

The Cow Puncher

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"Kitchener and
Other Poems"
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Here's an up-to-date story of the ranch country, the city and "over there." It's a love story—the story of the master passion that drives a man on to success for the sake of the woman he loves. The hero is a maverick of the foothills. The heroine is a city girl born to the conventions.

As the boy was practicing shooting with his cayuse on the dead run along came the first automobile he had ever seen. It obligingly tipped over right behind the ranch house and broke the owner's leg. So there was time for Dave and Irene to get acquainted—which was to fall in love.

They parted with a kiss—she to go back to her city life, he to win his way up to her.

CHAPTER I.

The shadows of the spruce trees fell northeastward, pointing long, cool fingers across belts of undulating prairie or leaning lazily against the brown foothills. And among the trees it was cool and green, and clear blue water rippled over beds of shining gravel.

The house was of round, straight logs; the shingles of the squat roof were cupped and blistered with the suns of many summers. Refuse loitered about the open door: many empty tins, a leaky barrel with missing hoops, boxes, harness, tangled bits of wire. Once there had been a fence, a sort of picket fence of little saplings, but wild broncos had kicked it to pieces and range steers had straggled unscarred across its scattered remnants.

Forward, and to the left, was a small corral, mill slabs on end or fences of lodgepole pine; a corner somewhat covered in, offering vague protection from the weather. The upper poles were worn thin with the cribbing of many horses.

The desertion seemed absolute; the silence was the silence of the unspoken places. But suddenly it was broken by a stamping in the covered part of the corral, and a man's voice saying:

"Hip, there! Whoa, you cayusel! Get under your saddle! Sleepin' against a post all day, you Sloppy-eye. Hip! Come to it!"

Horse and rider dashed into the sunlight. The boy—for he was no more than a boy—sat the beast as though born to it, his little frame taking every motion of his mount as softly as a good boat rides the sea. With a yell at his horse he snatched the hat from his head, turning to the sun a smooth brown face and a mane of dark hair, and slapped the horse across the flank with his crumpled headgear. The animal sprang into



The Animal Sprang into the Air, Then Dashed at a Gallop Down the Roadway.

the air, then dashed at a gallop down the roadway, bearing the boy as unconcerned as a flower on its stem.

Suddenly he brought his horse to a stop, swung about, and rode back to a gentle canter. A few yards from the house he again spurred him to a gallop, and, leaning far down by the animal's side, deftly picked a bottle from among the grass. Then he circled about, repeating this operation as often as his eye fell on a bottle, until he had half a dozen; then down the road again, carefully setting a bottle on each post of the fence that skirted it to the right.

Again he came back to the house, but when he turned his eye was on the row of posts and his right hand lay on the grip of his revolver. Again his sharp yell broke the silence and the horse dashed forward as though shot from a gun. Down the road they went until within a rod of the first bottle; then there was a flash in the sunlight and to the clatter of the horse's hoofs came the crack-crack of the revolver. Two bottles shivered to fragments, but four remained in

tact, and the boy rode back, muttering and disappointed. He reasoned with his horse as he rode:

"Tain't no use, you ol' Slop-eye; a fellow can't get the head if he ain't got the fillin'—cooked meals an' decent chuck. I could plug 'em six out o' six—you know that, you ol' floppers. Don't you argue about it, neither. When I'm right inside my belt I smash 'em six out o' six, but I ain't right, an' you know it. You don't know nothin' about it. You never had a father; leastways you never had to be responsible for one. . . . Well, it's comin' to a finish—a d— lame finish, you know that. You know—"

But he had reloaded his revolver and set up two more bottles. This time he broke four and was better pleased with himself. As he rode back his soliloquy was broken by a strange sound from beyond the belt of trees. The horse pricked up his ears and the boy turned in the saddle to listen. "Jumplin' crickets! What's loose?" he ejaculated. He knew every sound of the foothill country, but this was strange to him. A kind of snort, a sort of hiss, mechanical in its regularity, startling in its strangeness, it came across the valley with the unbroken rhythm of a watch tick.

