

## IN DEFENSE OF COWS

BY KARL W. KAMB

I AM starting a movement to introduce the cow to her proper place in literature. In her being there lies untouched what may be the last pristine opportunity for fiction and character drawing, an unexploited mass of material rife with romance and tragedy, heroism and cowardice, love of life and plain ennui. I am amazed that the cow should have been this long overlooked.

The almost utter absence of the bovine from the song and saga of mankind may be partly traceable to the seemingly phlegmatic nature of her outward disposition. Unlike the horse, her most immediate contemporary in the fields, the cow has been bred toward a utility and a physical equipment so prosaic and ponderous as to offer nothing to the imagination. In every essential she seems to lack — well, speed. It might be said, and with some justification, that the cow is our most obvious domestic animal. On account of her downright plainness, unrelieved by as much as the faintest pretension to individuality,

except as revealed to her intimates, she has been relegated, for literary purposes, to a limbo populated by creatures having no more personality than door knobs. Ungainly of movement, reserved in manner, unresponsive to the rump-slapping, ear-tickling familiarities which pass as signs of amity and kindness between ourselves and our creatures, she has earned for herself a reputation for stupidity and smugness that is totally undeserved.

Her name has come to be synonymous with a contentment that borders closely on imbecility. I think we shall find, however, that this apparent self-satisfaction, this tranquil resignation to whatever episodes each new day may contrive to introduce, is merely a pose, a veneer. A cow is merely making the best of a bad, dull job, and keeping very quiet about it. Underneath her stoicism are to be found the same essential qualities which made the book *Black Beauty* — a fair horse story — sell for years to a number of copies almost challenging the sales of the Bible, and

which qualities, even to this day, at Christmas, bring happiness to the publishers of all dog stories. Had a cow but the ability to shoulder lazily into her master's den, where he sits before an open fire with a book on his knees, and had she but the grace to sink gently on the rug at his feet, rest her muzzle on his slippered instep, and gaze worshipfully upward at him, then there would be no occasion for this peroration. . . .

If you arise at four or five o'clock in the morning, it is cold, even in Spring. In Fall or Winter, the air is bitter until you get in the barn, where the heat of the animals standing all night in the stalls has warmed the whole building. The first thing you do is fill the mangers with new hay. You go from one cow to the next, down the whole row of them, poking mixed timothy and clover under their impatient noses, making certain that you do not accidentally stick them with your pitchfork. The hay is dusty, but sweet and rich, and the long line of cows locked shoulder to shoulder in their stanchions, turn their heads toward you, wide-eyed and anxious—those last envious of the first fed.

Then you get your milking stool and your bucket. You step up to the first cow on her right side and

familiarly slap her on the flank, saying, "Soo, Boss!" or whatever her name may be. You slide the stool to about the right place, sit down with the bucket between your knees and, in the half-light, your hands instinctively go to the two front teats. The fronts are generally longer than the back, and harder to milk. You give a tentative squeeze or two to make certain that the passages are clear and not caked with solidified milk from the night before. If the teats are hard and dry, you moisten them slightly with their own warm milk, and instantly they become soft and pliable. Then you bury your head hard against the cow's flank, your cheek against her belly—she is warm, and the ample heat of her goes down through you and makes you feel warm, too—and away you go.

As the first streams hit the bare bottom of the bucket, it rings like a metal drumhead. A fog of vaporized milk rises from the pail. Soon the bottom is covered. The muscles of your hands and forearms, flexing in a satisfying cadence, recover from the night's stiffness and the initial fatigue. Your hands acquire a second wind, as it were. Then as the pail fills, a thin foam gathers over the hot, fresh milk, growing thicker as the level gets higher. By

the time the bucket is full, the foam is an inch deep and as stiff as meringue.

