The Cow Puncher

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Illustrations by IRWIN MYERS

CHAPTER XI.—Continued.
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Bert Morrison's confession had, however, set up another very insistent train of thought in Irene's mind. She realized that Bert, with all her show of cynicism and masculinity, was really a very womanly young woman, with just the training and the insight into life that would make her almost irresistible should she enter the matrimonial market. And Bert and Dave were already good friends; very good friends indeed, as Irene suspected from fragments of conversation which either of them dropped from time to time. Although she never doubted the singleness of Dave's devotion, she sometimes suspected that in Bert Morrison's presence he felt a more frank comradeship than in hers. And it was preposterous that he should not know that Bert might be won for the winning. And meantime . . .

Another winter wore away; another spring came rushing from the mountain passes; another summer was upon them, and still Irene Hardy had not surrendered. A thousand times she told herself it was impossible, with her mother to think of—and always she ended in indignation over her treatment of Dave. It was outrageous to keep him waiting . . . and somewhere back of her self-indignation flitted the form—the now seductive form—of Bert Morrison.

Irene Hardy chose to be frank with herself over the situation. She had not doubted the sincerity of her attachment for Dave Elden; but, had she experienced such a doubt, the entry of Bert Morrison into the drama would have forever removed it. In fairness she admitted that things could not continue as they were. If she continued to trifle with Dave Elden—

Yes, trifle. She would be frank. She would not spare herself. She had been trifling with him. . . . She would lay her false pride aside. In the purity of her womanhood, which he could not misunderstand, she would divest herself of all convention and tell him frankly that—that—

She was not sure what she would tell or how she would tell it. She was sure only that she would make him know. At the very next opportunity. . . .

It came on a fine summer's evening in late July, while Dave and Irene drifted in his car over the rich ripening prairies.

Everywhere were fields of dark-green wheat, already beginning to glimmer with the gold of harvest; everywhere were herds of sleek cattle sighing and blowing contentedly in the cool evening air. Away to the west lay the mountains, blue and soft as a pillow of velvet for the head of the dying day; overhead, inverted islands of brass and copper floated lazily in an inverted sea of azure and opal; up from the southwest came the breath of the far Pacific, mild and soft and gentle.

"We started at the wrong end in our nation building," Dave was saying. "We started to build cities, leaving the country to take care of itself. We are finding out how wrong we were. Depend upon it, where there is a prosperous country the cities will take care of themselves. We have been putting the cart before the horse—"

But Irene's eyes were on the sunset; on the slowly fading colors of the cloudlands overhead. Something of that color played across her fine face, mellowing, softening, drawing as it seemed, the very soul to cheeks and lips and eyes. Dave paused in his speech to regard her, and her beauty rushed upon him, engulfed him, overwhelmed him in such a poignancy of tenderness that it seemed for a moment all his resolves must be swept away and he must storm the citadel that would not surrender to siege. . . . Only action could hold him resolute; he pressed down the accelerator until the steel lungs of his motor were drinking power to their utmost capacity and the car roared furiously down the stretches of the country road.

It was dusk when he had burnt out his violence, and, chastened and spent, he turned the machine to hum back gently to the forgotten city. Irene, by some fine telepathy, had followed vaguely the course of his emotions; had followed them in delicious excitement and fear and hope. She sensed in some subtle feminine way the impulse that had sent him roaring into the distances; she watched his powerful hand on the wheel; his clear, steady eye; the minute accuracy with which he controlled his flying motor; and she prayed—and did not know what or why she prayed. But a color not all of the dying sunlight lit her cheek as she guessed—she feared—she hoped—that she had prayed that he might forget his fine resolves—that his heart might at last outrule his head. . . .

In the deepening darkness her fingers found his arm. The motion of the car masked the violence of her trembling, but for a time the pounding of her heart would not allow her speech.

"Dave," she said, at length, "I want to tell you that I think you—that we—that I—Oh, I've been very selfish and proud—" Her fingers had followed his arm to the shoulder, and the car had idled to a standstill. "I have fought as long as I can, Dave. I—I always wanted to—to lose, you know; and now—I surrender."

Elden lost no time in facing the unpleasant task of an interview with Mrs. Hardy. It was even less pleasant than he expected.

