

"A Stitch in Time Saves - Money!"

The Smoking Flax

By ROBERT STEAD

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

(Continued from last issue.)

Then, one evening, just as he came home to his boarding house from the printing shop, a telegram was placed in his hand. He looked at it curiously, signed for it, and carried it to his room. It was a new and somewhat important experience; never before had he received a telegram. On his way upstairs he began to associate it with Celesta. Perhaps she was coming home; perhaps he was to meet her at the train! He took the last three steps at a bound.

In his room he tore open the envelope. The upper part of the sheet was a series of unintelligible characters, but the central sentence leapt out at him. "Your sister very sick in private hospital here wants you."

It was a moment before Cal grasped its significance. When he read it again he saw it was signed by a Doctor Anson, and an address was given.

The boy walked to the window and looked out on the quiet street, filled with the glory of September. But he saw nothing of the glory now, for a tremendous fear was clutching at his heart. "Celesta! Celesta!" The name came dry from his lips. Could there be a world—could there be life—without Celesta?

There was time to catch the evening train, and he fortunately had a few dollars in his pocket. He packed the battered club bag handed down by Dr. Beach, told the landlady he would be gone for a day or two, and hurried away. It was midnight when he reached the city. Clamorous cab drivers barked for his bag and his patronage, and not knowing which street car to take, he parted with a dollar to be driven to his address. It proved a large but dingy house, once the residence of a prosperous family, but now reduced to the status of a sort of boarding house for sick persons. By the dim light of a porch lamp he pressed the bell, and waited.

After a considerable period the door was opened by a young woman in nurse's uniform. "I am the only one on night duty," she explained, as she showed him into a little office off from the main hall. "I was busy with a patient and could not come at once to the door. Dr. Anson, of course, does not live in at nights."

Cal was conscious of an odor of disinfectants and an oppressive sense of being among the sick. "I am sorry to trouble you at such an hour," he said. "but I got Dr. Anson's telegram just in time to catch the night train. I am Cal Beach."

The nurse regarded him with interest, but the name did not appear to carry any suggestion to her mind.

"Yes, Mr. Beach? And what can we do for you?"

"It is about my sister. She is here, and very sick. Dr. Anson telegraphed me to come at once." As though to support his statement he produced his telegram.

"What is her name?" the nurse inquired.

"Celesta Beach. Spelled B-e-a-c-h."

"Beach? I don't remember any Beach." She turned to a register and scanned a couple of pages. Finally, "No Celesta Beach here."

"But there must be," Cal insisted. "She is my sister."

"The nurse ran a pencil through her hair and puckered her lips as though studying a deep puzzle. "What is she like?" she asked at length.

"She is young—about twenty—and looks a bit like me," said Cal, blushing a little at the reference to his personal appearance.

"Pretty?" the nurse suggested. Cal wondered how a nurse could be frivolous in the presence of sickness, but his color deepened a trifle under her eyes.

"I shouldn't tease," she continued, suddenly, penitently. "Let me see—"

Nurse Rooke pondered a moment. "Mrs. Raymond has been asking for her brother," she said, "and I believe Dr. Anson did wire for someone. But, of course, she couldn't be your sister."

"No—no. My sister is not married, and her name is Celesta Beach."

"Better come along with me," said the sophisticated nurse, springing up quickly under the impetus of a sudden idea. "Strange things happen in hospitals."

Cal followed her with a sense that he was groping vaguely. He was conscious mainly of the hospital smell and the shuffle of his feet on the silenced floors.

Nurse Rooke led him into a room. On the bed a woman was lying, her face pale, worn; her eyes closed; her dark hair braided and falling about her cheeks. She stirred with a sense of their presence.

"Is she your sister?" the nurse asked, gently.

But the boy was beside the bed, leaning over, peering into her face. "Celesta!" he cried. "Celesta!" and fell on his knees beside her.

Slowly she opened her eyes, strangely big against her pale, thin face, and looked into his. "Cal," she breathed.

"Cal, my brother. . . . I have been expecting you." She drew a thin hand from under the coverlet and reached for his. "Cal, my brother!"

"I came—once—first train after the telegram. . . . Did you . . ."

What is the matter?"

Celesta's eyes swept the little room. The nurse had gone. Then the lids fell, and, as he watched, Cal saw little pools of water gather through her lashes.

"Celesta, dear," he whispered, "tell me."

"It isn't easy telling," she said at length, in a voice so low he hardly could hear it. "I wonder what you will think."

Look.

Gently she turned down the coverlet and Cal got a vision of a little pink head, with eyes prodigiously puckered against the light, and a little pink fist clutched and groping.

"Celesta! Married! . . . Who is this Raymond?"

Again she closed her eyes. "I am not married, Cal," she murmured. "There is no Raymond."

The boy staggered to a chair, dazed by the terrific, unexpected blow. When he did not speak, she continued in a voice that was all pleading and yet had in it a note of challenge, almost of defiance—the voice of the self-willed Celesta: "Try not to think too bitterly of me, Cal. I won't be here long. The doctor says—something wrong—I will not get better."

