The Smoking Flax

By ROBERT STEAD

Author of The Cowpuncher, Neighbors, etc.

(Continued from last issue.)

The granary which was to be their home was built on two logs or skids, roughly pointed, so that it could be hauled beside the "set" at threshing time and filled direct from the separator. It seemed to have been left just at the spot where the loitering of the horses had overbalanced the persistence of their driver. It pointed nowhere in particular. Nearby, and similarly pointed, was another granary, its exact double. It gave signs of habitation, as over the door, scrawled with brown paint on the side of an apple box, was the gleend, "Dirty Moore".

Cal absorbed these general facts as he loaded the sacks and harness into the Ford for transportation to the hay shed. When this was done they went up to the house, assuming that Jackson Stake would now have completed his preliminary overtures. The house stood a little to the north of the principal cluster of buildings; it was a four-cornered box with a roof, and a chimney at each end of the roof. The door was in the centre of the eastern side, and in reaching the door from the barnyard one made a detour around a water barrel which had leaked somewhat copiously at the southeastern corner. This detour, however, could not be accomplished in a wide and curving movement; some sharp angles were necessary to avoid collapse over the pile of stove wood which occupied the right front of the prospect. A hewn block of wood served as a doorstep, with a fragment of plough-share nailed to one end as a boot scraper. Dexterous footwork over a washtob and sundry minor uteusils landed Cal and Reed safely upon the step.

The door was open, and their shadow, falling inwards announced their presence. Jackson Stake was seated in a big chair, prodding his pipe with a straw from the kitchen broom, while Mrs. Stake wrestled an ample armful of dough on the wooden table. "This is the missus," said the farmer, without rising. "She'll be glad to see you."

"I'd be a heap gladder to see a woman," said Mrs. Stake, severely, without looking up from her dough. "You men are all alike; seem to think there's no limit to the mouths a woman can fill. Jackson can always get another man or two, whether he needs him or not; but I can't get a woman, not for the soul or sake o' me. Come in!"

She was tall and square, big boned and not over fleshed. As she kneaded the dough the muscles of her arms rose and fell like those of a man. With a knife she severed a section, moulded it skillfully into shape, and tucked it into a pan with a twin brother. With all her brusqueness there was a touch of something akin to tenderness as she patted it into place. She crossed the floor with quick, straight strides and set it up on a board bridging two chairs beside the oven. Then as she looked up, "Hello? Where'd the boy come from?

"He's mine."

"Yours? Did you hire him, too, Jackson?" Apparently Jackson's courage had failed him before he got this far in his revelation. "Yours, did you say?" again to Cal. "Yours and whose?"

"Mine—adopted. My sister's," Cal explained.

Mrs. Stake looked at Reed and Reed looked at Mrs. Stake, and as they looked all the woman's sternness melted into an expression very human and motherly. "Come on in, Son," she said, "I know you're hungry. Boys o' eight or nine are always hungry. I've raised three, an' I know."

She broke a bun from a fine fresh brown panful just out of the oven and placed it in the boy's hand. Then she turned to her kneading. "It's not that I mind work," she confided in the dough; "what I mind is everlastin' work, mornin', noon an' night; never done. The men can get help, even when they don' partic'lar need it, but the women just have to plug alone. There's Minnie, now; if she'd stick to the farm— But she bolted. I dunno as I blame her. Some days I'm blame near boltin' myself. Well, what d'ye want?" to Cal, who still stood framed in the doorway.

"A broom and a mop, if you please," Cal ansered.

"For what?"

"To brush up the granary, a bit."

Mrs. Stake regarded Cal with some curiosity. "Partic'lar, ain't ye? Well, I dunnor but it's a good idea." She rubbed the dough from her hands and filled a pail with hot water. From behind the door she produced a broom and a mop, and severely handed the lot to Cal, who thanked her and started for the granary. At the corner by the leaky water barrel he was arrested by her sharp voice calling him.

"You'll be sendin' the boy to school," she called, "an' I'll wager his clo'es is more holy than righteous. Bring 'im in tonight an' I'll darn' 'em up."

