THE COW PUNCHER

By ROBERT J. C. STEAD

Author of "Kitchener, and Other Poems"

Illustrations by IRWIN MYERS

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Living with his father on a small, badly managed ranch, David Elden has reached the age of eighteen with few educational advantages. An accident to the auto in which Dr. Hardy, eminent eastern physician, and his daughter Irene, are touring the country, brings a new element into his life. Dr. Hardy's leg is broken, and he is necessarily confined to his bed. Friendship, and something more, develops between Irene and David.

CHAPTER II.—Irene greatly enjoys the unconventional freedom of ranch life, and her acquaintanceship with David ripens into affection. On Dr. Hardy's recovery the young people part, with the understanding that David will seek to improve his position in life and they will meet again.

CHAPTER III.—The sudden death of his father leaves David with practically nothing but the few bare acres of the ranch, the elder man having through years of dissipation wasted the income. His debts paid, David goes to the nearest town, determined to keep his promise to Irene by acquiring an education and making himself worthy of her. He secures the first work offered, driving a team for a coal dealer, and meets a man named Conward, about his own age, by whom he is led into dissipation.

CHAPTER IV.

Elden awoke Sunday morning with a prodigious thirst, which he slaked at the water pitcher. It was the practice of Metford's gang to select one of their number to care for all the horses on Sundays while the others enjoyed the luxury of their one day of leisure. In consequence of this custom the room was still full of snoring sleepers and the air was very close and foul.

Dave sat down by the little table that fronted the open window and rested his head on his hands. He was recalling, with considerable effort, the events of the previous night; piecing them together in impossible ways; reassorting them until they offered some sequence. The anger he had felt toward Conward had subsided, but the sting of shame rankled in his heart.

"Fool!" he said to himself. And because he could think of no more specific expression to suit his feelings, and because expression of any kind brought a sort of relief, he kept on repeating the word, "Fool! fool! fool!" And as his self-condemnation gradually won him back to a sense of perspective he became aware of the danger of his position. He had left his ranch home to better himself, to learn things, to rise to be somebody. He had worked harder than ever before, at more disagreeable employment; he had lived in conditions that were almost nauseating—and what had he learned? That you can't beat a card man at his own game, price sixty dollars, and that the gallery seats are cheaper and sometimes safer than the orchestra.

Then all of a sudden he thought of Reenie. He had not thought of her much of late; he had been so busy in the days and so tired at nights that he had not thought of her much. Now she burst upon him again with all that beauty and charm which had so magnetized him in those glad, golden days, and the frank cleanness of her girlhood made him disgusted and ashamed. It was to fit himself for her that he had come to town, and what sort of mess was he making of it? He was going down instead of up. He had squandered his little money, and now he was squandering his life. He had been drunk. . . .

Dave's nature was one in which emotions were accelerated with their own intensity. And the sudden manner in which Reenie had now invaded his consciousness intensified the blackness in which he was submerged, as lightning darkens the storm. . . . He saw her on that last night, with the moonlight wooing her white face, until his own body had eclipsed it in a warmer passion, and he heard her words, "I know you are true and clean." . . .

True and clean. "Yes, thank God, I am still that!" he cried, springing suddenly to his feet and commencing to dress. "I've been spattered, but nothing that won't wash off. Perhaps"—and he stopped as the great thought struck him—"perhaps it was the luckiest thing in the world that the booze did put me out last night. . . . It'll wash off."

* * * * * *

Fortunate fate, or whatever good angel it is that sometimes drops unexpected favors, designed that young Elden should the following day deliver coal at the home of Mr. Melvin Duncan. Mr. Duncan, tall, quiet and forty-five, was at work in his garden as Dave turned the team in the lane and backed them up the long, narrow drive connecting with the family coal chute. As the heavy wagon moved straight to its objective Mr. Duncan looked on with approval that heightened into admiration. Dave shoveled his load without remark, but as he stood for a moment at the finish, wiping the sweat from his coal-grimed face, Mr. Duncan engaged him in conversation.

"You handle a team like you were born to it," he said. "Where did you get the knack?"

"Well, I came up on a ranch," said Dave. "I've lived with horses ever since I could remember."

"You're a rancher, eh?" queried the older man. "Well, there's nothing like the range and the open country. If I could handle horses like you there isn't anything would hold me in town."

"Oh, I don't know," Dave answered. "You might get sick of it."

"Did you get sick of it?"

Elden shot a keen glance at him. The conversation was becoming personal. Yet there was in Mr. Duncan's manner a certain kindliness, a certain appeal of sincere personality, that disarmed suspicion.

