

The Smoking Flax

By ROBERT STEAD

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

(Continued from last issue.)

Gander contributed a flicker of interest. "What you goin' to do about it?" he inquired.

"I'm going to think about it," Gander replied. Cal, recalling his mental picture, saw the bear get down from the top of his post and resume the plodding of his well-worn circle.

The flicker of interest had died in its birth. But it had not. Suddenly Cal was aware of the germ of an idea burrowing into his consciousness. Leaping from Gander's unresponsive brain it was igniting the combustible material in his own. He knew it for a great moment, and he slipped away, eager for a solitude in which he might compress the nebula into a solid thought.

In the shade of the granary he evolved it. It was very simple when reduced to terms; it simply meant that here, on the farm of Jackson Stake, he was to take his post-graduate course in sociology. He had put his science away, as a thing to be kept under safe covers while his health was mending, little dreaming that right here was the environment in which he could best develop it, and the raw material for his experiments. This prairie homestead, prosperous, no doubt, in a gross kind of way, in the kind of way that is measured by acres and bushels and droves of stock, with its rough buildings, its simple customs, its labors, its drudgeries, its flickers of humor, its pathetic shadows, its unconscious tragedy—this was to be the school of his post-graduation.

What characters, what material to his hand! Jackson Stake, himself a broad-shouldered boy of sixty; Susie Stake, a domestic treadmill, but a treadmill with a heart, and a heart which, in some unaccounted way, had been set pounding again by the presence of the boy Reed; Gander and Grit, all-wise and self-sufficient; Hamilton, deep in the happy embarrassment of his love for Elsie Fyfe; even Reed, a strange light from out of the darkness—what subject matter for his study! And Minnie. A gust of reaction swept him at the thought of including Minnie in his investigations; of impaling her as a rare specimen and subjecting her to the microscopic scrutiny of the eye of science. Yet not the least of the material to his hand was she, and science must not be impeded by the clamor of the heart.

As Cal turned these new thoughts in his mind he smiled at the complacent ignorance in which he had written his prize thesis on "The Reaction of Industrialism Upon the Rural Social Atmosphere." Here, now, was no musty textbook; here was life, throbbing, pulsating, grinding, to which the text-book bore no closer relationship than does the photograph to the living soul.

It was too tremendous to be taken standing, and Cal sought repose in the prairie fields. Fancy injecting idealism into this clay; substituting art for materialism; living for being alive; implanting an intellectual consciousness; attuning minds to the infinite; reactions of Truth; broadening horizons until they included the world, the universe itself! Cal walked the fields by himself, his soul afire with dreams; forgot his midday meal, and came out of his trance only when he discovered that the family was preparing to attend church in the district schoolhouse, that the Dodge was drawn up at the door, and that Minnie was dressed apparently for walking rather than riding.

"Dad will drive, of course," she explained, "and Mother will ride with him. Hamilton is over at Double F's, and you three men will fill the back seat. I don't mind walking; indeed, I don't. I rather like it."

So Cal said something about liking to walk, too, and with Reed in the back

seat it would be crowded, anyway, and it was only a mile and a half, wasn't it? And perhaps, they had better start at once. And presently he and Minnie were tracking together the winding trail through the poplar groves to the highroad.

The sun poured down upon them as they walked, and they sought the grass at the side of the road to escape the dust. In his left hand Cal carried his soft hat that he might the better enjoy the breeze which from time to time teased through his hair, but his right swung free and in dangerous proximity to Minnie's left. He had thought he would have much to say, but they were strangely silent; they had not found a conversational point of contact, and to grope for one seemed too obvious. He asked himself in furtive glances at the trim figure at his side, glances of appraisal; glances that took note of the flirting curls of her bronze hair, of the long lashes over her brown eyes, of the mould of her lips, the curve of her neck, the white V of her bosom, the swing of her limbs, the lift of her ankle. He told himself he was studying her; that she was a part of his field of investigation. Exhibit A! Absurd. Yet what else? Anything else would be still more absurd.

"I thought perhaps you would want to talk, as well as walk," she said at length. She was master of a sidelong glance charged with menace to the cause of science.

"I do, tremendously," he answered. "Perhaps that is why I can't."

The explanation seemed to satisfy her and again they walked on in silence. "At any rate I'm glad—we're all glad—you came," she volunteered when they had crested the knoll that commands the school. "That was why I had to leave the farm."

"I don't understand."

"A girl must have some one to talk to," she told him, frankly. "I felt that I was just—drying up—on the farm. Not that it's so much better in Plainville, but at any rate there's not the drudgery. You haven't talked much yet, but I'm sure you can, and you will. You see, I've been studying you."

