



## Hired Hand

*by Larry Edson*

**T**HE SWING of the scythe became rhythmic, clearing a growing swath among the high weeds of the fence row. The tender green stalks of hemp and foxtail fell easily under the thrust of the razor-like blade. Mustard plants just breaking into golden bloom scattered among the stubble on the warm earth.

Simeon Dove grasped the cracked wooden handles protruding at right angles from the curved shaft. His gnarled hands became one with the tool as his whole body followed the long sweep and return, arch and pull.

The cutting was easy work chosen carefully by an old man. This he could do; leave the hard work for a hired hand. He had taken on such a man a few days earlier, and chuckled to himself as he thought of his son's anger.

"Now what the hell did you do that for," he'd say. "It's time you left that place and came into town with us." Maybe Brant was right; he was doing well selling rural real-estate. It could be a comfortable life. But was comfort enough? He had repeatedly urged Sim to leave.

"My God, Dad, d'ya want to die there in that pig-stye? It gets worse every year and you're not able to improve it. Look

at last year, if it hadn't been for the land bank, you'd never have broken even. You're too damn old, man. It's time you faced up to it."

Brant had forgotten his youth spent on this same farm, had forgotten the close kinship the two once knew. He was insensitive to that memory and the others that bound a man to his land long after he could work it.

Sim had given in. It was a weak moment, mind you, for later, the sun had broken through spring's lingering rain. The sun with its great healing power for an old body as well as the tired land he stood on. The fence rows bloomed with the soft hues of morning glories, half hidden in the tall grass that reached beyond the lowest strand of barbed wire. And old Sim watched.

He had lingered longer over his morning coffee, surveying the birth of spring through the kitchen window; or walked among the scratchy pigweed in the barnyard, hearing again the sounds of livestock that had been sold at auction in the fall. He'd watched until his old eyes were tired, rediscovered every corner of the land until his hands ached with a desire to feel, to know again the strength of labor.

He had searched the tool shed for the scythe, the means of "getting back to the land." He remembered the politicians using that phrase as they peddled their wares on the streets of the town, and on the high wooden platform built especially for the rally on that hot summer night of long ago. He chuckled when he compared his meaning with theirs. You had only to live, pay taxes and die. He was concerned with the first; the others would come soon enough.

When he found it, the blade was rusted and dull, and the wooden handle, drying in the heat of the shed, had splintered and cracked after the dampness of winter. He spent a whole evening on it. Resting the blade on the big iron cookstove, he filed and polished, bringing back to life its sharp metal edge. He carressed the handle as if it were a living thing. The oil and thick wax of carnauba reached far into the pores of its wood, softening the brittle dryness. And he, as he worked, was somehow like that wooden shaft. Was it ever too late? Because something seemed beyond use, did that mean it should be discarded? And he pondered

such thoughts as he awaited the new day when his son would bring a buyer and the decision would be complete.

In the early morning light, he had eaten alone as every morning for the past three years, sipping the steaming coffee at the white enamel table beneath the kitchen window.

Before the sun had broken over the high roof of the barn, he had followed the rocky path to where the tallest oak stood and the fence rows tapered away in either direction. He had stood there, savoring the excitement that welled up in his chest. He caught himself and cursed.

"Damn fool! Damn old fool! Look at you standing here. Giddy as a girl, that's what you are. Like a damn kid, only worse at your age. What is so happy about cutting a few weeds? It's time to be solemn. Today you must decide."

With that he had taken a sample stroke, testing his steadiness and the pull of the blade through the lush growth. Slowly the rhythm came. His gnarled hands became one with the tool as his whole body followed the long sweep and return. And it was no decision at all.

The sun was high over the oak before he stopped to rest. The early joy had quickened with the beating of his heart until it reached a rhythm of its own, building to a crescendo of satisfied fatigue. He leaned on the scythe, using it as a staff as he surveyed his work and beyond to the dusty road.

Satisfied, he bowed down to the base of the oak, letting it mother and support him in the crux of its twisted roots. The feel of the rough bark against his back comforted him and communicated its strength to his tired muscles as he rested.

From where he sat, Sim could still see the road. The one-room school where Brant had gone through the eighth grade had been abandoned after the vote for consolidation. It stood as always, just before the road curved out of sight and down the hill toward town. He settled his eyes at this point and watched.

After a while, when the brown speckled thrush had finished its song, and the grasshoppers had come and gone, chasing each other through the growth, a cloud of dust announced movement on the road.

