

The Smoking Flax

By ROBERT STEAD

Author of *The Coupuncher*, *Neighbors*, etc.

(Continued from last issue.)

Her confession brought her face toward him with a laugh, and suddenly Cal knew it was her eyes that he had seen in that first glimpse through the darkness.

"Let us hope Gander is a good o'p'ner," he said, and they laughed together.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sunday morning was a time for rest, and Cal slept late. It was seven when he awoke from a sleep strangely but pleasantly haunted by visions of a beautiful maiden who had a disconcerting habit of thrusting her stockings feet in the fire. At the cost of shattering some proprieties Cal gently but firmly averted the danger. It was a particularly engaging kind of heroism, this rescuing of silk-stockinged feet with a beautiful maiden attached, and he had something of a grievance at the sunlight when, pouring in through the window, it interrupted his gallant occupation.

Cal drew on his clothes and stretched himself at the granary door. The sunshine filled the yard like a flood, and the air filled his lungs like a bellows. The world was singing a morning spasm of peace, and a lilt in his heart beat of accompaniment. Matronly hens were taking their dust bath by the side of the stables while their younger sisters cackled over belated layings in the hay shed, and as Cal crossed the yard the family sow turned from sunning herself by the water trough to greet him with an amiable grunt. But at the stable Old Jim cast him a look of reproach. For an hour he had been snuffing and nibbling in his empty manger, and he felt righteously aggrieved. It was not until he had been fed and curried, and left unharnessed, that the big bay seemed to remember that day it was, and took to a friendly nodding of a mouth broadly whiskered with hay. Plainly Jim was a believer in Sunday observance.

When he had finished with his horses Cal turned toward the water barrel at the house for his morning ablutions, but in the yard he was arrested by a sound of singing, accompanied by a drone faintly suggestive of distant bagpipes. It seemed to come from one of the smaller stables to which his duties had not yet taken him. After a moment of irresolution he turned toward it, and found an even more humble building than that which housed the horses; the chinks had fallen out in many places and the door hung only by one tenacious hinge. Inside were cows, four of them, with necks bracketed to their mangers, and a girl seated at one, streaming industrious white ribbons of milk into a pail which rang its reverberations now partly smothered in creamy froth. She was singing, and for a moment he did not disturb her. He was watching the rounded, rising muscles of her arms, the quick action of her slender wrists, the warm curve of her ear—

"Music hath charms!" he quoted, manfully, when he felt that he must announce himself.

She stopped and regarded him for a moment. "Yes, hasn't it?" she agreed, and resumed her milking.

It was true, then, that her hair was bronze; certain audacious threads, peeping out from beneath her milking cap, returned it.

He was wishing he could help her milk. After all, what avails it to write the prize thesis on "The Reaction of Industrialism Upon the Rural Social Atmosphere" if one has not learned to milk? He said so, but not in such language. "I am afraid my education has been neglected," he explained.

"Don't pity yourself," she advised him. "A first-class farm hand never milks."

So he was a farm hand. All right, he was above being hurt by being called a farm hand. Besides, he was a farm hand.

"But why?" he asked.

"Because milking is drudgery. The experienced farm hand always lays it out that he can't milk and has no intention of learning. It's only the neophyte who says, 'No, I can't milk, but I'd like to learn.'"

Evidently Miss Minnie could give on some pointers, and was not averse.

"But why? These mid-eyed cows; that creamy pail. Why?"

She was stripping the last drops between finger and thumb. Then setting her pail to one side—he rushed forward to take it from her hand—she arose, wearing a pinned-up skirt, and a fragment of feminine attire commonly regarded as obsolete, lifted up her stool, seated Bossie on the flank, and stepped out.

"There!" she said, as one who had had a considerable weight pleasantly lifted from her mind. "That's that."

"Finished?"

"Finished."

She turned to another full pail, which had not seen. He took up both in his strong arms, never stronger than on his happy Sunday morning, and together they walked toward the house.

"You asked why," she said, picking up the thread of his thought. "I'll tell you. You've seen the film, 'Why Girls Leave Home?'"

"Don't know that I have."

