

'DRY HOLE' JIM AND THE MALADY

BY JOHN H. THACHER

THE real trouble with our town is that we lack an Infirmity. We are painfully conscious of our failing in this respect. Not to suffer from a Great American Ailment — preferably a Psychic Ailment — puts us beyond the pale of diagnosis in the current American literary clinics. To find no semblance of 'Main Street' in our Main Street; to find ourselves unable to detect in our magic glass 'the mournful baffled face of a soul which does not know how to live'; to find in our hours of rest no 'arid leisure' of the contemporary essayist; to discover in ourselves no palsy and withering of the soul; — these be grave matters for the confessional. Fortunate indeed are we if we avoid social quarantine; at best we are a total loss as a literary theme; and all, as you will see, because of our friend 'Dry Hole' Jim.

If the truth must be told, we do not seem to fit into any of the divers moulds fashioned by the contemporary analyst of American life. For ours, you must know, is an 'oil town.' We are all interested, directly or indirectly, in the production of petroleum.

In fiction and film, on the stage and in story, this crude oil has held the imagination as the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Yet we, who produce it, find here no 'electric' atmosphere of rapt romanticism. It is no more to us than a raw organic product of the earth, like corn or cotton. We do not call it 'liquid gold.' More prone are we to call it 'grease.' It is a business; as matter of fact as making soap or pickles. Stockjobbing, fake oil promotions, and

glowing prospectuses have little part in our workaday cosmos. Yet we find each day, presented in newspaper or magazine, a certain terrifying apparition, big-jowled and dollar-marked, a briber of legislators, a corrupter of courts, an incarnation of greed and avarice. As there leers from the pages this impressive ogre, it is borne in upon our intelligence that we, who had serenely thought our consciences void of offense against our fellows, are, as it were, the very flesh and blood of this Gargantuan monster! We, who are oil folk, meet the public concept of the Oil Man. We strive with some perplexity to fit this unlovely image into our daily environment. Whether because of our moral astigmatism, or because we are so deeply steeped in what the editorial writer would term our 'miasma of corruption,' we find that our only reaction to this Ogreish Semblance is that it greatly tickles our sense of humor.

We look about us, and find a town of some 20,000 people, a Carnegie Library, a palatial high school, a University Women's Club. We have the same thirty miles of paved streets, fronted by comfortable homes, well-kept lawns, and blooming flower-gardens, that are to be found in other prosperous Mid-Western cities of our class. On the hills east of our town the usual country-club spreads its broad verandahs under the oak trees, and looks out over an eighteen-hole course that is different from other links only in that it is hemmed in on two sides by gaunt oil-derricks. In our schools 'education moves ahead'

under the progressive methods approved by Eugene Randolph Smith and President Eliot. From year to year, in June, our public park lends its green slopes as a background to an alfresco Shakespearian pageant. A women's musical club brings us symphony concerts and our share of the great artists of their profession. We are a law-abiding community. There is nothing here of Bret Harte or California Gulch, and but the faintest echo of the old Dodge City days.

Moreover, we are a churchgoing folk in our town — fundamentalists, we confess, yet from our pulpits we carry into our lives a kindly philosophy that enables us to rejoice sincerely in our neighbor's news, from the field, in black headlines, '200 barrels after the shot,' or sympathize with him when, in fine print, we learn that his well is 'dry and abandoned at 3000 feet.'

But these things are out of drawing in a picture of a dehumanized community; a community of 'damaged souls.' Surely, somehow, with deep introspection, we shall find sign or symbol of our own peculiar dæmon. We do not care to be set apart and isolated from our fellow countrymen, writhing under their malady. An inspiration comes to us. Our 'Nomadic Habit'!

To this failing we cheerfully confess. But on second thought, our confession avails us little. For if we find ourselves touched with a trace of the nomadic impulse, we know that it is but the wanderlust of the pioneer and the explorers, whose lives are at least supposed to be free from the 'moral effluvium of vulgarization.' So also, if there be an unkindly Trollope or a Dickens to make us out as crass and raw in our artless leisure, we only smile as we turn our faces to the purple-clad hills and the broad, rolling, flower-carpeted prairies of our spring and summer, or tune our ears to the call of the bobwhite or the swish of the mallard's wings in the

crisp days of our autumn, and reflect that these things also are in a measure crude and raw to unseeing eyes and ears falsely attuned. If we do, perhaps, share the dyspepsia which is a concomitant of the national malady, we accept the burden, or so much of it as shall survive the jolting over atrocious roads to the distant wildcat well — provided, always, that the sacrifice be made on the Altar of Southern Cooking.

