

THE COW PUNCHER

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"Fitchener, and Other Poems"

Illustrations by IRWIN MYERS

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CHAPTER VII.

David Elden smoked his after-dinner cigar in his bachelor quarters. The years had been good to the firm of Conward & Elden; good far beyond the wildest of their first dreams. The transaction of the section bought from the English absentee had been but the beginning of bigger and more daring adventures. Conward, in that first wild prophecy of his, had spoken of a city of a quarter of a million people; already more lots had been sold than could be occupied by four times that population.

Dave had often asked himself where it all would end.

The firm of Conward & Elden had profited not the least in the wild years of gain-getting. Their mahogany-finished first-floor quarters were the last word in office luxuriance. Conward's private room might with credit have housed a premier or a president. Its purpose was to be impressive rather than to give any other service, as Conward spent little of his time there. On Dave fell the responsibility of office management, and his room was fitted for efficiency rather than luxury. It commanded a view of the long general office where a battery of stenographers and clerks took care of the details of the business of Conward & Elden. And Dave had established his ability as an office manager. His fairness, his fearlessness, his impartiality, his courtesy, his even temper—save on rare and excusable occasions—had won from the staff a loyalty which Conward, with all his abilities as a good mixer, could never have commanded.

He had prospered, of course. His statement to his banker ran into seven figures. Dave was still a young man, not yet in his thirties; he was rated a millionaire; he had health, comeliness, and personality; he commanded the respect of a wide circle of business men, and was regarded as one of the matrimonial prizes of the city; his name had been discussed for public office; he was a success.

And yet this night, as he sat in his comfortable rooms and watched the street lights come fluttering on as twilight silhouetted the great hills to the west, he was not so sure of his success. He was called a success, yet in the honesty of his own soul he feared the coin did not ring true. He felt that the crude but honest conception of the square deal which was the one valuable heritage of his childhood was slipping away from him. He had little in common with Conward outside of their business relationship. He suspected the man vaguely, but had never found tangible ground for his suspicion.

He was turning the matter over in his mind and wondering what the end would be, when a knock came at the door.

"Come," he said, switching on the light. "Oh, it's you, Bert! I'm honored. Sit down."

Roberta Morrison threw her coat over a chair and sank into another. Without speaking, she extended her shapely feet to the fire, but when its soothing warmth had comforted her limbs she looked up and said:

"Adam sure-put it over on us, didn't he?"

"Still nursing that grievance over your sex?" laughed Dave. "I thought you would outgrow it."

"I don't blame him," continued the girl, ignoring his interruption. "I am just getting back from forty-seven tests. Gabble, gabble, gabble. I don't blame him. We deserve it."

"Then you have had nothing to eat?"

"Almost. Only insignificant indigestibles."

Dave pressed a button, and a Chinese boy (all male Chinese are boys) entered.

"Bring something to eat. Go out for it, and be quick. For two."

"You've had your dinner, surely?" asked Bert.

"Such a dinner as a man eats alone," he answered. "Now for something real. You stick to the paper like the ink, don't you, Bert?"

"Can't leave it. I hate it—and I love it. It's my poison and my medicine. Most of all I hate the society tangle. And, of course, that's what I have to do."

"Bert," Dave said, suddenly, "why don't you get married?"

"Who, me?" Then she laughed. "It would be mean to put over anything like that on a man, and a girl wouldn't have me."

"Well, then, why don't you buy some real estate?" he continued, jocularly. "Every man should have some disposition—something to make him forget his other troubles."

"A little late in the meal for that word, isn't it? But the fact is, I have invested."

A look came into his face which she did not understand. "With whom?" he demanded, almost imperceptibly.

"With Conward & Elden," she answered, and the roguishness of her voice suggested that her despised femininity lay not far from the surface. "Were you about to be jealous?"

"Why didn't you come to me?"

knew. He had his poise again. "Real estate is the only subject I would trust him on," she continued. "I must say, Dave, that for a shrewd business man you are awfully dense about Conward."

He remained silent for a few moments. He decided not to follow her lead. He knew that if she had anything explicit to say about Conward she would say it when she felt the time to be opportune, and not until then.

