...
to kill one of...
the king's...
deer as to...
kill one of...
his subjects.

The Game of Curling
The "horsehoe"...
sport, often...
known as...
curling, is...
actually a...
combination...
of horsehoe...
and...
board, played...
on ice....
Instead of...
throwing...
stones,...
sliding...
heavy weights...
along the...
ice, aiming...
for the...
center of a...
circle...
instead of...
a peg.

Chateau de Temps
The Chateau...
de Temps is...
located in...
Paris. It...
dates from...
the...
Seventeenth...
century and...
was once...
owned by...
Mme. de...
Fouquet. It...
was...
presented...
to the...
nation as...
an official...
residence...
for the...
President.

Status in Salt Mines
The salt...
mines near...
Cracow, Po...
and, worked...
for more...
than a...
thousand...
years, are...
decorated...
with...
statues...
altars and...
other...
religious...
symbols...
carved by...
devout...
miners...
through the...
years.

Most Accurate Clocks
Probably the...
most accurate...
clocks in...
the world...
are two at...
Greenwich...
observatory...
in England...
Each is...
checked...
every 50...
seconds...
by a...
datum...
swinging...
in a...
vacuum.

Winds Are Constant
Because of...
the world's...
rotation...
there are...
certain...
latitudes...
in which...
the winds...
blow in a...
more or...
less...
definite...
direction...
almost the...
whole...
year...
through.

Cranberry Little Changed
Unlike many...
fruits that...
have been...
almost...
"made over"...
by...
cultivation...
the...
cultivated...
cranberry...
is not...
greatly...
different...
from the...
native...
or wild...
plant.