He was at her side again. "I do not think bitterly of you, Celesta. But . . ."

but . . . His voice failed. Then, his cheek against hers, "Tell me, Celesta."

"It's not much to tell. I loved him. I thought he was a god. I neglected you for him. I gave up everything for him. Then—he persuaded me to leave you. That our secret might be kept. He made me great promises; he promised me everything. Then, at last, he—went away. . . . I know I am to blame, Cal. I accept my punishment, but—I loved him. He was half god, half—half devil."

"And now you hate him, as I hate him," said Cal, through his teeth.

Again she turned her eyes to him. "No, Cal. I love him."

He leaned back, perplexed, confused, struggling in currents too deep for his years. "What can I do?" he demanded, after a silence.

"Will you do one thing for me?" Bring up the boy as your own, and promise he shall never know. Promise me that, Cal. And, folding her within his arms, he promised.

"Oh, it is true, Cal—it is true!" she cried, when he had released her. "See—the promise." She pointed to a motto, the only decoration that hung on the bare walls. "A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench."

"That has been my ray of light, Cal. I have yearned to it, hung on it, all these days. His kindness which would not break the bruised reed—would it reach out to me? It has—it does, in you!" The boy took her in his arms again, and for lack of something better to say, whispered in her ear, "My bruised reed—my bruised reed!"

Finally she sent him to get a room, and a sleep. He did not see her again, alive.

Cal was fortunate enough to find a Mrs. Barnes, who had raised six boys and sent them out into the world, and whose mother heart was still unsatisfied. When Mrs. Barnes looked into the great blue eyes of Celesta's baby it was not hard to make a bargain.

"What is his name?" she asked.

"Reed—Reed Beach," said Cal.

Mrs. Barnes took Cal as a boarder, as well as the baby, and Cal immediately found work in a printing office. He had made up his mind that under no circumstances would he go back to his old home. The secret of Celesta was well hid. The hospital had known her only as Mrs. Raymond. He had given his pledge for the boy's sake, and for the boy's sake, and Celesta's, and his own, that pledge he would keep though the heavens fell. The few belongings he had left at the boarding house would satisfy his small debts.

The printing office in which Cal worked was also a newspaper publishing office. Perhaps it was a romantic twist in the boy's nature, together with a certain joy which he found in expressing ideas in words, which led him to seek reportorial work. With a baby to support, he needed all the money he could earn, and night assignments presently began to supplement his weekly wage as a printer.

He covered police, morgues, hotels, and got a glimpse of a life far removed from that of a professor's family and a sleepy university town. He began to see that the tragedy which had befallen Celesta was not altogether exceptional. She had been a bruised reed, it was true, but now he moved among reeds not merely bruised, but broken. . . . Out of his experiences his young mind, groping for some solid philosophy of life, arrived at the conclusion that the great error for which all the world pays penalty is misdirected effort. Every human soul, he thought, is an engine which will go; the thing is to put it at useful work and save it from blowing itself, and others, to pieces. . . .

Even this Raymond fellow—he thought of him as Raymond for lack of another name—even he must have had his better qualities. It was impossible to think of the strong-willed Celesta—

It was when Reed was almost three, and giving promise of being another "unreliable" boy, as Aunt Bertha would have said, that Cal discovered

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the conceit of teaching the lad to call him "Daddy X." Daddy he was already called; the x he added in its algebraic sense, as signifying the unknown quantity.

About this time his interest in sociology excited within him a determination to resume his university studies. He re-entered college, this time with a definite purpose in view. At nights he continued his reportorial rounds to make a living for himself and the boy.

Cal recalled the proud day, now only a few months ago, when, his course completed, he had faced the world on what he considered his mission of life.

His immediate plan was to do a series of sociological studies for one of the more serious-minded magazines, and at the same time gather material for a book for popular circulation, which he hoped would not only advance his cause, but provide money with which he could continue his work. But he had barely begun on this program when Dr. Anson, in whom he had found a personal friend, vetoed it.

"It's the open air for you, my boy," he had said, after the examination; "the open air, and no more of this day and night grind. A year or two in the open, say on the prairies, and you may be all right. No more of this grind!"

"But, Doctor, my work—"

"But, Cal, your life—and your boy."

The boy. Oh, yes, there was the boy! Of course, the boy. . . .

Reed was eight now; going to school; healthy, happy; more "tremendous" than even Cal had been; whimsical; romantic; serious only in those bedtime moments when Cal reminded him of his mother Celesta, and they repeated his verse together, and he told him whence his name had come. Yes, there was the boy.

Cal had gathered his little capital about him, brought a second-hand Ford and some camping utensils, and said good-bye to the heartbroken Mrs. Barnes. And here they were.

To be continued.

