

The Smoking Flax

By ROBERT STEAD

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

(Continued from last issue.)

The fire had died until only a few coals glowed before him; a chill of night air came up from the lake, the stars shone stolidly overhead. The river, swollen with the spring overflows of the prairie sloughs, muttered gurglingly at his feet. Into its black tide he looked as though it could give, perhaps, some answer to the mystery of life.

Then he yawned, tapped the ashes from his pipe, put it away, and went to bed.

CHAPTER THREE

Reed awakened with the sun pouring in upon him. His arm, reaching under the blankets beside him, found the place empty, and he sprang up from his pillow. In the gravel near by he saw Cal bending over a fire.

"Hello, Daddy X!" he cried. "Why didn't you call me? What luck for breakfast?"

"Big doings, Reed; big doings! Come and see."

The boy clambered out of the car and ran to the spot where Cal, frying pan in hand, leaned over his little fire. An appetizing odor came up from something grilling on the hot metal.

"Smells scrumptious," Reed approved. "What is it, Daddy X?"

"A secret. Listen. Hold down your heat. Let me whisper. Wild duck!"

"Wild duck? How? But you said we mustn't shoot them; you said it was against the law?"

"The law allows an exception for explorers threatened with starvation. We are explorers, Reed, threatened with starvation—if we don't get something to eat. And on top of that, when this fine drake a-lit on the river just at day-break it was too much for an empty stomach, Reed."

"But I didn't hear you shoot?"

"You are a sound sleeper. Conscience sits light on a young stomach, as well as on an empty one. Now, have your dip. It's cold, but safe, if you stay near the shore."

With a sudden contortion of his arms the boy emerged from his nightdress. There was a gleam of sunlight on his little lithe body as he plunged into the stream. He came up spluttering and shaking.

"O-o-w-h!" he shouted. "You said it was cold, and you were right!"

The boy was jumping about on the gravel.

"O-o-w-h!—Where's the towel?"

"Try a sun rub, Reed. It's better for you, and saves laundry."

The boy raced up and down the bank, rubbing his body with his hands as he went. In a minute or two the morning sun and air had whipped him clean and dry.

After breakfast: "How's Antie this morning? Have you called the roll?"

"Antelope, please. No, sir, the roll has not been called."

"Very well. Sergeant, call the roll."

"Briak and business-like, Reed plunged into the tool kit for the tire gauge and made a quick examination of the wheels while Cal measured their oil and gasoline resources. Then he presented himself with a salute.

Front left, sixty; rear left, sixty-five; front right, sixty; rear right, fifty."

Cal returned the salute. "Fifteen pounds fatigue duty, for rear right."

"Yes, sir!"

More business with the gasoline tank. Then:

"Sergeant, our advance is cut off!"

"General. How cut off?"

"No gasoline!"

"Just a drop—perhaps a quart. Sergeant, you are a practical man. We have gasoline enough for five miles, and oil enough for fifteen miles; how far can we go?"

"Twenty miles!"

"Good! Let us be off!"

But on the way to the long hill out of the valley Reed slipped from his happy world of make-belief. "What are we going to do for gasoline, Daddy X?" he ventured. "You gave your last money to the man who pulled us out of the mud."

"Yes. We are in a bad way. We have neither money nor gasoline. What do we do when we have neither money nor gasoline?"

"Write a story. Oh, Daddy X, write the story of the oak and the elm!"

But Cal shook his head. The youngster was thinking of the recourse Cal had had to newspapers in the cities they had come through; he was generally able to sell some kind of "story" to buy gasoline and food.

"No newspaper market here," he had to say.

"Isn't there a paper in Plainville?"

"A country paper. But country papers don't buy stories, usually. The editor writes his own, or acquires them by means of a long pair of shears and a paste-pot. No, Sergeant, the army must go to work."

"Where? On a farm?"

"On a farm. On the first farm we come to. Certainly on a farm within five miles."

"A tremendous word for a sergeant, I must say," said the general, severely. They were up on the rolling prairie again, bowling through a country tufted with groves of small poplars and willows. Presently a trail led off to the left through a gate in a wire fence and lost itself amidst the poplars. Cal brought his car to a stop.

"Consultation of staff," he announced. "Doubtless that trail leads to a farmstead. Shall we go in?"

