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THE VILLAGE CONVICT

By Heman White Chaplin 1887

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"Wonder 'f Eph's got back; they say his sentence run out yisterday."

The speaker, John Doane, was a sunburnt fisherman, one of a circle of well-salted individuals who sat, some on chairs, some on boxes and barrels, around the stove in a country store.

"Yes," said Captain Seth, a middle-aged little man with ear-rings; "he come on the stage to-noon. Would n't hardly speak a word, Jim says. Looked kind o' sot and sober."

"Wall," said the first speaker, "I only hope he won't go to burnin' us out of house and home, same as he burnt up Eliphalet's barn. I was ruther in hopes he 'd 'a' made off West. Seems to me I should, in his place, hev in' ben in State's-prison."

"Now, I allers hed quite a parcel o' sympathy for Eph," said a short, thickset coasting captain, who sat tilted back in a three-legged chair, smoking lazily. "You see, he wa'n't but about twenty-one or two then, and he was allers a mighty high-strung boy; and then Eliphalet did act putty ha'sh, foreclosin' on Eph's mother, and turnin' her out o' the farm in winter, when everybody knew she could ha' pulled through by waitin.' Eph sot great store by the old lady, and I expect he was putty mad with Eliphalet that night."

"I allers," said Doane, "approved o' his plan o' leadin' out all the critters, 'fore he touched off the barn. 'T ain't everybody 't would hev taken pains to do that. But all the same, I tell Sarai 't I feel kind o' skittish, nights, to hev to turn in, feelin' 't there's a convict in the place."

"I hain't got no barn to burn," said Captain Seth; "but if he allots my hen-house to the flames, I hope he'll lead out the hens and hitch 'em to the apple-trees, same's he did Eliphalet's critters. Think he ought to deal ekally by all."

A mild general chuckle greeted this sally, cheered by which the speaker added,—

"Thought some o' takin' out a policy o' insurance on my cockerel."

"Trade's lookin' up, William," said Captain Seth to the storekeeper, as some one was heard to kick the snow off his boots on the door-step. "Somebody 's found he's got to hev a shoestring 'fore mornin'."

The door opened, and closed behind a strongly-made man of twenty-six or seven, of homely features, with black hair, in clothes which he had outgrown. It was a bitter night, but he had no coat over his flannel jacket. He walked straight down the store, between the dry-goods counters, to the snug corner at the rear, where the knot of talkers sat; nodded, without a smile, to each of them, and then asked the storekeeper for some simple articles of food, which he wished to buy. It was Eph.

While the purchases were being put up, an awkward silence prevailed, which the oil-suits hanging on the walls, broadly displaying their arms and legs, seemed to mock, in dumb show.

Nothing was changed, to Eph's eyes, as he looked about. Even the handbill of familiar pattern—

*"STANDING WOOD FOR SALE.
Apply to J. CARTER, Admin'r,"*

seemed to have always been there.

The village parliament remained spellbound. Mr. Adams tied up the purchases, and mildly inquired,—
"Shall I charge this?"

Not that he was anxious to open an account, but that he would probably have gone to the length of selling Eph a barrel of molasses "on tick" rather than run any risk of offending so formidable a character.

"No," said Eph; "I will pay for the things."

And having put the packages into a canvas bag, and selected some fish-hooks and lines from the show-case, where they lay environed by jack-knives, jews-harps, and gum-drops,—dear to the eyes of childhood,—he paid what was due, said "Good-night, William," to the storekeeper, and walked steadily out into the night.

"Wall," said the skipper, "I am surprised! I strove to think o' suthin' to say, all the time he was here, but I swow I couldn't think o' nothin'. I could n't ask him if it seemed good to git home, nor how the thermometer had varied in different parts o' the town where he 'd been. Everything seemed to fetch right up standin' to the State's-prison."