Meanwhile, Old Boss stands there munching her hay; or, if she is full, stares into space, turning her ears backward and forward as if on hinges. She beats you now and then, absent-mindedly, with the thick rope of her tail, or shifts her hind feet involuntarily, the better to support her weight on the hard plank floor. Occasionally, she sighs. It is a ponderous blowing off through the nostrils that seems to express satisfaction: satisfaction with the flavor and tenderness of the hay, satisfaction with the manner of your milking, and with the friendly warmth of the big, twilight barn. Her digestive processes play a small symphony in your ear, squashed hard against her rounded belly. The bubbling operations in her bowels make you think of her insides in terms of the mechanical fittings of a great ocean-going ship. She gurgles and grumbles; but all to a purpose.

When you are done with her — maybe by this time she is chewing her cud, regurgitating lumps of it the size of your fist from her initial stomach, patiently chewing them once more before dumping them into her second stomach — when you are done with her, and

you have gone over all the teats again with one hand, stripping them down to be sure the bag is emptied, she breathes deeply, a profound sigh of relief. She is glad it is over and her bag is relaxed. Especially if newly fresh, she is glad, for with a full udder she is barely able to walk. This uncomfortable accessory when full is an encumbrance to locomotion. She might as well be astride of a barrel.

Then you turn her out to pasture. She backs out of her stanchion slowly, mindful of her ears. She walks languidly but heavily to the open door. Before easing her body down the ramp into the barnyard, she pauses to sniff the morning wind. If the air is balmy, she strides out firmly, intent on new grass or, perhaps, the watering trough. If there is rain or a cold wind blowing, her head droops and she moves forward into it with slow resignation.

Later in the morning, you may see her again; perhaps when she comes in from the field to drink in the middle of the day. If you have a carrot in your hand, she may take it from you. A cow prefers to eat with her head down. She would rather that you drop the tidbit on the ground, but having learned to overlook your peculiarity, she will

take it reluctantly from your fingers. The expression on her face, smashing a carrot in her strong jaws, rolling the macerated bits of it along her tongue before swallowing, is one of transcendent delight. The faint flavor of wet clay intermingled with the sweet of the vegetable—the serrated scar near the top caused by a rat's nibbling pause at the storage bin—these imperfections mean nothing to her. At each swallow, her ears come forward and her eyes ask you if, perhaps, there is not more for her?

At night, by long habit, she is waiting tranquilly not far from the barn door. She listens with ardent attention to the muffled sound of your footsteps inside the barn, and the swish of hay being pitched into the mangers. As you slide the door back, she moves soberly toward it, knowing you will stand out of her way and not be a bother to her getting inside comfortably and without haste. She goes directly to her own stanchion. Always it is the same one for her, night and morning, day after day, and woe unto any blundering interloper. She will bat the intruder's sides and shoulders with her hard skull until you come over and straighten things out. A cow wants her own place and her own hay.

## II

Only in the Spring of the year is the cow downright quarrelsome. This fleeting pugnacity occurs at a time shortly before she is said to be "bulling". In herds, this brief period of self-assertiveness, coming upon a number of the animals at the same time, is the cause of much seasonal confusion. For obvious reasons, the herd sire is permitted but brief association with the members of his harem, and his imminent need is announced by a cumbersome love play that would be a delight to Havelock Ellis, even to the inclusion of the resultant brawling. In a well-regulated dairy, each cow is kept for the sole reason that she produces milk; it is not intended that she confuse this prosaic career by injecting into it the complication of personal affections. Likewise the bull. He is not supported for his pleasure alone. Except as he is wanted for his own peculiar uses, he is kept to himself, penned in a stout enclosure. Among his kind, he is accorded the attention and comforts due a reigning sultan, except that he is denied, perquisites notwithstanding, the titillating intimacies of his own seraglio, other than as permitted under strict supervision.

This condition brings about a

state of near-matriarchy in the administration of the affairs of the herd. The cows, deprived of the leadership of the herd sire, find themselves compelled to elect from among their midst a bell cow, or more accurately, a "boss" cow, to act as a sort of working executive and to occupy a position not greatly different from that of a corporation vice-president. Election is accomplished by means of tournament. The barnyard is the arena. Skulls as hard as sledge hammers are the weapons. The strongest cows meet on common impulse in pairs, squaring off, heads locked together. Sometimes the boss cow's tenure of office is being challenged. Again, it may be merely a bout between white hopes, fighting their way up from the ranks and looking toward a chance to meet the Champ.