"Well, I guess it won't eat us," he ventured at last. "We'll just run it down and perhaps poke a hole in it." So saying, he cantered along the road, crossed the little stream, and swung up the hill on the farther side.

He was half way up when a turn in the road brought him into sudden sight of the strange visitor. It was the first he had seen, but he knew it at once, for the fame of the automobile, then in its single-cylinder stage, had already spread into the farthest ranching country. The horse was less well informed. He bucked and kicked in rage and terror. But the boy was conscious not so much of the horse as of two bright eyes turned on him in frank and surprised admiration.

"What horsemanship!" she exclaimed. But the words had scarce left her lips when they were followed by a cry of alarm. For the car had taken a sudden turn from the road and plunged into a growth of young poplars that fringed the hillside. It half slid, half plowed its way into a semi-vertical position among the young trees. The two occupants were thrown from their seat; the girl fell clear but her father was less fortunate.

In an instant the boy had flung himself from his horse, dropping the reins to the ground, and the animal, although snorting and shivering, had no thought of disgracing his training by breaking his parole. With quick, ungainly strides the boy brought himself to the upturned machine. It was curious that he should appear to such disadvantage on his feet. In his soiled and a lasso better'n a scrubbin' brush." He was already losing his shyness.

"Now you take the feet again. Steady! Look out for that barrel hoop. This way now."

He led into the old ranch house, kicking the door wider open with his heel as he passed. A partition from east to west divided the house, and another partition from north to south divided the northern half. In the northeast room they set the stretcher on the floor.

"Now," said the boy, "I'm goin' for the doctor. It's forty miles to town, and it'll likely be mornin' before I'm back, but I'll sure burn the trail. There's grub in the house, and you won't starve—that is if you can cook." (This was evidently for Irene. There was a note in it that suggested the girl might have her limitations.) "Dig into anythin' in sight. And I hope your father's leg won't hurt very much."

"Oh, I'll stand it," said Doctor Hardy, with some cheerfulness. "We medical men become accustomed to suffering—in other people. You are very kind. My daughter may remain in this room, I suppose? There is no one else?"

"No one but the old man," he answered. "He's asleep in the next room, safe till mornin'. I'll be back by that time. That's my bed," indicating a corner. "Make yourselves at home." He lounged through the door, and they heard his spurs clanking across the hard earth.

The girl's first thought was for her father. She removed his boot and stocking, and, under his direction, slit the leg of his trousers above the injury. It was bleeding a little. In the large room of the house she found a pail of water, and she bathed the wound, wiping it with her handkerchief and mingling a tear or two with the warm blood that dripped from it. "You're good stuff," her father said, pressing the fingers of her unoccupied hand. "Now if you could find a clean cloth to bandage it—"

"Very good, my boy," said the man. "That was a wonderful lift. The leg is broken—compound. Can you get some way of moving me to shelter? I will pay you well."

The last words were unfortunate. Hospitality in the ranching country is not bought and sold.

"You can't pay me nothin'," he said rudely. "But I can bring a light wagon, if you can ride in that, and put you up at the ranch. The old man's soused," he added, as an afterthought, "but it's better than sleepin' out. I won't be long."

He was back at his horse, and in a moment they heard the clatter of hoofs galloping down the hillside.

The girl rested her father's head in her lap. Tears made her bright eyes brighter still.

"Don't cry, Reenie," he said gently. "We are very lucky to be so close to help. Of course I'll be laid up for a while, but it will give you a chance to see ranch life as it really is." He winced with pain but continued: "I fancy we shall find it plain and unvarnished. What a horseman! If I could run an automobile like he does a horse we should not be here."

"He's strong," she said. "But he's rude."

"The best fields for muscle are often poor schools for manners," he answered.

The boy was soon back with a wagon and a stretcher. He avoided the eyes of his guests, but quickly and gently enough he placed the injured man on the stretcher. "I guess you'll have to take the feet," he said. The words were for the girl although he did not look at her. "I could hustle him myself but it might hurt 'im."

