

The Cow Puncher

(Continued from Last Week)
CHAPTER XII.

Conward paused to speak to Irene before leaving the house. "I owe you my good wishes," he said. "And I give them most frankly, although perhaps with more difficulty than you suppose."

"You are very good, Mr. Conward," she acknowledged.

"I could not wish you anything but happiness," he returned. "And had I been so fortunate as Elden, in making your acquaintance first, I might have hoped to contribute to your happiness more directly than I can under the present circumstances." He was speaking in his low, sedulous notes, and his words sent the girl's blood rushing in a strange mixture of gratification and anger. The tribute he implied—that he himself would have been glad to have been her savior—was skillfully planned to appeal to her vanity, and her anger was due to its success. She told herself she should not listen to such words; she should hate to hear such words. And yet she listened to them, and was not sure that she hated them. She could only say:

"You are very good, Mr. Conward." He pressed her hand at the door, and again that strange mixture of emotions surged through her.

Conward proceeded to the business section of the town, well pleased with the evening's events. He found his way impeded by crowds in front of the newspaper offices. He had paid little attention to the progress of the war scene, attributing it to the skillful publicity of interests connected with the manufacture of armaments. To the last he had not believed that war was possible.

"Nobody wants to fight," he had assured his business acquaintances. "Even the armament people don't want to fight. All they want is to frighten more money out of the taxpayers of Europe." To Conward this explanation seemed very complete. It covered the whole ground and left nothing to be said.

But tonight he was aware of a keener tension in the crowd atmosphere. They were good-natured crowds, to be sure, laughing and cheering and making sallies of heavy wit; but they were in some way more intense than he had ever seen before. There was no fear of war; there was, rather, an adventurous spirit which seemed to fear that the affair would blow over, as had so many affairs in the past, and all the excitement go for nothing. That war, if it came to war, could last no one dreamed; it would be a matter of a few weeks, a few months, at the most, until a thoroughly whipped Germany would retire behind the Rhine to plan ways of raising the indemnity which outraged civilization would demand.

Conward elbowed his way through the crowds, smiling, in his superior knowledge, over their excitement. Newspapers must have headlines.

At his office Conward used a telephone. Then he walked to a restaurant, where, after a few minutes, he was joined by a young woman. They took a table in a box. Supper was disposed of, and the young woman began to grow impatient.

"Well, you brought me here," she said, at last. "You've fed me, and you don't feed anybody, Conward, without a purpose. What's the consideration?"

"I'm pulling off a little joke, and I want you to help me. You know Elden—Dave Elden?"

"Sure, I've known him ever since that jolt put him out of business up in your rooms, ever so many years ago. He was too rural for that mixture."

"I want you to get him down to your place some night to be agreed upon—I'll fix the date later—and keep him there until I call for him, with his fiancée."

"Some joke," she said, and there was disgust in her voice. "Who is it on—Elden, me, or the girl?"

"Never mind who it's on," Conward returned. "I'm paying for it. Here's something on account, and if you make a good job of it I won't be stingy."

He handed her a bill, which she kissed and put in her purse. "I need the money, Conward, or I wouldn't take it."

This part of his trap set, Conward awaited a suitable opportunity to spring it. In the meantime he took Mrs. Hardy partially into his confidence. He allowed her to believe, however, that Elden's habits would stand correction and he had merely arranged to trap him in one of his favorite haunts. She was very much shocked and thought it was very dreadful, but "of course we must save Irene."

But concerning another part of his program Conward was even less frank with Mrs. Hardy. He was clever enough to know that he must observe certain limitations.

At length all his plans appeared to be complete. The city was in a tumult of excitement over the war, but for Conward a deeper interest centered in the plot he was hatching under the unsuspecting noses of Irene and Elden. If he could trap Dave the rest would be easy. If he failed in this he had another plan to give failure at least the appearance of success.

