

The Parson's Cows



Drawings by Julian de Miskey

by HJALMAR SÖDERBERG

Translation by Charles Wharton Stork

I HAD NOT seen my old student comrade, Pastor Torelius of Lerkila, for ten years when, on a fine warm summer evening just a little while ago, we ran into each other on the corner of the sidewalk in front of the Grand Hotel. We had been at the same mess table at Upsala, where I was studying something, I don't remember what — probably the piano — but he was studying “divvers” and was a very serious young man, except on Saturday nights. For he had regular habits and was exact in everything, even in the matter of youthful indulgence. He had an excellent head, and as he was also of a good old clerical family and had more than one bishop, if not for blood uncle at least for uncle by courtesy, he had made his way quickly, so that while he was still quite young he had been assigned to a fairly good parish. All this has given him a predominantly bright and harmonious conception of Christianity, and when I saw him coming toward me on the sidewalk with arms outspread, as if it had been only a week ago we had parted at Taddi's café, I should have believed from his expression that it was Saturday

night, if I hadn't known it was only Friday.

We sat us down at a table under the awning of the restaurant and were served with various refreshments. It so happened that we came to the end of our student memories more quickly than we expected, and our conversation dealt mostly with the present. I was informed that he had already been married for the second time and that his second venture promised to be as happy as his first would have been, had the Lord so ordained. He talked about his charming life out in the country, which he wouldn't change for anything else in the world. He was fond of his congregation and believed that they in turn respected him. We also touched on the subject of present religious tendencies, and I asked, among other things, if he was much bothered by revivalists in his community.

“You mean the Independents?” he said. “No, I can't say that I am. It was vexatious when the Archbishop came on his visitation and saw that more people streamed into the meeting-house than into church. But I was new in the district, my predecessor was made

the scapegoat, and since then conditions have changed for the better. There is a more conciliatory spirit, and though I can't exactly say I have more people in church than before, at least — God be thanked! — there are fewer in the meeting-house. Ah well, and there's a special reason for that. . . ."

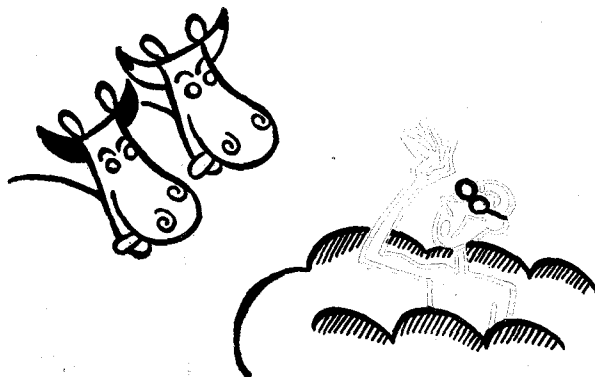
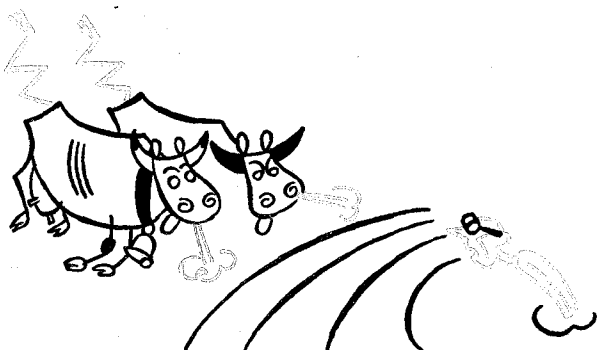
He broke off and looked very mysterious, but I asked no further questions, and we sat silent for a minute. On the sidewalk in front of us an occasional lean Yankee was parading amid the fat Stockholmers; from the river terrace came the last bars of a Viennese waltz, which left behind a strange stillness; and through the midst of this stillness burst the lowing of a cow. It proceeded from one of the coast boats which had just come in at the dock; a moment later we could hear the cow trampling on the gangway, another followed, and we saw a little old peasant leading both the cows after him on one rope.

