

The Smoking Flax

By ROBERT STEAD

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

(Continued from last issue.)

The community knows that you are each, that you come from the East, you're green as grass, that you're through university, and that Jack-Stake is trying you out and will keep you on for the season if you attend to your knitting and don't give me any more trouble than any else, meaning in particular Hamill-Stake, Gander Stake, and Grit Stake, in the order named."

"What else?" the community knows that Reed is years old, and your sister's son, that he has a funny name, and that Mother Stake had taken quite a liking to him. "What else?" the young friend is observant, Miss By the way, speaking of funny eyes narrowed a little under his but the light in them danced eagerly. "My name is Frawdic, F-r-a-w-d-i-c, it's easier to listen to their misnaming of it than to correct them. "Frolic is a rather pleasing appellation, don't you think?" he asked.

"Who knows?" she said, and momentarily dropped her eyes. The children were beginning to gather school. They came barefooted, and of them without coats, and swinging over their shoulders bags with their school books and lunches. The visitor an object of their curiosity, and for two of the bolder boys edged up close enough to hear the conversation. Miss Frawdic proved to be something of a diplomatist.

Here, Harold, she called to the who had come closest. "This is a girl. His name is Reed. Take him away and get him started playing with the other boys. Start a ball game, have twenty minutes yet until time." Harold looked Reed up and down a moment. "C'mon," he said, Reed moved, somewhat shyly, but in a few minutes his voice was coming from the ground as loud as any.

The teacher was in no hurry to return her work at the blackboard, and had a feeling that as Gander had engaged without him successfully for twenty-three years he would probably get along for another morning. He said, "Oh, I forgot to ask Reed's other name," said Miss Frawdic, as though for a subject. "Beach," said Cal. "Beach? That's your name, isn't it? And he's your sister's son?"

The eyes with the shallow furrows that were now looking into his, Cal resented them just a little. He had no intention of being questioned by Annie Frawdic, nor of lying to evade her curiosity. His name is Beach," he said. She lapsed into an appropriate silence, and it was for a moment only. Annie Frawdic had no thought of allowing any pleasantness to develop between her and the community's latest acquisition. The shadow in her eyes was as temporary as that of a flying cloud upon prairies.

"We are so glad to have you," she titled. "You know—a university man, are all such dubs." "Oh, not all, I am sure," said Cal, faintly. "You soon get that way, like as iron sharpeneth iron, you know. I know I have grown very dull for lack of a—a—"

"A whetstone," Cal suggested. "Exactly—a whetstone. Take care I don't call you Mr. Whetstone." They were progressing. With a slim toe she described a circle in the dust on the floor. She was waiting for him to speak, so he spoke a platitude: "It must be wonderful to teach these bright-eyed children; to see them growing up under your guidance, your counsel."

"It isn't. It's a bore, to them and to me. They come to school because they can't help themselves. I teach them for the same reason." Her frankness was engaging. If she had said, "I am teaching school because I have failed to land a husband," he could not have understood her better. He wondered how far she would go. "Never give up," he said.

Her eyes narrowed a trifle, but there was no anger in them. She described another circle with her toe on the floor. As it happened the circles interlinked each other. "You have been in Plainville?" she queried, presently. "No." "Then you have not seen Minnie?" "You mean Miss Stake?" "I hope not," she said, punning on the name. Still, it's a mistake that might be excused."

Cal did not answer. He remembered the uncanny way in which gossip swept through the community, and he had a mental picture of receivers being silently lifted and greedy eaves strained forward to catch what Jackson Stake's new man had said about Minnie. "Nine o'clock!" Miss Frawdic exclaimed. "I must call the children." She extended her hand and took his in a friendly grip. The bones of her thin hand were sharp and firm against his palm.

"I will do the best I can for Reed," she said. Cal turned from the door to take Reed in his arms. "Make good, old Indian; make good!" he whispered in his ear, and gave him an affectionate shake. He waved a friendly arm to the children now trooping into the school, and turned up the road to Jackson Stake's. As he walked he tried to turn the conversation over in his mind. And it always came back to this: "What was it she said about Minnie? Something about a mistake that might be excused. Funny girl. Strange girl. I mean Annie Frolic. Good name. Well, we shall see."

