

The Smoking Flax

By ROBERT STEAD

Author of *The Cowpuncher, Neighbors, etc.*

(Continued from last issue.)

"That's so," she said, looking at him curiously, as though she were examining some kind of specimen. Then, after a pause, "That's so. Perhaps I see it quite straight, thinkin' so much o' Minnie. You don't know her, of course. Well, she's my daughter—only daughter, twenty-one in June. I set a heap by her. When I was a young'un, all day an' all night, I was round half the night with squawlin' babies, I useta say. Wait till Minnie grows up. Minnie was the youngest, except Hamilton, an' she was my only girl, an' I sort o' set an extra store on her, as you might say. I suppose mother had a sort o' sympathy for their girls, but they don't have for their boys; they know what's ahead o' 'em. Well, useta keep up those times with promisin' myself that when Minnie grew up, her an' me'd sort o' hit it off together. But would she stay on the farm? Not for the soul o' sake o' her. She's a lawyer's office in Plainville—though they have to write about so much o' Plainville beats me—an' I'm still beginnin' the pots an' pans."

Something suspiciously like moisture gathered in the old woman's eyes and she reached for the corner of her handkerchief. "Land's sake, you're long here!" she suddenly exclaimed. "The boys'll be wantin' your help with the beans, though if you're just from the city I reckon they won't be missin' much, but you may as well jump in at once, an' get your feet wet. Away they say, an' they waded them out of the house."

"It's not that she wanted to hurry off to work," Cal summed it up to himself. "She had shown a little more of her heart than she intended—to a stranger. And not a bad heart at that, I'm mistaken."

I wonder about this Minnie."

Jackson Stake met him in the yard, can you handle horses?" he demanded. "I've driven a team," Cal answered, calling a week end when he had taken the reins of two downhearted nags placed at his disposal. But a fine air of confidence was bubbling within him. It was the climate, the air, the sunshine, the big spaces, the big roads, the big meal, or something. Perhaps Jimmie. At any rate he was beginning to understand why the only thing a stranger feels apologetic about is having to apologize for anything. "Sure, I can drive a team," he asserted. "You should, at forty dollars a month," the farmer remarked drily. "But I expect what you have in mind is an arario team. Two horse. A team here four horses—sometimes six. Can you drive four horses?"

"I never have," Cal confessed. "Well, it don't come without learnin'. It takes a bit of education to run a team—you'll find that, an' you may as well start at the bottom. Suppose you, along with Gander this afternoon, keep your eyes an' ears open. I'll show you tomorrow how drunk I was when I hired you."

Something about the twinkle in the old man's eyes set Cal wondering, just which had been playing with the other, perhaps Jackson Stake really wanted other man and had dropped into his play on purpose. Well—Gander's four horses were lined up in a company on Parade, and Gander was busy snapping the reins to the busy and affectionate cuffing the muzzles curled up at him as he went by. "Will you show me how to do that?" he asked. "Let me get the system of it in my head. I'll savvy if you give me chance."

Gander turned a not unfriendly look on him. "Not you're shottin'," he said. "It's easy; see—"

Oh, I dunno. His name's Fraser Fyfe, so we cut it down to Double F. School teacher here, Annie Frolic—you'll be goin' to her, Reed, once you get settled—says it means very loud, but I don't see no connection. Ham's a bit soft on Double F's daughter Elsie; that's what Grit was kiddin' him about at noon, you remember, when he was washin'. Nice girl, though. Her an' Minnie useta be back an' forth a lot, Ham's name in Hamilton, of course, but he jus' gets Ham, excep' from Mother. 'Hamburgher Stake', we call him sometimes, for fun. An' Grit, I guess that's his real name; dunno; sometimes I call 'im Dinty Moore. Looks a bit like 'im, I'll say."

Cal felt a delicacy about asking an explanation of Gander's own appellation, and Gander offered none, evidently quite overlooking the need of it. It was not entirely associated with his lean, flexible neck. When he was a boy of fourteen or fifteen years, his voice, in going through those contortions peculiar to the voices of boys of about that age, had shown a tendency to break out in a goose-like honk. To Gander's great embarrassment these honks would come at the most inopportune moments and wholly without notice, so that the most casual statement, begun in a tame and respectable note, ended in something suggestive of a wild goose piping to its mate. Some stuck; it had stuck so long and so well that he had almost forgotten he had a christened name, William, perfectly good and only slightly used.

They had passed out of the lane into an unfenced field. Directly before them, with its tongue deep in the damp soil, Cal supposed to be the seeder. It resembled a long trough with a cart wheel at either end, a quantity of short lengths of garden hose suspended underneath, and a series of steel discs resting on the ground. Gander dexterously swung his two "off" horses across the tongue, then he was at their heads, hitching the neck-yoke; then he was at their heels, hitching the traces, while Cal dog-trotted about after him, arriving at each scene of operations just after Gander had finished.