In our town, we do not tremble at the fulminations of Teapot Dome, although transgressions of men in high places are not condoned by us, and we know, of course, that certain inner circles of Dante's *Inferno* were originally located down there near the mouth of the Potomac; yet these be matters for casual rumination about the derrick floor, or as one smokes a pipe behind the boiler on the midnight 'tower.' Even then, such comment holds in it a languid irrelevance, as one would speak of earthquakes in Chile.

We remember, perhaps, the educational film made by the Bureau of Mines, showing the processes of oil production. In this is portrayed through the eye of a powerful microscope the surface of the axle and its bearings. Those surfaces, so smooth and polished to our unaided vision, are shown, in actual fact, to be rough and jagged like the contour of a mountain range. Such surfaces pressing against one another in rapid revolution would generate a destructive heat, were it not for the smooth film of lubricant that separates them. How small a matter on which to rest the fate of empires! England, and all the nations of the world, came to a point of frantic hysteria in the World War, when they realized how closely related were the issues of the conflict to that tenuous film of oil, and the significance of the Foch epigram: 'The Allies floated to victory on a sea of oil.' In our town, we take pride in the knowl-

edge that we control one of the rivulets that fed this mighty sea. I think it is this pride that gives a certain hopeful urge in our lives. It gives impulse to our daily work and enables us to enjoy a sound leisure that is neither one long Rondo-Allegro nor yet a melancholy Lento movement in minor mode.

Wherefore waste our elocation
On impossible solution.
Life's a pleasant institution —
Let us take it as it comes.

Closely related to the soundness of a man's leisure are his reactions to success. These reactions in our town are three: to secure a good home; to travel; and to drill just one more wildcat well. Education of the best for our children is a resultant also and — this, whispered to the incredulous ear — ask your art dealer what percentage of fine American paintings are sold in Oklahoma!

For music and poetry and the affairs of the 'higher psychic plane,' we have none of the harsh contempt so deplored by the contemporary Intellectual Brahmins of to-day. We know that these frigid altitudes exist, and if we do not seek to scale them, we are full of admiration and tolerance for those who do. With true Gilbertian forbearance we accept the fact that their

. . . capacity for innocent enjoyment
Is just as great as any honest man's!

To make deep holes in the earth's rebellious crust; to find the oil-bearing sand; to rend it and tap its fluid content; to guide that fluid into tanks; to ship it in long pipe-lines across the continent; to refine it and blend it; and above all, to hurry, to hurry, to speed our efforts lest all the wheels in Christendom should stop and mankind should revert to the state of the blanket Indian — that is the 'good life' of our town!

You need waste no time in searching the spirit and soul of our town for a 'complex.' The first person you meet

on the street corner will let it slip in ten minutes' conversation: —

' . . . It has first-class geology, and they had a good show of oil, with a million feet of gas, in the dry hole to the east, but they did n't drill deep enough. Dry Hole Jim has a bunch of leases right on top of the structure and he'll sell a sixty-fourth interest in the well for . . . '

And if you feel no subtle quickening of the pulse, no quivering flame of imagination, no impulse to 'pass flyingly over all the stumblingblocks of prudence' and take a whirl on Jim's venture, then are you fashioned of material too dull and cloddish to understand our complex — the Lure of the Wildcat Gamble. On it rests the whole Freemasonry of our brotherhood; and since you cannot hope to feel the spirit of our fraternity unless you know the product of that complex, why should you not meet our friend Dry Hole Jim and hear his story, knowing that in it we shall find revealed at last the true secret of our escape from the Malady.