"How much did you invest?"

"Not much. Just what I had."

"You mean all your savings?"

"Why not? It's all right, isn't it?"

He had risen and was standing by the window.

"It's all right, isn't it?" she repeated.

"I'm afraid it isn't," he said, at length, in a restrained voice. "I'm afraid it isn't."

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Bert," he continued, "did it ever occur to you that this thing must have an end—that we can't go on forever lifting ourselves by our own bootstraps? We have built a city here, a great and beautiful city, almost as a wizard might build it by magic overnight. There was room for it here; there was occasion; there was justification. But there was no other occasion nor justification for turning miles and miles of prairie land into city lots—lots which in the nature of things cannot possibly, in your time or mine, be required for city purposes. These lots should be producing; wheat, oats, potatoes, cows, butter—that is what we must build our city on. We have been considering the effect rather than the cause. The cause is the country, the neglected country, and until it overtakes the city we must stand still, if we do not go back. Our prosperity has been built on borrowed money, and we have forgotten that borrowed money must some time be repaid."

"You mean that the boom is about to burst?" she said.

"Not exactly burst. It will not be so sudden as that. It will just ooze away like a toy balloon pricked with a pin."

There was silence for some minutes. When she spoke at length it was with a tinge of bitterness. "So you are unloading?"

"The firm is. I beg you, Bert, to believe that if I had known your intention I would have tried to dissuade you."

"Why me particularly? I am only one of the great public. Why don't you give your conclusions to the world? Now that you see the reaction setting in doesn't honesty suggest what your course should be?"

There was reproach in her voice, Dave thought, rather than bitterness. He spread out his hands. "What's the use? The harm is done. To predict a collapse would be to precipitate a panic. It is as though we were passengers on a boat at sea. You and I know the boat is sinking, but the other passengers don't. They are making merry with champagne and motorcars—if you can accept that figure—and revelry and easy money. Why spoil their remaining few hours by telling them they are headed for the bottom?"

After a moment she placed her fingers on his arm. "Forgive me, Dave," she said. "I didn't mean to whine."

"You didn't whine," he returned, almost fiercely. "It's not you. You are too good a sport. But there will be lots of whining in the coming months. Manlike, it did not occur to Dave that in that moment the girl had bidden goodby to her savings of a dozen years and had merely looked up and said, 'Forgive me, Dave, I didn't mean to whine.'"

He glanced at his watch. "It's late for a theater," he said, "but we can ride. Which do you say—auto or horseback?"

"I can't go horseback in these clothes and I don't want to change."

Dave pressed a button and the omnipresent Chinese "boy" stood before him. "My car," he said. "The two-passenger car. I shall not want a driver." Then, continuing to Miss Morrison: "You will need something more than that coat. Let me see. My smoking jacket should fit."

In a few minutes they were threading their way through the street traffic in Dave's machine. Presently the traffic thinned, and the car hummed through long residential avenues of comfortable homes. On and on they sped, until the city streets and the city lights fell behind and the car was swinging along a fine country road through a land marked with streams and bridges and blocked out with fragrant bluffs of young poplars.

At last, after an hour's steady driving in a delight of motion too keen for conversation, they pulled up on the brow of a hill. Dave switched off his lights, the better to appreciate the majesty of the night, and in the silence came the low murmur of water. There were no words. They sat and breathed it.

Suddenly, from a sharp bend behind in the road, flashed the lights of an approaching car. Dave was able to switch his own lights on again only in time to avoid a collision. The oncoming car lurched and passed by furiously, but not before Dave had recognized Conward as the driver. Back on its trail of dust floated the ribald notes of half-intoxicated women.

"Close enough," said Dave when the dust had settled. "Well, let us jog back home."

They took the return trip leisurely, drinking in the glories of the night and allowing time for the play of conversation. Bert Morrison was a good conversationalist. Her points of interest were almost infinite. And they were back among the street lights before they knew it.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Bert said, as they parted, as though she really had forgotten. "I was at a reception to-day when a beautiful woman asked for you—asked me if I had ever heard of Mr. David Elden."