The new Buick came over the crest of the hill, moving slowly after its long climb. Sim rose to his feet as the car turned into the lane. Slinging the scythe over his shoulder, he started down the rocky path toward the barn.

The Buick rode smoothly over the ruts in the lane and came to a halt near the windmill. Two men got out and walked toward the old stock tank. Sim recognized Brant's quick, precise step and short stature before he was close enough to distinguish features. Brant shielded his eyes with one hand and cut broad waving strokes through the air with the other. Sim saluted with the scythe as the long "halloo" drifted across the field.

The action was as Minna would have done it, as Minna had done it in the early twilights of the past. She met him always at the gate near the barn as he came in from the field. Minna who loved the land, whose hard work had helped him build the farm. Minna whose careful savings had carried them through the lean years when others had sold out, moving on for what they could get.

One night, she hadn't been there, hadn't waved. He'd hurried faster and faster until he saw the black car in the lane. Doc Robbins was just coming from the house and stopped him at the gate.

"There was an accident," he'd whispered, gripping Sim's arm tightly. "The old gas cookstove—you were too far away to hear. A neighbor stopped and . . . well, they didn't know where you were. She was so close to. . . . I'll find Brant and send the ambulance."

He'd left Sim alone; alone to grieve beside the still bed. Alone to feel the chill come into the room as he wept. He had grieved too long, half-working the land until he was too old. He saw signs of it in the turned up shingles of the barn's roof, in the broken boards of the corn crib, and the low-hanging wire of the fence as he stepped over it to greet the two men who waited.

"Hello, Dad," Brant looked from the scythe to his father's face. "I thought you'd be in the house."

"Resting?" Sim chuckled aloud.

"Well. . . Dad, I brought a buyer to look at the place. You remember, I told you I was going to."

"God, does he think I'm senile," Sim thought to himself.

"This is Mr. Colter, John Colter." Sim took the stranger's hand. "My father, Mr. Colter. He's decided to come to town and. . . ."

"I'm sorry I wasted your time," Sim broke in in a rush.

"Wasted our. . . ."

"I've decided to stay."

"Stay? Look Dad, we've been all over this. I thought it was decided. You're too. . . ."

"Too old to run the farm alone," Sim finished the familiar phrase. "Well, I'm not running it alone, I got me a hired hand."

"Who?"

"Davis," Sim said flatly. "He's startin' first of the week."

"Davis? Jim Davis? Why, he's a drunk. Everybody knows he drinks."

"So do a lot of men."

"A lot of men stay sober, too. A lot of men care for their wife and family, 'stead of leavin' 'em back East with their kin. He's no good."

"There's good in every man," Sim said sharply. "Just could be he needs help," and he can help me, Sim thought to himself. "I'll rent some of the land. Young Johnson's been after me often enough."

Brant was angry now. His face was flushed. He prided himself on never having lost a buyer, and his own father. . . ." His hand trembled as he spoke. "We'll talk about this later."

"Nothin' to talk about, I decided. I'm stayin'." Pride welled up in Sim as he said the words defiantly. "I couldn't live in town. It'd be 'the home' next. Ya ain't old till ya stop." He felt suddenly strong. "I ain't stoppin' till I gotta, and that's a long way off, son, a long way."

"We'll talk about it later." Brant turned toward the car cursing under his breathe. "Damn stubborn old man!"

Over the engine's roar, Sim heard Brant's voice, the whiny salesman's quality back again. "I got this other place listed. Good land. . . ."

The car moved down the lane. Sim did not look up, but stared instead at his reflection in the green water of the stock tank. The face smiled back, savoring sweet triumph, and he

addressed it. "The hired man's comin'—first of the week."  
He looked around at the weathered buildings of the farm.  
God, there's a lot to be done."

## Advice

*by Christos Saccopoulos*

Before you abandon yourself to sleep at night  
Step out on your front porch  
Unshaved

Uncombed

Barefooted.

Wear only your red, striped pajamas  
And a pair of bedroom slippers.

Do not let the distant campanile  
That just struck once scare you.  
This is not time for sleep  
—Not yet.

Stop the phonographs  
And listen to the crickets  
—Only to the crickets.

Turn the electric lights off  
And nail your eyes on the stars.

Throw away your cigarette  
And draw the night into your lungs.

And now—  
Yes now  
You can go to bed.