"I was just goin' to say, 'How'd ye leave everybody?'" said Doane; "but that kind o' seemed to bring up them he 'd left. I felt real bad, though, to hev the feller go off 'thout none on us speakin' to him. He 's got a hard furrer to plough; and yet I don't s'pose there 's much harm in him, 'f Eliphalet only keeps quiet."

"Eliphalet!" said a young sailor, contemptuously. "No fear o' him! They say he 's so sca't of Eph he hain't hardly swallowed nothin' for a week."

"But where will he live?" asked a short, curly-haired young man, whom Eph had seemed not to recognize. It was the new doctor, who, after having made his way through college and the great medical school in Boston, had, two years before, settled in this village.

"I believe," said Mr. Adams, rubbing his hands, "that he wrote to Joshua Carr last winter, when his mother died, not to let the little place she left, on the Salt Hay Road; and I understand that he is going to make his home there. It is an old house, you know, and not worth much, but it is weather-tight, I should say."

"Speakin' of his writin' to Joshua," said Doane, "I have heard such a sound as that he used to shine up to Joshua's Susan, years back. But that 's all ended now. You won't catch Susan marryin' no jailbirds."

"But how will he live?" said the doctor. "Will anybody give him work?"

"Let him alone for livin'," said Doane. "He can ketch more fish than any other two men in the place—allers seemed to kind o' hev a knack o' whistlin' 'em right into the boat. And then Nelson Briggs, that settled up his mother's estate, allows he 's got over a hundred and ten dollars for him, after payin' debts and all probate expenses. That and the place is all he needs to start on."

"I will go to see him," said the doctor to himself, as he went out upon the requisition of a grave man in a red tippet, who had just come for him. "He does n't look so very dangerous, and I think he can be tamed. I remember that his mother told me about him."

Late that night, returning from his seven miles' drive, as he left the causeway, built across a wide stretch of salt-marsh, crossed the rattling plank bridge, and ascended the hill, he saw a light in the cottage window, where he had often been to attend Aunt Lois. "I will stop now," said he. And, tying his horse to the front fence, he went toward the kitchen door. As he passed the window, he glanced in. A lamp was burning on the table. On a settle, lying upon his face, was stretched the convict, his arms beneath his head. The canvas bag lay on the floor beside him. "I will not disturb him now," said the doctor.

A few days later Dr. Burt was driving in his sleigh with his wife along the Salt Hay Road. It was a clear, crisp winter forenoon. As they neared Eph's house, he said,—

"Mary, suppose I lay siege to the fort this morning. I see a curl of smoke rising from the little shop in the barn. He must be making himself a jimmy or a dark-lantern to break into our vegetable cellar with."

"Well," said she, "I think it would be a good plan; only, you know, you must be very, very careful not to hint, even in the faintest way, at his imprisonment. You mustn't so much as *suspect* that he has ever been away from the place. People hardly dare to speak to him, for fear he will see some reference to his having been in prison, and get angry."

"You shall see my sly tact," said her husband, laughing. "I will be as innocent as a lamb. I will ask him why I have not seen him at the Sabbath-school this winter."

"You may make fun," said she, "but you will end by taking my advice, all the same. Now, do be careful what you say."

"I will," he replied. "I will compose my remarks carefully upon the back of an envelope and read them to him, so as to be absolutely sure. I will leave on his mind an impression that I have been in prison, and that he was the judge that tried me."

He drove in at the open gate, hitched his horse in a warm corner by the kitchen door, and then stopped for a moment to enjoy the view. The situation of the little house, half a mile from any other, was beautiful in summer, but it was bleak enough in winter. In the small front dooryard stood three lofty, wind-blown poplars, all heading away from the sea, and between them you could look down the bay or across the salt-marshes, while in the opposite direction were to be seen the roofs and the glittering spires of the village.

"It is social for him here, to say the least," said the doctor, as he turned and walked alone to the shop. He opened the door and went in. It was a long, low lean-to, such as farmers often furnish for domestic work with

a carpenter's bench, a grindstone, and a few simple tools. It was lighted by three square windows above the bench. An air-tight stove, projecting its funnel through a hole in one of the panes, gave out a cheerful crackling.

