Short Story

ROSIE AND I

(Written for "The Listener" by G. R. GILBERT)

I'M back working in the city again, trying to forget one of the best pals a man ever had. She was a great old girl, Rosie was, never a cross word, never an angry look or an inconsiderate action. But that's all over now, and here I am back in the city trying to forget her among the noise and bustle.

It's rather strange that I should end up in the city again because I first went to the lighthouse to get away from it. I'd had enough of humanity. I didn't like the smell of them, or the look of them, or the sound of them. They got in my way all the time. Solitude was what I wanted, and I found it at Wairemu Point all right. The nearest farm was 10 miles away, and most of the distance was measured along the beach when the tide was out—when the tide was in you couldn't measure it. All the stores were brought in by launch and landed on a nasty little beach with a peach of a backwash that made the shingle crawl.

It was an automatic light at Wairemu, needing only a single keeper to look after it. From my angle the set-up was perfect—the sea on two sides, and 12 miles away from interference. Here, I thought, is the very thing for a man who wants to be alone.

The keeper I was relieving was glad to get out. "Wait till you've been here a couple of years," he said. "You start hearing things out in the scrub. You start carrying a waddy around with you just in case. I guess I'm getting out just in time . . . Another six months and I'd be *taken* out."

He showed me around while his gear was being loaded on to the lighthouse supply ship. There was the white cottage, and the light and the generators. The cow-bail and the fowl-yard and a small miserable patch of garden that did its best in competition with the spray-laden south-easters.

He grumbled about the garden. "Won't grow anything except beetroot," he said. "Salt burns everything else down to the ground—and beneath it even . . ." He meditated. "I've seen the wind bring spray up that gully so thick that you couldn't see more than 20 yards, and the next morning the salt'd be on the panes of the light like hoar frost." He shaded his eyes with his hand and looked up at the cloudy sky. "Might be coming up for a blow now, even," he observed. "Well—I won't be here for it this time, thank God." And off he went.

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I WAS left alone with nine hens, and a cow that I had bought for seven pounds ten. "You can have them chickens," he had said. "Most of them are well past their prime, anyway." They looked it—one or two of them were so far gone that they had to eat sitting down.

That evening I took the milk-bucket down off the nail and went off to round up the cow. "You don't want to worry about the bail," he had said, "it faces the wrong way—right into the wind. The south-wester'll blow the milk out of the bucket as fast as you can get it in. The roof isn't too sound either. But the old girl's as quiet as a lamb. You can milk her anywhere."

I found the old girl in a nice sheltered spot down at the back of the light. She was lying down and quietly chewing her cud. When she saw me she obligingly got to her feet. She was an old cow all right—the ex-keeper had said something to the effect that it was believed that she had been put ashore by Captain Cook. Listening to her get up I could give full credit to that story; she creaked like a slat-bed under the weight of a sergeant-major. Once up she didn't exactly sway on her feet, but she looked as though she'd like to lie down again.

Besides being the oldest cow I had ever seen, she was also the largest, when I got down beside her it was like milking the side of a house. But even at that early stage in our acquaintance we got along well, for she never moved, although there were strange, and not too expert, hands milking her.

That was my introduction to Rosie—afterwards we met twice a day regularly, wet or fine, and slowly our acquaintance ripened into friendship.

Not long after I began to realise that a man needs somebody or something to talk to—I began finding myself muttering as I worked about the house or in the tower. I decided that I needed a partner in this business, even although he were only a sleeping one. I wouldn't talk to the hens—talking to those hens would be worse than talking to myself, and besides, they were well on the way to extinction. So there was only old Rosie. I got into the way of having long chats with her while I was milking, and afterwards as I scratched her ears. At first Rosie merely maintained her dignified bearing, standing firmly on her four large splay feet in their white socks, twitching her brown ears as she chewed. I discussed many things with Rosie—the state of the weather, the wind, the state of civilisation. Often I would merely discuss my own state. Sometimes I would admiringly enlarge on Rosie's strange resemblance, full face, to Rex Harrison. And although Rosie maintained a scrupulous silence, I could sense that she was warming towards me.

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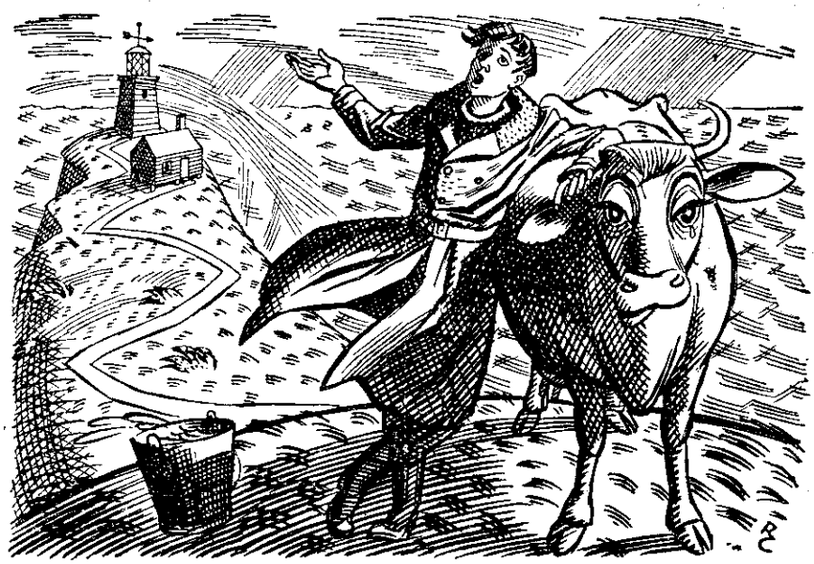
IT was a little later on that I began to sing to Rosie as I was milking. I did a lot of singing while I was at Wairemu Point. I found that it made a pleasant contrast to the silence—I loved the silence so much that I wanted to make a noise occasionally so that the silence would seem more quiet afterwards. It was also a matter of happiness. I was happy, so I sang.

Anyway, one evening I began to sing to Rosie—my repertoire included such favourites as *Daisy Bell, If You Were the Only Girl in the World,* and one or two celebrated New Zealand folk-songs that I don't think will ever see the printed page. Rosie seemed interested. At least she kept her ears pricked back to see where the row was coming from. And then one milking-time I finished singing *I Like You Very Much* Carmen Miranda fashion in a high falsetto, but mooing instead of using the words which I didn't know, and I asked Rosie if she liked it. And I'll swear that the old cow nodded. At least she lowered her head, and it looked like as good a nod as I've ever seen. After that I took to singing more than ever.

But you know how it is when you have a great regard for someone—it brings its own responsibilities and worries. I began to worry about Rosie being out when the south-wester was belting up the gully blowing the salt rain before it. When it was cold and I sat before a fire I hoped that Rosie was in a good snug spot, and when, after a dry spell, the paddock was brown and dead, I worried as to whether she was hungry and thirsty on a diet of salt-encrusted dry grass stalks.

I was very concerned when Rosie bellowed for her lover across the barbed-wire fence, and let her through the gate into the run where the neighbouring farmer kept a bull with his stock cattle. I was upset when she returned the next morning in a miserable condition with one horn torn off in a fight with a few of her sisters, and the embryo horn that was left looking tender, and streaming



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