By midday the granary wore a very different appearance. The floor had come through the ordeal of soap and water with mixed emotions, but now convinced that no harm was intended, and that this was only the strange way of these strange people, it smiled back pleasantly upon Cal and Reed as they sorted their few belongings into position. The cushions from the Ford would continue to be their bed; set on the corner of the floor, and equipped with mattress, blankets, and pillows, they looked tempting enough for a noon-day nap, not to speak of nights after heavy labor in the fields. The suitcases were opened; Cal's mirror and shaving set hung from nails in the wall; the gun straddled over the door, and the cartridges sat on a little shelf which Cal had built; even the spare tire with the blow-out, hanging by the window, helped to lend a furnished air to the place. A table and chairs would come in time; they were luxuries, not necessities. Outside, Cal had moved the grindstone so that it stood parallel with the granary, and not in reckless disregard of any definite angle to it; had built little brackets on which he hoisted the binder knives that had been found lying in the grass nearby; had moved four sections of drag barrows from the side around to the back and had stood them up on edge with some show of symmetry, and had carried a log which leaned against the granary for no particular purpose except in fulfilment of fate to the general log pile, where its fate could more conveniently be fulfilled. Inside and out the granary proclaimed that a soul had moved in to possess a body just comfortably started on its way to disintegration.

It was noon before they knew it filled with that peculiar lightness of heart which has to do with the making of a place in which to live. The jingle of trace chains and the heavy stamping of work horses were their first reminder that the morning was gone. The farmyard shook itself awake, discarded its air of sunny indolence, and suddenly became a scene of bustling activity. Twelve great horses, arranged in three teams of four, each harnessed abreast, sweeping in from the fields, now crowded aggressively about the long wooden water trough in the centre of the yard—(if an area so undefined as Jackson Stake's farm-yard can be said to have a centre. Just where the yard began or ended no one knew or cared). A lanky young man with a gait apparently acquired in the supporting of his overalls moved a lever and presently from overhead came the rush of air in the blades of the windmill and the slow "clank . . . clank" of the connecting-rod as it operated the pump.

"Grit, old Jim is checked up," said the young man with the gait to a head suddenly thrust through a space in the shouldering mass of horse-flesh. The head was crowned with a straw hat which, either through age or misadventure, had lost the greater part of its brim; underneath the remnant a pair of deep eyes twinkled slowly as though sunken fires of humor far within, lit by unseen fires of humor far within; and an expanse of cheek and chin gave roothold to a stubby whisker well laden with dust and sand. The head made its way amid the heaving backs to a great bay who, with nostrils high in air, was snorting his protest above the busy drinking of his companions. A hand, no doubt associated with the head, unhooked the check-line, and the bay, feeling release, plunged his eager muzzle into the water.

"Got to check 'im, Gander," said the head. "He won't do nothin' but flirt with this Mollie-mare if he ain't checked up short. Fact. When I think o' him an' then o' you, I says to myself, 'Old boy, you've almost human'."

"Come, Dinty, I ain't no flirt," said the man addressed as Gander. "You know that. Ain't in my line." But his voice suggested that the charge was not distasteful.

"Can' I help?" said Cal, who had approached unheard above the clamor of the horses. "I am the new hired man. My name is Cal Beach."

The two others turned toward him and regarded him for a moment in silence. While they were thus engaged a third figure, a youth of eighteen or thereabout, emerged from the mass. All three regarded him.

"Well, welcome to our city," said the man who answered alternately to the names of Grit and Dinty. "You're the new hired man. I'm the old hired man. It's the business of the old hired man to boss the new hired man, eh, Gander?"

Gander was non-committal. "Didn't know Dad was figurin' on hirin' any more help," he remarked. "However, he's the doctor. What can you do?"

"Not so very much, I am afraid. I can drive a Ford—"

"'An' it takes a good man to do that,'" Grit chanted from a popular song.

—and horses a little, and I'm middling strong, and—I've been through university.

The words were not out before he realized how inapt they were. "Hang it!" he thought, "that isn't what meant. I meant to let them know that I wasn't a dub, that I had sense, that I could pick up things if they gave me a chance."

"Sounds all right, all but the last," said Gander. "Don't know as what they learn you in the university 'll help much. A man on a farm don' need no D.D.'s, or whatever it is, after his name. What he wants is horsepower an' savvy. Well, we'll see. Go down to the barn an' throw some hay in the mangers."

"Savvy," thought Cal. "That was the word. Means the same thing—or should . . . But does it?"