Dry Hole Jim is a wildcatter. He drills for oil at remote and inaccessible spots where it is exceedingly unlikely that he will find it. He is first cousin to the old grubstake prospector. His mission is to play against the odds of an almost unbeatable game. Cold statistics of 78,500 wells drilled east of the Rocky Mountains in three years show that 83.78 per cent are of problematic value; that the capital prizes — the 'great gushers,' the market-breakers, the 2000-barrel wells one reads of in fiction or roseate prospectus — are less than one per cent. It takes a deep faith in what Jules Payot, the French philosopher, terms 'the inexhaustible generosity of primordial laws' to enable a man to face such hazards. A kindly old Scotchman, of forty years' experience, had Jim's case in mind when he said: 'In other lines of trade, bankruptcy carries

a tinge of odium and disgrace. In the oil business we regard it as only an intermission between gushers.'

Let us take Dry Hole Jim as we find him now, out on his lease on Deep Fork Creek, standing, no doubt, on top of the flow tank, watching the oil bubbling in from the 'lead' lines. He waves a friendly greeting, then turns his rapt gaze back to the mouths of those crooked-neck pipes, and watches the spurt of golden fluid foaming into the tank. The pipes lead off in different directions to where the iron jacks are nodding rhythmically over the wells. From the little power-house near by comes the steady chug of the gas engine. Thin snaky rod-lines crawl stealthily back and forth through the prairie grass as they carry the impulse from the power-house to the jacks. A sharp wind from the tail of a norther is blowing across the Oklahoma prairies; we shiver and draw our coats closer about us; but Jim, in shirt sleeves, with gaze fixed on those spurting mouths, is oblivious to wind or weather. He is telling us, absently, that Number Three is n't making her oil as she ought to — 'cup' trouble — and needs 'pulling'; that Number One is n't real well and strong, either — with a leak at the 'stuffing-box' — and Number Six! Well, anyone can see from Jim's smile and shrug that Number Six, the youngest of the family, is wayward, fickle, and lovable — always the prerogatives of the youngest; came in at a hundred barrels flush, quit flowing, jolted her with a hundred quarts of glycerine, shot off two joints of casing, and had a four months' fishing job. 'She's no-ways steady, and never was. Seems to pick odd days in the month for her workdays, like those Greasers down to Tampico. Takes holidays and feasts-days to lay off work, five times a week.'

A burst of foaming oil drops from the mouth of Number Six, and is followed

by a steady flow that lasts some minutes, and stops suddenly with a final roar of gas and foam.

'That's her! Chews it over like a bonehead stuttering out a smart comeback! Maybe she'll take a day to make up her mind again and then flow for an hour straight!'

Oil wells, we learn, have personalities; complexities of character; dispositions; moods — like folks, or horses, or dogs. 'Take Number Two there — as steady as an elder in the Presbyterian Church — just two barrels a day, whether it's Fourth of July, Christmas, or Thanksgiving. But that there Number Five!' Jim shakes his head sadly. 'New rods, new tubing, new cups, newfangled working-barrels — squibbing — steaming — tried 'em all. A fine well, when she came in, but past helpin' now.' And from Jim's tone, we draw the inference that Number Five is irretrievably launched upon a life of sin.

A guarded question or two, a little casual prodding, and we have from Jim the story of the lease. In our town it is an old story — so old, in fact, that it has almost passed into formula.

Of course, it was in the beginning a 'rank wildcat'; there had been a bit of eastern dip in the strata exposed down along the creek bed, with a few outcroppings on a neighboring hill; an old dry hole a mile away had a 'show' of oil. He persuaded a farmer to give him a lease on three hundred and twenty acres for a well.

Jim peddles his leases from office to office in Tulsa, until he finds a company that will buy an 'offset' eighty acres, advancing a part of the purchase price when the well is commenced. He borrows a derrick for an interest in his well; rents his casing for another forty acres; his slim credit is stretched to the utmost for teaming and supplies; he chops wood for fuel; his tools are rusty; his boiler leaks, and his water pump disap-

