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THE RIGHTEOUS PERISH

BY MARY ALDEN HOPKINS

It is customary to say that the old New England stock is losing control of the land to the Italians, Poles and Czechs because its best blood has poured into the cities—because only drunkards, half-wits and lazy ones remain on the farms. This is true in part—but only in part. Many high-minded men and women, as noble in their ideals and their acts as any New England has ever produced, are still living on the acres their forefathers wrung from the wilderness. What is to be made of that fact? I turn to a section where immigrant farmers increase steadily as the old stock as steadily disappears. The decay of the latter is plain—but has it been due to vice or to virtue? I find idiots and wastrels, but I also find lofty souls who have been beaten and brought down by their very passion for renunciation.

The Hargrave family, for instance. The three Hargrave brothers have in common not only a physical likeness in their long, slender build, their sandy complexion, and their slight forward thrust of the head; they also share that look of accepted melancholy so frequent among those who brood on the joys of heaven. The three brothers have devoted the greater part of their earthly lives to realizing an abstraction. As other men concern themselves with material things so they consecrated their years to an ideal. They

passed almost a quarter of a century in the occupation of keeping a promise. They promised their widowed mother that they would not marry while she lived, and they kept their word. Though they affianced themselves to neighbors' daughters, they lived on at home, farming the land for the tyrannical old lady till she died. Then all three at last, belatedly and hopelessly married.

The Hargrave house, standing well back from the road, is the only stone house for miles around. Its solid, square shape, low eaves and substantial chimneys suggest the respectable security of the family. An abundant orchard sweeps away from one side, and on the other the cool green fodder corn is higher than a tall man's reach. Fields in varying shades of green and gold, marked off in rectangles by gray stone walls, stretch like a patchwork quilt over the low hills, announcing a fertility marvelous in this pasture country. But there are no children 'round the house.

The oldest son, John Hargrave, and his wife live here. Mrs. Hargrave is a middle-aged woman of thin-chested refinement, dressed in black silk with a white lace collar. She receives one, in the afternoon, in a sitting room that is furnished with rocking chairs. The big Boston rocker, its woodenness relieved by turkey red cushions,

is for the man of the house. A small mahogany rocker, upholstered in black haircloth, is for the wife. Rockers, big, little, squat, old, hard, soft, each with its clean crocheted white tidy, await occupants. Yet despite this domestic and hospitable background, I always seem to see Mrs. John Hargrave behind a school-room desk, facing wooden benches full of squirming youngsters. She cannot lose the schoolmarm air she acquired while she taught during the long years of her betrothal.

The marriage so long anticipated has been tragically difficult. Nor have the two other brothers been at ease in their marriages. The six stiff-moving, elderly men and women cannot adjust themselves to the new relationship. They had too well acquired the habit of not being married. Men who are good sons too many years do not make good husbands, and dutiful daughters are not always satisfactory wives. *Their austere strength makes them unadaptable.* The Hargrave promise was kept; the Hargrave ideal is realized. But the Hargrave family is at a standstill. Turn, now, to Jurgus Biersach, a neighbor. Jurgus is a Bohemian immigrant—and by failing to live up to his simple code of ethics he has won as fine a family of squirrel - chasing, green - apple - eating, brook-wading youngsters as any man could wish. It is most confusing to the mind.

II

Jurgus is the miller who grinds corn and oats in the old stone mill by the swift millrace. He is a heavy, silent man, walking with a stoop, as if bent by the remembered weight of all the grain bags he has shouldered in twenty years. When I watch him, moving through the pleasant-smelling, dusky spaces of his vibrating mill, or letting the kernels of a sample of yellow corn slide through his calloused fingers slowly, as if he loved the feel, I have the sense of being in the presence of something strong and undefeated. He has

known romance that ended ignobly. He has experienced the unnecessary death of children that came too fast. He has endured years of continuous, unrelenting toil. Yet one receives from him no sense of defeat, of thwarted growth, of calamity, as one does from the noble-spirited, idealistic Hargraves.