Reed was at his heels as he entered the barn. The building was of poplar logs, with a loft overhead, and gables boarded perpendicularly with shiplap. Mangers ran along each end, and were cross-sectioned by short partitions which divided the space into stalls, each wide enough for two horses. From the ends of these short partitions stout posts supported the loft and gave anchorage for wooden harness pegs. Small stones and gravel to the depth of several inches, impacted under the hoofs of many horses, made a floor almost as hard as rock.

Cal and Reed has barely time to fill the mangers from the hay shed when the horses were down upon them. As each came in, nodding his head and clanking his harness prodigiously, he walked straight to his stall and made an immediate inspection of the oat box nailed to the corner of the manager. Finding it empty his nostrils went up in annoyance, but a moment later, evidently on the theory that half a loaf is better than no bread, he plunged into the fragrant hay.

"Hello, who's the kid?" said Gander, encountering the boy in the doorway.

"Another hired man?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's your name?"

"Reed, sir."

"Reed what?"

"Reed Beach."

Gander stroked the back of his long neck meditatively, "You don' mean he's your daddy?" he said, indicating Cal with a jerk of his head.

Gander seemed to mouth a remark, but swallowed it. Then:

"An' have you been through university, too?" Cal, from his work between two horses, heard the words, and they struck home nastily. But his heart bounced at the boy's prompt rejoinder:

"Not yet, but I'm going to. Have you?"

"Why, no, can't say as I have," said Gander, and his hand dropped from his long neck and gave Reed's hair a not unfriendly tousle. "All the horses got oats?" he demanded, in a voice intended to reach Grit Wilson. "Well, c'mon an' eat. C'mon, Cal."

The youth of eighteen or so had preceded them to the house. Humped over a bench beside the water barrel he was engaged in splashy and noisy ablutions.

"That'll do, Ham," said Wilson, crowding him away from the bench very much as the horses had crowded each other at the water trough. "Yo ain't tivatin' to go over to Double D's at this time o' day."

"Oh, we'd rather wash, if we may," said Cal.

"Sure, you may. No, law agin it," Gander agreed. "Go ahead."

Cal washed. The coarseness of the basin and of a huge bar of laundry soap was compensated by the fresh rain water and the warm spring sunshine. When he had washed someone shoved the towel into his hand. It was of heavy duck, made down from a grain sack, and showed many evidences of use and abuse. Through eyes smarting with the strong soap he tried to locate a spot less soiled than the average. When he turned to empty his basin he found Gander burrowing in it.

A side of biscuit tin nailed to the wall made a passable mirror, and a wire comb chained nearby completed the toilet equipment.

"C'mon," said Gander again. "Don' keep the ol' lady waitin'. She's a bit skittish."

Inside, a long table, covered with oilcloth that had once been white but through which blacks mudges of wear were now showing at the creases and corners, stood in the middle of the floor. Chairs were set about it and the men moved straight to their places, much as Cal again thought, as did the horses in the stable.

Cal and Reed hung back. "Sit down, anywhere," said Jackson Stake. "No formal'ties. Now dig in."

They "dug in"—into boiled potatoes and mashed turnips and fried pork and hot, strong tea and bread thick and white and flaky and butter smooth and yellow and delicious. Mrs. Stake had a large family to feed, and she fed them, as her husband said, without formalities, but she fed them well. She herself did not join them, but waited on the table, reloading bread plates, refilling potato bowls and tea-cups as the ravages of the moment demanded. Then, at the first sign of a pause, came great helpings of rice-and-raisin pudding dumped from a mighty spoon into plates just cleared of meat and potatoes.

"We're a bit rough an' ready," she apologized to Cal as she loaded his plate. "'Specially since Minnie left I don' get time to wash any more dishes than I jus' can't help. You're a city man an' I reckon you've been places where they give you a heap more tablecloth an' a heap less to eat. More puddin', Son?" to Reed. "Fill up. It's a long time till supper."

The men consumed amazingly big meals in an amazingly short time; and as each cleared his plate he got up and went out. Presently Cal noted that only he and Reed remained. Mrs. Stake swept the soiled dishes from a corner of the table and sat down with her own well-laden plate.

"Ever worked on a farm?" she demanded, presently.

"No. This will be my first attempt. I expect to find it a great life."

"Don' over-expect yourself. It's a great life, all right, if you don' have to live it. That's why everybody's leavin' the farm for the city."

"But they're not," Cal ventured to correct her. "For example, I've just left the city for the farm."

To be continued.

After shaving—Minard's Liniment.