pears in a cloud of its own steam; his rickety derrick is a spider web of guy ropes and bailing wire. With the first stroke of his bit begins a fight against all the manifold perversities of inanimate things: a caving hole, unexpected water and gas strata, mechanical breakdowns; and finally, of course, his wire-line snaps at the rope socket and leaves the tools in the hole just a few feet from the oil sand. Sixty feet of shale caves in on the drilling tools, and in time other tools used to fish for them are also lost in the hole. In the phrase of the oil fields, he has 'everything in the hole but the boiler.' The strain of 'fishing' is too much for the aged derrick and it pulls in; his men are unpaid, his credit exhausted. Without a thought of quitting, Jim trudges to town and trades another forty-acre lease for a second-hand automobile, sells the car for enough to pay the repairs on the derrick and a part payment to his drillers, and the hole is finally cleaned. Then, one day there comes a puff of gas at the casing-head, a 'rainbow' on the bit and stem; the hole fills up rapidly with oil; 1000 feet, then 1500 feet, then a rich golden-green fountain — flashing in the sunlight, flowing over the derrick!

A great day, you say — a rich reward for all his trouble. He has made a well of it! A two-hundred or three-hundred barrel well — a little miracle, one chance in five! Wealth, flowing from the stored-up treasure of the Devonian age. 'Clean money,' as Jim says; that adds something to the world's store and helps man in his painful upward struggle from chaos to order. Drilling an oil well is your true creative gesture. It enriches the world and robs no man. Jim's brief hour of prosperity sees no one the poorer for it. Who, more than Dry Hole Jim, shall serve to deliver mankind from a world that is 'heartless, furtive, narrow, bleak, mournful, mean, and inhuman?'

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I do not know what Heaven is reserved beyond the Great Divide for the wildcatter. It must, at best, be a tame affair, a matter of mere Celestial Harmonies, with no musical splash and roar of the oil in the flow tank.

But Jim's Paradise is still far off. The very next day, one of the buzzards of the law, ever hovering near the new wildcat well, swoops down with a fake Indian heir, brings suit, and paralyzes Jim's oil sales by garnishment of the pipe-line company. Choosing reluctantly between blackmail and a charge of manslaughter, Jim borrows enough to settle the claim out of court. Then follows the supreme disaster. Some field in Mexico or California comes in with a new flood of oil, and the crude market breaks. With tanks full and overflowing, he cannot sell a drop of his oil. His wells would suffer if he closed down, and yet he has no market for his product. By staving off lawsuits and liens, by selling a little oil for fuel, by twist and turn, Jim survives the long depression, and now after five years he has battled through to ten barrels of 'settled production,' a sacred symbol; Jim has attained to the dignity of an 'Oil Producer,' with us an elevation to the ranks of the Elect — a commercial Croix de Guerre. And remember, you of the Brotherhood of the Internal Combustion Engine, that were it not for the Dry Hole Jims, who have discovered over fifty per cent of the mid-continent pools, you would find a posted price of gasoline at your filling stations that would afford you all the vivid sensations of a paralytic shock. All the 'World Struggle for Petroleum,' all the ponderous interlocking mechanism of great corporate agencies could not accomplish the commercial miracle of selling 5300 British Thermal Units of power for one cent were it not for the individual initiative and enterprise of Dry Hole Jim and his fraternity.

It is not for his importance to the community and economic laws that we hold Dry Hole Jim in such high esteem in our town. Economic laws we never think of, except when the big companies use them as an excuse for cutting the price they pay us for our oil. Let us say it is rather because we dimly sense the kinship between Jim and certain hardy forbears of his who broke the trails into western forests; felled their trees; built their cabins; defended them at the loophole; fared then even farther out across the mountains with pick and gold-rock-er and transit. It is not because of Jim's relation to the mechanism of modern civilized life that we value him in our town, but rather because we reverence the fast vanishing spirit of the pioneer, the adventurer, and the explorer.

If by some miracle we are, as we claim, preserved from the American Malady, if there be found in our town no symptoms of spiritual malaria, we know that we shall be assaulted with demands for an explanation — a formula. We are prepared to furnish it. It is because our glass, ours and Jim's, is constantly filmed over by the magic of that last thrice-blessed sprite of Pandora's box. We live in an atmosphere of eternal, unquenchable hope! If there be a trace of ingrained pessimism here, it is only that which Mr. James describes as born of long compulsory association with the optimist. No one can be an 'Oil Producer' who is not possessed of such fundamental, fixed, and inborn optimism as will be unshaken and undimmed by the longest succession of dry holes, or the lowest, most desperate of markets for 'crude.' This is not the thin Pollyanna vacuity of spirit that 'glows with the happiness of mere being,' but a certain contentment with a simple philosophy of everyday life which is based on creative effort in our hours of labor and a cheerful sane preoccupation in our moments of leisure.