Exhibit B! Ah! Well, that was fair, and two could play at it. At this moment the Dodge swept by them, and other cars were raising their dust-clouds in the distance. When they came up to the school a little group of farmers was assembled on the shady side of the building, discussing the progress of their seeding and the prospect of rain. A blue-black cloud, already forming in the west, gave point to their prophecies; but their absorption in crops and weather was not so great that they failed to note the young man walking with Minnie Stake, and to encourage certain gentle surmises, more hinted than spoken. As other cars came up other farmers joined the group, while their wives and daughters took seats inside the school.

It may have been quite by accident, but Annie Frawdic was at the door. "Hello, Minnie," she greeted them; "who's your friend?"

"Oh, this is Mr. Beach, Cal Beach, Miss Frawdic."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Beach," said Annie, as she extended her hand. Then, while Minnie's head was turned aside for a moment to take note of those who were in the building, she added, sotto voce, "For the second time, remember my predictions, and take them as a warning."

And as Cal returned the pressure of her hand, which had not been prematurely withdrawn, he mentally registered—Exhibit C!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cal found a strange new zest in his

labors all that week. The thought that he could combine practical research in sociology—a sort of post-graduate course in his specialty—with the equally practical business of making a livelihood and re-establishing his health was a particularly encouraging and inspiring one. In an instant it drained the drudgery from his toil, revealing those rich social deposits which drudgery so often conceals; it gave purpose to his life; it invested the meanest surrounding with mystery and romance.

He had talked with loosened tongue to Minnie that night, until Gander, with inopportune impatience, had roused his engines to a roar as he awaited her in the car. She had sprung to her feet from the Ford cushion where she had sat at the front of his granary, with a deft hand whipping the dust from the fringe of her skirt as she arose.

"I must go," she had said. "Brothers get a beastly hurry just when—"

But she stood before him, and did not go. "Can you drive a Dodge?"

"I can easily learn. It's a little different—"

"You ought to learn. . . . Good night. . . . And she was gone."

That was an idea! That was something to think about. It gave him a pleasurable little thrill of intoxication, like a very light wine. It may have been unscientific, but it was very enjoyable, and he nursed it until he fell asleep.

He must have slept lightly, for he was awakened by the first pattering of rain on the shingler before the very dark; so dark he could not see his hand when he raised it before his face. A cool breeze came in through his open window and stirred his workday overalls where they hung from a nail beside his bed; he could hear the suspender buckles rasping lightly against the board wall as they stirred. The few drops of rain which had awakened him lulled and died down, then gathered again for a more determined assault. Pat-a-pat, pat-a-pat, pat-a-pat, like some myriad-footed creature of the night they sprang upon his cedar shingles; he could smell the damp odor of the cedar filtering through the roof and filling his little room. Presently there was a splash of water as it gathered in little pools under his eaves; and always the myriad-footed pat-a-patting on the roof.

Reed stirred in his sleep, projecting a corner of himself into Cal's section of the bed, and Cal gently but firmly unknocked him. With a strong hand he straightened the sturdy little limbs, apparently hopelessly entangled among themselves and fragments of blanket, and pointed them in the direction in which they should be pointed. Then he rested back to the luxury of the rhythm of the rain on the roof, linking his fingers palm-upward on the pillow and nesting his head in the warm junction of his hands, he lay in a quiet ecstasy of spirit that was very new and wonderful. It did not occur to him to question whether that spirit was quite scientific. One mood of impatience, beating a tattoo on the roof of the room, presently changed to a mood of resignation, and he reached Plainville before the rain.

Sht had. Gander had let her down at Mrs. Good's boarding house and, his mood of impatience having now given way to that of one who has an amplitude of time, had gone strolling down the streets of the little town in search of such adventure as might be afoot at eleven o'clock of a Sunday evening. It was well after midnight when Minnie heard the shifting of his gears, for the girl was still awake, turning over in her mind the events of a day which she remembered as eventful. She admitted having become interested in Cal Beach. He was a new type, and she was fond of studying types. It had been the monotony of types, perhaps as much as the cow-drudgery of the farm, which had goaded her to a school of stenography in Winnipeg, from which she had re-

turned to be reimmersed in a monotony of types in the village of Plainville. These farm men, these little-town men, she knew them all; she "had their number", as she confidently assured herself.