Gander carried the reins around behind the implement and started his team with a word, and Cal and Reed followed, watching the operations with great interest. The discs began to turn, scooping little, narrow trenches in the soil; into these trenches, through the rubber hose, kernels of oats began to fall, and to be immediately buried by a series of short chains dragging behind. It was very interesting. Presently Reed discovered, at the top of the hose, a little machine, grinding the kernels down from the trough, almost as though it were counting them. It was tremendously interesting.

"The field was a mile long, and it was accomplished without a word, save Gander's voice occasionally raised in admonition of his horses. The heat of the sun was tempered with a cool breeze which caught up particles of dust from the machine, so that it seemed to be trailing a miniature, low-hanging cloud. At the end of the field the horses turned, almost of their own accord, and Gander stopped them with a tension on the reins.

"Nothin' to it," he remarked; "nothin' to it. Old Jim here knows the job as well as I do. All you got to do is watch that you're almost touchin' your rear wheel, without overlappin' it. If you overlap it's a waste o' seed an' time; if you don't touch it means a strip not sowed. Nobody'll know about it now, but the whole neighborhood 'll know in a month from now, when the crop comes up, an' they'll say to me, 'Gander, you must o' been borie-eyed when you sowed your oats.' An' I'll have to say, 'Not me. It was that D.D. o' ours, his education havin' been neglected in his youth.' Try it," and he thrust the reins into Cal's hand. "Watch your main wheel there; it should run right in the track we made comin' down, an' "

CHAPTER FIVE
At six the next morning, while Cal, busy with the curry comb and brush,

Fashion Fancies



By Marie Belmont

All the new hats are small and close-fitting. They must fit the head snugly, as the three models shown here. The upper hat is of dark green velvet. There are rows and rows of bias stitching for trimming, and a tiny bow of the velvet at the back.

The middle hat is of rose velour. The brim rolls up at the front, and at the back there is a stiff bow of the velour which slips through a slit in the crown of the hat.

The lower hat is a small black felt affair, with two black quills dipping from back to front.

keep an eye now an' again that the grain is workin' through all the tubes; sometimes they get plugged up. Go to it!"

And so the day went on. By four in the afternoon Reed tired of following the seeder up and down as, like a mighty shuttle, it wove a web a mile wide from fringe to fringe, and went back to the farmyard, where he interested himself in a long and critical inspection of the old fanning mill. About the same time Gander pronounced his commendation upon Cal. "You're doin' O. K.," he said. "Take a round by yourself an' lend me some tobacco."

Cal handed over his pouch, and pressed on in high spirits. It was plain that his adaptability had made an impression upon Gander. "Funny world," he mused to himself, as he thought of Gander. "Not a bad scout, though, and that D.D. talk of his is just fun. Still, it's plain he thinks himself the best man of the two." And, damn it, he is—that's the joke of it. Well, he won't be, before long. I'll pick this up in no time. Oh boy, feel that air! I know I'm going to have lungs like a bellows before fall."

Tired, hungry, happy, Cal turned with his team to the farm-yard at the close of the day. Mrs. Stake could not pile his plate too high at supper, and when the chores were done, he and Reed were ready for bed.

"No story tonight, Reed," he said. "Too big a day, and too much to think about. Say your verse and let us roll in." And Reed, climbing on his knee for a good-night caress, said, "Get, but it's great to be a farmer. When I grow up I'm going to be a farmer, with a lot of big horses, and a granary, and a fanning mill, and everything."

Presently, up from the cushions of the old Ford came the measured breathing of two tired farmers sleeping the sleep of labor and contentment, while the last red rays of sunset faded out of the west and the still hush of night settled over the fields and prairies.

humped over the flock of Jim, the big bay, with whom he already had struck up something of a friendship, Jackson Stake entered the stable. He observed the currying process for a moment or two with apparent satisfaction.

"Good enough," he remarked, when Cal straightened up. "You know, Beach, a horse—any horse worth while—is as vain as a woman. You can make a hit with old Jim jus' combin' his mane an' fetlocks an' sayin', 'Jim, old boy, you're lookin' your best th' smornin'. Where's the lad?'"

"Not up yet. All in last night, so I let him sleep."

"Sure. That's good for him. The missus was askin'. Seems to have taken kind of a shine to him. You know, we lost a boy, as you might say, an' a woman never gets over that kind o' thing."

"I'm sorry," Cal said simply, while Jackson Stake masked his features by worrying a plug of chewing tobacco. Something in his face suggested that the old man himself had not quite got over "that kind o' thing."

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