Eph, in his shirt-sleeves, his hands in his pockets, was standing, his back against the bench, surveying, with something of a mechanic's eye, the frame of a boat which was set up on the floor.

He looked up and colored slightly. The doctor took out a cigarette, lit it, sat down on the bench, and smoked, clasping one knee in his hands and eying the boat.

"Centre-board?" he asked, at length.

"Yes," said Eph.

"Cat-rig?"

"Yes."

"Going fishing?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"I was brought up to sail a boat," said the doctor, "and I go fishing in summer—when I get a chance. I shall try your boat, some time."

No reply.

"The timbers aren't seasoned, are they? They look like pitch-pine, just out of the woods. Won't they warp?"

"No. Pitch-pine goes right in, green. I s'pose the pitch keeps it, if it's out of the sun."

"Where did you cut it?"

Eph colored a little.

"In my back lot."

The doctor smoked on calmly, and studied the boat.

"I don't know as I know you," said Eph, relaxing a little.

"Good reason," said the doctor. "I 've only been here two years;" and after a moment's pause, he added: "I am the doctor here, now. You 've heard of my father, Dr. Burt, of Broad River?"

Eph nodded assent; everybody knew him, all through the country,—a fatherly old man, who rode on long journeys at everybody's call, and never sent in his bills.

The visitor had a standing with Eph at once.

"Doctors never pick at folks," he said to himself—"at any rate, not old Dr. Burt's son.

"I used to come here to see your mother," said the doctor, "when she was sick. She used to talk a great deal about you, and said she wanted me to get acquainted with you, when your time was out."

Eph started, but said nothing.

"She was a good woman, Aunt Lois," added the doctor; "one of the best women I ever saw."

"I don't want anybody to bother himself on my account," said Eph. "I ask no favors."

"You will have to take favors, though," said the doctor, "before the winter is over. You will be careless and get sick; you have been living for a long time entirely in-doors, with regular hours and work and food. Now you are going to live out-of-doors, and get your own meals, irregularly. You did n't have on a thick coat the other night, when I saw you at the store."

"I haven't got any that's large enough for me," said Eph, a little less harshly, "and I 've got to keep my money for other things."

"Then look out and wear flannel shirts enough," said the doctor, "if you want to be independent. But before I go, I want to go into the house. I want my wife to see Aunt Lois's room, and the view from the west window;" and he led the way to the sleigh.

Eph hesitated a moment, and then followed him.

"Mary, this is Ephraim Morse. We are going in to see the Dutch tiles I have told you of."

She smiled as she held out her mittened hand to Eph, who took it awkwardly.

The square front room, which had been originally intended for a keeping-room, but had been Aunt Lois's bedroom, looked out from two windows upon the road, and from two upon the rolling, tumbling bay, and the shining sea beyond. A tall clock, with a rocking ship above the face, ticked in the corner. The painted floor with bright rag mats, the little table with a lacquer work-box, the stiff chairs and the old-fashioned bedstead, the china ornaments upon the mantel-piece, the picture of "The Emeline G. in the Harbor of Canton," were just as they had been when the patient invalid had lain there, looking from her pillow out to sea. In twelve rude tiles, set around the open fireplace, the Hebrews were seen in twelve stages of their escape from Egypt. It would appear from this representation that they had not restricted their borrowings to the jewels of their oppressors, but had taken for the journey certain Dutch clothing of the fashion of the seventeenth century. The scenery, too, was much like that about Leyden.

"I think," said the doctor's wife, "that the painter was just a little absent-minded when he put in that beer-barrel. And a wharf, by the Red Sea!"

"I wish you would conclude to rig your boat with a new sail," said the doctor, as he took up the reins, at parting. "There is n't a boat here that 's kept clean, and I should like to hire yours once or twice a week in summer, if you keep her as neat as you do your house. Come in and see me some evening, and we 'll talk it over."

