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The Hired Man's Courtship

—BY—
A. *K.* CRIPPS



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A PLAY IN TWO SCENES



By A. K. CRIPPS



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ELDRIDGE ENTERTAINMENT HOUSE,

FRANKLIN, OHIO

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Cast of Characters

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Mr. Horton—a prosperous Pennsylvania farmer.

Mary Horton—his wife

Ruth Horton—his only daughter

Captain Ralph Edwards, a wealthy young man from Philadelphia

Jim Ables—a hired man of year's standing on the Horton farm.

Hepsey Sanders—who has worked in the Horton home until she is almost like one of the family.

Ezra Johnson—(colored) a returned soldier

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The Hired Man's Courtship

Scene—The dining room in the Horton farm house. Mr. Horton and Jim are resting after the noonday meal. Mrs. Horton is sewing. Hepsy is clearing the table and Ruth is standing by the window reading a newspaper.

Ruth—Here is your advertisement for help in the Centerville News, Father. Do you want to see it? (She brings it to him.)

Mr. H.—Yes, and I'm going to hire every man who answers that ad without a question. With all this hay to get up, I'm almost crazy. And the harvest is upon us. I don't care what the fellow is like, I'm going to get him into the field as quickly as possible. A man can't be particular in these days of terrible labor shortage.

Hepsy—Sure, now, Mr. Harvey, don't you go and get reckless. You ought to inquire into the habits and past lives of the men you hire. You might get one of them Bol-she-vik-eyes, in disguise.

Mr. H.—Well, I reckon that's about the best way a Bolshevik could disguise himself, getting down and working hard day after day, and you know I won't stand for idling. No, if a man will go at it and work, I'll hire him if he's bow-eyed and cross-legged.

Jim—(laughing) Well, now that would be some feller, wouldn't it? But, speakin' of them I. W. W.'s. I'd a-been a-trampin' yet if it wasn't that every once in a while one o' them guys would come up and call me "brother," and I didn't like the notion. I thought I'd work a while, and sort of get people to understand that I am a loyal citizen before I take up trampin' again. But as soon as I have folks convinced, I reckon I'll hear the call of the open road, and then what will Hepsy do?

(Hepsey glowers at him and shakes her fist.)

Mrs. H.—*(laughing)* Now, Jim Ables, you know you have been a hard-working, sober man all your life. We don't any of us believe that tramp story, but there comes Harvey's first applicant up the walk.

(Knock outside. Ruth goes to the door. Enter Ezra Johnson.)

Ezra—Is dis where Mr. Harvey Horton libs? I admire to see him a minute on business.

Mr. H.—Well, I'm the man. Do you want to work?

Ezra—I shore do, Boss.

Mr. H.—Can you do what you're told without stopping to talk about it?

Ezra—I shore can, Boss. Dat's jis' what I has been doin' fer de las' t'ree years, sah.

Mr. H.—Well, go along with Jim, there, and get the horses out. I'll be out in a minute.

(Knock at the door. Mr. Horton opens it and Ralph Edwards steps inside.)

Edwards—I came to see if I could get—

Mr. H.—*(interrupting)* Yes, you can. I never needed help so bad in my life. You can start in working this afternoon, but you can't work in those duds. Step into the bedroom there and I'll bring you some work clothes. Hurry, for we are just ready to start for the field. We'll talk things over further this evening after supper.

(In the meantime, Ruth has raised her face from the paper and her eyes meet Edwards'. Both start with surprise and Ruth quickly takes refuge behind her paper. Without a word, Edwards goes into the room designated and Mr. H. takes him overalls and a blue shirt.)

Hepsey—That boy ain't used to workin'. I'll bet he don't know a cornstalk from a tater bug. You're plumb crazy, Harvey Horton, a-bringin' these strange men on the place. Did you see how he looked at Ruthie? He'll be makin' love to her yit.

Ruth—Oh, Aunt Hepsey. Please keep quiet. He'll hear you.

Hepsey—Well, he will, now. Didn't I see him? Why he never tuk eyes offen you all the time yer pa was a-talkin'. Do you reckon I can't see?

Ruth—(desperately) Sh-sh!