But the injured man interrupted. "I beg your pardon," he said, "that I did not introduce my daughter. I am Doctor Hardy; this is my daughter Irene, Mr.—"

"They don't call me mister," said the boy. "Misters is scarce in these woods. My name is Elden—Dave Elden."

The girl came up with extended hand. He took it shyly, but it made him curiously bold.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Elden," she said.

"I'm glad to meet you, too," he answered. "Misses is scarce than misters in this neck o' the woods."

Carefully they lifted the injured man into the wagon, and Dave drove to the ranch building with an unwonted caution that must have caused strange misgivings in the hearts of his team.

"It ain't much of a place," he said, as they pulled up at the door. "I guess you can see that for yourself," he added, with a grin. "You see there's just dad and me, and he's soused most of the time, and I handle a lasso better'n a scrubbin' brush." He was already losing his shyness.

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"Is that you, Dave?"
"Yes, Reenie, and the doctor, too."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

"HE'S A WONDERFUL BOY."

Synopsis—Dave Elden, son of a drunken ranchman and almost a maverick of the foothills, is breaking bottles with his pistol from his running cayuse when the first automobile he has ever seen arrives and tips over, breaking the leg of Doctor Hardy but not injuring his beautiful daughter Irene. Dave rescues the injured man and starts for the nearest doctor, 40 miles away.

CHAPTER I—Continued.

She looked about the place somewhat hopelessly. Her father read her perplexity.

"It seems as though you would be in charge here for a while, Reenie," he said, "so you will save time by getting acquainted at once with your equipment. Look the house over and see what you have to work with."

"Well, I can commence here," she answered. "This is Dave's room. I suppose I should say Mr. Elden's, but—what was it he said about 'mistering'? It would be splendid if it were cleaned up," she continued, with kindling enthusiasm. "These bare logs, bare floors, bare rafters—we've got back to essentials, anyway. And that's his bed." She surveyed a framework of spruce poles, on which lay an old straw mattress and some very gray blankets. "I suppose he is very tired when he goes to bed," she said, drolly, as though that could be the only explanation of sleep amid such surroundings.

In the south end of the larger room stood a fireplace, crudely made of slabs of native rock. The fires of many winters had crumbled the rock, so that it had fallen in places and was no longer employed for its original purpose. A very rusty and greasy stove now occupied the space immediately in front of the fireplace, the stovepipe leading into the ample but tottering chimney. Near the stove was a bench supporting a tin washbasin, a wooden pail and certain fragments of soap—evidently all the equipment necessary for the simple ablutions of the Elden household. The remnant of a grain-bag, with many evidences of use and abuse, performed the functions of a towel, and a broken piece of looking-glass gave the faintest intimation that a strain of fundamental relationship links the sexes. By the western wall was a table, with numerous dishes, and to the wall itself had been nailed wooden boxes—salmon and tomato cases—now containing an assortment of culinary supplies. A partially used sack of flour and another of rolled oats leaned against the wall, and a trapdoor in the floor gave promise of further resources beneath.

There was a window in the east and another in the west, both open and uncurtained; myriads of flies gave the only touch of life to the dismal scene. Irene looked it all over, then leaned against the window sill and laughed. Her father had brought her west for holidays, with the promise of changed surroundings and new experiences, but he had promised her no such delight as this. With the Elden kitchen still photographed in her mind she called up the picture of her own city home—the order; the precision; the fixedness; the this-sits-here-and-that-stands-there-ness; the flatness and emptiness and formality of it all; and she turned again to the Elden kitchen and laughed—a soft, rippling, irrepressible laugh, as irrepressible as the laughter of the mountain stream amid the evergreens.

Then she looked again from the open window, this time with eyes that saw the vista of valley and woodland and foothill that stretched down into the opening prairie. Suddenly she realized that she was looking down upon a picture—one of nature's obscure masterpieces—painted in brown and green and saffron against an opal canvas. It was beautiful, not with the solemnity of the great mountains, nor the solemnity of the great plains, but with that nearer, more intimate relationship which is the peculiar property of the foothill country. The girl drew a great breath of the pure air and was about to dream a new daydream when the voice of her father brought her to earth.