Eph built his boat, and, in spite of his evident dislike of visitors, the inside finish and the arrangements of the little cabin were so ingenious and so novel that everybody had to pay him a visit.

True to his plan of being independent, he built in the side of the hill, near his barn, by a little gravelly pond, an ice-house, and with the hardest labor filled it, all by himself. With this supply, he would not have to go to the general wharf at Sandy Point to sell his fish, with the other men, but could pack and ship them himself. And he could do better, in this way, he thought, even after paying for teaming them to the cars.

The knowing ones laughed to see that, from asking no advice, he had miscalculated and laid in three times as much as he could use.

"Guess Eph cal'lates to fish with two lines in each hand an' another 'n his teeth," said Mr. Wing. "He 's plannin' out for a great lay o' fish."

The spring came slowly on, and the first boat that went out that season was Eph's. That day was one of unmixed delight to him. What a sense of absolute freedom, when he was fairly out beyond the lightship, with the fresh swiftness of the wind in his face! What an exquisite consciousness of power and control, as his boat went beating through the long waves! Two or three men from another village sailed across his wake. His boat lay over, almost showing her keel, now high out of water, now settling between the waves, while Eph stood easily in the stern, in his shirt-sleeves, backing against the tiller, smoking a pipe, and ranging the waters with his eyes.

"Takes it natural ag'in, don't he? Stands as easy as ef he was loafin' on a wharf," said one of the observers. "Expect it 's quite a treat to be out. But they do say he 's gittin' everybody's good opinion. They looked for a reg'-lar ruffin when he come home,—cuttin' nets, killin' cats, chasin' hens, gittin' drunk! They say Eliphalet Wood didn't hardly dare to go ou' doors for a month, 'thout havin' his hired man along. But he 's turned out as peaceful as a little gal."

One June day, as Eph was slitting blue-fish at the little pier which he had built on the bay shore, near his rude ice-house, two men came up.

"Hullo, Eph!"

"Hullo!"

"We 've got about sick, tradin' down to the wharf; we can't git no fair show. About one time in three, they tell us they don't want our fish, and won't take 'em unless we heave 'em in for next to nothin',—and we know there ain't no sense in it. So we just thought we 'd slip down and see 'f you would n't take 'em, seein's you 've got ice, and send 'em up with yourn."

Eph was taken all aback with this mark of confidence. The offer must be declined. It evidently sprang from some mere passing vexation.

"I can't buy fish," said he. "I have no scales to weigh 'em."

"Then send ourn in separate berrels," said one of the men.

"But I haven't any money to pay you," he said. "I only get my pay once a month."

"We'll git tick at William's, and you can settle 'th us when you git your pay."

"Well," said he, unable to refuse, "I 'll take 'em, if you say so."

Before the season was over, he had still another customer, and could have had three or four more, if he had had ice enough. He felt strongly inclined that fall to build a larger icehouse; and although he was a little afraid of bringing ridicule upon himself in case no fish should be brought to him the next summer, he decided to do so, on the assurance of three or four men that they meant to come to him. Nobody else had such a chance,—a pond right by the shore.

One evening there was a knock at the door of Eliphalet Wood, the owner of the burned barn. Eliphalet went to the door, but turned pale at seeing Eph there.

"Oh, come in, come in!" he panted. "Glad to see you. Walk in. Have a chair. Take a seat. Sit down."

But he thought his hour had come: he was alone in the house, and there was no neighbor within call.

Eph took out a roll of bills, counted out eighty dollars, laid the money on the table, and said quietly,—

"Give me a receipt on account."

When it was written he walked out, leaving Eliphalet stupefied.

Joshua Carr was at work, one June afternoon, by the roadside, in front of his low cottage, by an enormous pile of poles, which he was shaving down for barrel-hoops, when Eph appeared.

"Hard at it, Joshua!" he said.