We have our faults. We know them. We do not have the rich cultural atmosphere of the Acropolis. But then, we banish no Solons. On the contrary we make geologists of them and drill dry holes on their judgment. We lack the ideals, the noble behavior, the intellectual enjoyments of the Italian Renaissance, yet we do not burn our Savonarolas. Our Chamber of Commerce organizes 'drives' for them or includes their activities in the budget of our 'Charity Chest.' And, if you think to shame and abash us, to humiliate us, to puncture our conceit by asking where is our 'thrice-hammered hardihood of Rome,' then with a clear, ringing chorus we respond, 'We have Dry Hole Jim, God bless him!'

It would appear, therefore, that we are hopelessly resigned to our lot as one that has fallen to us in the Industrial Era, or, if you will humor us, in the Oil Age. We are even reconciled to the fact that we have moved out 'into the void' beyond the rich popular culture of violin and clavichord, a culture tempered perhaps by rack and thumbscrew. We have even torn ourselves away from 'the gayeties of the heart,' dance, ballad, glee, and all those other rare diversions, including bear-baiting, the stocks, and the public gibbet, created of our forefathers as a means of happiness and for the 'wonder and wealth of their souls.' With all deference to what has been deftly termed the 'aesthetic appeal of conservatism,' our town finds in the hoydenish radicalism of our age an abundant life in which we thus wickedly flourish in health of body, mind, and spirit. And if such life be not in consonance with the voice of the Almighty it is at least in harmony with the Psalmist's wholesome spirit of youth: —

Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.

THE WORLD AND THE BLIND MAN

BY CHARLES MAGEE ADAMS

I

THIS whole attitude of mind we call civilization or culture depends peculiarly on a delicate balance between the contrasting mental activities, thought and emotion; and it proves exceedingly difficult to approach any subject touching blindness without disturbing this balance, for the reason that emotion has always been the preponderant reaction to blindness.

People can laugh at what happens to a deaf man, discuss the loss of an arm or paralysis with complete calm, yet the moment blindness is mentioned there is an instant and involuntary flux of emotions, such as pity and sympathy, that distorts the entire perspective. These emotions, although brought about by reasons somewhat obscure, are, nevertheless, universal, and color every concept of the blind held by the seeing. During this discussion it may therefore prove necessary to swing to the other extreme in order to restore the balance.

There has always been a particularly keen interest in the psychology of blindness, even before the general interest in psychology now so marked. The seeing are constantly asking questions covering every phase of it — and quite normally. Sight is such a universally used and useful sense that the loss of it would seem to bring about a psychological condition difficult to conceive. But two facts pertinent to an analysis of the subject are revealed by these questions: first, that in general the seeing believe (anyone who has read Dr. James H.

Robinson's *The Mind in the Making* will grasp the significance I am giving this word) that the psychology of the blind is something fundamentally different from that of the seeing; and second, they believe that the lack of sight is all but compensated for by an added keenness of remaining senses, new senses, and an increased richness of experience. These beliefs are not confined to people easily deluded on usual matters, moreover. They can be found in the most amazing quarters. In spite of this, the facts (having been blind nineteen years I feel fairly familiar with the facts) show that the psychology of the blind differs from that of the seeing only in that the blind do not see.

This is not intended as a paradox or an attempt to turn an epigram. It is a proposition of basic importance, and the only starting-point from which the subject can be properly approached. The psychology of the blind is neither irrevocably removed from that of the seeing nor all but identical with it through some compensating means. It is simply the full psychology of normality with such changes and deficiencies as are brought about by the lack of sight. The blind have no power or sense not possessed by the seeing, not even an increased keenness of the remaining senses; merely a subtraction of sight with a somewhat better utilization and development of the four other senses to meet conditions.

A peculiar fact in connection with