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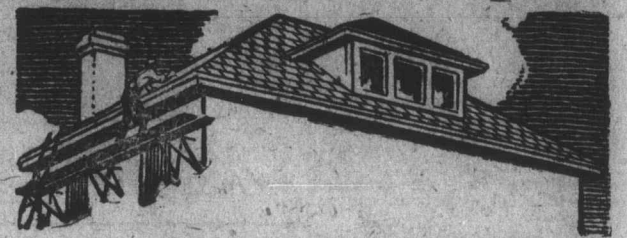
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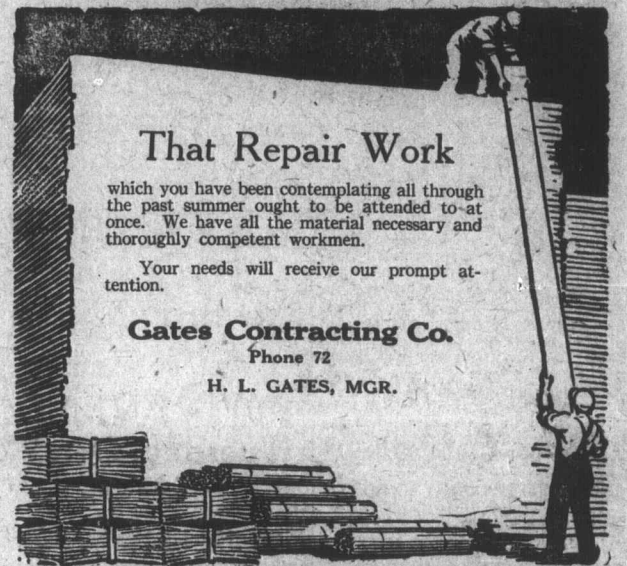


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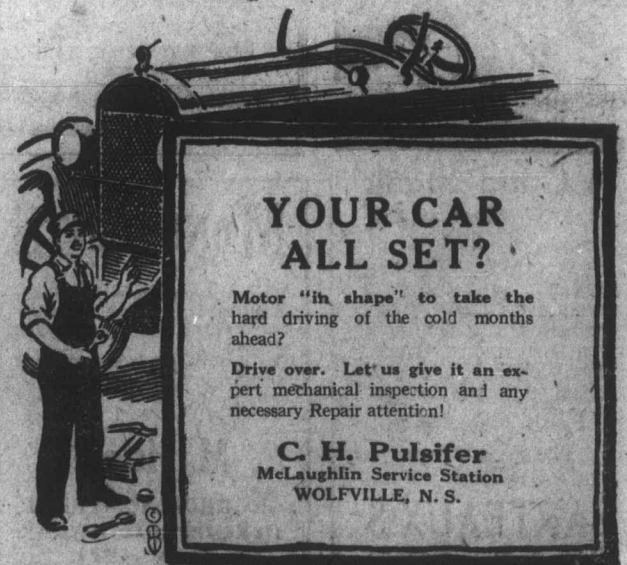
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A marriage of solemnized in K when Winnifred Mr. and Mrs.

N. S., became Eaton, son of Eaton, Canning will reside in Dun Eaton is engaged Eaton was for the teaching school.

Miss Jane Blawie the guest of Mr week.

Mrs. Pitcher h ing in Avonport, accompanied by ence B. West, been Night Super dren's Hospital, on her return to ber of the Victo

The Mission C Canning, held a in the vestry of evening. The ta tive with flower

girls assisted in the funeral of Mr. Erma Goldsmith

Oliver Eaton, Ge North, Kathleen Alice Holt, Amy ton, Dr. Thomas

William Mullett. Th

Miss Erma Goldsmith

ur—Miss Kath ceeds amounted.

The funeral of ning DeWitt was home, Blomidon, 7, at 2:30 p.m.

G. Hiseley, Mus church choir, as bridge, Canning

Messrs B. L. J. Greene, George offerings were v

cluded: Pillow—A. Reid; "Pillow

family: Flowers—Bennett, Mr. an Mrs. E. B. Lyon

Sheaf—George F The remains were

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ning, on Sabbath evening conducted

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and the Sunday the United Bapti

Mr. Warren Eat large.

Mrs. Vickery is at her former ho

Mrs. Robert A well known in the

her hip by falling pletely recovered.

Mrs. Spurr W from visiting her

Miss Edna Sa few weeks in U

Mr. and Mrs. Canning orchestra

Mrs. Charles Simm ing.

Mr. and Mrs. L. paried by Mr. an

pany were guests at the

Rev. L. P. Arch ible was a visitor

Miss Leah Ha the week end with

Mrs. W. W. Harr Mrs. Schurman

recent guest of Eaton.

The Boy Scout Thomas W. Hodg of the United ch and held an int

meeting.

The Sewing Cir held an interesting of Mrs. Fred West afternoon a social

the test-cup.

The Working B was entertained on Mrs. Hardy Vaugh pleasant evening b

Mrs. Eugene P Sewing Circle of a ten cent tea be much enjoyed.

Mrs. W. B. Bur at a meeting of the Society of the Unif

Mrs. Arnon Bigelov Anilee gave an in Missionary Endeav

Mrs. Arnon Bigelov of the Japanese vi afternoon was vi

Mr. Walter L. Andrew Marshall, S last week of the

The Community Mr. and Mrs. F and Mrs. W. B. B

Mrs. Charles Ells great pleasure to th