"What, Dave Elden, the millionaire?" I said. "Everybody knows him. He's the beau of the town, or could be if he wanted to." Oh, I gave you a good name, Dave."

"Thanks, Bert. That was decent. Who was she?"

"She said her name was Irene Hardy."

CHAPTER VIII.

Upon the return of Irene Hardy to the East it had slowly become apparent to her mother that things were not as they once had been. It seemed as though she had left part of her nature behind—had outgrown it, perhaps—and had created about herself an atmosphere of reserve foreign to her earlier life. It seemed as though the loneliness of the great plains had settled upon her.

"Whatever has come over Irene?" said Mrs. Hardy to the doctor one evening. "She hasn't been the same since she came home. I should not have let her go west alone."

The doctor looked up mildly from his paper. It was the custom of the doctor to look up mildly when Mrs. Hardy made a statement demanding some form of recognition. From the wide initiation into domestic affairs which his profession had given him Doctor Hardy had long since entirely ceased to look for the absolute in woman. He had never looked for it in man. He realized that in Mrs. Hardy he did not possess a perfect mate, but he was equally convinced that in no other woman would he have found a perfect mate, and he accepted his lot with the philosophy of his sixty years. So instead of reminding his wife that Irene had not been alone when she went west he remarked very mildly that the girl was growing older.

Mrs. Hardy found in his remark occasion to lay down the book she had been holding and to sit upright in a rigidity of intense disapproval. Doctor Hardy was aware that this was entirely a theatrical attitude, assumed for the purpose of imposing upon him a proper humility. He had experienced it many times.

"What," said Mrs. Hardy, "is the lapse of an appropriate period. 'Do you consider that an intelligent remark?'"

"It has the advantage of truthfulness," returned the doctor placidly. "It is susceptible of demonstration."

"I should think this is a matter of sufficient interest to the family to be discussed seriously," retorted Mrs. Hardy, who had an unfortunate habit of becoming exasperated by her husband's good humor. "Irene is our only child, and before your very eyes you see her—you see her—Do you know, I begin—I really begin to suspect that she's in love."

It was Doctor Hardy's turn to sit upright. "Nonsense!" he said. "Why should she be in love? It is the unfortunate limitation of the philosopher that he so often leaves irrational behavior out of the reckoning. 'She is only a child.'"

"She will be eighteen presently. And why shouldn't she be in love? And the question is—who? That is for you to answer. Who did she meet?"

"She met no one with me. My accident left me to enjoy my holiday as best I could at a ranch deep in the foothills, and Irene stayed with me there. There was no one else—"

"No one? No ranchmen, cowboys—cow punchers—I think I have heard—"

"No. Only young Elden."

"Only? Who is this young Elden?"

"But he is just a boy. Just the son of the old rancher of whom I have told you."

"Exactly. And Irene is just a girl. Doctor Hardy, you are all very well with your fevers and your chills, but you can't diagnose a love case worth a cent. What about this young Elden? Did Irene see much of him?"

The doctor spread his hands. "Do you realize that there were four of us at that ranch—four only, and no one else for miles? How could she have seen him?"

"And you permitted it?"

"I was on my back with a broken leg. They were good Samaritans to us. I couldn't chaperone her. And besides they don't do things that way in that country. You don't understand. It's altogether different."

"Andrew," said Mrs. Hardy, leaning forward, and the word was ominous for she used his Christian name only in moments of crisis, "was Irene ever with this young man—alone?"

The doctor arose to his feet and trod heavily upon the rich carpeting. "I told you you don't understand," he protested. "The West is not the East. Everything is different."

"I suppose human nature is different," she interrupted meaningfully. Then her head fell upon the table and her hands went up about her hair. It had been brown hair once but was now thin and streaked with gray. "Oh, Andrew," she wept, "we are ruined! That we should ever have come to this!"

It was now Doctor Hardy's turn to be exasperated. There was one thing his philosophy could not endure. That was a person who was not and who would not be philosophical. Mrs. Hardy was not and would not be philosophical.

"This is all nonsense!" said the doctor, impatiently. "There is nothing to it, anyway. The girl had to have some company. What if she did ride together? What?"