"Yes, I got sick of it," he said. "I lived on that ranch eighteen years and never was inside school or church. Wouldn't that make you sick? . . . So I beat it for town."

"And I suppose you are attending church regularly now, and night school, too?"

Dave's quick temper fired up in resentment, but again the kindliness of the man's manner disarmed him. He was silent for a moment, and then he said:

"No, I ain't. That's what makes me sick now. I came in here intendin' to get an education, an' I've never got even a start at it, excep' for some things perhaps wasn't worth the money. There always seems to be somethin' else—in ahead."

"There always will be," said Mr. Duncan, "until you start."

"But how's it to be done?" Dave questioned with returning interest. "Schools an' books cost money, an' I never save a dollar."

"And never will," said Mr. Duncan, "until you start. But I think I see a plan that might help, and if it appeals to you it will also be a great convenience to me. My wife likes to go driving Sundays, and sometimes on a weekday evening; but I have so many things on hand I find it hard to get out with her. My daughter used to drive, but these new-fangled automobiles are turning the world upside down—and many a buggy with it. Well—as I saw you driving in here I said to myself, 'There's the man for that job of mine, if I can get him; but I'm not rich and I couldn't pay you regular wages. But if I could square the account by helping with your studies a couple of nights a week—I used to teach school and haven't altogether forgotten—why, that would be just what I want. What do you say?"

"I never saw anything on four feet I couldn't drive," said Dave, "an' if you're willing to take a chance I am. When do we start?"

"First lesson tonight. Second lesson Thursday night. First drive Sunday." Mr. Duncan did not explain that he wanted to know the boy better before the drives commenced, and he felt that two nights together would satisfy him whether he had found the right man.

Dave hurried back to the coalyard and completed the day's work in high spirits. It seemed he was at last started on a road that might lead somewhere. After supper he surprised his fellow laborers by changing to his Sunday clothes and starting down a street leading into the residential part of the town. There were speculations that he had "seen a skirt."

Mr. Duncan met him at the door and showed him into the living room. Mrs. Duncan, plump, motherly, lovable in the mature womanliness of forty, greeted him cordially. She was sorry Edith was out; Edith had a tennis engagement. She was apparently deeply interested in the young man who was to be her coachman. Dave had never been in a home like this, and his eyes, unaccustomed to comfortable furnishings, appraised them as luxury. He soon found himself talking with Mrs. Duncan about horses, and then about his old life on the ranch, and then about coming to town. Almost before he knew it he had told her about Reenie Hardy, but he had checked himself in time. And Mrs. Duncan had noticed it, without comment, and realized that her guest was not a boy but a man.

Then Mr. Duncan talked about gardening, and from that to Dave's skill in backing his team to the coal chute, and from that to coal itself. Dave had shoveled coal all winter, but he had not thought about coal except as something to be shoveled and shoveled. And as Mr. Duncan explained to him the wonderful provisions of nature—how she had stored away in the undiscovered lands billions of tons of coal, holding them in reserve until the world's supply of timber for fuel should be nearing exhaustion, and as he told of the immeasurable wealth of this great new land in coal resources, and of how the wheels of the world, traffic and industry and science, even, were dependent upon coal and the man who handled the coal, Dave felt his breast rising with a sense of the dignity of his calling. He had had to do with this wonderful substance all winter, and not until tonight had it fired the divine spark of his imagination. The time ticked on, and although he was eager to be at work he almost dreaded the moment when Mr. Duncan should mention his lesson. But before that moment came there was a ripple of laughter at the door, and a girl in tennis costume and a young man a little older than Dave entered.

"Edith," said Mrs. Duncan.

Dave arose and shook hands. Then Mr. Allan Forsyth was introduced. Mr. Forsyth shook hands heartily, but Dave was conscious of being caught in one quick glance which embraced him from head to heel. And the glance was satisfied—self-satisfied. It was such a glance as Dave might give a horse when he would say, "A good horse, but I can handle him." It was evident from that glance that Forsyth had no fear of rivalry from that quarter. And having no fear he could afford to be friendly.

Dave had no distinct remembrance of what happened just after that, but he was conscious of an overwhelming desire to hear Miss Duncan sing. How like Reenie she was! And just as he was beginning to think Mr. Duncan must surely have forgotten his lesson he heard her asking him if she should sing. And then he saw Forsyth at the piano—why couldn't he leave her to do it herself, the butt-in?—and then he heard her fine, silvery voice rising in the notes of that song about the land where the sun should never go down. . . . And suddenly he knew how lonely, how terribly, terribly lonely he was. And he sat with head bowed, that they might not know. . . .

