

The Smoking Flax

By ROBERT STEAD

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

(Continued from last issue.)

Cal found himself framing some word of thanks, but the farmer had moved down the stalls and his voice was raised in loud criticism of Grit Wilson. A shoulder scald on one of Grit's horses seemed to be the occasion. Cal slipped out quietly to awaken Reed.

The morning sun was pouring through the window in the eastern end of the granary. Its beams fell on the tire with the blow-out and filled the room with a faint but pungent smell of rubber. On the bed in the corner, beneath a heap of blankets, lay the boy. One little foot protruding from under the rumpled mass, bore its own dark evidence of the previous day's journeyings in the dusty field; one arm thrown upwards, fell open-palmed across his forehead, the little finger linked in a flirting curl of hair; two ruddy lips, slightly parted in the sleep of childhood, disclosed the flash of white teeth through their smiles. Cal, leaning over him, paused for a moment in the clutch of a great poignancy; it was at wholly unexpected times that that same tremendous thing about the boy reached up around his heart and crushed through the word—'Celest'!

Dim-eyed, he saw the little figure through the mists of his dead mother's tragedy; dim-eyed he followed him down the eight wonderful years of his young life: down to Jackson Stake's farm and the old Ford cushions in the granary.

'Come, old Indian; time to roll out,' he said, shaking himself free of his mood. 'School today! Roll out!'

Breakfast was another hurried meal. All meals in the farmhouse, it seemed, were hurried; ample and hurried. There had been the same splashing in the wash basin by the rain barrel; the same single filing into the table; the same 'digging in'. This time it was into porridge and milk, fried potatoes and eggs, white bread and corn syrup. If Mrs. Stake had had a good night's rest, or no night's rest, she gave no sign; her pace was exactly what it had been the day before, and the day before that, and would be tomorrow, and the day after that. The same white table in the centre of the floor; the same succession of hungry mouths; yesterday, today, and forever.

The first maze of strangeness having worn off, Cal's eyes began to note the details of the house. The room in which they sat was large and square, and seemed to occupy half of the ground floor, which was cut through the middle by a stairway enclosed in partitions. Beyond those partitions, through an open door, came a glimpse of what was evidently the fine room of the house; a stiff, upholstered chair, with a single crimson furbelows drooping at right angles to the floor, and an enlarged crayon of some ancestral being hanging on the wall, were all the aperture commanded. The floor of the room in which they sat was covered with linoleum; traces of its staid pattern, which had long since disappeared about the table and the stove, still blazed up cheerily from the less trampled corners. The walls and ceiling were of plaster, one time white, but now stained from yellow to grey in token of many a culinary accident in the kitchen range. The door was to the east, a window in the south, another in the west. Red roller blinds, of a substance broadly suggestive of the linoleum under-foot, hung in the windows, their bareness sheathed by cheap cotton curtains which had taken something of the yellow-grey color of the walls. A poster announcement of the previous year's Brandon fair, and a calendar from the Plainville Garage, evidently intended to relieve the dull-

Mrs. Stake cleared a corner of the table and her throat simultaneously. It seemed she had a pesky tickle in her throat.

'Spring weather, I blame it on. Always like that in May. . . You must be a good boy for Annie Frolic. Do as she bids you, an' work hard at your lessons. It's the wind, the May wind—Was your sister married long; I mean—'

She stopped, realizing the indelicacy of her question, and in the momentary pause Cal recovered his balance.

'Not long; Reed was the only child,' he equivocated.

'Well, we mus' get him off,' she exclaimed, as seeking safety in action, she drew Reed on to the floor before her. Her fingers were trifling with his tie; her old knees seemed pressing hungrily against his; her hands were smoothing his riotous hair into some semblance of order.

Cal walked with Reed to school. They went out on the winding trail among the groves of poplar and willow, still sparkling and fragrant with dew, and turned south on the main road. Across a black ploughed field, now faintly tinged with green, lay a cluster of white-washed farm buildings, probably the homestead of Fraser Fyfe. To the left they could see Gander's four-horse team and seedbed, with Gander himself hitching along behind, as he drove his slow shuttle back and forth. Further afield faint spirals of dust against a sky as clear as spring water marked the progress of Grit Wilson and Hamilton Stake.

