

Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life

My cow started bulling at dawn and the noise can drive you crazy if the cowshed is right under your window. So I got dressed early and phoned Claud at the filling-station to ask if he'd give me a hand to lead her down the steep hill and across the road over to Rummins's farm to have her serviced by Rummins's famous bull.

Claud arrived five minutes later and we tied a rope around the cow's neck and set off down the lane on this cool September morning. There were high hedges on



either side of the lane and the hazel bushes had clusters of big ripe nuts all over them.

'You ever seen Rummins do a mating?' Claud asked me.

I told him I had never seen anyone do an official mating between a bull and a cow.

'Rummins does it special,' Claud said. 'There's nobody in the world does a mating the way Rummins does it.'

'What's so special about it?'

'You got a treat coming to you,' Claud said.

'So has the cow,' I said.

‘If the rest of the world knew about what Rummins does at a mating,’ Claud said, ‘he’d be world famous. It would change the whole science of dairy-farming all over the world.’

‘Why doesn’t he tell them then?’ I asked.

‘I doubt he’s ever even thought about it,’ Claud said. ‘Rummins isn’t one to bother his head about things like that. He’s got the best dairy-herd for miles around and that’s all he cares about. He doesn’t want the newspapers swarming all over his place asking questions, which is exactly what would happen if it ever got out.’

‘Why don’t you tell me about it,’ I said.

We walked on in silence for a while, the cow pulling ahead.

‘I’m surprised Rummins said yes to lending you his bull,’ Claud said. ‘I’ve never known him do that before.’

At the bottom of the lane we crossed the Aylesbury road and climbed up the hill on the other side of the valley towards the farm. The cow knew there was a bull up there somewhere and she was pulling harder than ever on the rope. We had to trot to keep up with her.

There were no gates at the farm entrance, just a wide gap and a cobbled yard beyond. Rummins, carrying a



pail of milk across the yard, saw us coming. He set the pail down slowly and came over to meet us. 'She's ready then, is she?' he said.

'Been yelling her head off,' I said.

Rummins walked around my cow, examining her carefully. He was a short man, built squat and broad like a frog. He had a wide frog mouth and broken teeth and shifty eyes, but over the years I had grown to respect him for his wisdom and the sharpness of his mind.

'All right then,' he said. 'What is it you want, a heifer calf or a bull?'

'Can I choose?'

'Of course you can choose.'

'Then I'll have a heifer,' I said, keeping a straight face. 'We want milk not beef.'

'Hey, Bert!' Rummins called out. 'Come and give us a hand!'

Bert emerged from the cowsheds. He was Rummins's youngest son, a tall boneless boy with a runny nose and something wrong with one eye. The eye was pale and misty-grey all over, like a boiled fish eye, and it moved quite independently from the other eye. 'Get another rope,' Rummins said.

Bert fetched a rope and looped it around my cow's neck so that she now had two ropes holding her, my own and Bert's. 'He wants a heifer,' Rummins said. 'Face her into the sun.'

'Into the sun?' I said. 'There isn't any sun.'

'There's always sun,' Rummins said. 'Them bloody clouds don't make no difference. Come on now. Get a jerk on, Bert. Bring her round. Sun's over there.'

With Bert holding one rope and Claud and me holding the other, we manoeuvred the cow round until her head was facing directly towards the place in the sky where the sun was hidden behind the clouds.

'I told you it was different,' Claud whispered. 'You're going to see something soon you've never seen in your life before.'

'Hold her steady now!' Rummins ordered. 'Don't let her jump round!' Then he hurried over to a shed in the far corner of the yard and brought out the bull. He was an enormous beast, a black-and-white Friesian, with short legs and a body like a ten-ton truck. Rummins was



leading it by a chain attached to a steel ring through the bull's nose.

'Look at them bangers on him,' Claud said. 'I'll bet you've never seen a bull with bangers like that before.'

'Tremendous,' I said. They were like a couple of cantaloupe melons in a carrier bag and they were almost dragging on the ground as the bull waddled forward.

'You better stand back and leave the rope to me,' Claud said. 'You get right out of the way.' I was happy to comply.

The bull approached my cow slowly, staring at her



with dangerous white eyes. Then he started snorting and pawing the ground with one foreleg.

'Hang on tight!' Rummins shouted to Bert and Claud. They were leaning back against their respective ropes, holding them very taut and at right angles to the cow.

'Come on, boy,' Rummins whispered softly to the bull. 'Go to it, lad.'

With surprising agility the bull heaved his front part up on to the cow's back and I caught a glimpse of a long scarlet penis, as thin as a rapier and just as stiff, and then it was inside the cow and the cow staggered and the bull heaved and snorted and in thirty seconds it was all over. The bull climbed down again slowly and stood there looking somewhat pleased with himself.

'Some bulls don't know where to put it,' Rummins said. 'But mine does. Mine could thread a needle with that dick of his.'

'Wonderful,' I said. 'A bull's eye.'

'That's exactly where the word come from,' Rummins said. 'A bull's eye. Come on, lad,' he said to the bull. 'You've had your lot for today.' He led the

bull back to the shed and shut him in and when he returned I thanked him, and then I asked him if he really believed that facing the cow into the sun during the mating would produce a female calf.

‘Don’t be so damn silly,’ he said. ‘Of course I believe it. Facts is facts.’

‘What do you mean facts is facts?’

‘I mean what I say, mister. It’s a certainty. That’s right, ain’t it Bert?’

Bert swivelled his misty eye around in its socket and said, ‘Too bloody true it’s right.’

‘And if you face her away from the sun does it get you a male?’

‘Every single time,’ Rummins said. I smiled and he saw it. ‘You don’t believe me, do you?’

‘Not really,’ I said.