"Can't you find anything that will do for a bandage?" he asked.

"Oh, you dear Daddykins!" she replied, her voice tremulous with self-reproach. "I had forgotten. There was a spell, or something; it just came down upon me in the window. The bandage? Dear, no! The only cloth I see is the kitchen towel, and I can't recommend it. But what a goose I am! Our grips are in the car, or under it, or somewhere. I'll be back in a jiffy." And she was off at a sharp trot down the trail along which she had so recently come in Dave Elden's wagon.

The grips were duly found, and Irene congratulated herself that she and her father were in the habit of traveling with equipment for overnight. Arrived at the house, she deftly wrapped a bandage about her father's injury and set to work at the preparation of supper—a task not strange to her, as her

mother considered it correct that her daughter should have a working knowledge of kitchen affairs.

Once during the evening she took a glance into the other room. It was even less inviting than Dave's, with walls bare of any adornment save dirty garments that hung from nails driven in the logs. On the rude bed lay an old man. She could see only a part of his face—a gray mustache drooping over an open mouth, and a florid cheek turned to the glow of the setting sun. On a chair beside the bed sat a bottle and the room reeked with the smell of breath charged with alcohol. She gently closed the door and busied herself through the long evening with reforms in the kitchen and with little ministrations designed to relieve the sufferings of her father.

The sun sank behind the Rockies and a darkness, soft and mystical and silent, stole up the valley, hushing even the noiseless day. The girl stood framed in the open window and the moonlight painted her face to the purple ivory and toyed with the rich brown fastness of her hair and gleamed from a single ornament at her throat. She was under a spell. She was in a new world, where were manhood, and silence, and the realities of being, and moonlight, and great gulfs of shadow between the hills, and large, friendly stars, and soft breezes pushing this way and that without definite direction, and strange, quiet noises from out of the depths, and the incense of the evergreens, and a young horseman galloping into the night. And conventions had been swept away, and it was correct to live, and to live!

The first flush of dawn was mellowing the eastern sky when the girl was awakened from uneasy sleep by sounds in the yard in front of the ranch-house.

The stars were still shining brightly through the cold air. In the faint light she could distinguish a team and wagon and men unhitching. She approached and, in a voice that sounded strangely distant in the vastness of the calm night, called:

"Is that you, Dave?"

And in a moment she wondered how she had dared call him Dave. But she soon had other cause for wonder, for the boy replied from near beside her,



The Girl Stood Framed in the Open Window, and the Moonlight Painted Her Face to the Purest Ivory.

In that tone of friendly confidence which springs so spontaneously in the darkness:

"Yes, Reenie, and the doctor, too. We'll have Mr. Hardy fixed up in no time. How did he stand the night?"

How dared he call her Reenie? A flush of resentment rose in her breast, only to be submerged in the sudden remembrance that she had first called him Dave. That surely gave him the right to address her as he had done. Then she remembered she was in the ranch country, in the foothills, where the conventions—the conventions she hated—had not yet become rooted, and where the souls of men and women stood bare in the clear light of frank acceptance of the fact. It would be idle—dangerous—to trifle with this boy by any attempt at concealment or deception.

She could see his form now as he led the horses toward the corral. How straight he was, and how bravely his footsteps fell on the hard earth!

"He's a wonderful boy," said the doctor, of whose presence she had been unconscious. "Cat's eyes. Full gallop through the dark; side-hills, mountain streams, up and down; breakneck. Well, here we are." The doctor breathed deeply, as though this last fact was one to occasion some wonderment. "Your brother tells me you have an injured man here. Accident. Stranger, I believe? Well, shall we go in?"

Brother! But why should she explain? Dave hadn't bothered. Why hadn't he? He had told about the stranger. Why had he not told about both strangers? Why had he ignored her altogether? This time came another flush, born of that keen womanly intuition which understands.