When the New England owner of the mill died, Jurgus, who had had time to get his feet set in the new country, took it on a mortgage. Contrary to the custom of Central European immigrants, he married a pretty American girl with pansy eyes and a rope of black hair as thick as your wrist. There was a week's dancing and cake enough for all at their wedding. Jurgus was absorbed in paying off the mortgage on the mill. Alice, the young wife, wanted to keep on dancing. Whenever Alice asked Jurgus to hitch up after supper to take her to a party he was too tired. He used to send her off with the hired man and spend his own evenings in his stocking-feet. Finally Alice went off with the hired man and did not come back.

Later she got a divorce from Jurgus and married the man with whom she had run away. Jurgus did not approve of the divorce; it was against his religion. He refused to go to court. Alice says now that she is sorry she did it, because if she had stayed by Jurgus she would have her own kitchen instead of working in other women's. Jurgus, of course, had to have someone to do his housework. He hired a Czech woman with a baby in her arms. She was strong as a horse. After she had washed the dishes she weeded the garden. She helped him, too, in the pleasant, dusty mill, where shafts of yellow sunlight show the grain motes dancing. This peasant woman handled heavy sacks as easily as a man does. The sweat ran down her broad, flat face and stood in tiny glistening drops on her thick, creased neck, and she never ceased talking. She had lost the latch of her tongue.

For a long time Jurgus was stand-offish with her, but if he chased her out one

door of the mill she came in another. Months later, a few days before their first baby was born, he married her before a justice of the peace. Jurgus had not the noble austerity of the Hargraves, who drew a precious strength from the subtle joy of renunciation. The marriage, of course, was in direct violation of the simple ethics to which Jurgus subscribes. His Slavic neighbors hold, even yet, that "he ain't rightly married." He goes no more to church, and his wife travels to the city to receive communion at a church where "they ain't particular." But the children go to the village church along with the children of the truly wed. There are seven of them, all as daintily built as if they had been born of dancing Alice. The school supervisor says they must go on to high-school.

Does it not seem strange that the brothers Hargrave were not given this family as a reward for keeping their promise? Why should Jurgus have the sort of family the Fourth-of-July orators talk about, while the Hargraves have only the memory of their renunciation?

III

Was it Marta Peshak's virtue that brought the present comfortable security of herself, her husband and her children? Listen, and decide.

When Mr. Bondfield, who lived at the crossroads in the white shingled house with the small window panes and the Georgian porch, got to be an old man and all his family were dead or married, he hired Marta to keep house for him. Marta lived there several years and after she married Peshak they both lived there and worked the farm on shares. They took such good care of the old man that when he died he left them everything, even to the parlor carpet which is like stepping on feathers. Marta and John have five children, carefully raised, well-spoken and reliable. The whole family is very pious, and they even see to it that the neighbors

go to church too. All this is clearly the result of taking good care of an old man. But—their eldest child, as well as the farm, is a legacy from old Mr. Bonfield. It is very confusing.

There was a Polish wedding across the mountain from where I live. Much eating took place, and dancing and drinking. They even had a fight to make it complete. The bride and groom were vigorous and comely—the kind of folk that are not downed by rocky fields and weedy pastures. But the wedding differed from the usual New England wedding in that the bride had already had a child by another man. "But that," one of the women guests said to me, "might happen to any of us." True; we have a proverb about such things happening in the best-regulated families. Here, however, is a difference: no New England girl with an illegitimate child would be likely to marry the most desirable young man in town, and if she did, her wedding would certainly not be the social event of the season.

These extraordinary peasants not only commit flagrant sins against the social order; they also keep on prospering afterward. Women have babies which they hadn't ought to, and follow them up with respectable families. The men get drunk on hard cider day after day, and yet don't go to the poor-house. The vinegary stuff ties their stomachs into knots and ruins their tempers, but their farms remain prosperous. When a New Englander takes to drink, his farm breaks out in leaky roofs and sterile fields. In our eastern farming districts you may find New England drunkards working as hired men for Central Europeans who drink twice as much hard cider themselves.

