

The Storyteller

STRIKE OUT FOR HIMSELF

It was Sunday afternoon; the season late August; the place a quiet apple orchard on a New England farm, where beneath a tree, stretched at full length in the long grass, lay Dave Hallett, an overgrown boy about eighteen years of age. His clothes—of coarse flannel but neat and whole—were evidently his best, and his hat, a cheap rough and ready straw, he had made a basket, for it was filled with yellow August pippins.

With hands clasped behind his head, he gazed up amid the green boughs above him. Softly the sunlight filtered through them amid the foliage the harvest fruit gleamed like veritable 'apples of gold,' and a bluebird swayed a twig, sang litely, unvexed by fear of marauders. For his fledgelings had been safely reared, and, deserted by his tiny mate, he found himself with no family cares on this perfect afternoon. Or was he himself a fledgeling of the spring, free as air and joyous as the warm breeze that set every little leaf a dancing?

'I wish I could fly away to wherever my fancy might choose,' soliloqued Dave, raising himself on an elbow to pluck a spear of timothy, which he proceeded to nibble like a meditative calf. 'Bet I wouldn't be content to stay in the orchard like that jolly wagtail. No, Sir Blue Coat; I'd go to the city, but of course you wouldn't. The country is for birds and farmers, but the city is for young men who want to make their way in the world.'

Dave's wandering glance came down from the tree, and, roving beyond the green fields, farm houses of unlovely architecture and red bays of the plain, fixed itself upon the Berkshire hills, a line of misty violet that blended with the clouds at the horizon. Yes, beyond those hills lay the world for him. Some day he would pass them and mingle with the throng seeking employment in New York. The boy's eyes took on an absent look. In imagination he was stepping briskly along the crowded street, seeing the lions and with the prospect of a career before him.

So absorbed was he in the pleasant reverie that he did not perceive that he was no longer alone in the orchard, until a stern voice aroused him from his day dream.

'Humph, ne'er do well! Idim' here and eatin' apples. Aint you got anythin' better to do?'

The boy started to his feet and confronted his father, Hiram Hallett, a wiry, weather-beaten descendant of the Puritans.

'There is no work laid out for Sundays,' protested Dave, in self-excuse.

'There's no work laid out, but there's work to be done, all the same,' replied the farmer. 'You've been to church, and the walk there and back took the whole mornin'. But Sunday ain't a day for doin' nothin' on a farm. There are the cows to be driven up from the meadow and milked; and haven't the chores got to be done as usual? Yet here you dawdle under the trees instead of getting into your workin' clothes an' settin' about somethin'.'

'It wants an hour for milking time,' grumbled Dave. 'Dad, I've made up my mind to strike out for myself.'

Had a bomb exploded at the feet of Hiram Hallett he could not have been more surprised.

'What blamed foolishness is this?' he broke out, while an angry flush dyed his sun-tanned cheeks. 'Dave, you've never been such a boy as I was—never have gone from the evening chores to bed, and to the barn with a lantern long before daylight. When you were a little fellow you trespassed in other folks' orchards and cooned for water-mellons with the most mischievous of the neighbors' lads. And now that you are most grown up, you've given me the slip, taking the old mare out of the barn and ridden to all the socials and huskin' bees of the neighborhood. Oh, I ain't so blind as you thought.'

'Mother knew where I went and she did not mind,' protested Dave.

'Mothers are mighty soft-hearted 'bout these boys!' dryly answered the farmer.

'Anyhow, I'm going to strike out for myself,' repeated Dave doggedly.

'Tarnation! If you can't keep in the traces with me a-watchin' and a-gudin' of you, you'd make a bad break if you was flaxin' round on your own account. Farmin' was good enough for me, but I don't know that you are good enough for it. Fact is, Dave, I'm afraid the world may find out what a good for naught you are.'

So saying the farmer strode away to the barnyard. If Hiram Hallett had no patience with the aspirations of his only son, the boy's mother viewed the matter differently. A little school teacher of Irish-American parentage, she had come to I— for the summer vacat-

ion twenty years before. Hiram had promptly been attracted to her; and her influence, together with a mission held in the small Catholic church about that time, had made him a convert to the faith. Soon after he married the pretty summer visitor.

