



The Strategy of Rufus Stone

A STORY OF RURAL DIPLOMACY

By LOUISE C. GLASGOW

ON the day before the Stanley fair, Rufus Stone stood in his father's barn viewing with satisfaction his new Bangor buggy. Rufus had cleaned and polished the vehicle with the tenderest care and the most zealous inspection. He expected to drive the School ma'am to the fair, and that buggy had to be the best looking one on the road.

Rufus expected to take the School ma'am, but so far the School ma'am had not consented to go.

"You see, Mr. Stone," she had explained, when he asked her, "I have already lost several days which have to be made up by keeping school on Saturdays, and I dare not take another day. The trustees are so strict."

Rufus knew that her excuse was valid. He knew that the New Brunswick district school teacher may recover lost time by keeping school on Saturdays and holidays, but there must not be six school days in any two consecutive weeks. He knew, too, that the country trustee looks well to the ways of his "deestricht," and a frivolous teacher is not to be tolerated.

"Why doesn't she shut up the darned old shop and let the kids and the trustees all go to grass?" he growled. "It's a beastly shame when a girl has to be tied down to a pack of kids all the time!" Rufus seized a chamois and polished an imaginary spot on the Bangor with vigour, every rub making it more impossible for him to relinquish his scheme of driving to the Fair and taking the pretty brown haired teacher, who could talk to him and make him talk as no other girl had ever been able to do.

Rufus well knew that he should not take a day off himself just now, in the height of the fall work, but Rufus was an optimistic young man who believed everything would turn out for the best.

"Pshaw!" he said to himself. "What's a day! I'll work a lot harder to-day and the day after to make up for it." So he poked the chamois back in the box, and, seizing his digging fork, started for the field, where his father and three other men were digging potatoes.

"About time for you to show up," said his father, as he leaned on his fork for a moment. "Rufus, how are we to get these potatoes in the cellar? Guess we'll have to knock off digging and set the whole crowd to picking up."

"Seems a pity to do that!" put in Marven Jones from the next row. "When we git in the mood for diggin' that we've got into to-day it's a pity to shunt us off on something else. We must a' turned out nigh onto a hundred barrels to-day, and it's only two o'clock now." He looked back over the straight white rows with satisfaction. "We can easy finish this piece to-day and pick 'em up to-morrow."

"Oh, but there's the Sandy Hill field to start to-morrow," said Mr. Stone. "And d'ye spose it would be safe to leave these out over night; no danger of frost, d'ye think?"

Marven took great honour unto himself as a weather prophet.

"Frost! No, I should say not!" he cried, "Why, it's mild ez a day in June. We won't get frost fer to hurt fer a good two weeks yet, you'll see. That nipper we had a month back was calculated to last us fer awhile, an' that'er thunderstorm a few nights ago was a sure sign of an open fall. Frost! Sho!"

"Well, ye needn't a' be scart now that the prophet's spoke," said Sam West. "They won't be no frost to-night, that's sure, ef he says so. What Marven don't know about the weather ain't in the almanick."

Old Dennis, from the far row, straightened himself up and drew the back of his hand across his tobacco stained mouth. Dennis disdained new-fangled ideas in forks and diggers and stuck obstinately to his hoe. He was the veteran and champion digger of the neighbourhood, having a record, made in his prime, of fifty-one barrels in a day. He shifted his quid of black jack and whined out,

with his usual nasal notes: "They ain' no one now-a-days knows how to manage their diggin' like people used to. They used to have about fourteen boys a-follerin' after the hoes a-pickin' up. Then ye cleaned the piece off ez ye went along. That's the only way to git any satumfaction out o' diggin'."

Rufus' blood gave a sudden jump that left him slightly dizzy. Old Dennis' words called back a remark of the teacher's made the night before, "I have fourteen small boys at school as full of mischief as they can hold." And like lightning came remembrance of her other words: "Lena Johnston has asked all the girls to a birthday picnic on Wednesday. The boys were not invited, and I just know the little monkeys will be up to some tricks."

Rufus could have thrown up his hat with delight. He had a scheme which he believed would work, and he saw the pretty teacher by his side in the shiny Bangor buggy. He smelled the wayside flowers, he saw the winding river, he even felt the occasional bumps of the country road as his young roadster Jerry pulled them along. He spoke up suddenly.

"Yes, dad, I'm sure the potatoes will be all right on the ground. Let's finish the piece to-night and get them picked up to-morrow."

"All right," agreed Mr. Stone. "I guess they'll be safe enough if the cattle don't get in at them. We'll try it anyhow."

That night after supper Mrs. Stone took a little stroll across the fields, and there in a corner of the line fence she saw Rufus talking with the three Jones boys, and the Jones boys were giving undivided attention to Rufus and his subject. Mrs. Stone was puzzled. Such attention from Rufus to the Jones boys was certainly unusual!

Late in the evening Rufus rattled into the yard with Jerry and the old road wagon. Then he came into the kitchen where his mother was setting the bread for to-morrow's baking.

"How's that for a roast of beef, mother?" he said.

Mrs. Stone stood in amazement and surveyed the huge joint.

"For the land's sake, Rufus Stone," she said, "what do we want with a roast the size of that? Whenever will we eat it?"

"Hush, mother," he whispered, "don't talk so loud, but come in here till I tell you."

She followed him into the pantry, rubbing little balls of dough from her fingers as she went. A mystery was a-foot, something dear to Mrs. Stone's heart, and this was no time to bother washing hands.

"What is it, Rufus," she whispered excitedly, "what in the world's going on?"

Rufus told his story with flattering little words and pats here and there throughout, and much imploring for secrecy, though this was wholly unnecessary, for Mrs. Stone had never been known to spoil a joke or give away a secret in her life.

Next morning the boys all went early for a game of ball before school. The diamond was deserted, however, and eleven boys were gathered about the three Joneses in the far corner of the school yard. Billy Jones was talking fast and convincingly.

"He'll give every one of us fifty cents, mind ye! an' the most I ever got was thirty-five all the time I worked last fall," he finished.

"Let's go, boys," said Tom Grant, "We can have bully fun afterwards with fifty cents apiece."

"Yes," said Billy, "and they're goin' to have roast beef, an' plum puddin' mind ye; an' everythin'."

"Come on, I'm goin'," yelled another, and started on the run. The others followed, like sheep after their leader. Over the fence and through the woods, down they came, a yelling horde, on the potato field.

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