But however much the Slavic peasant drinks, he does not neglect his work. Sowing, cultivating and harvesting go right on. In this lies, perhaps, the explanation of the situation. The peasant does not sin against work. The two fundamentals of healthy living are the preservation of life and the preservation of the

race. In short words—work and love-making. My Slavic neighbors never sin against these fundamentals, and so they prosper and buy up the land. The New Englander is brought up in the belief that work is a curse laid on man by an angry God and that celibacy is holy. Mortgaged, rundown farms mark those who have evaded the curse. Scanty families or no offspring at all betray those who have not recognized the obligation of love-making.

The preservation of the race is the easier of the two fundamentals to be sloughed off. An inspection of any New England township convinces one that it is easier, in country districts, to give up love-making than to give up work, for hundreds of farms are run by unmarried men and women. All this to-do about the danger of being swamped by sexual desires seems absurd when one sees how many thousands of weaklings have altogether resisted them. Or are they, perchance, weaklings because all their strength has gone into their resistance? The peasants, on the other hand, may sin against the finer subtleties of virtue, but against nature itself they do not sin. And they are buying up the farms.

IV

Whenever the newcomers abandon their hold on the fundamentals, they perish exactly like their Puritan neighbors. Jurgus Biersach, the miller, was freed from his pretty wife Alice and got his children by another woman. But Susan Oglevy's patient immigrant suitor has fallen a victim to romantic love like any son of the Puritans.

The Oglevy house stands by the side of a main-traveled road on the top of a hill. It is a flat-faced house with two plastered chimneys for ears, a door in the center for a mouth and a couple of staring windows for eyes. A tall elm on either side of the front walk completes the agreeable symmetry. These are "bride and groom trees," planted by some dead Oglevy on his

wedding day. The land is held on a grant from one of the Georges and Susan is the last of the line. She is a small spry woman, nearing sixty, with the bright eyes of a girl of twenty and winter apples in her cheeks. She wears ordinary blue calico like her neighbors, but her white hair is dressed high on her head and thrust through with a delicately carved shell comb that came from Spain a hundred years ago. On Winter evenings she reads a first edition of Dickens with paper covers and Cruikshank drawings. She says there is no such writing nowadays. The hilltop farm is good for little except hay crops. Susan's livestock is for her personal delight rather than for profit. She is passionately devoted to anything that needs tending: pink, squawking pigs, whimpering collie pups, frost-dreading peach trees, and slips of young plants to be shielded from the sun.

Susan has not married, though it is neighborhood knowledge that she has had offers. She says she has remained single because she likes her independence, but the truth is that she is married to her dead father and dead brothers. She is not a spinster so much as the widow of her ancestors. But she has her romance, even at sixty. Susan is loved by an outlander. He fell in love with her when he came, years ago, to be her father's hired man, and he has loved her ever since. He flings himself away from the farm every now and then for months or even a year or two, but soon or late back he comes to be Susan's hired man again. An Oglevy cannot consider marrying a "foreigner," even after he has served forty years. Probably marriage has never been mentioned between them. Certainly Susan has permitted no love-making. An emotional tie has been woven between them without word or touch or glance of love. The affair is what we like to call an idyl and it is as pure as bleached bones in a desert.

The Hargrave brothers are annihilated by their principles. Susan, dragging her outlander in her train, is extinguished by

her filial devotion. The group dissolves, as it were, in the course of romantic ethical adventure. When they die, nothing will remain of them. They have taken their living from the soil, to which they will honorably return their ashes. They will be extinct. No action of theirs has benefited the world. Nothing they have done has decreased hunger, physical suffering or other misery. No contribution from them has made the world kindlier. They die in righteous sterility. Their great achievement has been the denial of the fundamentals of sound life. Jurgus Biersach, Marta Peshak and the Polish bride have made their arduous and clumsy contribution to human progress. Their farms are a little better than they found them, with fewer stones in the pastures and more on the stone walls. An acre of ground here and another acre there has been laboriously reclaimed from waste. And among their many lumpish children are some who are not lumpish at all.