"They rode together? Alone?"

"The doctor, whose impatience had made way for sarcasm. "You are mocking me. In this hour of shame you are making jests. Call Irene."

The girl was summoned. Her fine face had lost some of its brightness, and the eyes seemed deeper and slower, but she was still a vision of grace and beauty as she stood in response to their call, framed in the curtains of an archway. Her quick sense caught the tense atmosphere, and she came forward with parted lips and extended fingers.

"Yes?" she said. "What is wrong? Can I help?"

"Your father has confessed," said Mrs. Hardy, trying hard to speak with judicial calm. "Now tell us about your relations with this young Elden, this cow puncher. Let us know the worst."

Irene's eyes flew from her mother to her father's face, and there they caught something that restored their calm.

"There was no worst," she said with a ripple of laughter, "but there was a good deal of best. Shall I tell you the best?"

"Irene," said her mother severely, "did you permit that young man to make love to you?"

"If you did not give him permission, if that answers you, because he didn't ask it."

Mrs. Hardy had risen. "Andrew, you hear that? She confesses. It's dreadful! Horrible! What will everybody say?"

"No worse than you have said, I'll be bound," put in the doctor. "Yes, take her part. What care you for the family name?"

"I have a right to speak for the family name," said the doctor firmly. "It was mine before it was yours. I cannot see that the family name has been compromised in the slightest degree. This is Irene's first adventure. It will pass away. And even if it does not—it is a manly boy."

Mrs. Hardy surveyed her husband hopelessly, then turned to Irene. "Have you made any promises?"

"Only that I wouldn't make any promises until he had his chance. That seemed fair."

"I suppose you are receiving letters from him?"

"No."

"Why doesn't he write?"

"For the first time Irene's eyes fell and the color mounted richer in her cheeks. She had to confess now, not for herself but for him.

"He can't write," she said. "Merciful heavens!" exclaimed Mrs. Hardy, collapsing into a chair. "Andrew, bring me a stimulant."

The outcome was that Mrs. Hardy insisted upon Irene embarking at once upon a finishing course. Afterward they traveled together for a year in Europe. Then home again, Irene pursued her art, and her mother surrounded her with the social attractions which Doctor Hardy's comfortable income and professional standing made possible. Her purpose was obvious and but thinly disguised. She hoped

that her daughter would outlive her youthful infatuation and would at length, in a more suitable match, give her heart to one of the numerous eligibles of her circle.

To promote this end Mrs. Hardy spared no pains. Young Carlton, son of a banker and one of the leading men of his set, seemed a particularly appropriate match. Mrs. Hardy opened her home to him, and Carlton, whatever his motives, was not slow to grasp the situation. For years Irene had not spoken of Dave Elden, and the mother had grown to hope that the old attachment had died gone and would presently be quite forgotten in a new and more becoming passion. The fact is that Irene at that time would have been quite incapable of stating her relation toward Elden and its influence upon her attitude to life. She was by no means sure that she loved that sunburnt boy of romantic memory; she was by no means sure that she should ever marry him, let his development in life be what it would; but she felt that her heart was locked, at least for the present, to all other suitors. She had given her promise, and that settled the matter.

Notwithstanding her indifference the girl found herself encouraging Carlton's advances, or at least not meeting them with the rebuffs which had been her habit toward all other suitors, and Mrs. Hardy's hopes grew as the attachment apparently developed. But they were soon to be shattered.

Irene had gone with Carlton to the theater; afterward to supper. It was long past midnight when she reached home. She knocked at her mother's door and immediately entered. Her hair was disheveled and her cheeks were flushed, and she walked unsteadily across the room.

"What's the matter, Irene? What's the matter, child? Are you sick?" cried her mother, springing from her bed.

"No, I'm not sick," said the girl brutally. "I'm drunk!"

"Oh, don't say that," said her mother soothingly. "Proper people do not become drunk. You may have had too much champagne and tomorrow you will have a headache."