CHAPTER SIX
The week went on tremendously. Up at five every morning; filling manure and oat-boxes while the horses nodded and jerked in great gestures of approval; cleaning stables hot with the animal vapors of the night; currying and brushing manes and flanks and fetlocks; cuffing Big Jim as he curled his great upper lip in mock savagery; buckling the harness to place; running a hand affectionately under the collar to make sure it sat comfortably against the great and willing shoulder, while the sunlight poured through the open door and touched with gold a million dust-planets floating in its yellow wedge—such was the ritual of consecrating a new day to the service of Man. Then the splash at the corner of the house; the grateful solace of cold rain water; the caress of prairie breezes where the shirt neck, turned down for washing, exposed a skirt of white skin under the jacket of tan; the lungs bulking, the muscles elegant, the appetite on edge!

Breakfast, the tired woman moving mechanically back and forth as inexorably as the inexorable machine in which she had been caught; the horses again in Company on Parade, jingling their bits and stamping their big, flat feet; the procession to the fields, and the seeder shuttle up and down, up and down, up and down. After the first day Cal had found himself intrusted with the seeder; Gander had no jealousy when a distribution of the farm labor was being made, and nothing pleased Cal better than to take a little more than his share. Gander had christened him "D.D.," in acknowledgment of his university training, and the sobriquet threatened to stick, but if there had been any contempt in it at first it was quickly giving place to more friendly sentiments. Gander had complimented him generously, driving the compliment home with the declaration that he "never would have reckoned a D.D. could catch on so quick." He "reckoned" further that perhaps no one was quite hopeless, provided he was fortunate enough to fall into good hands at the start.

Every hour of the day had its own peculiar witchery, but it was five o'clock in the afternoon that Cal learned to look forward with greatest anticipation. By five o'clock Reed would be home from school and come skipping across the fields with tell-tale traces of Mother Stake's great bread-and-jam sandwiches hanging tenaciously to his cheeks. It seemed to Cal that never before had he measured the grip the boy had taken about his heart. Their constant association during six weeks of gipsying with "Antelope" had built up a chumship the strength of which he had not realized until these daily periods of separation. Always the boy had been to him the living representation of Celesta, and had been loved, perhaps, on her account, but now he was laying strange claims upon his guardian's heart in right and title of his own. But into Reed's life had, suddenly come a new object of affection. It happened on the second day on the farm that as the boy returned from school

he encountered on the road where it wound among the poplar groves a very brown and very curly and very bright-eyed spaniel. Only for a moment did they regard each other with misgivings, and then the dog, pouncing upon Reed, licked him a lavish welcome. Reed, to protect his face, wrapped his arms about the shaggy shoulders, and the two went down in a wrestle together, rolling and tumbling about on the grass. They formed friendship in that moment and raced off to the house to proclaim their discoveries. "Trix is a bad dog," said Mrs. Stake.

improvingly. "A bad, harum-scarum dog. The way she goes galavantin' over the country—I declare, it's not respectable." Flat on the floor, with chops resting on her extended paws and eyes closed to the merest twinkle, the spaniel gravely accepted her rebuke. Her demeanor was that of one who confessed it all and was not quite ashamed. "If you'd been home like a good dog you'd ha' met Reed yesterday," her mistress continued. "But no, you must be away scourin' the neighborhood, an' in no good company at that, I'll be bound. Now be off with you—both o' you!" But as she ordered them off she was spreading a great bread-and-jam sandwich, and neither Reed nor Trix was so foolish as to take her immediately at her word.

To be continued.
LISTENING ENCOURAGES
If you are a truly well-bred woman you do not listen to gossip of servants or encourage neighbors to talk about other members of a community. You encourage unkind reports if you listen and give credence to them quite as much as if you repeat them or start them. The person who greets you with, "Now, don't breathe this to a soul, but—" is not a person to be trusted or cultivated. The soldiers marched to the church and halted in the square outside. As one wing of the edifice was undergoing repairs, there was room only for about half of the company. "Sergeant," ordered the captain, "tell the men who don't want to go to church to fall out." A large number did so at once. "Now, sergeant," said the captain, "dismiss all the men who did not fall out and march the others in; they need it most."

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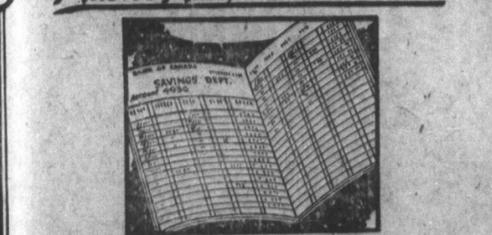
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