How Like Reenie She Was!

And then there were other songs, and at last Mrs. Duncan, who had slipped away unnoticed, returned with a silver teapot and cups of delicate china, and sandwiches and cake, and they sat about and ate and drank and talked and laughed. And when he looked at his watch it was eleven o'clock!

"I guess we didn't get any lesson tonight," he said as he shook hands with Mr. Duncan at the sidewalk.

"I am not so sure," replied his tutor. "The first thing for you to learn is that all learning does not come from books. A good listener can learn as much as a good reader—if he listens to the right kind of people." And as Dave walked home the thought deepened in him that it really had been a lesson, and that Mr. Duncan had intended it that way. And he wondered what remarkable fortune had been his. The air was full of the perfume of balm o' Gilead, and his feet were light with the joy of youth. And he thought much of Edith and of Reenie Hardy.

In subsequent lessons Dave was rapidly initiated into many matters besides parlor manners and conversation. Mr. Duncan placed the first and greatest emphasis upon learning to write and to write well. They had many philosophic discussions, in which the elder man sought to lead the younger to the acceptance of truths that would not fail him in the strain of after life, and when a conclusion had been agreed upon it was Mr. Duncan's habit to embody it in a copy for Dave's writing lesson.

As soon as Dave had learned to read a little Mr. Duncan took him one day to the public library, and the young man groped in amazement up and down the great rows of books. Presently a strange sense of inadequateness came over him. "I can never read all of those books, nor half of them," he said. "I suppose one must read them in order to be well informed."

Mr. Duncan appeared to change the subject. "You like fruit?" he asked.

"Yes, of course. Why—"

"When you go into a fruit store do you stand and say, 'I can never eat all of that fruit, crates and crates of it, and carloads more in the warehouse? Of course you don't. You eat enough for the good of your system and let it go at that. Now just apply the same sense to your reading. Read as much as you can think about, and no more. The trouble with many of our people is that they do not read to think but to save themselves the trouble of thinking. The mind, left to itself, insists upon activity. So they chloroform it."

Dave's talks with Mr. Duncan became almost nightly occurrences, either at the Duncan home or when he drove the family—for the master of the house often accompanied them—or when they met downtown, as frequently happened. And the boy was not slow to realize the broad nature of the task to which Mr. Duncan had set himself. His education was to be built of every knowledge and experience that could go into the rounding of a well-developed life.

The climax seemed to be reached when Mr. Duncan invited Dave to accompany him to a dinner at which a noted thinker, just crossing the continent, had consented to speak.

"It will be evening dress," said Mr. Duncan. "I suppose you are hardly fitted out that way?"

"I guess not," said Dave, smiling broadly. He recalled the half-humorous sarcasm with which the Metford gang referred to any who might be seen abroad in their "Hereford fronts." He had a sudden vision of himself running the gantlet of their ridicule.

But Mr. Duncan was continuing. "I think I can fix you up," he said. "We must be pretty nearly of a size, and I have a spare suit." And almost before he knew it it was arranged that Dave should attend the dinner.

It was an eventful night for him. His shyness soon wore off, for during these months he had been learning to accept any new experience gladly.

And as he sat among this company of the best minds of the town he felt that a new world was opening before him. His good clothes seemed to work up in some way through his subconsciousness and give him a sense of capability. He was in the mental atmosphere of men who did things, and by conforming to their customs he had brought his mind into harmony with theirs, so that it could receive suggestions, and—who knows?—return suggestions. And he was made to think, think, think.

CHAPTER V.

The summer was not far gone when Dave, through an introduction furnished by Mr. Duncan, got a new job. It was in the warehouse of a wholesale grocery, trundling cases and sacks of merchandise. It was cleaner than handling coal, and the surroundings were more congenial and the wages were better—fifty dollars a month to begin.

"The first thing is to get out of the deadline," said Mr. Duncan. "I am not hoping that you will have found destiny in a wholesale warehouse, but you must get out of the deadline. As long as you shovel coal you will shovel coal. And you are not capable of anything better until you think you are."

"But I've liked it pretty well," said Dave. "As long as I was just working for my wages it was dull going, but it was different after I got to see that even shoveling coal was worth while. I suppose it is the same with groceries, or whatever one does. As soon as you begin to study what you handle, the work loses its drudgery. It isn't a man's job that makes him sick of his job; it's what he thinks of his job."