The fact that the nation was now at war probably had an influence in speeding up the plot. Everything was under high tension; powerful currents of thought were bearing the masses along unaccustomed channels; society itself was in a state of flux. If he were to strike at all let the blow fall at once.

On this early August night he ascertained that Dave was working alone in his office. Then he called a number on a telephone.

"This is the night," he explained. "You will find him alone in his office. I will be waiting to hear from you at—" he quoted Mrs. Hardy's telephone number. Then he drove his car to the Hardy home, exchanged a few words with Irene, and sat down to a hand of cribbage with her mother.

Foring over his correspondence, Dave, with his ear cocked for the cry of the latest extra, spent the evening hours in a valiant effort at concentration.

There came a timid knock at the door. "Come in," he called.

No one entered, but presently he heard the knock again. He rose and walked to the door. Outside stood a young woman.

"If you please," she said, "excuse me, but—you are Mr. Elden, aren't you?"

"Yes. Can I help you in any way?" The woman tittered a moment, but resumed soberly: "You will wonder at me coming to you, but I'm from the country. Did you think that?"

"I suspected it," said Dave with a smile. "You knocked—" He paused.

"Yes?"

"Like a country girl," he said, boldly. She tittered again. "Well, I'm lost," she confessed. "I got off the train a short time ago. My aunt was to meet me, but there are such crowds in the street, I must have missed her. And I saw your name on the window and I had heard of you. So I just thought that I'd ask—if you wouldn't mind—showing me to this address."

She fumbled in her pocket, and Dave invited her into the office. There she produced a torn piece of paper with an address.

"Why, that's just a few blocks!" said Dave. "I'll walk around with you." He turned for his hat, but at that moment there was another timid knock on the door. He opened it. A boy of eight or ten years stood outside.

"What is it, son?"

The lad looked shyly about the office. It was evident he was impressed with its magnificence. "Are you Mr. Elden that sells lots?"

"Yes. Were you thinking of buying a few lots?"

"Did you sell lots to my father?"

"Well, if I knew your father's name perhaps I could tell you. Who is your father?"

"He's Mr. Merton. I'm his son. And he said to me, before he got so bad, he said, 'There's just one honest man in this city, and that's Mr. Elden.' Is that you, Mr. Elden?"

"Well, I hope it is, but I won't claim such a distinction. I remember your father very well. Did he send you to me?"

"No, sir. He's too sick. He don't know anybody now. He didn't know me tonight." The boy's voice went thick and he stopped and swallowed.

"And then I remembered what he said about you, and I just came."

"Have you help—a doctor—a nurse?"

"No, sir. We haven't any money. My father spent it all for the lots that he bought from you."

Dave winced. Then, turning to the young woman: "I'm afraid this is a more urgent case than yours. I'll call a taxi to take you to your address."

To his surprise, his visitor broke out in a ribald laugh. She had seated herself on a desk and was swinging one foot jauntily.

"It's all off," she said. "Say, Dave, you couldn't lose me in this burg. You don't remember me, do you? Well, all the better. I'm rather glad I broke down on this job. I used to be something of an actress, and I'd have put it over if it hadn't been for the kid. The fact is, Dave," she continued, "I was sent up here to decoy you. It wasn't fair fighting, and I didn't like it, but money has been mighty slow of late. I wonder—how much you'd give to know who sent me?"

Dave pulled some bills from his pocket and held them before her. She took them from his hand.

"Conward," she said.

Dave's blood went to his head. "The scoundrel!" he cried. "The low-down



Dave's Blood Went to His Head. "The Scoundrel!" He Cried.

dog! There's more in this than appears on the surface."

"Sure there is," she said. "There's another woman. There always is."

Elden walked to his desk. From a drawer he took a revolver, toyed with it a moment in his hands, broke it open, crushed it full of cartridges, and thrust it in his pocket.

The girl watched with friendly interest. "Believe me, Dave," she said, "if Conward turns up missing I won't know a thing—not a d— thing."