With a commonplace she led the doctor into the house and to the bedside of her father. When the operation was completed the girl turned her at-

tention to the kitchen, where she found Dave, sweating in vicarious suffering. He had helped to draw the limbo into place and it had been his first close contact with human pain. It was different from branding calves and he had slipped out of the room as soon as possible. The morning sun was now pouring through the window and the distraught look on the boy's face touched her even more than the frankness of the words spoken in the darkness. She suddenly remembered that he had been up all night—for her. She would not deceive herself with the thought that it was for her father's sake Dave had galloped to town, found a doctor, secured a fresh team and driven back along the little-used foothill trails. No doubt Dave would have done it all for her father, had her father been there alone, but as things were she had a deep conviction that he had done it for her. And it was with a greater effort than seemed reasonable that she laid her fingers on his arm and said:

"Thank you, Dave."

"What for?" he asked, and she could not doubt the genuineness of his question.

"Why, for bringing the doctor, and all that. I am sure I can't—father won't be able to—"

"Oh, shucks!" he interrupted, with a manner which, on the previous afternoon, she would have called rudeness. "That's nothin'. But, say, I brought home some grub. The chuck here was pretty tame. Guess you found that out last night." He looked about the room and she knew that he was taking note of her house-cleaning, but he made no remark on the subject.

"Well, let's get breakfast," she said, after a moment's pause and for lack of other conversation. "You must be hungry."

Dave's purchases had been liberal. They included fresh meat and vegetables, canned goods, coffee, rice and raisins. He laid the last three items on the table with a great dissembling of indifference, for he was immensely proud of them. They were unwonted items on the Elden bill of fare; he had bought them especially for her. But she busied herself at the breakfast without a thought of the epoch-marking nature of these purchases.

The doctor, who had been resting in the room with his patient, entered the kitchen. During the setting of the limbo he had gradually become aware of the position of Irene in the household; but had that not been so, one glance at the boy and girl as they now stood in the bright morning sunshine, he with his big, wiry frame, his brown face, his dark eyes, his black hair, she round and knit and smooth, with the pink shining through her fair skin and the light of youth dancing in her gray eyes and the light of day glancing on her brown hair, must have told him they had sprung from widely separated stock. For one perilous moment he was about to apologize for the mistake made in the darkness, but some wise instinct closed his lips. But he wondered why she had not corrected him.

They were seated at breakfast when the senior Elden made his appearance. He had slept off his debauch and was as sober as a man in the throes of alcoholic appetite may be. Seeing the strangers, he hesitated in his lurch toward the water-bench, took a great drink and set about washing his face and hands, while the breakfast proceeded in silence. As his preparations neared completion Irene set a place at the table.

"Won't you sit down here, Mr. Elden?" she said.

There had been no introductions. Dave ate in silence.

"Thank you," said the old man, and there was something in his voice which may have been emotion or may have been the huskiness of the heavy drinker's throat. The girl gave it the former explanation. As he took the proffered chair she saw in this old man shreds of dignity which the less refined eye of his son had not distinguished. To Dave his father was an affliction to be borne; an unfair load laid on a boy who had done nothing to deserve this punishment. The miseries associated with his parentage had gone far to make him sour and moody. Irene at first had thought him rude and gloomy; flashes of humor had modified that opinion, but she had not yet learned that his disposition was naturally a buoyant one, weighed down by an environment which had made it soggy and unresponsive. In years to come she was to know what unguessed depths of character were to be revealed when that stoic nature was cross-sectioned by the blade of a keen and defiant passion.

Mr. Elden promptly engaged the doctor in conversation, and in a few moments had gleaned the main facts in connection with the accident and the father and daughter which it had brought so momentarily under his roof. He was quite sober now and his speech, although slowly, was not indelicate. He was still able to pay to woman that respect which curbs the coarseness of a tongue for years subjected to little discipline.

Irene takes the first of many rides with Dave.

(TO BE CONTINUED)