

RED JACOBSEN

BY FRANCIS HACKETT

RED Jacobsen works for me. A normal employer would see no problem in this. He would regard Jacobsen as nothing but a machine, and indeed Jacobsen is a machine. That is the only name, I suppose, that you can apply to a scythe mower that has a two stroke engine. But if the literary life has any advantage at all, it leaves a man accessible to his emotions. I have emotions about this beast of a machine. I'd like to share them.

Everybody tells me that Jacobsen was a good buy. It cost \$225, but I got it for \$200. The man who sold it to me tried to buy it back. I refused to part with it, not because I valued it at \$200 but because Jacobsen had defeated me.

Men who understand machines always speak well of this one. They envy me the possession of it. They even think I was quite a sport to buy it. They admit it's tricky, but this seems to enhance me in their eyes. I bought a tricky machine, therefore I must be a considerable person, like a small woman with a Great Dane or a boy with a revolver.

If the name machine implies a thing that works methodically and calculably, this red devil that I brought so unsuspectingly into my home, with

which to conduct the battle of the wilderness around the house (for, I may as well confess, I also bought fourteen waste acres of Fairfield County) — this devil, I say, has nothing in common with any other machine in my possession.

Down in the basement there is a pump. That, in the accepted meaning of the word, is a machine. It seems to oil itself, to start itself, to stop itself. It runs with a subjection and a craven obedience which makes me take it completely for granted and never give it a thought. I do not respect the pump. It simply does what is expected of it. It fills the tank with water and fills me with complacency. I have the same feeling about the water-heater. From one end of a season to the other, this pump and this water heater behave impeccably. Someday, I gather, one or the other will konk out. Then I'll be hurt, angry and contemptuous. But until that day they are to me what a woman is romantically supposed to be to a Turk. I look to them for perfect, obsequious and, in a humble way, voluptuous service.

But Red Jacobsen — no Turkish delight, I assure you. Red may want to be treated right, to be cared for, to be babied. I have to wheedle, to

get down on my knees, to pamper and swipe and play the hypocrite. It's no good my getting sore. That ruins everything. Can I be employer to this employee, expect perfection, be exacting and suspicious? Gone are those happy days. Red is rebellious, fickle and temperamental. With a definite job allotted to him, he refuses to give what is in him. Red cheats. And then, just as I decide he is worthless and therefore to be put on the market for \$300, with a sudden burst of energy worthy of Orson Welles, the brute does so much work, so fiercely and brilliantly, that — well, I am flooded with self-satisfaction. I did it. I made him work. It took me. I triumph. I am master.

II

To start him is like starting myself in the cold of the morning, or the cold of the morning after. On all but the most felicitous days Red Jacobsen starts only to stop. It is a frustration about which books could be written. I yank the pull-starter, something or other turns over, my heart lifts, and then Red balks, subsides and ceases. Again I give the starter a firm pull, and draw out the choke. Again there is a convulsive response, and a fiasco. This can go on for quarter of an hour. It brings back the days that are no more. The days of the early flivver.

But there are mornings when the monster is gentle and cooperative. One good yank, and away he goes. He has to cut through briars, sumac,

stones, tree stumps, weeds and dead grasses. For that reason the whole sickle bar has to swivel. Off we swivel. It is poetry to hear the rhythm of the engine. It is epic when the scythe begins to gnash so terribly that the whole machine shakes and dances. The throbbing demon starts forward, throwing off fumes, devouring everything in his path, working into a fever. It snorts, grunts, spits and grinds. A wonderful team, myself and Jacobsen. We cut a swathe, I tell you. But as Red warms up, the relation ceases to be that of master and man. Jacobsen becomes imperious. His one object is to get rid of me. He feels, the poor fool, that I am merely management, and that without me he could do the work of ten. Red becomes Red, and I become Bourbon.

At the same time it is rather an inglorious position for a Bourbon. I have to hang on when Red goes Red. A large bramble, bitten from the ground, lashes itself across my calves. As I clutch the handles, dragged forward by the monster, the bramble tries to work its way between my legs and trip me. The dignity of the individual can hardly take it. Over hill, over dale, through the rocks and the swale, but with no further veto on the business, I follow Jacobsen. It is to my interest to do so. Proletarian though he is, in these moments of elation immense performances are nothing to him. He is no miserable suburban lawn mower, but a sort of tractor and bulldozer by instinct, quivering under my hand.

It is true that he is not a biological specimen. He cannot reproduce his kind. Put fifty Red Jacobsens in a barn, and after a year there will still be only fifty. There will not be ten small Red Jacobsens. Apart from this limitation, he seems to live. Were I to gnash forward under my own steam, I could not do half what Jacobsen does. Nothing is impossible for him. He gnaws on rocks as he passes. He crops down young crab trees. He goes right through thickets. The sickle bar, plus the two stroke engine, gives him dominance, mastery, superiority.

Had Nietzsche owned and operated a power scythe, he'd have worked off

a great deal of his Aryanism and his private poison.

Machines are self-destroying, cranky and unsympathetic. In this they do not much differ from human beings. But if you get on the right side of a machine, if you suit your ways to it, think of the rapport. I can understand the boys who love their B-29s. They do it all together.

Mingled with my gratitude to Red Jacobsen is my own sense of prowess. He has become an extension of my ego. I am that much more powerful, more masterful, more executive. See what we did, this Caliban and myself! Difficult to manage? Why, sir, I'd hardly say so. A little tricky.



Hell—

If there is no hell, a good many preachers are obtaining money under false pretenses.

— "BILLY" SUNDAY

One can get used to hell, as to everything else.

— RUSSIAN PROVERB

Hell is crowded with the ungrateful.

— SPANISH PROVERB

In hell there are fans.

— ARAB PROVERB

WHY I DON'T JOIN THE WACS

By RUTH E. PETERS

No group has let its nation down harder, lower and faster in World War II than the women of America in their apathy toward service in the armed forces."

So writes a columnist who pontificates in our hometown daily, echoing a condemnation that is spreading rapidly as the WAC recruiting drive lags. As an average woman qualified for WAC enlistment and one of the majority whom it has been suggested "is unmoved by any great sense of personal responsibility for helping fight this war," I raise my small voice to counter for myself and for all women who refuse to "join up."

It wasn't so long ago that newspapers now condemning women for their failure to respond to the Army's appeal for 600,000 Wacs (only about 70,000 have enlisted), were making caustic remarks about the idea of women in uniform. However, they only reflected reaction to the Congressional legislation creating the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (later renamed the Women's Army Corps) which was violent in some segments of the population. I was a USO Club

hostess at that time, and I know the feeling of men in the camps was 99 per cent against women going into the Army. Their sweethearts, sisters or wives leading a GI's life? Nothing doing! I remember also the reaction of some of the churchmen. A Roman Catholic cousin of mine begged her parents to let her join the WAC. Her father stormed and her mother consulted the parish priest. Gently but firmly the reverend father warned my aunt against dangers involved in submitting innocent and impressionable Alice to the environment and temptations of the Army. My own pastor, whom I consider a liberal, shook his head gravely and failed to see where "any good could come of it." When my aunt returned from a conference of civilian defence workers in a neighboring city where she had seen several Wacs boldly entering a bar, she was sure the decision she had made for Alice was right.

The antipathy of churchmen to the idea of women in Army uniforms was no greater than that of many Army officers. Infatuated at first with the idea of joining up, I consulted several

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