"Yes, yes!" said Joshua, looking up through his steel-bowed spectacles. "Hev to work hard to make a livin'—though I don't know's I ought to call it hard, neither; and yet it is ruther hard, too; but then, on t' other hand, 't ain't so hard as a good many other things—though there is a good many jobs that's easier. That's so! that 's so!"

*'Must we be kerried to the skies
On feathery beds of ease?'*

Though I don't know's I ought to quote a hymn on such a matter; but then—I don' know's there's any partic'lar harm in't, neither."

Eph sat down on a pile of shavings and chewed a sliver; and the old man kept on at his work.

"Hoop-poles goin' up and hoops goin' down," he continued. "Cur'us, ain't it? But then, I don' know as 'tis; woods all bein' cut off—poles gittin' scurcer—hoops bein' shoved in from Down East. That don't seem just right, now, does it? But then, other folks must make a livin', too. Still, I should think they might take up suthin' else; and yet, they might say that about me. Understand, I don't mean to say that they actually do say so; I don't want to run down any man unless I know—"

"I can't stand this," said Eph to himself; "I don't wonder that they always used to put Joshua off at the first port, when he tried to go coasting. They said he talked them crazy with nothing."

"I 'll go into the house and see Aunt Lyddy," he said aloud. "I 'm loafing, this afternoon."

"All right! all right!" said Joshua. "Lyddy 'll be glad to see you—that is, as glad as she would be to see anybody," he added, reaching out for a pole. "Now, I don't s'pose that sounds very well; but still, you know how she is—she allers likes to hev folks to talk, and then she's allers sayin' talkin' wears on her; but I ought not to say that to you, because she allers likes to see you—that is, as much as she likes to see anybody. In fact, I think, on the whole—"

"Well, I'll take my chances," said Eph, laughing; and he opened the gate and went in.

Joshua's wife, whom everybody called Aunt Lyddy, was rocking in a high-backed-chair in the kitchen, and knitting. It was currently reported that Joshua's habit of endlessly retracting and qualifying every idea and modification of an idea which he advanced, so as to commit himself to nothing, was the effect of Aunt Lyddy's careful revision.

"I s'pose she thought 't was fun to be talked deaf when they was courtin'," Captain Seth had once sagely remarked. "Prob'ly it sounded then like a putty piece on a seraphine; but I allers cal'lated she 'd git her fill of it, sooner or later. You most gin'lly git your fill o' one tune."

"How are you this afternoon, Aunt Lyddy?" asked Eph, walking in without knocking, and sitting down near her.

"So as to be able to keep about," she replied. "It is a great mercy I ain't afflicted with falling out of my chair, like Hepsy Jones, ain't it?"

"I 've brought you some oysters," he said. "I set the basket down on the door-step. I just took them out of the water myself from the bed I planted to the west of the water-fence."

"I always heard you was a great fisherman," said Aunt Lyddy, "but I had no idea you would ever come here and boast of being able to catch oysters. Poor things! How could they have got away? But why don't you bring them in? They won't be afraid of me, will they?"

He stepped to the door and brought in a peck basket full of large, black, twisted shells, and with a heavy clasp-knife proceeded to open one, and took out a great oyster, which he held up on the point of the blade.

"Try it," he said; and then Aunt Lyddy, after she had swallowed it, laughed to think what a tableau they had made,—a man who had been in the State prison standing over her with a great knife! And then she laughed again.

"What are you laughing at?" he said.

"It popped into my head, supposing Susan should have looked in at the south window and Joshua in at the door, when you was feeding out that oyster to me, what they would have thought!"

Eph laughed too; and, surely enough, just then a stout, light-haired, rather plain-looking young woman came up to the south window and leaned in. She had on a sun-bonnet, which had not prevented her from securing a few choice freckles. She had been working with a trowel in her flower-garden.

"What's the matter?" she said, nodding easily to Eph. "What do you two always find to laugh about?"