For a moment he stood irresolute. He could only guess what Conward's plan had been, but that it had been diabolical and cowardly, and that it

concerned Irene, he had no doubt. His impulse was to immediately confront Conward, force a confession, and deal with him as the occasion might seem to require. But his eye fell on the boy, with his shock of brown hair and wistful, half-frightened face.

"I'll go with you first," he said, with quick decision. Then to the girl, "Sorry I must turn you out, but this case is urgent."

"That's all right," she said. "I'm used to being turned out." And before he knew it she was in the street.

"All right, son," said Dave, taking up the matter now in hand. "What's your name—your first name?"

"Charlie."

"And your address?"

The boy mentioned a distant subdivision.

"That is out, isn't it? Well, we'll take the car. I guess I'd better call a doctor at once."

He went to the telephone and gave some directions. Then he and the boy walked to a garage and in a few moments were humming along the by-streets into the country. Dave had already become engrossed in his errand of mercy and his rage at Conward, if not forgotten, was temporarily dismissed from his mind.

He chatted with the boy.

"You go to school?"

"Not this year. Father has been too sick. Of course, these are holidays, and he says he'll be all right before they're over."

Dave smiled grimly. "The incurable optimism of it," he murmured to himself. Then outwardly: "Of course he will. We'll fix him up in no time with a good doctor and a good nurse."

They drove on through the calm night, leaving the city streets behind and following what was little more than a country trail. Here and there they bumped over pieces of graded street, infinitely rougher than the natural prairie; once Dave dropped his front wheels into a collapsing water trench; once he just grazed an isolated hydrant.

"And this is one of our 'choice residential subdivisions,'" said Dave to himself. "Fine business! Fine business!"

As the journey continued the sense of self-reproach which had been static in him for many months became more insistent. The intrusion of Conward into his mind sent the blood to his head, but at that moment his reflections were cut short by the boy.

"We will have to get out here," he said. "The bridge is down."

Investigation proved him to be right. A bridge over a small stream had collapsed and was slowly disintegrating amid its own wreckage. Dave ran the car a little to one side of the road, locked the switch and walked on with the boy.

"Fine business!" Dave repeated to himself. "And this is how our big success has vanished as quickly as it came. I suppose there is a law somewhere that is not mocked."

They were passing through a settlement of crude houses, dimly visible in the starlight and by occasional yellow blurs from their windows. Before one of the meanest of these the boy at last stopped, pulled the door open and Dave entered. At first he was conscious of a very small and stuffy room, with a peculiar odor which he attributed to an oil lamp burning on a box. He walked over and turned the lamp up, but the oil was consumed; a red, sullen, smoking wick was its only response. Then he felt in his pocket and struck a match.

The light revealed the dinginess of the little room. There was a bed covered with musty, ragged clothing; a table littered with broken and dirty dishes and pieces of stale food; a stove cracked and greasy, and one or two bare boxes serving as articles of furniture. But it was to the bed Dave turned, and with another match bent over the shrunken form that lay almost concealed amid the coarse coverings. He brought his face down close, then straightened up and steadied himself for a moment.

"He'll soon be well, don't you think, mister? He said he would be well when the holidays—"

But Dave's expression stopped the boy, whose own face went suddenly wild with fear. "He is well now, Charlie," he said, as steadily as he could. "It is all holidays now for him."

The match had burned out and the room was in utter darkness. Dave heard the child drawing his feet across the floor, then suddenly whimpering like a thing that had been mortally hurt. He groped toward him, and at length his fingers found his shock of hair. He drew the boy slowly into his arms; then very, very tight. . . . After all, they were orphans together.

"You will come with me," he said at length. "I will see that you are provided for. The doctor will soon be here, or we will meet him on the way, and he will make the arrangements for—the arrangements that have to be made, you know."