For as long as a half-hour, they struggle. Panting and blowing, they spar for an advantage, flat skull against flat skull, legs braced like posts against the sudden thrust of the next strategic flanking movement calculated to be upsetting. They whirl around as if their joined heads were an axis. First one way, then another. Superior endurance, although adroitness counts, generally determines the victor, and the vanquished retires

to a neutral area, invariably propelled by vigorous buttings and proddings from behind. Out of a series of such encounters must arise, ultimately, an undisputed champion — a matriarch to reign as long as she cannot be supplanted or dethroned.

The boss cow's responsibilities are varied. It is her duty, as the reigning Stuyvesant, to regulate the department of the herd, bearing down particularly on the heifers that are not yet settled to the ways of life, having calved but once. It is her job to drive any stray dog from the field, challenging him first herself; then, if necessary, with a bellow like a trombone amplified over a public address system, she masses the weight of the herd behind her and they go charging after the mongrel in a thundering phalanx, nostrils distended, hooves flashing, until the enemy, ingloriously routed, scurries under the fence. The boss cow also calls the hour of noon. While the herd is scattered over the field grazing, she keeps her eye on the progress of the sun, having in mind as well the state of her stomach. Its need for the midday's deep drink at the watering trough is as dependable as an alarm.

The watering over, there is, as a rule, a half-hour siesta to be taken

lying down with eyes half-shut in the warm sun, or standing soberly in the shade of the barn, rocking peacefully from side to side, chewing the cud of the partly-digested morning's feed, keeping the tails, like long fly swatters, in constant motion. In due course, the boss cow leads the way once more to pasture, not to return until time for the evening milking.

A cow regulates her day according to heat and light instead of by the clock. The Summer provides long, warm, lazy feeding days; the Winter cold, whipping sleet and wind and tasteless stubble, relieved only by hours spent in the barn, heartened by the easy warmth and nearness of fragrant hay. In Summer, if left to herself, a cow will often overstay her milking hour and not come to the barn until twilight, sometimes as late as nine o'clock — even at the cost of a painfully full bag. She will lag, reluctant to leave the lush grass, and if a collie is sent to fetch her, she will fight, head down and feet flying, until the dog's sharp teeth and loud barking drive her to the barn, where she arrives breathless and out of temper, the sphincters controlling her udder locked in spasms from nervousness. It is nearly impossible to milk her, and the milker damns the cow, the dog,

and his lot; in fact, creation in general, until the tiresome job is done.

In Winter, however, she comes to the barn eagerly. She stands for hours in the deep mud of the lane or in the barnyard, awaiting the sound of the squealing rollers as the door slides open. Her tail is down; her back is to the cold wind; her hide is matted with mud and she lows mournfully from time to time her impatience to be in the warm barn. When the sliding door is drawn, she moves rapidly up the cleft ramp and goes directly to her place. She gratefully shoves her cold nose deep into the hay; or if there is a feeding of grain for her, she dives into it with her muzzle and with uncontrollable eagerness; she flops and flails the cereal with her tongue. The grain gone, she reaches tentatively for the hay. The transition is as from a caviar *canapé* to the *entrée*.

The eating of hay is a slow contemplative business. Taking a mouthful from her portion, the cow, lifting her head, tears the clinging straws from the main tangled mass in the manger. Her tongue acts as an escalator, along which the hay rides gradually upward into the region of her great molars. She chews her hay with the full weight of her jaw. She swings it from side to side, oscillating as

she bites down, so that the coarse, sweet stems are reduced to a mangled pulp by a single sweep of her molars. She swallows heavily, and reaches for another mouthful.