They swung along cheerily. Reed with his noonday lunch wrapped in the current issue of the Plainville Progress; Cal with his thoughts busy over the favorable turn their prospects had taken. There was occasion for cheerfulness. He had literally motored into a job, and not only a job, but a home for himself and Reed. Over what the old farmer would say when he discovered that the bargain supposed to have been made in Plainville was the creature of Cal's imagination—provided the old farmer was under any delusion—Cal allowed himself no uneasiness. Sufficient to the day. It was enough that in twenty-four hours he and Reed had become members of the family. It was enough that Reed had captured the heart of the stern and overworked Mrs. Jackson Stake. The fiddling with his neck-tie—Cal was not blind. It was enough that Big Jim had muzzled his shoulder playfully that morning while he carried his mane. It was enough that the sun shone and the birds twittered as they hopped along the barbed wire fences that bordered the road and that the yellow but-tercup glimpes shyly out of the green grass, and that little dribbles and shreds of a whistled tune fell from Reed's pursed lips as he jogged along by the side of his 'Daddy X'. It was enough.

As they crested a low ridge they caught sight of the school, a rectangular wooden building studded with windows on its northern side, and standing back a short distance from the road. It seemed to have been painted once upon a time, but wind and weather had taken their toll. The door stood open, and when Cal and Reed looked in they could at first distinguish nothing in the comparative gloom. A cool dampness greeted them from the darkness, and presently they discerned a young woman at the end of the room, her back to them, her arm raised in the act of writing on the blackboard. If she was aware of their presence she gave no sign, until at length Cal, in his deepest bass, addressed her.

'Good morning, Teacher. How about a new pupil this morning?'

She turned with a start, dropping the chalk to the floor.

'Oh, good morning, Mr. Beach. You will think me very rude. I thought it was some of my children. And is this Reed, whom I have been hearing about?'

'Mr. Beach?'

'Reed, whom I have been hearing about. Our fame precedes us.'

She took Reed's hand first, and then Cal's, and it struck Cal that their welcome seemed to be somewhat in the ratio of their ages. He had a glimpse of blue eyes, with thin, telltale puckers about them; fluffy hair; clean, sharp features, somewhat older than they would care to confess; a spare, light figure, rectangular like the school house and the school grounds and the quarter section which accommodated them. There was chalk dust on her hair and it may have been always heard that country school teachers are very wonderful.

'I have always heard that country school teachers are very wonderful,' said Cal, when she seemed waiting for him to speak. 'It is all true. How did you know my name, and his?'

There was a light dancing in her eye that was not bad to see. 'Oh, that's easy. You know a great invention. . . Then Mrs. Stake telephoned you?'

'No, she didn't. I see you are curious. I thought only girls were curious?'

Cal summed her up as a little witch. Very well.

'I offer no apology for being curious—about you,' he said.

There was a light dancing in her eye that was rather good to see.

'How nice!' she chattered. 'Then I'll tell you. Last night, between eight and nine, Hamilton Stake called up Elsie Fyfe for their usual bedtime confab. About the same time I tried to call Elsie, and found the line busy, so I listened in. Oh, don't be shocked. We all do it, although we don't all admit it. I wasn't the only one; I could tell that by the quiet lifting of receivers. You get to know it, with practice. Shall I tell you what the community knows this morning about you and Reed?'

'I am mildly interested,' he admitted, noting that there was really a curve to her throat, in defiance of her general rectangular plan. A rather pleasant curve, it was. And her eyes were full of fun, or something.

To be continued.

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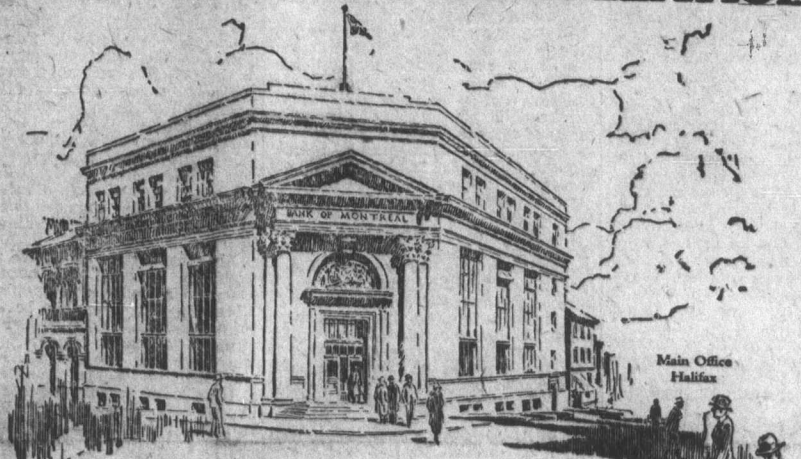
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