"They are beautiful cows," said the clergyman, "though not so beautiful as mine. I have the fattest and handsomest in the whole parish. But one must see cows in a green landscape to appreciate them. There is nothing I'm fonder of than my cows — among the things of this world, I mean, of course. But for that too there's —"

"A special reason?"

"Precisely. Let me tell you the whole story, about the cows, the Independents, and my marriage. It all belongs together.

"YOU MAY, perhaps, remember that it was very warm last summer, especially just before midsummer. One day I was going the rounds of my place as usual. I went out along the ditches in the full sunlight, crossed a meadow where my people were cutting hay,



and came to the pasture where my cows were grazing. You can't imagine how handsome they looked between the birch trunks. I scratched them behind the horns and talked to them the way I do, to Primrose and Buttercup and White Girl — she is my bell-cow; she has no horns and is as white as milk — and to Hercules, my bull, who is a combination of strength and mildness. No animal is better tempered than a bull if only one doesn't irritate him at the start.

"I talked to them all, and they answered me as well as they could, lowing after me when I left. I also talked with an 'enlightened' tailor whom I met on the slope, a man who was a pillar of strength among the 'awakened' in the parish. I've even heard tell that he used to drive out devils. He responded a bit wryly, of course — and then I came down to the lake. There it lay still and shining. It's a principle with me never to go in swimming before midsummer; but it was only a couple of days till then, and I was perspiring with the heat. I couldn't resist. In a twinkling my clothes were off, I jumped into the water, and swam out. However, it was colder than I had thought, and I didn't stay in long.

"But when I came out, what did I see but all the cows coming toward me? I called to them, and they came nearer, but slowly and cautiously. White Girl came first, with Hercules close beside her. When they were ten or fifteen paces away, I suddenly saw by their expression that they didn't recognize me, that they didn't even take me for a human being! And in Hercules' look I thought I saw something I had never seen there before. I confess that all at once I got frightfully scared. If you want to know what panic terror means, picture yourself stark naked in front of a dozen large beasts with sharp horns — I have eleven cows



and a bull — with a lake behind you!

"I for my part went half crazy with fear and began to run along the shore. Then some life came into the cows. I heard them behind me at a sharp trot. What was I to do? I caught hold of a bough that was fairly low and swung myself up into a tree. It was high time; the whole herd was upon me, and Hercules snorted at me and butted the tree with his horns. Well, he couldn't reach me, and luckily it was so warm that I didn't catch a chill, though ordinarily my stomach is very sensitive. I tried to talk sense to them, but there was no possibility of such a thing. White Girl responded only with contempt, Primrose lowered her head and gave me an ugly look, and Hercules lost his composure for the first time.

"And in their way they were right. How could they conceive that this strange white thing, which took flight at their coming and climbed into a tree, this animal which had neither black clothes, nor spectacles, nor a straw hat with a wide brim, was identical with their master and good friend? This creature must then inevitably be their enemy, or at least a strange, ridiculous, and indecent phenomenon which ought to be combated.

III

"**I**T IS, however, luckily a fact that a violent emotion is seldom long-lived, at least not with animals. After a while the luscious grass began to distract their attention, and I hid myself in the leaves as much as I could, in the hope of being forgotten. The beasts had

already begun to spread out and I began to hope for liberation — the rough bark was most uncomfortable to my skin — when I heard the prattle and laughter of girls' voices. It was the schoolmistress and the enlightened tailor's two daughters — all of them enlightened, of course — who were coming with towels in their hands to bathe!

"I can't deny that I whispered to myself, 'This is the very devil!' I only hoped that they wouldn't see me and I vowed in turn to look the other way. As far as that goes, there wasn't much to look at, if I except the youngest. They were, I must say, so quick in their motions that I had hardly time to think what I should do before the younger girl was standing with one foot in the water and all her clothes neatly laid on a stone. To be frank, I didn't dare to turn my head away for fear of making a rustle in the leaves. Well, soon all three of the girls were splashing in the water, while I was sitting in my tree as silent as a little rat. There's nothing like getting used to things: the bark no longer hurt my poor skin as much as before, and I began to submit to my fate and hope for a happy end to the story. So there was, too, in the end, though not in the way I imagined.

