



The COW PUNCHER

By Robert J.C. Stead

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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 arm of which Mr. Hardy, eminent eastern physician, and his daughter Irene, are touring the country, brings a new element into his life. Mr. 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 acquaintance with David ripens into affection. On Mr. 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.

Early next morning he was awake and astray. The recollection of his loss sent a sudden pang through his morning spirits, but he tried to close his mind to it.

"No use worryin' over that," he said, jingling the few coins that now represented his wealth. "That's over and gone. I traded sixty dollars for my first lesson. Maybe it was a bad trade, but anyway I ain't goin' to squeal." He whistled as he finished dressing, ate his breakfast cheerfully, and set out in search of employment.

Almost the first person he met was the stranger who had schooled him in the gambling game the night before. There was something attractive about his personality; something which invited friendship and even confidence, and yet beneath these emotions Dave felt a sense of distrust, as though part of his nature rebelled against the acquaintanceship.

"That was the rottenest luck you had last night," the stranger was saying. "I never saw the beat of it. I was hopin' you'd stay and raise him next time; you might have got your money back that way."

"Oh, I don't mind the money!" said Dave, cheerfully. "I don't want it back. In fact, I figure it was pretty well spent."

"Lobs more where it came from, eh?" laughed the other. "You're from the ranches, I see, and I suppose the price of a steer or two doesn't worry you a hair's worth."

"From is right," Dave replied. "I'm from them, an' I ain't goin' back. As for money—well, I spent my last nickel for breakfast, so I've got to line up a job before noon."

The stranger extended his hand. "Shake," he said. "I like you. You're no squealer, anyway. My name is Conward. Yours?"

Dave told his name and shook hands. Conward offered his cigarette box, and the two smoked for a few moments in silence.

"What kind of a job do you want?" Conward asked at length.

"Any kind that pays a wage," said Dave.

"I know the fellow that runs an employment agency down here," Conward answered. "Let's go down. Perhaps I can put you in right."

Conward spoke to the manager of the employment agency and introduced Dave.

"Nothing very choice on tap today," said the employment man. "You can handle horses, I suppose?"

"I guess I can," said Dave, "some."

"I can place you delivering coal. Thirty dollars a month, and you board with the boss."

"I'll take it," said Dave.

The boss proved to be one Thomas Metford. He owned half a dozen teams and was engaged in the cartage business, specializing on coal. He was a man of big frame, big head, and a vocabulary appropriate to the purposes to which he applied it. Among his other possessions were a wife, numerous children and a house and barn, in which he boarded his beasts of burden, including in the term his horses, his men and his wife, in the order of their valuation. The children were a by-product, valueless until such time as they also would be able to work.

Dave's duties were simple enough. He had to drive a wagon to a coal-yard, where a very superior young man, with a collar, would express surprise that he had been so long gone, and tell him to back in under chute number so-and-so. It appeared to be always a matter of great distress to this young man that Dave did not know which chute to back under until he was told. Having backed into position a door was opened. There was a fiction that the coal in the bin should then run into the wagon box, but as Dave at once discovered, this was merely a fiction. Aside from a few accommodating lumps near the door the coal had to be shoveled. Then Dave had to drive to an address that was given him, shovel the coal down a chute located in the most inaccessible position the premises afforded, and return to the coal-yard, where the young man with the collar would facetiously inquire whether Mrs. Blank had invited him in to afternoon tea, or if he had been waiting for a change in the weather.

His work and supper were over by seven o'clock each evening, and now was the opportunity for him to begin the schooling for which he had left the ranch. But he developed a sudden disinclination to make the start; he was tired in the evening, and he found it much more to his liking to stroll downtown, smoke cigarettes on the street corners, or engage in an occasional game of pool. In this way the weeks went by, and when his month with Metford was up he had neglected to find another position, so he continued where he was. He was being gradually and unconsciously submerged in an inertia which, however much it might hate its present surroundings, had not the spirit to seek a more favorable environment.

So the fall and winter drifted along; Dave had made few acquaintances and no friends, if we except Conward, whom he frequently met in the pool-rooms and for whom he had developed a sort of attachment.

One Saturday evening, as Dave was on his way to their accustomed resort, he fell in with Conward on the street. "Hello, old man!" said Conward cheerily. "I was just looking for you. Got two tickets for the show tonight. Come along. There'll be doings."

There were two theaters in the town, one of which played to the better-class residents. In it anything of a risqué nature had to be presented with certain trimmings which allowed it to be classified as "art," but in the other house no such restrictions existed. It was to the latter that Conward led. Dave had been there before, in the cheap upper gallery, but Conward's tickets admitted to the best seats in the house.

It was an entirely new experience. From the upper gallery the actors and actresses always seemed more or less impersonal and abstract, but here they were living, palpating human beings, almost within hand-reach, certainly within eye-reach. Dave found himself regarding the young woman immediately before him; all in white she was, with some scintillating material that sparkled in the glare of the spotlight; then suddenly she was in orange, and pink, and purple, and mauve, and back again in white. And although she performed the various steps with smiling abandon there was in her dress and manner a modesty which fascinated the boy with a subtlety which a more reckless appearance would have at once defeated.