A light of satisfaction was in his teacher's eyes as Dave made this answer. Mr. Duncan had realized that he was starting late with this pupil, and if there were any short cuts to education he must find them. So he had set out deliberately to instil the idea that education is not a matter of schools and colleges, or courses of reading, or formulae of any kind, but a matter of the five senses applied to every experience of life. And he knew that nothing was coarse or common that passed through Dave's hands.

Dave's energy and enthusiasm in the warehouse soon brought him promotion from truck hand to shipping clerk, with an advance in wages to sixty-five dollars a month. He was prepared to remain in this position for some time, as he knew that promotion depends on many things besides ability. Mr. Duncan had warned him against the delusion that man is entirely master of his destiny.

But Dave was not to continue in the grocery trade. A few evenings later he was engaged in reading in the public library. Mr. Duncan had directed him into the realm of fiction and poetry, and he was now feeling his way through "Hamlet." On the evening in question an elderly man engaged him in conversation.

"You are a Shakespearean student, I see?"

"Not exactly. I read a little in the evenings."

"I have seen you here different times. Are you well acquainted with the town?"

"Pretty well," said Dave, scenting that there might be a purpose in the questioning.

"Working now?"

Dave told him where he was employed.

"I am the editor of the Call," said the elderly man. "We need another man on the street; a reporter, you know. We pay twenty-five dollars a week for such a position. If you are interested you might call at the office tomorrow."

Dave hurried with his problem to Mr. Duncan. "I think I'd like the work," he said, "but I am not sure whether I can do it. My writing is rather—wonderful."

Mr. Duncan turned the matter over in his mind. "Yes," he said at length, "but I notice you are beginning to use the typewriter. When you learn that God gave you ten fingers, not two, you may make a typist. And there is nothing more worth while than being able to express yourself in English. They'll teach you that on a newspaper. I think I'd take it.

"Not on account of the money," he continued, after a little. "You would probably soon be earning more in the wholesale business. Newspaper men are about the worst paid of all professions. But it's the best training in the world, not for itself but as a step to something else. The training is worth while, and it's the training you want. Take it."

Dave explained his disadvantages to the editor of the Call. "I didn't want you to think," he said, with great frankness, "that because I was reading Shakespeare I was a master of English. And I guess if I were to write up stuff in Hamlet's language I'd get canned for it."

"We'd probably have a deputation from the Moral Reform league," said the editor with a dry smile. "Just the same, if you know Shakespeare you know English, and we'll soon break you into the newspaper style."

So almost before he knew it Dave was on the staff of the Call. His beat comprised the police court, fire department, hotels and general pick-ups.

Dave almost immediately found the need of acquaintanceships. The isolation of his boyhood had bred in him qualities of aloofness which had now to be overcome. He was not naturally a good "mixer;" he preferred his own company, but his own company would not bring him much news. So he set about deliberately to cultivate acquaintance with the members of the police force and the fire brigade and the clerks in the hotels. And he had in his character a quality of sincerity which gave him almost instant admission into their friendships. He had not suspected the charm of his own personality, and its discovery, feeding upon his new born enthusiasm for friendships, still further enriched the charm.

(TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

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That tract of land known as the Swain Land, situated in Scuppernong Township Tyrrell county, near Woodley's Station. Bounded on the north by the public road and the lands of Amos McClees; on the East by the public road leading from Creswell to Columbia; on the South by the lands of the heirs of Andrew Bateman; on the west by the lands of Mrs. Sarah Williams (known as the Duncan farm.) Containing by estimation 40 acres. Place of sale. on the premises. Time of sale, 26th day of November 1919 at 12 o'clock noon. Terms of sale, cash. October 18, 1919.

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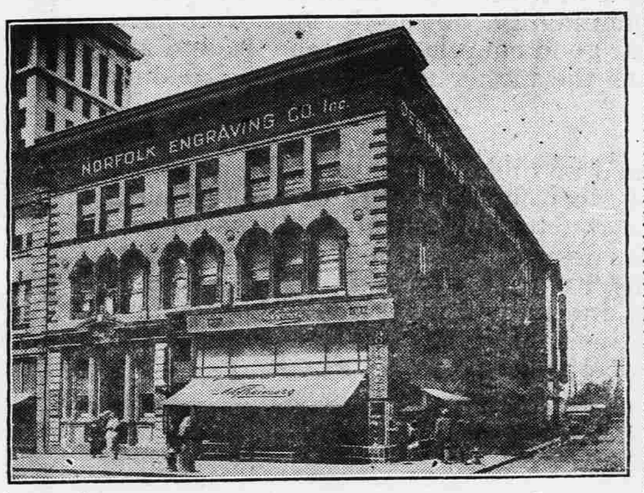

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