Hepsey—Well, I'm goin' now. I've got to git some taters fer supper. Call me if you need me, Mrs. Horton. (Exit.)

(Noise outside. Mrs. H. jumps up and runs out.)

Mrs. H.—Harvey, come quick, the hogs are into my garden again.

(Edwards comes from the bedroom just as Mrs. H. leaves the room, followed by her husband. He comes at once to Ruth.)

Edwards—Ruth, girl! Why don't you speak to me? Why don't you introduce me to your parents? Why did you leave me last winter in Philadelphia without a word? You've given me torture, honey.

Ruth—Did you come here to find me? You didn't come to get work on the farm?

Edwards—No, I didn't come here to get work, but I got it, and I found you. Now, I'm going to stay as long as I can please your father. Perhaps you will explain it all some day.

Ruth—I hate you. And the longer you stay, I'll despise you more.

Edwards—But you loved me last winter. You told me you did.

Hepsey—(bursting in with a pan full of potatoes; seizes Ruth's arm and pushes her out of the room) I'll stay here with you, you young jackanapes. Didn't I say you wasn't to be trusted? Here you are a-flirtin' with Ruthie already. Young man, don't you let me see you talkin' to her no more while you work here or I'll tell Mr. Harvey an' have you fired. There's sumthin' wrong

or a young feller of your stripe wouldn't be hirin' out as no farm hand.

Edwards—I assure you that I am respectable. I can give the best of references.

Hepsey—Oh, fish! That's what they all say. There ain't a man on earth but what will bear watchin'!

Mr. H.—(*outside*) I'm ready, now.

(*Exit Edwards. Hepsey stands by the table, shaking her head.*)

CURTAIN



SCENE II.

(*Two months later. The same room. Mr. and Mrs. H. are resting in rockers. Hepsey is sewing buttons on an apron.*)

Mr. H.—It has been two months since I hired Ezra and Ralph and we've surely gone through a lot of work. They are the best hands I ever hired during the summer. I expected Ralph to go the coming Saturday, but it was a blow to me to find that Ezra and Jim are leaving, too, the first of October.

Hepsey—(*dropping her work*) You don't mean that Jim Ables is leavin' you after all these years. I know it comes from that city chap you hired. He's at the bottom of all this.

Mr. H.—Why, Hepsey, he's made a fine hand. He was just back from the army and he was as sound as a knot. He says he loves the country and will never go back to the city to live. He took to farming like a duck takes to water. He says he thinks that army life spoiled the city for him. There is one thing I don't understand, though, Mother, that Ezra knew Ralph right away and saluted him quite properly. A half hour later I heard Ralph offering Ezra twenty-five dollars if he'd keep still

about who he was. Now, what do you reckon he is ashamed of?

Mrs. H.—He seems like such a fine boy. I can't imagine that he can be wanting to hide. Why, he is just the kind of man I'd have wanted my son to be had I ever had one. But he has worried Ruth in some way, though I can't imagine how, for he never hardly spoke to her. It was just the way he looked at her, I suppose. I think he worships her, but I've never breathed such a thing to Ruth. For, after all, there is something wrong, or a man of his education would never be working on a farm as a laborer. I'm sorry Jim is leaving you, too.

Hepsey—Everlastin', jumpin' rabbits, Mr. Horton, where is Jim a-goin'? He's worked here since before I did.

Mr. H.—Jim claims he's bought the 25 acres across the road, a part of the Hill place and he is going to marry and settle down. I suppose he's old enough. He'll be forty-seven this coming Christmas time.

Hepsey—(*fanning herself and shaking her head*) Jim Ables a-buyin' a farm and a-contemplatin' matrimony! My land!

Mr. H.—Something you have never contemplated, eh, Hepsey? Well it's not too late yet, maybe Jim's figurin' on taking you along.

Hepsey—Everlastin', jumpin' rabbits, now, Mr. Horton, you don't reckon nothin' like that, do you?

Mr. H.—No telling. He surely said he was going to get married if he could arrange things the coming year. He's an old fool for leaving a good home like this.

Hepsey—He's no fool, Mr. Horton. He'll be in before long. I guess I'll go change my dress. (*Exit.*)

(*Mr. H. winks at Mrs. H. and she smiles and nods.*)

Mrs. H.—And where is Ezra going?