At times I worry lest the immigrants become infected with the debilitating fineness and negative nobility which lead to oblivion. The newcomers take over the farms as they stand, often moving into houses partly furnished with the old stuff. They eat at the scrubbed deal tables and sit in the ladder-backed chairs with woven reed seats. Is it fantastic to imagine that they may absorb some of the fatal essence of the lost families that dwelt so many years within the walls? Summer

folks complain that the immigrants are buying up parlor mahogany chairs that could formerly be had for a single bid. "They can't appreciate them," runs the grievance, "but they are crazy to get any furniture that belonged to the people who lived here before they did." Newcomers who love our land, our houses and our furniture, are hardly safe from our ideals. I fear they will soon be seeking those fine-spun emotional satisfactions which come from turning one's back on life.

Our selectmen apply the compulsory school law to immigrants' children with the active satisfaction with which we do good to those who want to be let alone. They gather the infants in from the onion beds and the potato fields and install them among freshly painted blackboards. Over the children are placed New England schoolmarms to influence them toward those ideals which have decimated the race of New Englanders. These schoolmarms, upon whom we so pride our civilization, are workers but not lovers. One of the two fundamentals they have successfully denied, and this denial is intrinsic in their teaching. The bullet-headed, yellow-haired youngsters fight valiantly against their teachers, but they are surely in danger. They are exposed to the native passion for spiritual excellence. When their assertive wants change from land and sex to "higher" things, civilization will have got them. They will begin to develop into New Englanders—and then they, too, will go.

CALL FOR A LITERARY HISTORIAN

BY FRED LEWIS PATTEE

I HAVE nearly a hundred histories of American literature on my shelves, and I am still adding more—a hundred volumes to tell the story of our literary century, and all of them alike, all built upon the same model! I think I could dictate one to a stenographer in three days, with no reference to authorities save for dates: Colonial Period, Revolutionary Period, Knickerbocker Period, New England Period, and so on. Always there is the same list of authors, beginning with Captain John Smith, Anne Bradstreet, and Cotton Mather. A few are treated in chapters by themselves: Franklin, Irving, Bryant, Cooper, Emerson, Hawthorne, Whittier, Longfellow, Holmes, Poe, Lowell, and, of late, Whitman and Mark Twain. The rest are assorted into groups according to chronology, geography, or literary forms.

But the really stereotyped thing about these histories is their critical method: always the same list of biographical facts with emphasis upon the picturesque, always the repetition of a standard series of well-worn myths. Irving is always genial and sunny, always loyal to his lost boyhood sweetheart, Matilda Hoffman—so loyal, indeed, that he mourns her in bachelorhood to the day of his death—inexpressibly touching! Poe is always first of all the drunkard; a gruesome genius, author of "The Raven" and "The Bells," a critic lashing his enemies and praising his worthless friends; finally, the maker of the most horrible tales in the whole range of American literature. Tenderly the myths settle over Longfellow and Whittier; not so tenderly over Cooper and Whitman.

Almost all of these histories are textbooks. With the exception of John Nichol's now antiquated volume, which was written primarily for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and "The Cambridge History of American Literature," which is not a history at all but a series of essays and bibliographies by a varied assortment of writers, and D. H. Lawrence's startling "Studies in Classical American Literature," all of them have been written with class-room intent. Even Tyler's volumes on the Colonial and Revolutionary periods were first put on paper as lectures to college students. Special purpose and provincial prejudice wave over every one of them like red flags. One may arrange their authors in groups. There is, first, the New England group, headed by the Victorian Charles Francis Richardson, and later by Barrett Wendell, whose bulky "Literary History of America" should have been entitled "A Literary History of Harvard University, with Incidental Glimpses of the Minor Writers of America." In every volume produced by this group the Transcendental Movement requires a full chapter, looming almost as large as the Reformation in European history. Often there is an additional chapter on "The New England Renaissance." Next comes a group of Southern histories, some of them frankly bearing the title, "Literature of the South." This region has always been peculiarly sensitive, peculiarly eager to make the most of its scanty literary annals. In all its books Simms, Cooke, Timrod, Hayne, Lanier, and the after-the-war school of novelists, (with scant mention of Cable) are made of major im-