"Why, I thought you city men—been at the Plainville Electric Theatre. Some theatre, let me say. A

sort of tunnel with a sheet at one end and a ticket box at the other. Well, I could write a scenario for a film, 'Why Country Girls Leave Home', and I'd use only one actor."

"Who?"

"A cow. A herd of cows. That's why."

Her remark opened up a new avenue of speculation. By no stretch of the imagination had cows, common domestic cows, female Bovina, appeared within the scope of the university curriculum touching sociology. And now—

He had much to say, but before any of it had been said they were at the house.

"What do you do with it now?" he asked helplessly.

"Run it through the separator. You can turn it for me, if you like."

He liked, and a minute later the whine of the cream separator rose above the volcanic bubbling of the porridge on the range and the clatter of Mrs. Stake's fascination Cal watching out of its long slender spout into the receptacle placed for it, while presently his arms cramped to the ache of a strange exercise and the sweat began to gather on his face.

"My land, you might let 'the man have his Sunday rest," Mrs. Stake protested.

Cal wondered who supplied the horsepower for this machine on week days. Certainly not Gander, nor Hamilton. It boiled itself down to Jackson Stake or his wife. Perhaps, in days gone by, Minnie, the girl was strong of bicep, he could see that.

The men were filling in for breakfast. The slumbering chuckle in Grit Wilson's eyes leaped to flame at sight of Cal turning the separator; then instantly died down again. A new note from the whirling bowl, a sort of throaty growl whine, proclaimed the task finished, and at a signal from Minnie, Cal released the handle, which dropped inert to the lowest point of its circle while the machine itself coasted joyously along, like Antelope with the clutch out on a down grade.

"Thank you," she said, simply, in a voice to reach him alone, and he went to his seat more than repaid. What he cared for the mocking eyes of Grit Wilson? What, indeed! No more than for the peripatetic functioning of Gander's Adam's apple, more obvious than usual against the background of a red neck and a clean collar!

After breakfast they turned the horses free for exercise, and the drove, with Big Jim at their head and Reed and Trixie bringing up the rear, set out on a sedate trot around the pasture field. The trot steadily gathered momentum, and when Grit's big grey thought to slip ahead of Jim on a corner it broke into a gallop, and ended with a flourish of tails and stamping at the pasture gate. Then were many rollings on the warm grass, and heavings of great hoofs and fetlocks in the air, and prodigious scatchings of vertebral ridge-poles on the sandy earth.

The forenoon was spent in congenial laziness. Cal, drawing upon the warm water reservoir at the back of the kitchen range, and requisitioning an iron wash-tub that lay upturned in the yard before

the house, sought the privacy of his granary for a bath, and marvelled at the evidences of honest toil which the residue in the tub afforded. He shaved with more care than usual, selected clean shirt, underwear, and socks from his somewhat limited wardrobe, parted his hair with military exactitude, and superintended similar operations, says the shaving, on the part of Reed. Then he sallied forth, conquering and to conquer.

There was no sign of Minnie, so he rambled about the stables. On the sunny side of one of the buildings he came upon Grit and Gander lounging in the warm sand.

"We was jus' sayin'," said Grit, through the clenched teeth that held his pipe; "we was jus' sayin' you ought to rig up the old Ford to run that milk buzzer. That shouldn't be hard for a man with a education."

"For a D.D.," Gander expanded the description.

Cal sat down with them, hunched his back against the sunny wall, and got out his pipe. Not until it was drawing well and the peace of tobacco was upon his soul did he take up the theme.

"I'm afraid my education, along practical lines, has been neglected," he said.

"Minnie'll make up for that," said Gander. "She was givin' you a good start this morning. But take a tip from father, don't get mixed up in this chorbusiness. There's nothin' to it."

"That's what she said—or words to that effect."

"She did, eh? Well, she's wise. She knows. An' when a man drives a team all day, an' feeds up at night, I'll say he's done a day's work, an' he's through."

"Same here," Mr. Wilson volunteered.

"Sounds reasonable," Cal admitted.

"And when a woman feeds a herd of hungry men three times a day, a day's work, and she's through, too. Is that right?"