‘Come with me,’ he said. ‘And when you see what I’m going to show you, you’ll bloody well have to believe me. You two stay here and watch that cow,’ he said to Claud and Bert. Then he led me into the farmhouse. The room we went into was dark and small and dirty. From a drawer in the sideboard he produced a whole stack of thin exercise books. They were the kind children use at school. ‘These is calving books,’ he announced. ‘And in here is a record of every mating that’s ever been done on this farm since I first started thirty-two years ago.’

He opened a book at random and allowed me to look. There were four columns on each page: COW’S NAME, DATE OF MATING, DATE OF BIRTH, SEX OF CALF.

I glanced down the sex column. *Heifer*, it said. *Heifer, Heifer, Heifer, Heifer, Heifer*.

‘We don’t want no bull calves here,’ Rummins said. ‘Bull calves is a dead loss on a dairy farm.’

I turned over a page. *Heifer*, it said. *Heifer, Heifer, Heifer, Heifer, Heifer*.

‘Hey,’ I said. ‘Here’s a bull calf.’

‘That’s quite right,’ Rummins said. ‘Now take a look at what I wrote opposite that one at the time of the mating.’ I glanced at column two. *Cow jumped round*, it said.

‘Some of them gets fractious and you can’t hold ’em steady,’ Rummins said. ‘So they finish up facing the other way. That’s the only time I ever get a bull.’

‘This is fantastic,’ I said, leafing through the book.

‘Of course it’s fantastic,’ Rummins said. ‘It’s one of the most fantastic things in the whole world. Do you actually know what I average on this farm? I average ninety-eight per cent heifers year in year out! Check it for yourself. Go on and check it. I’m not stopping you.’

‘I’d like very much to check it,’ I said. ‘May I sit down?’

‘Help yourself,’ Rummins said. ‘I’ve got work to do.’ I found a pencil and paper and I proceeded to go through each one of the thirty-two little books with great care. There was one book for each year, from 1915 to 1946. There were approximately eighty calves a year born on the farm, and my final results over the thirty-two-year period were as follows:

Heifer calves.....	2,516
Bull calves.....	56
Total calves born, including stillborn.....	2,572

I went outside to look for Rummins. Claud had disappeared. He’d probably taken my cow home. I found Rummins in the dairy pouring milk into the separator. ‘Haven’t you ever told anyone about this?’ I asked him.

‘Never have,’ he said.

‘Why not?’

‘I reckon it ain’t nobody else’s business.’

‘But my dear man, this could transform the entire milk industry the world over.’

‘It might,’ he said. ‘It might easily do that. It wouldn’t do the beef business no harm either if they could get bulls every time.’

‘How did you hear about it in the first place?’

‘My old dad told me,’ Rummins said. ‘When I were about eighteen, my old dad said to me, “I’ll tell you a secret,” he said, “that’ll make you rich.” And he told me this.’

‘Has it made you rich?’

‘I ain’t done too bad for myself, have I?’ he said.

‘But did your father offer any sort of explanation as to why it works?’ I asked.

Rummins explored the inner rim of one nostril with the end of his thumb, holding the noseflap between thumb and forefinger as he did so. ‘A very clever man, my old dad was,’ he said. ‘Very clever indeed. Of course he told me how it works.’

‘How?’

'He explained to me that a cow don't have nothing to do with deciding the sex of the calf,' Rummins said. 'All a cow's got is an egg. It's the bull decides what the sex is going to be. The sperm of the bull.'

'Go on,' I said.

'According to my old dad, a bull has two different kinds of sperm, female sperm and male sperm. You follow me so far?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Keep going.'

'So when the old bull shoots off his sperm into the cow, a sort of swimming race takes place between the male and the female sperm to see which one can reach the egg first. If the female sperm wins, you get a heifer.'



'But what's the sun got to do with it?' I asked.

'I'm coming to that,' he said, 'so listen carefully. When an animal is standing on all fours like a cow, and when you face her head into the sun, then the sperm has also got to travel directly into the sun to reach the egg. Switch the cow around and they'll be travelling away from the sun.'

'So what you're saying,' I said, 'is that the sun exerts a pull of some sort on the female sperm and makes them swim faster than the male sperm.'

'Exactly!' cried Rummins. 'That's exactly it! It exerts a pull! It drags them forward! That's why they always win! And if you turn the cow round the other way, it's pulling them backwards and the male sperm wins instead.'

'It's an interesting theory,' I said. 'But it hardly seems likely that the sun, which is millions of miles away, could exert a pull on a bunch of spermatozoa inside a cow.'

'You're talking rubbish!' cried Rummins. 'Absolute and utter rubbish! Don't the moon exert a pull on the bloody tides of the ocean to make 'em

high and low? Of course it does! So why shouldn't the sun exert a pull on the female sperm?'

'I see your point.'

Suddenly Rummins seemed to have had enough. 'You'll have a heifer calf for sure,' he said, turning away. 'Don't you worry about that.'

'Mr Rummins,' I said.

'What?'

'Is there any reason why this shouldn't work with humans as well?'

'Of course it'll work with humans,' he said. 'Just so long as you remember everything's got to be pointed in the right direction. A cow ain't lying down you know. It's standing on all fours.'

'I see what you mean.'

'And it ain't no good doing it at night either,' he said, 'because the sun is shielded behind the earth and it can't influence anything.'

'That's true,' I said, 'but have you any sort of proof it works with humans?'

Rummins laid his head to one side and gave me another of his long sly broken-toothed grins. 'I've got four boys of my own, ain't I?' he said.

'So you have.'

'Ruddy girls ain't no use to me around here,' he said. 'Boys is what you want on a farm and I've got four of 'em, right?'

'Right,' I said, 'you're absolutely right.'