"Ephraim was feeding me with spoon-meat," said Aunt Lyddy, pointing to the basket, which looked like a basket of anthracite coal.

"It looks like spoon-meat!" said Susan, and then she laughed too. "I 'll roast some of them for supper," she added,—“a new way that I know.”

Eph was not invited to stay to supper, but he stayed, none the less: that was always understood.

"Well, well, well!" said Joshua, coming to the door-step, and washing his hands and arms just outside, in a tin basin. "I thought I see you set down a parcel of oysters—but there was sea-weed over 'em, and I don't know's I could have said they was oysters; but then, if the square question had been put to me, 'Mr. Carr, be them oysters or be they not?' I s'pose I should have said they was; still, if they 'd asked me how I knew—"

"Come, come, father!" said Aunt Lyddy, "do give poor Ephraim a little peace. Why don't you just say you thought they were oysters, and done with it?"

"Say I *thought* they was?" he replied, innocently. "I knew well enough they was—that is—knew? No, I did n't know, but—"

Aunt Lyddy, with an air of mock resignation, gave up, while Joshua endeavored to fix, to a hair, the exact extent of his knowledge.

Eph smiled; but he remembered what would have made him pardon, a thousand times over, the old man's garrulousness. He remembered who alone had never failed, once a year, to visit a certain prisoner, at the cost of a long and tiresome journey, and who had written to that homesick prisoner kind and cheering letters, and had sent him baskets of simple dainties for holidays.

Susan bustled about, and made a fire of crackling sticks, and began to roast the oysters in a way that made a most savory smell. She set the table, and then sat down at the melodeon, while she was waiting, and sang a hymn; for she was of a musical turn, and was one of the choir. Then she jumped up and took out the steaming oysters, and they all sat down.

"Well, well, well!" said her father; "these be good! I did n't s'pose you hed any very good oysters in your bed, Ephraim. But there, now—I don't s'pose I ought to have said that; that was n't very polite; but what I meant was, I did n't s'pose you hed any that was *real* good—though I don't know but I 've said about the same thing, now. Well, any way, these be splendid; they 're full as good as those co-hogs we had t'other night."

"Quahaugs!" said Susan. "The idea of comparing these oysters with quahaugs!"

"Well, well! that's so!" said her father. "I did n't say right, did I, when I said that! Of course, there ain't no comparison—that is—*no* comparison? Why, of course, they is a comparison between everything,—but then, cohogs don't really compare with oysters! That's true!"

And then he paused to eat a few.

He was silent so long at this occupation that they all laughed.

"Well, well!" he said, laying down his fork, and smiling innocently; "what be you all laughin' at? Not but what I allers like to hev folks laugh—but then, I did n't see nothin' to laugh at. Still, perhaps they was suthin' to laugh at that I didn't see; sometimes one man 'll be lookin' down into his plate, all taken up with his victuals, and others, that's lookin' around the room, may see the kittens frolickin', or some such thing. 'T ain't the fust time I 've known all hands to laugh all to once-t, when I didn't see nothin'."

Susan helped him again, and secured another brief respite.

"Ephraim," said he, after a while, "you ain't skilled to cook oysters like this, I don't believe. You ought to git married! I was sayin' to Susan t'other day—well, now, mother, hev I said anything out o' the way? Well, I don't s'pose 't was just *my* place to have said anything about gitt'n' married, to Ephraim, seein's—"

"Come, come, father," said Aunt Lyddy, "that'll do, now. You must let Ephraim alone, and not joke him about such things."

Meanwhile Susan had hastily gone into the pantry to look for a pie, which she seemed unable at once to find.

"Pie got adrift?" called out Joshua. "Seems to me you don't hook on to it very quick. Now that looks good," he added, when she came out.

"That looks like cookin'! All I meant was, 't Ephraim ought not to be doin' his own cookin'—that is, 'f you can call it cookin. But then, of course, 'tis cookin'—there's all kinds o' cookin'. I went cook myself, when I was a boy."