Mr. H.—He says he's going to work for the man who has bought the Hill place.

(Enter Ruth, prettily dressed in white. She has been crying. She throws herself into a chair.)

Ruth—This is just too much. I heard in town this afternoon that Captain Edwards is the man who has bought the Hill place. It wasn't enough to come here and stay in my home all summer, where I'd see him every day. He had to buy the adjoining farm and make it his permanent home. I call it cruel. He's even made Mother care for him.

Mr. H.—Why, Ruthie, girl, what do you mean? I don't see what he's done. He never hardly speaks to you. I didn't know that you cared for him.

Ruth—I'm trying *so* hard not to, and I don't believe I would if he'd only go away. I met him last year when I visited Margaret Blair in Philadelphia. I never told either of you. I was too unhappy. I loved him then, and Dad, he asked me to marry him. I told him he must come and become acquainted with you folks first and then I'd give him his answer, but he knew that I cared for him and others knew that we cared for each other. Then, just the afternoon before I left, his cousin came to see me. She made me hate him.

Mr. H.—Why, daughter, what do you mean?

Ruth—She said he married a simple country girl, just about my age last year and then deserted her just before her baby was born and she felt that it was her duty to come and tell me. She begged me to never tell Ralph, because they were not friendly.

Mr. H.—The rotten scoundrel. I'd like to thrash him. I'll settle with him.

Mrs. H.—But I can't believe this is true. Sometimes people have underhanded reasons for telling such tales. I certainly would have given him a chance to defend himself.

Mr. H.—Now, Mother, what reason could his cousin have? That story sounds bad. He's followed Ruth here and hounded her all summer, and now he roosts right un-

der her nose and takes my help away with him when he goes. I know he let Jim have his little spot on time, gave him long payments. I'll fix him. (*Calls to Jim out the door.*) Hey, Jim, tell Edwards to come in here.

(*Enter Edwards.*)

Edwards—Jim says that you want to see me, Sir.

Mr. H.—(*angrily pacing the floor*) Yes, I do. Never wanted to see anybody worse. I'm going to thrash the lining out of you, too, in about a minute.

Edwards—I'd like to know what I've done. I feel that is my right.

Mr. H.—Don't talk rights to me. You came here and asked me for work.

Edwards—I never asked you for work, Mr. Horton. I came here two months ago. I needed water for my car. It stopped just around the bend in the road. You thought I had come for work and you thrust it upon me. That night after you had all retired, I carried water to the car and ran it back to your little town and left it in the garage. It is there yet. I had reasons for wanting to stay here this summer, and no particular reason for not staying. I have given you good service and I don't understand your attitude this evening.

Mr. H.—And why did you want to stay, young man?

Edwards—(*looking him straight in the eye*) Because I love your daughter, Sir.

Mr. H.—(*advancing toward him threateningly*) That's about enough.

Edwards—I met her last winter in Philadelphia. We cared for each other then, and I had asked her to marry me. She left, suddenly, leaving me no clue as to where I might find her. I came upon her here, two months ago, entirely by accident. I knew of no reason why she should leave me with no explanation last winter, and I hoped that if I stayed here among her own people for a while and she knew me in these surroundings, she would give me some explanation and would yet consent to become my wife.

Mr. H.—(raising his arm to strike) You slick tongued scoundrel How about the girl wife you deserted not two years ago, just before your child was born? I'll kill you yet. *(Seizes him.)*

Mrs. H.—(seizing her husband's arm) Give him a chance to speak Father. Neither you nor Ruthie has given him a single chance to defend himself.

Edwards—(turns to Ruth and takes her hands) Oh, Ruth, girl, did some one make you believe that of me? Tell me who told you that. Quick, dear!

Ruth—(hangs her head) Your cousin, Isabelle.

Edwards—(drops her hands and paces the room) Ah, I begin to see. Jim, go to my room and get the large envelope in the lower dresser drawer. It has a rubber band around it.

Ruth—(goes to him) Do tell me, Ralph, can it be that it isn't true? I was sure your cousin ought to know. She said that she lived in your home before your father died.