"The girls came out of the lake again, but the schoolmistress happened to come ashore a bit farther away, of course just where my clothes were. She came running to tell of her discovery: 'A man's clothes are over there; there's a man bathing right by us!'

"'But where has he gone?'

"'He must have swum far out.'

"They dressed in a great hurry, then stood and listened. They could hear nothing, could see nothing out in the lake. Had he been drowned? And who could it be? They would have to look more carefully at the clothes. The youngest was the boldest; she stole off and came back with the news: 'It's the parson. Only think — if he's been drowned!'

"'What will become of his poor soul?' the schoolmistress wondered.

"'His soul, nothing!' responded the youngest girl, angry and at the same time with a sob in her throat; 'He confirmed me three years ago and I was very fond of him, even if he didn't have the true revelation. But God isn't as spiteful as you are.'

"Suddenly they all grew silent and began

to stare up into the tree as if they were bewitched. Then they let out a triple shriek and the next instant they were off like the wind.

"Finally I got down out of the tree and dressed. I was comparatively calm. You must admit I hadn't much more to lose. Never, surely, was a poor servant of the Lord so innocently placed in such a damning situation. It wasn't long before the tailor came to the spot with two more of the faithful. They looked a bit grim, all three of them, but in the tailor's eyes was a gleam of secret fire. You can imagine the rascal's delight at the thought of driving out the devil from no less a person than the lawful guardian of his soul, the parish minister. However, by the greatest luck I had already managed to get my clothes on, and with them the dignity of which I was now in so much need. Before the tailor could open his mouth, I told him I should call on him in the afternoon and explain everything; whereupon I dismissed them with a wave and went off with firm composure.

IV

THAT AFTERNOON I fortunately met the girl first. She was standing by a bush in the orchard eating gooseberries. Her father, I should mention, had a fine place with an excellent orchard; he had been blessed outwardly as well as inwardly, had saved his money and bought this house. I explained everything to her, and the dear child believed me at once. She was the only sensible one of the lot. First she had thought I was crazy to have climbed up naked into a tree, but when she heard me talk and saw that I had my wits in control, she believed me right away. She was a simple-

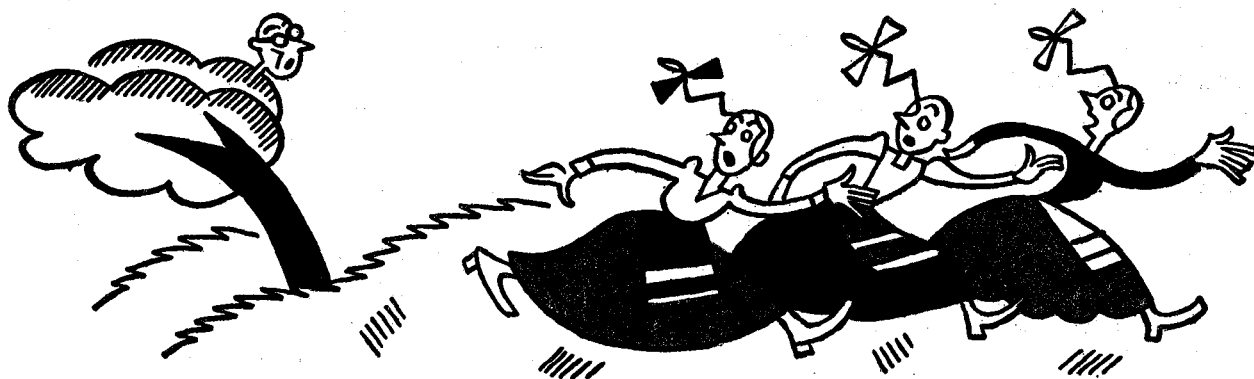
hearted, unsophisticated girl, and what had happened did not seem to her nearly so dreadful as I had thought. It is assuredly true, as someone has said, that woman is closer to nature than man, and that she feels much less shame about natural things than do we, although we always think the opposite when we are young and do not know her."