"Irene is of age," said Mrs. Hardy, bluntly. "If she will, she will. But I must tell you plainly that I will do all I can to dissuade her. Ungrateful child!" she exclaimed, in an outburst of temper, "after all these years to throw herself away in an infatuation for a cow puncher when there are men like Mr. Conward—"

"Conward!" interrupted Dave.

"He has the manners of a gentleman," she said, in a tone intended to be crushing.

"And the morals of a coyote," Dave returned hotly.

"O-o-o-h!" said Mrs. Hardy, in a low, shocked cry. That Elden should speak of Conward with such disdain seemed to her little less than sacrilege. Then, gathering herself together with some dignity: "If you cannot speak respectfully of Mr. Conward you will please leave the house. I shall not forbid you to see Irene; I know that would be useless. But please do not trouble me with your presence."

When Dave had gone Mrs. Hardy rang up Conward's number.

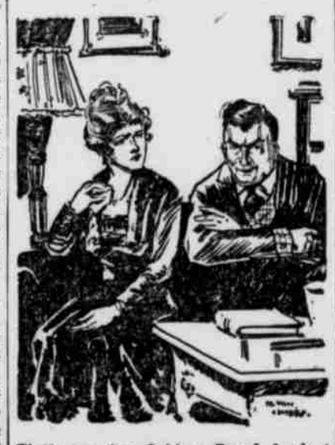
"Oh, Mr. Conward!" she said. "You know who is speaking? . . . Yes. You must come up tonight. I do want to talk with you. I—I've been insulted—in my own house. By that—that Elden. It's all very terrible. I can't tell you over the telephone."

Conward called early in the evening. Mrs. Hardy had heard the bell and bustled into the room. She had not yet recovered from her agitation, and made no effort to conceal it.

"Come into my sitting room, Mr. Conward. I am so glad you have come. Really, I am so upset. It is such a comfort to have some one you can depend on—some one whose advice one can seek, on occasions like this. I never thought—"

"There, there," he said. "You must control yourself. Tell me. It will relieve you, and perhaps I can help."

"Oh, I'm sure you can," she returned. "It's all over Irene and that—that—I will say it—that cow puncher.



Flatterers Are Seldom Proof Against Their Own Poison.

To think it should have come to this! Mr. Conward, you are not a mother, so you can't understand. Ungrateful girl! But I blame him. And the doctor. I never wanted him to come West. It was that fool trip, in that fool motor—"

Conward smiled to himself over her unaccustomed violence. Mrs. Hardy must be deeply moved when she forgot to be correct. He had readily surmised the occasion of her distress. It needed no words from Mrs. Hardy to tell him that Irene and Dave were engaged. He had expected it for some time, and the information was not altogether distasteful to him. He had come somewhat under the spell of Irene's attractiveness, but he had no deep attachment for her. He was not aware that he had ever had an abiding attachment for any woman. Attachments were things which he put on and off as readily as a change of clothes. He planned to hit Dave through Irene, but he planned that when he struck it should be a death blow. Their engagement would lend a sharper edge to his shaft.

It may as well be set down that for Mrs. Hardy Conward had no regard whatever. Even while he shaped soft words for her ear he held her in contempt. To him she was merely a silly old woman.

From the day he had first seen Mrs. Hardy his attitude toward her had been one of subtle flattery, partly because it pleased his whim and partly on that same day he had seen Irene, and he was shrewd enough to know that his approach to the girl's affections must be made by way of the acquaintanceship which he would establish under the guise of friendship for her mother. Since his trouble with Dave Conward had a double purpose in developing that acquaintanceship. He had no compunctions as to his method of attack. While Dave was manfully laying siege to the front gate Conward proposed to burglarize the home through the back door of family intimacy. And now that Dave seemed to have won the prize Conward realized that his own position was more secure than ever. Had he not been called in consultation by the girl's mother? Were not the inner affairs of the family now laid open before him? Did not his position as her mother's adviser permit him to assume toward Irene an attitude which, in a sense, was more intimate than even Dave's could be? He turned these matters over quickly in his mind and congratulated himself upon the wisdom of his tactics.

"It's very dreadful," Mrs. Hardy was saying, between dabbings of her perfumed handkerchief on eyes that bore witness to the genuineness of her distress. "Irene is not an ordinary girl. She has in her qualities that justified me in hoping that—that she would do—very different from this. Need I conceal from you, Mr. Conward—from you, of all men—what have been my hopes for Irene?"