Edwards—No, Ruth, girl it isn't true. She did live in our home until Father died. Father had a strange idea. He believed in early marriages, and he made a provision in his will that ten thousand dollars was to be paid to my wife on her wedding day, providing I married prior to my twenty-fifth birthday.

(Jim comes in with the papers. Edwards takes the envelope and gives it to Mr. H. Jim goes out.)

*Edwards—*I think you will see there that Father made such a provision and that he further provided that if I did *not* marry before I was twenty-five, the said ten thousand was to be paid to Isabelle on my twenty-fifth birthday. I was twenty-five last May eleventh and on that day Isabelle received the money, because I was still single at that time.

*Mr. H.—*I begin to see. Then your cousin feared that you and Ruth might be married before your coming birthday in May, so she told Ruth this story, hoping to prevent her marrying you and receiving your father's bequest.

Edwards—Exactly, Sir. It was worth ten thousand dollars to her if she could make Ruth believe that I was unworthy of her. She knew that we cared for each other last winter, Sir.

Ruth—(*going to him*) Oh, Ralph, how cruel. Can you ever forgive me? I shall never distrust you again. Why she even gave me the girl's picture. I was planning to speak to you about it, so I have it here. (*Takes picture from inside a book on the table.*)

Ralph—That is my sister who died five years ago. I have an exact copy of it with a note written from her on the back of it. She sent it to me while I was in college.

(*Enter Jim and Hepsey, looking foolishly happy.*)

Jim—You know, Boss, I told you I was contemplatin' matrimony. Well, Hepsey and me have knowed each other fer years and we've decided to hitch up and travel in double harness from this on.

Mr. H.—Well, you surely have my best wishes.

Mrs. H.—I am glad, too, Hepsey, but I don't know how I'm to get along without you.

(*Ralph and Ruth have been standing in the background, talking together. Ralph puts his arm around her shoulders as they come to Hepsey and Jim.*)

Edwards—We wish you all the happiness in the world, of course.

Hepsey—(*eycing Ralph's arm*) Seems to me, young man, I told you, you wasn't to talk to Ruthie. You are mighty public about your devotions I think.

Ruth—(*stily*) Oh, now, Aunt Hepsey, you must stop quarreling with Ralph. You'll have to love him, now, because I do.

(*Ezra's black head first appears at the door, and as he studies the situation, he comes on in, scratching his wooly head.*)

Ezra—(*to Ralph*) Say, Cap'n, if you-all thinks that you'll need a cook when you gits into the Hill house,

I got the dandiest little black girl in Alabamy. Don't you reckon I had better occupy myself wid injucin' her to come No'th? She shore is a fine cook, Cap'n.

Edwards—(laughing) By all means, Ezra.

Mr. H.—Get out of here, all of you. This disease must be catching. But, Ralph, you are worse than an I. W. W., to rob a man of his help. When you came here two months ago, I had two good hired men, my wife had a girl in the kitchen and a daughter at home to help her extra times and by October we will be all by ourselves. I call that pretty bad. *(Laughs.)*

Ezra—Law, now, Missir Horton, I'se got to wo'k fo' Cap'n Edwards. I wo'ked fo' his pa afo' I went to de wa' an' it was jest de greatest quincidence dat I met de Cap'n here. I got to wo'k fo' him if I can.

Mr. H.—So you didn't want me to find out that I was hiring a man as a field hand who could buy and sell me ten times over, eh, Edwards? That was why you hired Ezra to keep quiet.

Ezra—Why, I neber told nobody, Boss. How'd you know boughten dat?

Mr. H.—Oh, that's all right, Ezra. I didn't find out who he was. But I'm thinking he's a bad kind of a man to have around. What am I going to do for help?

Hepsey—Sure now, Mr. Harvey, I'll be just across the road. I'll still work for Mrs. Horton. I couldn't leave her, no way.

Ezra—An' my little girl from Alibamy, will help Miss Ruth.

Edwards—(slyly winking at Mrs. H.) Guess we'll try a little socialism. We'll buy some tractors and work the farms all together.

Ezra—One, two t'ree, foah happy families where one growed befo'. T'ree cheers foah de United State of Matrimony.

(All laugh and give the cheers as curtain falls.)

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