Gander took his pipe from his mouth and held it at a non-committal angle. "What are you drivin' at?" he demanded.

"Well, I've only been here a few days, and perhaps it is too soon to reach conclusions, but my specialty in college was sociology."

"Who's that got to do with? Socials, an' free cats? Sounds like a good subject. It was Grit who was commentin'."

"You'll be see high when the box social science comes round."

"No, it's not exactly that," Cal continued, husbanding his good humor. "I don't know quite how I'd explain it to this audience. He paused, but his irony was too delicate; it was lost upon them."

"But the purpose of all education is to teach a man to observe, to think—"

"Poor business," Grit interrupted.

"The biggest trouble I ever got into came from observin'—an' thinkin'." He was for launching into a salacious story, but Cal would not be deflected.

"And my habit of observing and thinking," he continued, "has caused me to take notice that the hardest worked beast of burden on the farm is the farmer's wife. Now that's a tremendous fact. I suppose it has more to do with the movement from the farm to the city than anything else."

To be continued.

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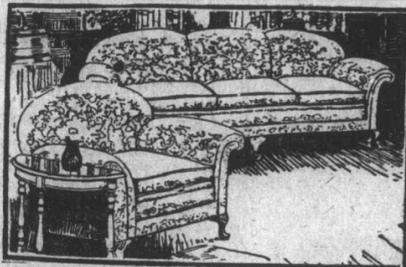
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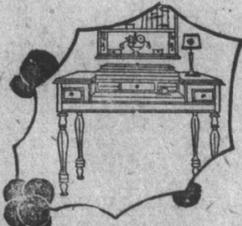
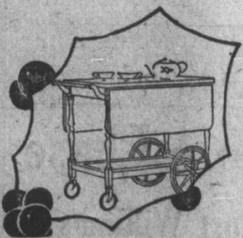
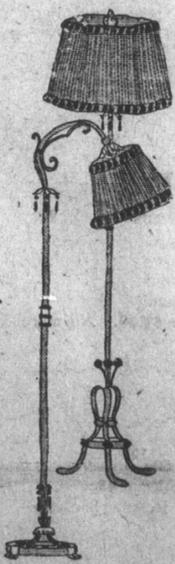
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The following property will be sold, by the Town Clerk, for arrears of Taxes, interest, etc., under the authority and by virtue of the Revised Statutes of Nova Scotia of 1923, Chapter 86, Sections 141 and following sections on Monday, the 28th day of December, A.D. 1925, at the hour of 10 o'clock in the forenoon, at Public Auction, in the Town Hall, Wolfville, unless before said time the amounts due be respectively paid.

Any property sold may be redeemed at the time and in the manner provided in said Revised Statutes. The Mayor's warrant for the sale was executed the 26th day of November A.D. 1925. The arrears of taxes to December 31st, A.D. 1923, together with interest and expense to date, are shown below.

Terms—Cash at time of sale.
R. W. FORD,
Town Clerk.

Properties of Charles F. Stewart.

No. 1—Lot of land on South East side of Willow Avenue, containing, six acres more or less.
Taxes due at Dec. 31, 1923 \$62.24
Interest due at Nov. 27, 1925 14.75
Legal and advertising expenses 15.45

\$92.44

No. 2—4 Lots of land on Central Avenue, East side, each 60 ft X 120 ft.
Taxes due at Dec. 31, 1923 \$75.82
Interest due at Nov. 27, 1925 5.40
Legal and adv. expenses 20.80

\$102.02

No. 3—Lot of land on Starr Street, South side and directly East from property of Frank W. Murphy and abutting on said property.
Taxes due at Dec. 31, 1923 \$10.05
Interest due at Nov. 27, 1925 1.44
Legal and adv. expenses 6.65

\$18.14

In addition to the foregoing taxes there are also due, on each lot, amounts as follows for 1924 and 1925:

No. 1—Taxes \$53.95 \$57.06
Interest 3.11

No. 2—Taxes \$47.00 \$49.48
Interest 2.48

No. 3—Taxes \$13.00 \$13.79
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