This Cal person was different. Perhaps no better, but different. At any rate he could talk; she had found that out. She had prodded him out of his shell as they sat in pleasant proximity on the cushion of the old Ford in front of the granary. She had led him to talk about himself as the easiest angle of attack, and he had told her something of his plans, and of how they had been interrupted by the doctor's edict, and of how he hoped soon to be able to take up again his study of sociology. She remembered how she had laughed when he said he might find the material close at hand, and how she had banteringly inquired if she was to be a subject for investigation, and how he had over-denied it. Well, he was very interesting, and she should see what she should see. He had not told her much about Reed; rather dried up on the subject of Reed. A winsome kid who had walked right into Mother Stake's arms. Well, Mother needed something of that kind to keep her soul alive. . . . Of course, people would talk, but let them. They always did. . . . Cal seemed rather to like her. Of course, nothing serious. That would be nonsense. But Cal Beach was a chap a girl could be proud of, even if he was her father's hired man, and she might show some of them a thing or two at the summer picnics. She was glad she had worn her new skirt and her silk stockings out to the farm over Sunday. Let's see—how much had she coming from the law office? She fell asleep while making calculations of her assets, present and prospective, and a budget of expenditures, most of which had to do with the ladies' wear department of Sempster & Burton's general store.

In the morning the skies cleared and the rain stopped, and the seeding and plowing were resumed where they had been left off Saturday night. But as Cal followed his machine up and down the length of the oat field the vague schemes which had been pleasantly tormenting his mind began to take more

definite form. Jackson Stake was an amiable and easy-going farmer, addicted, as Cal had learned, to only two vices—occasional over-indulgence in "formalin" and a mania for attending auction sales and buying wholly unnecessary and usually obsolete equipment which he dragged home behind a wagon, or in it, in exchange for a lien note so drawn as to complicate his title to all things here and hereafter. It was Mrs. Stake who had told Cal about it.

"They've prohibited liquor", she said, "an that's all right as far as it goes. Jackson don't get goin' as often as he use to, though I mus' say when he does start he goes further, an' now if they'd jus' prohibit auction sales, I might get our feet under us. I go out to the boneyard some day; I call it the boneyard, jus' beyond the cow stables, an' see the old machinery he's got piled up there. Enough to mor'gage a township. An' me churnin' butter—"

To be continued.

ANNUAL MEETING Nova Scotia FRUIT GROWERS' ASSOCIATION CAPITOL THEATRE KENTVILLE MONDAY, TUESDAY, AND WEDNESDAY December 14, 15 and 16

This convention marks the beginning of a new year for the Nova Scotia fruit grower. The programme is a very fine one. Important business, especially that with reference to a systematic, Valley-wide control of "Black Spot" and "Aphis", is coming before this meeting for action. Ladies invited to attend.

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- MARSHMALLOW TOPPINGS**
A vanilla cookie base, a puff of snowy marshmallow and a sprinkling of pure chocolate kernels; others have candied caraway on the marshmallow instead of the chocolate. This is a delightful biscuit especially for the children.
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These were the first words of a person who sampled our new biscuit, so we called it "I Like". It is a bit of water

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Vol. XLV.

FINE PERFORMANCES AT U.S. THEATRE

Given by Acadia and the Acadia University first programme to the final performance of the week of May. . . .

The Acadia and the Acadia University first programme to the final performance of the week of May. . . .

The orchestra from Athens, with this was followed by the "Mouphony".

Miss Betulah soprano solos: "By Hope; and she was second. A violin solo by Miss Grace Clark. They Miss Minnie P. Then followed by the choral and "Deeply".

The evening's "War" Mendelssohn's. Miss Gertrude have given two fortunately ill.

WOLFVILLE

The following Citizen of last with interest by groom in Wolfville, expect Wolfville.

"A wedding attractiveness and took place quiet Episcopal church yesterday, when Ambrose, you and Mrs. George to Lieutenant Royal Canadian attached to Her late Capt. Mrs. Tingley."

"The church ed with palms, Barber, officiated was played by organist. Give father, the Brit Paul Tingley, of of the groom, "The bride's dress robe Lucie gundy Patou chiffon velvet tone. Bronze stockings were small model of pings of Kaitie beige lace. She of the valley."

"Following a small reception of the bride's for the immediate intimate friend Mrs. Tingley, and Halifax, were a brown collar and cuff return to Ottawa residence at 34."

DRAMATIC

The play, dramatized very popular story, programme expression in day evening. The rest of the the direction of The cast of Ebeuear St. Jacob Marie Red. Scr. White. Bob's Creation Spirit of Ch Escheran. Spirit of Ch Torry. Spirit of Ch The entrance stage was made suitable music facts.

Other music were readings Elsie Davis who mas Tree", by Ena Roop, w Sicily"; Miss Miss Vera, Mo of the Prince. Members of Club played the overture, an overture Miss Helen solos, "Lento" clear in a Min lego. Banquet selections "G Allegro in C