

# The Smoking Flax

By ROBERT STEAD

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

(Continued from last issue.)

The rush of strange, new work had early interrupted the bed-time stories. When supper was over and the horses done up for the night Cal was ready to drag his weary limbs to the cushions and blankets in the corner of the granary. In those first days all the horse power of his engines was needed to drive the physical machines; nothing was left for romantic adventures. But soon he hardened to his work; soon the work became mainly automatic, leaving his mental reserves almost untouched, and after three days of coma he again began to think. It was then he became somewhat startled by the ease with which one can get out of the way of thinking. Gander, and Grit, for example, it was quite apparent they didn't think. Their minds trudged around in a deep-grooved circle, like a captive bear around a post; rarely climbing to the top of the post for an observation; never excursions into the vast unknown that lay just beyond the circle. To them there was no unknown; the world lay complete within their deep-grooved circle; complete and fully comprehended. Everything was simple, and for the most part, satisfactory, and to be contemplated with amiable acquiescence. No sleepy bear amid his bones was more content than they; no scientist, searching heaven and earth for truth, was half so wise. Their contempt for Cal's university education was not assumed; it was genuine, and without even the saving flavor of a tinge of envy. The sting of it was not mitigated by the fact that, if Cal was now rising somewhat in their opinion, it was in spite of, not because of, his scholarship. Cal almost frightened himself with the question whether it might be that he, too, would presently find all the universe within his circle, and plod it with the unconscious paws of Gander and Wilson. At all costs he must save himself from that; he must save his soul alive. The first thing was to resume the bedtime stories for the boy. He would begin again Saturday evening.

Saturday evening, just after supper Hamilton Stake waylaid Cal. He had as yet had scarcely any conversation with Hamilton, for no particular reason except that they worked in different fields and did not come much in contact. Such impression as he had had had been favorable, so when Hamilton strolled with over-acted casualness into the granary where Cal was spreading blankets after their day's airing he welcomed him heartily.

"Lo, Ham; come along. What do you think of my diggings? Some bore, eh?"

"Pretty nifty," Hamilton agreed, a beautiful smile playing across his clean, fair face. "Never would 'a' thought you could make this old dog-house look like home, but it does."

Cal sensed a note in the boy's voice quite different from anything in Gander's or Grit's. There was appreciation in it; something, perhaps, not far removed from admiration, in it.

"A little touch of art, you know," said Cal, off-handedly, makes all the difference between an animal and a man."

Ham did not answer, but subjected the tire with the blow-out to an unnecessarily exhaustive inspection. Presently he was wondering if you'd mind helping me out a bit to-night."

"Sure. If I can. What is it?"

"I was wondering if you'd mind feeding up for me. Gander's gone to town with Dad's car, and I don't like asking Cal to do it."

Cal glanced at him quizzically. He noted that the ruddy down had disappeared from the upper lip; that the curly copper hair was parted as well as its turbulent nature would permit; that the neck of a clean shirt was neatly tucked together with a new and glorious and bayoneted in place with a diamond pin which, if genuine, would have been worth about a thousand dollars. And as Cal's own lips parted in a smile at the boy's parted in response, and they were friends.

"Sure, I'll feed up," said Cal. "And I might give my regards to Miss Gander."

"You're wise," the boy grinned, and you're white," he added, and was something very much like a lump of sugar in Cal's throat as he thought of the short but all-comprehensive tribute he was feeding the horses Jackson Stake came into the stable and regarded Cal silently for a minute.

"You don't put Ham's?" he commented. "Don't let that young gaffer put you over on you. He'd be at Double morning, noon, and night if some one would do his work at home. I sort of suspect he's gonna marry the whole of one o' these days. Couldn't you have it that bad over one or two?"

Cal felt that this was hardly a matter for discussion. "Ham's all right," he ventured. "Good clean boy. You'd be proud of him."

Hamilton Stake's straight figure seemed straighten more where he stood before the stalls. "Dang it, I am proud of him," he declared. "We all get our share an' I've got mine, but I reckon him as one o' my compensations."

Elsie's all right, too. Good, as I'm not kickin' if you ain't."

Cal struck Cal that his employer's sharp corners. And he wondered particularly bump Jackson Stake's mind. "Minnie? Perhaps. Then would you object to a small camp in the yard, beside the granary, for a night?"

"What for? You ain't campin' here? There's an old stove—no. Not cold. It's just a sort of fire every night, and I used to build a fire every night, and we thought it'd be nice to have one here, if you don't mind. I'd go out and cut wood for it."

"The kid wants a fire he can have," said Jackson Stake, decisively.

was finished. Darkness had settled down; the little fire glowed gipsy-like before them; whiffs of its fragrant smoke fondled about their faces and tickled their nostrils with its feathery pungency. They had been so interested that the approach of an automobile to the house had been unheard, and Cal was not prepared for a girlish voice almost at his elbow.

"Interesting—if true," the voice remarked, and Cal sprang to his feet. She was standing a step or two away from them somewhat in the shadow of the fire lined her figure only in the vague and suggestive way which is the gift of art. Indeed, as it afterwards seemed to Cal, all he saw was her face and head, and imagination filled in the figure as it does in those clever illustrations for advertisements which were before him in vogue. But it was her face he saw, pink and ruddy and well made, with lips half parted in a bantering smile.

No, it was her eyes he saw, deep and brown glowing. No, it was her hair, bronze hair surely, trapping and teasing the ruddy light—

"I'm Minnie," she said simply and held out her hand. "May I join your party? I'm really not so bad mannered as I seem."

It was a hard remark to be sure of that, which, of course, was not the right thing to say at all, and the girl sat down on the cushion beside Cal. "I know all about you, little man," she said, slipping her arm around him. "Shall we be friends?"

"Yes," said the child, soberly, "but you'll have to be friends with Daddy X, too."

"Daddy X?"

"That's my nickname," Cal hastened to say, anxious to avoid any lengthy explanations.

"Then it's a bargain," she answered. She was facing the boy, but Cal had a feeling the words were intended for him. There was something unaccountably pleasant in that presumption.

"I really didn't intend to 'listen in,'" she continued, turning toward him. "Gander brought me home in the car, and when I came out to get some groceries which I had left in it I saw the

fire by the granary, so I rambled down. Then I found there was serious business on hand, so I didn't interrupt. Of course Gander told me about you. He said you were a D.D."

"I'm not, really," Cal answered. "The initials after my name—if I cared to use them—would stand for something quite different from Doctor of Divinity. What else had our friend Gander reported?"

She had crossed her ankles and was pointing her shapely toes to the fire. Cal noted the low shoes, the silk stockings, the fashionably cut skirt. She rubbed a small heel in the earth, but she did not answer.

In the glow from the fire the profile of her face was cut as clean as a cameo between Cal and the darkness. "What else did Gander report?" he repeated.

"It was quite favorable," she said, after a silence. "Shall I tell you? He said he reckoned if you stuck around for a while it wouldn't be so hard to keep Sister Minnie on the farm."

To be continued

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