"We are out of gasoline?"

"Almost."

"And food?"

"Almost."

"And money?"

"Quite."

"Let us go in."

"Very good, Sergeant."

He turned the wheels to the left and the rickety car contorted itself stangely, but successfully down into the ditch and up again. The gate was open and they stumbled along a trail threading its way among the poplars. Suddenly it broad-

ened into an open space and they found themselves in the midst of a village of farm buildings. There was a scurrying of poultry out of their way and much chatter from a flock of geese more than half disposed to hostility. Cal brought his car to an abrupt stop, wedged between an obstreperous steer and the corner of a log building.

Around the corner of the building, from the eastward, came the shadow of a man, grotesque and squat on the hard-packed earth of the barnyard. In immediate pursuit of the shadow came the substance; six feet and sixty years of substance; broad-chested substance under a blue cotton shirt and blue duck overalls held in precarious position by a pair of red leather suspenders with two ruptured eyelets; the whole surmounted by a large, ruddy, and not ill-natured face, fringed about the ears with a pleasant tangle of grey hairs and topped with a submissive lump of straw hat.

"Whoa, Eliza!" he exclaimed. "Jump in' jack rabbits, who have we here?"

"Two hired men," said Cal. "You weren't expecting us?"

"Not as you'd notice it. Whose hired men?"

"Yours."

The farmer removed the twisted accumulation from his head and harrowed his scalp with his thick fingers. "Well, I'll be danged," he confided at last. "I admit bein' in Plainville last night an' havin' a bit more formalin than was good for me, but I don't have no recollection of hirin' a man an' a boy an' a tin Lizzie. What is the deal?"

The farmer's partial confession opened in an unexpected channel for Cal's quick wits. "Forty dollars a month for me during the season," he said; "the boy gets his board and goes to school, and Lizzie makes herself useful about the farm if you furnish the gasoline."

The thick fingers gently continued their harrowing, while a "twinkle of amusement lit up the broad, red face. "Not so bad," he confided. "I was afraid I might have sold you the farm, or got you engaged to Minnie, or traded off the wife's spaniel, or something serious like that. Well, Jackson Stake is a man that stands by his bargain. But one thing," he added, with an apparent twinge of apprehension; "nothin' o' this to the wife. She's a suspicious creature, is the wife. I think she doubts all as well as Plainville last night. Not a word o' it to her. I'll tell her I met you just the now on the road and hired you, an' that's all there's to it. I can use another man, but you'll have to sleep in a granery. As for Lizzie, you can pasture her out. I drive a Dodge."

Cal already knew something of the jealousies peculiar to owners of different makes of cars, and wondered whether the farmer's remark was to be taken as an indication of snobbery or a piece of harmless information. Aloud: "Good. Lead us to the granery, and let us get to work."

"Give 'er the juice," said Jackson Stake, and as Cal drew the car by him the farmer hepped on to the running-board with the agility of a boy of twenty. "To the right, around the pig pen. Gee! Gee! Don't you know gee from haw? To the right. Look out for the sow! Look out for the hay rack! Look out for the wagon tongue! There, the frame caboose, straight ahead."

Cal steamed straight ahead toward the "caboose," speeding up as he went, and brought the car to a sudden stop a yard from the door. The old man lurched forward with a jerk but did not lose his grip. "Jumpin' jack rabbits! If you're as quick a starter as you are a stopper we'll get along fine. . . . This is it."

They got out and inspected "it." It was a frame building, twelve by fourteen feet; one thickness of drop siding nailed to two-by-four studs; floored with shiplap; roofed with shingles; a door in one end, a window, which could be removed, in the other. A heap of old sacks with a musty smell; a heap of old harness with a leathery smell; an old fanning-mill without any smell. Three sacks of screenings; up-ended and open-mouthed; probably chicken feed. The screenings had been strewed somewhat generously about the floor, and in a corner, where the rain had got in, had taken root and were sending thin,

fungus stalks groping up the board wall. The theory that the screenings were chicken feed was suddenly supported by a commotion in the farm-yard. An old rooster, on sentry-go, observing the granary door open, had given the "cook-house call," and the barnyard poultry were sweeping down upon them from every direction like cavalry in a charge, shedding superfluous feathers as they came. They were into the fortress, among everybody's feet, dabbling with terrific velocity, before the garrison had time to drop the portcullis.