They retraced their steps toward the town, meeting the doctor at the broken bridge. Dave exchanged a few words with him in low tones, and they passed on. Soon they were swinging again through the city streets. Even with the developments of the evening pressing heavily upon his mind Dave could not resist the temptation to stop and listen for a moment to bulletins being read through a megaphone.

"The Kaiser has stripped off his British regalia," said the announcer. "He says he will never again wear a British uniform."

A chuckle of derisive laughter ran through the mob; then someone struck up a well-known refrain—"What the

a—do we care?" Up and down the street voices caught up the chorus. . . . Within a year the bones of many in that thoughtless crowd, bleaching on the fields of Flanders, showed how much they cared.

Dave drove direct to the Hardy home. After some delay Irene met him at the door, and Dave explained the situation in a few words. "We must take care of him, Renee," he said. "I feel a personal responsibility."

"Of course we will take care of him," she answered. "He will live here until we have a—some place of our own."

Her face was bright with something which must be tenderness. "Bring him upstairs. We will allot him a room and introduce him first to—the bathroom. And tomorrow we shall have an excursion downtown, and get some new clothes for Charlie—Elden."

As they moved up the stairs Conward, who had been in another room in conversation with Mrs. Hardy, followed them unseen. The evening had been interminable for Conward. For three hours he had awaited word that his victim had been trapped, and for three hours no word had come. If his plans had miscarried, if Dave had discovered the plot, well—And here at length was Dave, engrossed in a very different matter. Conward followed them up the stairs.

Irene and Dave chatted with the boy for a few moments, then Irene turned to some arrangements for his comfort and Dave started downstairs. In the passage he was met by Conward.

"What are you doing here?" Dave demanded, as he felt his head beginning to swim in anger.

Conward leered only the more offensively, and walked down the stairs beside him. At the foot he coolly lit another cigarette. He held the match before him and calmly watched it burn out. Then he extended it toward Dave.

"You remember our wager, Elden. I present you with—a burned-out match."

"You liar!" cried Dave. "You infamous liar!"

"Ask her," Conward replied. "She will deny it, of course. All women do."

Dave felt his muscles tighten, and knew that in a moment he would bear his victim to pieces. As his clenched fist came to the side of his body a stroke something hard. His revolver! He had forgotten; he was not in the habit of carrying it. In an instant he had Conward covered.

Dave did not press the trigger at once. He took a fierce delight in torturing the man who had wrecked his life—even while he told himself he could not believe his boast. Now he watched the color fade from Conward's cheek; the eyes stand out in his face; the livid blotches more vivid still; the cigarette drop from his nerveless lips.

"You are a brave man, Conward," he said, and there was the rasp of hate and contempt in his voice. "You are a very brave man."

Mrs. Hardy, sensing something wrong, came out from her sitting room. With a little cry she swooned away.

Conward tried to speak, but words stuck in his throat. With a dry tongue he licked his dried lips.

"Do you believe in hell, Conward?" Dave continued. "I've always had some doubt myself, but in thirty seconds—you'll know."

Irene appeared on the stairway. For a moment her eyes refused to grasp the scene before them; Conward covering (terror-stricken) Dave (fierce, steady, implacable, with his revolver fixed on Conward's lips). Through some strange vision of the mind her thought in that instant flew back to the bottles on the jacks of the Elden ranch, and Dave breathing five out of six on the rafter. Then suddenly she became aware of something only. A tragedy was being enacted before her eyes.

"Oh, don't, Dave! Don't, don't shoot him!" she cried, flying down the remaining steps. Before Dave could grasp her purpose she was upon him, had clutched his revolver, had wrapped her arms about his. "Don't, don't, Dave!" she pleaded. "For my sake don't do—that!"

Her words were tragically unfortunate. For a moment Dave stood as one paralyzed; then his heart dried up within him.

"So that's the way of it!" he said, as he broke her grip, and the horror in his own eyes would not let him read the sudden horror in hers. "All right; take it," and he placed the revolver in her hand. "You should know what to do with it." And he—

(Continued Next Week)



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