### III

Cows are remarkably healthy animals. They endure extreme cold and rain and, at times, acute heat, with little or no shelter other than their own hides. They survive drought and flood, injury and occasional bacterial infection, with stoic calm. A sick cow is by far more exceptional than common.

When she is ailing, or becomes old and disabled, a cow expects no consideration or relief from her kind. Nor does she get any. A sick cow is butted out of the herd; she is compelled to feed and water alone, on the penalty of a drubbing. Thus ostracized, she either recovers and eventually returns to the herd; or she dies. This is the law of the grass — of the grazing animal. It is the law of the short pasture and the failing water hole. It devolves from the open prairie, the veldt, the steppes. The land is already burdened to provide for the young and the able. Among herbivora, transportation of grass and water to the ailing is manifestly impossible, as is moving the dis-

abled to better pasture. Among carnivora, contrastingly, a kill may be made a mile away, and the carcass carried to where the mate lies temporarily incapacitated.

But the grass people must snatch their sustenance from the broad earth, ranging widely as they feed. We say of a sick or injured animal that it is "down". We mean exactly that. Down. It is down under some scrub trees or in a thicket, eyes staring fixedly forward, growing thirstier and thinner hourly, losing by fever the energy needed to rise first to its knees, then to its feet; down finally with its head lolling, tongue out, eyes rolling. Alone. The herd has moved on. It is the law of the grass.

The cow has a callow, unresponsive reaction to displays of affection or tenderness. She could never be housebroken in a thousand years; her defection in this regard is notorious and alarming. She may be casually attentive to any master, yet remain singularly unimpressed by and unpreferential toward all. She may be bought and sold every month, passing from hand to hand with unruffled calm. She marks with her eyes only the man on the haystack.

Your love and appreciation of her will be unrequited; yet, if you know her, you will persist in it.

# AMERICANA

## MASSACHUSETTS

A FORMER mayor of Boston finally decides that the Union is big enough to hold both New England and California:

The Honorable John F. Fitzgerald  
Cordially invites you to attend the  
"Hands Across the Continent"  
Celebration

Monday, April 12, at 2:30 P.M.  
NORTHERN AVE. BRIDGE  
ENGINE 44

A cask of water from the Pacific Ocean, brought here by "The Great Waltz" Company as a gesture of good will on their coast-to-coast tour, will be poured into the Atlantic. Members of the company will assist in the ceremony.

EXTRAORDINARY effect of the Uplift upon a devoted parent, as advertised in the scholarly pages of the *Boston Traveler*:

### THANK GOD FOR ROOSEVELT

His inaugural was an epic! He has no patience with the outworn Republican-Banker bunk about "pay as you go", and "balanced budgets", while humans suffer. His heart and mind are centered on the unemployed; on the underprivileged — the poor. He sets an example for the States. He'll live in history with Lincoln, as the friend of the downtrodden. Let's try here in Massachusetts to emulate him

by spending to help the poor — by hiring — not firing. I feel certain that the golden words of the President must, and will, turn the Administration on Beacon Hill towards following him in actions, rather than in words of praise.

Today, my namesake son goes to the altar with his charming choice. My prayer is that the theme of our great President's utterance may be impressed on his mind so that he'll always emulate him in helping the underdogs, the unfortunates — yes, even what a Boston editorial writer calls "stumble bums" and "ne'er-dowells", in criticizing the President; that he'll always have in mind the words of John Bunyan, as he saw a prisoner walking up to be hanged: "There, but for the Grace of God, goes John Bunyan." May I ask all my friends, those "out there" and those men, women, and boys whom I have aided in the past, to say a prayer that "Dan, Jr., and Peg" may be as happy as his dear mother and I are, after thirty-three years together. Won't you all join in making this a novel gift — a spiritual wedding bouquet?

DANIEL H. COAKLEY

52 Parsons St.

## NEW JERSEY

THE MERCURY's favorite poet, the Sweet Singer of Passaic, contributes another gem to the celebrated *Herald-News*: