

CHAPTER FOUR

The brothers had made steady progress during their first year of farming. They had made enough hay for the winter with some to spare and had established a herd of twelve cows that were their pride and joy. They had not been to Gillingham Market for quite a while, but their big ricks were well made and thatched with straw; now they could relax and have a day off at the market.

Dick was growing in confidence after almost a year as an independent farmer. He was still tongue-tied and easily embarrassed, but his shy smile was disarming, and strangers talked to him readily. When people learned that Dick and Sidney were in their first year of farming, at a time when established farmers were going under, they wanted to know how it was going.

“Well, it is not too bad, we’ve made some good hay and some not, but we need to be milking a few more cows.”

"You might be lucky today. Prices have come down a lot since the Wall Street Crash last October." This comment came from the auctioneer who was moving among the small groups of farmers.

But a cautious older farmer warned, "If they are cheap in July what will they be in October when you've got six months of expensive feeding ahead of you?"

"Well, it is certainly a good time to buy now when the cattle will live cheap for some months to come," the auctioneer responded, trying desperately to maintain a sense of optimism.

Dick nodded to the auctioneer in response to his friendly remarks,

"Yeah well, we better go and have a look at them before they go into the ring. How long before you start selling?"

"Oh, you got twenty minutes."

They moved carefully along the cows, some noticeably unsettled in strange circumstances. Having made a note of the ones they did not want, they moved to a position around the ring where they could see the auctioneer and the cows.

Sidney was as anxious as ever and said, "Wouldn't it be better to wait till October when they are cheaper?"

His brother disagreed, "They will be cheaper then. But if she gives three gallons a day at eight pence a gallon for four months in the summer, we'll be able to buy another cow with the money."

Sidney was silent for a minute, "That'll be twelve pounds, Dick."

What Dick sensed instinctively, Sidney found by mental arithmetic. After a longer hesitation Dick said, "Alright, it won't be quite enough in four months, but it'll nearly do it."

Whether it was the impulse of youth or a shrewder recognition that the first one of the day is often the cheapest, but they bought the first cow to come into the ring; quite a nice shorthorn cow with a heifer calf at her side. The cow had been secured before some of the farmers were even ready to bid. Dick had hoped of repeating his luck but none of the other cows were quite as cheap again.

They hung around in the market after the sale enjoying the buzz of conversation; shy Dick was beginning to feel quite at home. Yet the general mood was extremely cautious. Banks were foreclosing on a number of farmers who had seemed to be well established; some of them in a pretty good way of business. As they got ready to move the cow and calf from the market the seller came up to them,

“You’ve got a good cow there, you know, I really did not want to sell her. I hope you do well with her, she could be the foundation of a good herd another day.” Noticing a look of surprise in Sidney’s face, he added, “Thing is, I’ve had to let two of my men go to save costs. I’m just keeping the old cowman on for now.”

Later as they walked the cow and her calf for three miles back to the farm, they reflected on the pessimistic conversations though Dick was quietly certain, “We don’t need to take any risks but if we keep getting the milk and do everything ourselves, we’ll be alright.”

They attended Gillingham Market almost every Friday buying another cow when they had the cash available. But the rent was due to be paid at the end of September and they put money aside each month for this and other expenses. After the rent was paid, they were able to buy two more cows in October.

Quite a number of farmers were selling up and for a while there were farm sales every week. Dick thought they should see if they could replace their rickety old swathe turner that had given trouble later in the season when the crops of grass were heavier. A farm sale is often a sad end for a family and their connection with an old home.

The sight of strangers picking over their machinery and the belongings of a lifetime must have been quite dispiriting; it might have felt that the only friend they had on the day was the auctioneer.

But for two hopeful young farmers no such thoughts were in their mind. They wanted to buy a machine that would be reliable and would not let them down and leave them exposed to bad weather. They wriggled and poked the machine and screwed up their faces trying not to look desperately keen. Not until the third sale of the month, did they buy the machine they needed, together with a few hand tools that would always come in handy. Dick went off to pay for the purchases leaving Sidney to stand guard against unknown people of ill intent.

Dick returned and suggested he should cycle back to the farm to bring one of the horses over to collect the swathe turner they had purchased, and Sidney agreed to continue guard duties. An October afternoon is pretty dreary at the best of times, but on a cloudy day threatening rain it soon begins to appear that darkness is imminent.

The numbers of people in the sale field were thinning out leaving the successful buyers to make arrangements to take their purchases home. There was a bit of conversation, but time dragged very

slowly; at one stage a well-dressed farmer strolled by, "You've been waiting here for a while."

"Yes, it feels like a long time. My brother has gone back to West Knoyle to get a horse."

"Oh, that's where I come from by the Church."

"Oh, the big farm; well, we're a mile down from there at Lower Green."

"Yes, I know it. You went in last October. Your cows have milked well judging by the number of churns beside the road. You seem to be doing a good job."

"We are living on the smell of an oily rag for a year or two, but we've got a few more cows now," then as an afterthought, "We've probably got a bit too many for forty acres."

"I suppose you are looking for a bit more land. I reckon you have started at the right time. Most of us have lost half of our money since the war, perhaps more."

Sidney nodded sympathetically and politely but really did not fully understand the crisis. At the weekend Sidney cycled to Semley again and as it was a pleasantly warm day, they went for a longer walk than usual and quite lost all track of time. When they returned to the cottage it was really time for him to leave.

“Oh, come in, do Sidney, and have a bit of bread and butter before you go.”

He was usually feeling hungry but between munches and mouthfuls he mentioned his experience at the farm sale earlier in the week and told how he had met the farmer from Church Farm under the downs at West Knoyle. Old Mr Sutton appeared to be fast asleep but somehow had kept abreast of the conversation. “Oh, that’s Cousin Tom. How is he keeping? I have not seen him in years.”

As Sidney left, Mrs Sutton followed and closed the cottage door behind her. “Sidney, could you call in on Tom at Church Farm? It would be nice if he could visit Allan, while he is still well enough.”