And then Dave looked in her face. It was a pretty face, notwithstanding its grease paint, and it smiled right into his eyes. His heart, thumped between his shoulders as though it would drive all the air from his lungs. She smiled at him—for him! Now they were away again; there were gyrations about the stage.

Then there was a sudden break-away in the dance, and the girl disappeared behind a forest. Dave supposed she had gone to rest; dancing like that must be hard on the wind. He found little to interest him now in what was going on on the stage. It seemed rather foolish. He wished the girl behind the forest would come down and rest there. Then she could see the show herself. Then she could see—

But there was a whir from the forest, and the girl reappeared, this time all in red, right before him. And then she looked down and smiled again at him. And he smiled back. And then he looked at Conward and saw him smiling too. And then he felt a very distressing uncertainty, which brought the color slowly to his face. He resolved to say nothing, but watch. And his observations convinced him that the smiles had been for Conward, not for him. And then he lost interest in the play.

They hustled into their overcoats to the playing of the national anthem. "Hurry!" said Conward. "Let's get out quick! Ain't she some dame? There—through the side exit—the stage door is that way. She promised

me," he cried. "You made a fool of me. I've a mind to bash your skull in for you."

"Don't be silly," Conward retorted. "I didn't enjoy it any more than you did—introducing you as my friend, and then have you go out like that. Why didn't you tip me? I didn't know it would put you to sleep."

"Neither did I," said Dave. "Well, the next thing is to get you home. Can you walk?"

"Sure."

Dave started for the door, but his course suddenly veered and he found himself leaning over a chair. Conward helped him into his overcoat, and half led, half shoved him to his boarding house.

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 fringed the open window and rested his head on his hands. He was receding, with considerable effort, the events of the previous night; piecing them together in impossible ways; re-asserting 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 splattered, 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."

from the chorus, but Dave could not recall her part. He was sudden; aware of being introduced.

"This is my friend Belton," Conward was saying.

Dave was about to correct him when Conward managed to whisper: "Whist! Your stage name, Miss Edward. Don't forget."

Conward took the first girl by the arm, and Dave found himself following rapidly with the other. They cut through certain side streets, up a stairway, and into a dark hall. A door opened. Conward pressed a button, and they found themselves in a small but comfortably furnished room—evidently bachelor apartments.

The girls threw off their wraps and sauntered about the place, while Conward started a gas grate and put some water to boil.

"Sorry I've nothing for you to eat," he said, "but I've some good medicine for the thirst."

"Eating's poor business when there's a thirst to be quenched," said one of the girls with a yawn. "And, believe me, I've a long one."

The glasses were filled and raised. "Bo!" said Conward.

"Here's looking!" said one of the girls.

Dave hesitated, but the other girl elbowed her glass against his. "Here's looking at you," she said, and she appeared to lay special emphasis on the last two words. Certainly her eye were on Dave's as she raised her glass to her lips. And under the spell of those eyes he raised his glass and drained it.

Other glasses were filled and drained. The three were chattering away, but Dave was but vaguely conscious of their talk and could weave no connected meaning into it. His head was buzzing with a pleasant dreamy sensation. A very grateful warmth surrounded him, and with it came a disposition to go to sleep. He probably would have gone to sleep had his eye not fallen on a picture on the wall. It was a picture of a girl pointing her finger at him. . . . No girl could point her finger at him. He arose and made a lunge across the room. He missed her, and with difficulty retraced his steps to the table to make a fresh start.

"She's makin' fun of me," he said, "an' I don't stand for that. Nobody can do that with me. Nobody—see? I don't 'low it."

"Oh, you don't?" laughed one of the girls, running into a corner and pointing her finger at him. "You don't?"

He turned his attention to her, studying himself very carefully before he attempted an advance. Then, with wide-stretched arms, he bowed down cautiously upon her. When he had her almost within reach she darted along the edge of the room. He attempted a sudden change in direction, which ended disastrously, and he found himself very much sprawled out upon the floor. He was aware of laughter, but what cared he? He was disposed to sleep. What better place to sleep than this? What better time to sleep than this? In a moment he was lost to all consciousness. . . .

It was later in the night when he felt himself being dragged into a sitting posture. "Where am I?" he said, blinking at the light. He rose uncertainly to his feet and stared about the room in returning consciousness.

"Where's the girls?" he asked.

"Gone," said Conward sulkily. "Couldn't expect 'em to stick around all night to say goodby, could you, and you sleeping off your drunk?"

Dave raised his hand to his head. A sense of disgrace was already upon him. Then he suddenly turned in anger on Conward. "You put this up on

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"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."

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"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 kindness, 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 kindness 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, except for some things perhaps wasn't worth the money. There always seems to be somethin' else—in ahead."

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"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 coal-yard 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 undisclosed lands billions of tons of coal, holding them in reserve until the world's supply of lumber 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. . . .

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 halm 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 fall him in the straits 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 cartloads 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