"Hist! Hist! Sho!" cried Jackson Stake, making a great swipe with his foot which caught a rooster on the wish-bone and sent him somersaulting under Antelope. "Hungry heathens! Who'd think they were fed an hour ago? Strike me! but I never could see how a four-pound hen could eat a bushel of wheat without wabblin'."

By united efforts they stemmed the charge and cleared the battle ground. "Well, this is it," the farmer repeated, when the door had been closed on the last invader. "You can dump this stuff in the hay shed, an' the wife'll give you a broom an' a mop, if you're fastidious. Got your own blankets?"

Cal nodded.

"Good! Now I'll go up to the house an' sort of break it gently. You know what it is to cook for two more mouths. Dang it, I don't blame 'er. If there's any doggonder job than a farmer's it's a farmer's wife's. In about ten minutes she'll be prepared for the worst, an' you bump in then to borrow the broom. Mind, now, give me ten minutes!"

And the old farmer was off houseward, pursued by a scouting detachment from the poultry yard.

Cal and Reed exchanged looks which began seriously, and ended simultaneously in an outbreak of laughter. "But he didn't hire us last night, Daddy X," the boy protested, when his sides were settled.

"And I didn't say he did, if you noticed," Cal returned. "Just a bit of good luck, and when Fate hands you a bit of good luck, don't question her too."

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Fashion Fancies



By Marie Belmont

The frock above was designed especially for wear in one of the new Broadway productions.

The material of the dress is velvet, and the color is the new golden pheasant shade, striped in black. The dress is cut on straight lines, with a scarf collar of the plain black velvet dropping at one side.

Golden pheasant is also lovely in crepe frocks, and a number of them have been designed for early Fall wear.

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closely. Now, let's wrestle this stuff out of here. Let me see—that's the hay shed over there beyond the pig pen."

Cal took an observation of the position. It was evident that in the laying out of this ramble of structures on Jackson Stake's homestead no town planner had been employed. Most of the buildings were of logs, and the obvious theory was that the logs were hauled in winter and dumped wherever chance dictated, and in the spring a building was put up wherever the logs happened to lie. One larger building, which might, in a pinch, be called a barn, elbowed off a swarm of lesser brethren crowding in about its feet, much as Jackson Stake warded off the chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys, and young pigs which pursued him on his perambulations about the yard. Except for the house, which was of boards and stood a little to one side, the cardinal points of the compass had been blandly disregarded. Everywhere were buildings, disparting in every direction, in all states of repair and disrepair, with gaping doors yawning in the morning sunshine, housing, no doubt, all sorts of strange quadr-

ped. The place gave promise of enormous interest.

To be continued.

A GIRL BLACKSMITH

Up in St. Paul, Minnesota, a girl eighteen years old, Miss Ela Farnsworth by name, is running an up-to-date blacksmith shop, and doing any and all kinds of work any other blacksmith would do. Since the death of her father, who ran the shop for twenty-five years, Miss Farnsworth has become owner and operator, and employs two men to assist her in doing the work. Ever since a small child, she had been working with her father when not in school, and during these years she not only learned to like the work, but actually mastered the trade. She became an expert in welding and tempering iron, and shoeing horses, in fact, in everything pertaining to blacksmithing. Today she is one of the best blacksmiths in St. Paul, and says she expects to continue her work at the forge as long as business lasts.

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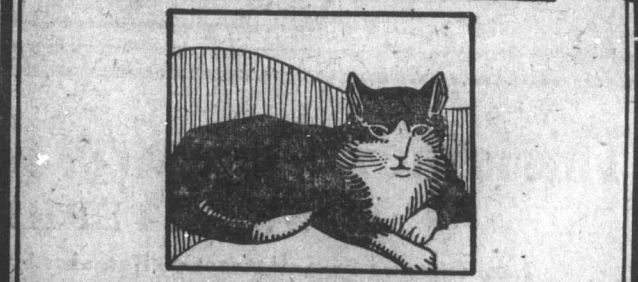
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No. 98 From Yarmouth, arrives 3.12 p.m.
No. 97 From Halifax, arrives 6.12 p.m.
No. 99 From Halifax (Mon., Thurs., Sat.) arrives 11.48 p.m.
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