

Sketch

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Article 18

On Going—

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Jim crossed the street to his car and climbed in. As he reached for the switch, he saw Zeb still standing there by the bank with the unlit cigar dangling limply from his mouth.

The train was sliding away from the depot now, towards the west. Old Jim strained his eyes after it, seeing again the flutter of long, khaki-covered arms thrust through the window, and Bill, alive and grinning, as the train carried him away.



On Going—

Arnold Skromme

THE cows munched their dry hay and tossed it raspingly up and down the sloping mangers. The uneasy fall wind whispered hoarsely around the barn and through the grove of box elder trees to the north. The last of the lingering shadows had lengthened and retreated into the night.

Sigard emptied his foaming pail of milk into the large strainer on the can. His coarse, rough hands shook so that the swirling milk rose and fell in overlapping waves. Damn it! Milk and work, milk and work out here in the barn . . . and Marie not feeling so well, no, Marie not so good at all.

He sat down and began on the next cow's teats. The tingling, whining stream of milk shrieked inside the pail . . . zing . . . zing . . . the shriek tore his taut spine into whipping threads—the whipping threads lashed against his thudding brain . . . zing . . . his face wrinkled with each zing . . . zing . . . zing-zing . . . Marie . . . Marie . . . sick . . . sick . . . not die . . . won't die . . . can't die. Then soon, buzzume, buzzume, the milk was getting deeper in the pail now—the foam was smothering the zing, but it was boiling, bubbling deep inside. Sigard's eyes dilated, then nearly closed with each buzzume. His feelings boiled . . . rose . . . and fell.

“Sigard?”

HE TWITCHED, trembled, then steadied himself and leaned his head against the cow's warm, slowly heaving side. Oh—just his boss, Ole.

“Huh?” he replied, panting gruffly.

“Last cow?”

“Oh—er—no—three more, I guess . . . my fingers are kinda stiff . . . kinda slow . . . can't stand it . . . too jumpy, I guess.” His full red face contorted many words that his thin mouth never uttered. . .

Ole muttered something to himself about “not much left up there now—liable to crack,” and then spoke out loud again.

“Better go, kid, take it easy. Wife says Marie's a little worse.”

God! Marie worse—moaning perhaps . . . no, not again . . . Not his Marie—his wife. He shoved the handle of the pail into Ole's hands and jogged out the door in tense leaps toward the squatty, two-room shack among the willows behind the big white house with green shutters. A pale kerosene light flickered sallowly from the two small windows of the hired man's “coop”. No, no—Marie worse—she couldn't die, he loved her—so much—so long.

BOUNCING up the creaky steps, he brushed through the narrow door and tried to close it quickly and quietly, but it swished and creaked across the frayed sill. The latch finally clicked shut. He released the knob. It rattled. Then he heard her—Marie—moaning and crying, moaning, and talking broken bits. Ole's wife parted the curtains of the bedroom doorway. Her scared, white face brought the blood pounding to his aching head.

“I'll get the doctor again, Sigard. Keep rubbing her hands.” She was gone. He strode into her room. Marie lay on the low bed, muttering and rolling from side to side. He stooped, bending his six-foot frame low over the bed, and grabbed her hands. Each time she rolled his mind echoed . . . stop it . . . stop it stop it . . . his mind whirred, plunged into blackening depths, then rose sputtering to the surface. His sweaty, calloused hands squeezed and grated the slender, red fingers of his wife. Slowly, dully, she stopped mumbling . . . her eyelids fluttered, then opened momentarily.

"**T**HAT you, Les? Les, oh, Les." Her gently pleading voice was dry, rasping. "I love you, Les. Please take me away. I love you . . . I want you."

Sigard's spine dripped cold sweat, rocked a bit, then froze. Les? Les? Les!! His brain pounded at his ear drums. No, not Les. "Sigard!" he blurted aloud, infuriated . . . so funny . . . Les? . . . so funny.

She heard. Something, somehow, released her fevered mind a bit, and again her eyelids fluttered open. Sigard's heart melted like a scolding mother's.

"Oh, Sigard, please, Sigard. I want Les. I've got to see Les. I've got to tell him! I must tell him! Get Les, Sigard, please. You've had me long enough, Sigard; now let me have him for just a while."

His spine tightened again.

She looked up . . . her eyes fixed on the rafters above. Her unkempt brown curls lay smeared with sweat against the thin, grey pillow. Tense lines of taut muscles streaked across her flushed face and ended at her mouth. Sigard stared back with dilated red-shot eyes and quivering nostrils. Protruding blue veins throbbed across his aching temple. Sweat dripped from his long, smooth nose.

"Les?" The word hissed hollowly from his open mouth. "Les?" he reflected tensely. "Oh, yes, Les, down in the hollow. . . Les! Get Les . . . get . . . get Les."

HE WAS running down the gravel road now. . pound. . crunch . . pound . . crunch . . get Les . . get Les, damn Les . . get Les . . here's Les . . Les in bed . . sh-sh. He had lowered into the foggy hollow, and dropped to a jerky walk . . sh-sh . . Les in bed . . she want Les . . I get Les . . ya-a-as. . He muttered hoarsely, groped into the fog and twisted his grasping fingers jerkily in space. . I get in. . I got him . . got him! Squeeze 'em . . ach . . neck blue . . eyes pop . . tongue's out . . squeeze harder . . make neck crack—He was running, wobbling again—face blue . . squeeze . . make neck crack, must crack, crack!! . . *crack!!* . . oh.

He stopped running, shook his hands to rid them of the carcass, then wiped the blood from his sweaty, trembling hands on

a dish towel of Marie's . . . one of Marie's bath towels—no, her apron . . . yes, he wiped on all of them. . . She and Les, her new Les, would wash them on the next day and next year, too. . . Sigard would help to scrub Marie's and Les' clothes, too. . . He would have so much fun, helping Les and Marie.

He reached a bend in the river road, but traveled straight ahead to . . . oh, yes, his own new land. . . Oh, here's the nice woolly fur road to Les' house, right ahead through these big cow teats sticking out of the ground . . . oh, time to milk . . . milk . . . no more zing . . . so nice . . . all these strings on the nice bossy's teats. . . He fingered the fence post tenderly. . . . Maybe Marie wants milk . . . no, she want nice Les, must get my big brave Les now . . . maybe she want Les' dog and chickens, too . . . get Les, first, now.

He wavered meekly into the thickening fog.



Tired?

Betty Talbott

Tired?

So slobby tired I couldn't even raise my hand
To pull that apple over here. Raise my hand?
Lord, I couldn't even chew.

I'm tireder than a run-down clock,
Or a slow old transport truck, groaning up a hill,
Or a heavy-headed cow too tired to moo.

These humming, twitching threads were once my nerves.
To move this bulky, knotted mass of me
Is infinitely more than I can do.

Tired.