"Mother! I have had too much champagne, but not as much as that precious Carlton of yours had planned for. I just wanted to see how desirable he was, and I floated downstream with him as far as I dared. But just as the current got too swift I struck for shore. Oh, we made a scene, all right, but nobody knew me there, so the family name is safe and you can rest in peace. I called a taxi, and when he tried to follow me in I slapped him and kicked him. Kicked him, mother. Dreadfully undignified, wasn't it? And that's what you want me to marry, in place of a man!"

Mrs. Hardy was chattering with mortification and excitement. Her plans had miscarried. Irene had misbehaved. Irene was a difficult, headstrong child. It was useless to argue with her in her present mood. It was useless to argue with her in any mood. No doubt Carlton had been impetuous. Nevertheless he stood high in his set and his father was something of a power in the financial world. As the wife of such a man Irene might have a career before her—a career from which at least some of the glory would reflect upon the silvering head of the mother of Mrs. Carlton.

"Go to your room," she said at length. "You are in no condition to talk tonight. I must say it is a shame that you can't go out for an evening without drinking too much and making a scene. . . . What will Mr. Carlton think of you?"

"If he remembers all I told him about himself he'll have enough to think of," the girl blazed back. "You know what I have told you—and still Mister Carlton stands as high in your sight as ever. I am the one to blame. Very well. I've tried your choice and I've tried my own. Now I am in a position to judge. There will be nothing to talk about in the morning. Mention Carlton's name to me again and I will give the whole incident to the papers. . . . with photographs. . . . and names. Fancy the feature heading, 'Society Girl, Intoxicated, Kicks Escort Out of Taxi.' Good night."

But other matters were to demand the attention of mother and daughter in the morning. While the scene was occurring in Mrs. Hardy's bedroom her husband, clad in white, toiled in the operating room to save the life of a fellow being. There was a slip of an instrument, but the surgeon toiled on; he could not at that juncture pause; the life of the patient was at stake. When the operation was finished he found his injury deeper than he supposed, and Irene was summoned from her heavy sleep that morning to attend his bedside. He talked to her as a philosopher; said his life's work was done and he was just as glad to go in the harness; the estate should yield something, and there was his life insurance—a third would be for her. And when Mrs. Hardy was not at his side he found opportunity to whisper, "And if you really love that boy out West marry him."

The sudden bereavement wrought a reconciliation between Mrs. Hardy and her daughter. Mrs. Hardy took her loss very much to heart. While Irene grieved for her father Mrs. Hardy grieved for herself. It was awful to be left alone like this. And when the lawyers found that, instead of a hundred thousand dollars, the estate would yield a bare third of that sum, she spoke openly of her husband's providence. He had enjoyed a handsome income, on which his family had lived in luxury. That it was unequal to the strain of providing for them in that fashion and at the same time accumulating a reserve for such an eventuality as had occurred was a matter which his widow could scarcely overlook.

Her health had suffered a severe shock, for beneath her ostentation she felt as deep a regard for her late husband as was possible in one who measured everything in life by vari-

ous social formulas. She consulted a specialist who had enjoyed a close professional acquaintance with Doctor Hardy. The specialist gave her a careful, meditative and solemn examination.

"Your condition is serious," he told her, "but not alarming. You must have a drier climate and, preferably, a higher altitude. I am convinced that the conditions your health demands are to be found in —" He named the former cow town from which Irene's fateful automobile journey had had its start, and the young woman, who was present with her mother, felt herself go suddenly pale with the thought of a great prospect.

"Oh, I could never live there!" Mrs. Hardy protested. "It is so crude. Cowpunchers, you know, and all that sort of thing."

The specialist smiled. "You will probably not find it so crude, although I dare say some of its customs may jar on you," he remarked, dryly. "And it is not a case of not being able to live here. It is a case of not being able to live here. If you take my advice you should die of old age, as far as at least, as your present ailment is concerned. If you don't—and he dropped his voice to just the correct note of gravity, which pleased Mrs. Hardy very much—"If you don't, I can't promise you a year."

Confronted with such an alternative, the good lady had no option. She accepted the situation with the resignation which she deemed to be correct under such circumstances, but the boundless prairies were to her so much desolation and ugliness. Irene gathered that her mother did not approve of prairies. They were something new to her life, and it was greatly to be suspected that they were improper.

(TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

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