Conward's heart leaped at the confession. He had secretly entertained some doubt as to Mrs. Hardy's purpose in opening her home to him as she had done; absurd as the hypothesis seemed, still there was the hypothesis that Mrs. Hardy saw in Conward a possible comfort to her declining days. He had no doubt that her vanity was equal to that supposition, but he had done her less than justice in supposing that she had any directly personal ambitions. Her ambitions were for Irene. She had hoped that, by bringing Conward into the house, by bringing Irene under the influence of a close family acquaintanceship with him, that young lady might be led to see the folly of the road she was choosing. She had hoped that he would be the successful suitor for Irene. And Conward's heart leaped at the confession.

"I suppose I need not conceal from you," he answered, "what my hopes have been. It is reasonably safe to judge a daughter by her mother, and by that standard Irene is one of the most adorable of young women."

"I have been called attractive in my day," confessed Mrs. Hardy, warming at once to his flattery.

"Have been?" said Conward. "Say rather you are. If I had not been rendered, perhaps, a little partial by my admiration of Irene, I—well, one can scarcely give his heart in two places, you know. And my deep regard for you, Mrs. Hardy—my desire that you shall be spared this—ah—threatened humiliation, will justify me in using heroic measures to bring this unfortunate affair to a close. You may trust me, Mrs. Hardy. Irene is—you will forgive me, Mrs. Hardy, but Irene is, if I may say it, somewhat headstrong. She is—"

"She is her father over again," Mrs. Hardy interrupted. "I told him he should not attempt that crazy trip of his without me along, but he would go. And this is what he has brought upon me, and he not here to share it."

Mrs. Hardy's tone conveyed very plainly her grievance over the doctor's behavior in evading the consequences of the situation which his headstrong folly had created.

"She is set in her own mind," Conward continued. "We must not openly oppose her. We must adopt other tactics."

"You are very clever," said Mrs. Hardy. "You have been a student of human nature."

Conward smiled pleasurably. Little as he valued Mrs. Hardy's opinion, her words of praise fell very gratefully upon him. Flatterers are seldom proof against their own poison.

"Yes, I have studied human nature," he admitted. "The most interesting—and the most profitable—of all studies. And I know that young couples in love are not governed by the ordinary laws of reason. That is why it is useless to argue with Irene—sensible girl though she is—on a subject like this. We must reach her some other way.

"The way that occurs to me is to create distrust. Love is either absurdly trustful or absurdly suspicious. There is no middle course, no balanced judgment. In the trustfulness of love little virtues are magnified to angelic qualities, and vices are quite unseen. But change that trust to suspicion, and a hidden, sinister meaning is found behind the simplest word or act. We must plan two campaigns. One, which I have already suggested and one, if that should fail, to cause Elden to distrust Irene. No, no," he said, raising his hand toward Mrs. Hardy, who had started from her seat, "there must be no vestige of reason except that the end justifies the means. It is a case of saving Irene, even if we must pain her—and you—in the saving."

"It's very dreadful," Mrs. Hardy repeated. "But you are very thorough. I you leave nothing to chance. I suppose that is the way with all big business men."

"You can trust me," Conward assured her. "There is no time to be lost. I must plan my campaigns at once."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Sew to Speak.

Surgeon (threading his needle)—Feel much like laughing, Houlihan?

Victim (of an accident)—Save your funny sthories, docthor—ye'll have me in stitches soon enough!—Buffalo Express.

A girl who lets a young man have his own way during courtship is only biding her time.

The real test of the song's popularity is the parody.

The spider is an expert fly fisher.

Tunneling Machine.

A Texas plumber is the inventor of a hand operated tunneling machine for laying sewer pipes without digging trenches.

The henpecked husband has more than a peck of trouble.

Feeding a Grudge.

"I see the railroad restaurant men are to have a banquet." "I'd like to supply the sandwiches."

Fortunes await the inventor of a lifeboat that will float on the sea of trouble.

Cold.

Jones—What became of that shimmy dancer you used to go with?

Jones—She shook me.

Nowadays most any man would like to meet a woman who could drive him to strong drink.