"But what about the tailor?"

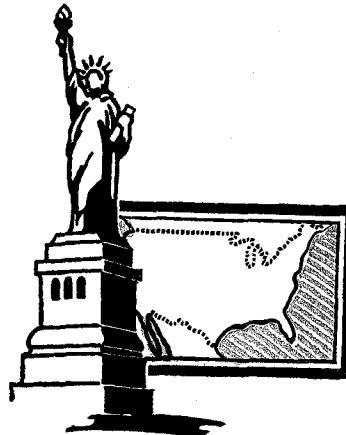
"He never would believe me. But that didn't, of course, prevent him from feeling flattered when a couple of months later I came to ask for the hand of his daughter. You will have gathered by this time that it is she who is now my wife. But my father-in-law still believes I climbed up into a tree naked to see the girls bathe. For his family's sake, however, he regards this as a very natural and pardonable fault, which I have completely atoned for since. But among his fellow believers his indulgence toward me has awakened surprise and displeasure, and that is why the services at the meeting-house which he and his family conduct are no longer so well attended as formerly."

As it was getting late, we rose to depart. When we separated, we shook hands heartily and I wished him all success, both for the victory of the true church and for the good turn which the affair had taken in respect to him personally.

"Thanks," said he, "I am happy already. It is, to be sure, a fact that my wife has not had the same intellectual advantages as I; but she has the culture of the heart. And it made an impression on me, too, that she laid down her clothes so neatly, whereas the others threw them all higgledy-piggledy."



The FALLACIES of Prohibition



Drawings by Geoffrey Norman

by FABIAN FRANKLIN

THE PROHIBITION question has been treated from three different standpoints in the articles which have appeared in the last three issues of *THE FORUM*. The present contribution is not designed as a comprehensive criticism or estimate of those articles, but will deal with only a few salient points; and these not because they are peculiar to the articles but because they form part of the general stream of prohibition discussion.

Mr. Coudert* strikes the keynote of his article at the very outset. He says:

Prohibition is not a question of gastronomy, nor even of religion; it is a problem in government. Reluctance or inability to grasp this simple truth is at the root of the present intolerable situation.

How vital this question of government is, how profoundly the enactment of the Eighteenth Amendment and the statutes for its enforcement violate the fundamental principles of our government, how dangerous to our institutions will be a persistence in this violation — all this is brought out with great clearness and with abundant illustration in Mr. Coudert's article; and to all this Mr. McBride† makes no attempt to reply. He is content to wave it aside, without any argument whatsoever, in these few words of mere denial:

Is it true that the dry laws are incompatible with the spirit of our government, and therefore that citizens need not respect them? This theory is entirely false.

*Frederic R. Coudert, Jr., "Repeal the Jones Act!"—*THE FORUM*, August, 1929.

†F. Scott McBride, "Enforce Prohibition!"—*THE FORUM*, September, 1929.

No law ever was adopted in this country in more strict conformity with the democratic rules of self-government.

If this calls for any remark, it is only that the Eighteenth Amendment is incompatible with the spirit of our government, not because of any irregularity in the process of its adoption, but because of the nature of the Amendment.

Since Mr. Coudert's presentation is so forcible, and Mr. McBride attempts no reply to his argument, there might appear to be no occasion for saying anything further on this head. It seems desirable, however, to supplement Mr. Coudert's treatment by calling attention to some vital points which are so elementary and so evident that they ought to be familiar to everyone, but which are far too seldom impressed upon the public mind.

The object of any constitution like ours is to place beyond the reach of the ordinary processes of legislative change certain fundamental features of the government and certain fundamental rights of the people. The Constitution of the United States undertook to do this, and nothing more. It provided a certain framework for the Federal Government which it created; it fixed the limits of the power of that government, as distinguished from the state governments; and it guaranteed certain essentials of liberty and property.

Into this great instrument there was injected for the first time by the Eighteenth Amendment matter of a wholly different kind — not only a different kind but the opposite kind.