To Mrs. Hallett life had been perhaps a disappointment. For years her horizon had been bounded by hard work. She had seen her husband grow callous and narrow in his round of toil, and as close-fisted as any miser in the counting room; careless in religion and grudging to the Lord the enforced rest of a Sunday, like many a fevered speculator of the Stock Exchange. But she cherished one ambition; her son would go forth into the world. In her prayers she asked not that he should become rich—only that he might earn an honest livelihood and be faithful to the practice of his religious duties. She knew that, though he did not take to farming, he was the best scholar of the district school. Therefore, now when he told her that he was going away, she wept but did not oppose him.

A few days later Dave left home.

'Good-bye, mother!' he said, as he kissed her. 'Yes, I'll remember and always go to Mass on Sunday. Don't worry; I'm sure to get work of some kind.' Then he turned to his father: 'Good-bye, dad.'

'Good-bye!' said Hiram, gruffly. 'A foolish colt must be let run; but I notify you now, Dave, that if you get into trouble you needn't call on me, 'less you're ready to come back and settle down to farmin'.'

At first the boy wrote regularly to his mother. After a year or more a letter announced that he was going west; it was the last that came. For a long time she prayed daily for her son's return, but when years had passed she began to pray for him as for one dead. A severe illness brought her almost to death's door, but she recovered, and the trial was not without its reward. It unlocked in the heart of her husband the frozen mountain of his early love, and reminded him that Marie had been a good wife; and as the fact was impressed upon him by the doctor's verdict that she had broken down from overwork, he found himself calling her 'Mollie,' and helping her in little ways about the house, as he was wont to do in the first days of their marriage. He even began to go with her to church once more. But he, too, was breaking down; the mortgage on the farm was due, and, with age creeping upon the couple, they must seek another home.

One September morning Hallett returned from the village post office.

'Read that, Mollie,' he said, tossing a letter into her lap as she sat by the window.

The communication was from a country lawyer and ran as follows:

'Sir,—I am instructed by my client, Mr. Tompkins, to inform you that in a business deal he has transferred the mortgage on your farm to a gentleman who will go out from New York some day next week to look over the land—Yours, etc., J. KETCHUM.'

Mrs. Hallett's eyes lit up with a ray of hope.

'He don't say the man is going to foreclose,' she said.

The farmer muttered something to himself.

'Tarnation! Trust those New Yorkers!' he added aloud. 'This farm has the purtiest lay o' land in the county. The fellow'll want to make a landscape garden of it and build towers and balconies onto this old house, so as it'll look like an Eyetalian villa. We'll be bundled out as so much rubbish.'

'Ah, if Hiram had only been willing to help Dave instead of mortgaging all the farm to buy those swamp lands,' thought the wife sadly. 'If a man is too hard upon his child, how can he expect the Lord to be merciful to him? Well, it is too late for regrets, and God's will be done.'

The next day dawned fair and warm; but during the forenoon a thunderstorm freshened the fields and changed the dust in the roads to red mire.

As Hallett and his wife were taking their midday meal in the farm house kitchen the dog outside on the doorstep barked fiercely.

Hiram rose from the table and threw open the door to find a man standing before it. The stranger's boots were covered with mud; his clothes had suffered from a drenching, and a negligee shirt open at the throat, a slouch hat, and a short beard completed his unkempt appearance.

'Humph!' thought Hiram. 'Genteel tramp. I know the sort.'

For a moment the searching eyes of the tramp met those of the farmer. Then they passed him by and rested with an intent eagerness upon the face of Mrs. Hallett.

'I'll allow the fellow's hungry,' said Hiram to himself, and he was not far wrong, though he little understood the hunger of that gaze.

'Well,' he demanded, as the wayfarer did not speak. 'You want a square meal, I s'pose? Sit down on the bench outside and my wife will fetch you somethin' to