After supper, Aunt Lyddy sat down to knit, and Joshua drew his chair up to an open window, to smoke his pipe. In this vice Aunt Lyddy encouraged him. The odor of Virginia tobacco was a sweet savor in her nostrils. No breezes from Araby ever awoke more grateful feelings than did the fragrance of Uncle Joshua's pipe. To Aunt Lyddy it meant quiet and peace.

Susan and Eph sat down on the broad flag door-stone, and talked quietly of the simple news of the neighborhood, and of the days when they used to go to school, and come home, always together.

"I did n't much think then," said Eph, "that I should ever bring up where I have, and get ashore before I was fairly out to sea!"

"Jehiel's schooner got ashore on the bar, years ago," said Susan, "and yet they towed her off, and I saw her this morning, from my chamber window, before sunrise, all sail set, going by to the eastward."

"I know what you mean," said Eph. "But here—I got mad once, and I almost had a right to, and I can't get started again; I never shall. I can get a living, of course; but I shall always be pointed out as a jailbird, and could no more get any footing in the world than Portuguese Jim."

Portuguese Jim was the sole professional criminal of the town,—a weak, good-natured, knock-kneed vagabond, who stole hens, and spent every winter in the House of Correction as an "idle and disorderly person."

Susan laughed outright at the picture. Eph smiled too, but a little bitterly.

"I suppose it was more ugliness than anything else," he said, "that made me come back here to live, where everybody knows I 've been in jail and is down on me."

"They are not down on you," said Susan. "Nobody is down on you. It 's all your own imagination. And if you had gone anywhere that you was a stranger, you know that the first thing that you would have done would have been to call a meeting and tell all the people that you had burned down a man's barn and been in the State's-prison, and that you wanted them all to know it at the start; and you wouldn't have told them why you did it, and how young you was then, and how Eliphalet treated your mother, and how you was going to pay him for all he lost Here, everybody knows that side of it. In fact," she added, with a little twinkle in her eye, "I have sometimes had an idea that the main thing they don't like is, to see you saving every cent to pay to Eliphalet."

"And yet it was on your say that I took up that plan," said Eph. "I never thought of it till you asked me when I was going to begin to pay him up."

"And you ought to," said Susan. "He has a right to the money—and then, you don't want to be under obligations to that man all your life. Now, what you want to do is to cheer up and go around among folks. Why, now you 're the only fish-buyer there is that the men don't watch when he 's weighing their fish. You'll own up to that, for one thing, won't you?"

"Well, they are good fellows that bring fish to me," he said.

"They were n't good fellows when they traded at the great wharf," said Susan. "They had a quarrel down there once a week, regularly."

"Well, suppose they do trust me in that," said Eph. "I can never rub out that I 've been in State's-prison."

"You don't want to rub it out. You can't rub anything out that's ever been; but you can do better than rub it out."

"What do you mean?"

"Take things just the way they are," said Susan, "and show what can be done. Perhaps you 'll stake a new channel out for others to follow in, that haven't half so much chance as you have. And that's what you will do, too," she added.

"Susan!" he said, "if there 's anything I can ever do, in this world or the next, for you or your folks, that's all I ask for,—the chance to do it. Your folks and you shall never want for anything while I'm alive.

"There's one thing sure," he added, rising. "I'll live by myself and be independent of everybody, and make my way all alone in the world; and if I can make 'em all finally own up and admit that I'm honest with 'em, I'm satisfied. That's all I 'll ever ask of anybody. But there's one thing that worries me sometimes,—that is, whether I ought to come here so often. I 'm afraid, sometimes, that it 'll hinder your father from gettin' work, or—something—for you folks to be friends with me."

"I think such things take care of themselves," said Susan, quietly. "If a chip won't float, let it sink."

"Good-night," said Eph; and he walked off, and went home to his echoing house.

After that, his visits to Joshua's became less frequent.

It was a bright day in March,—one of those which almost redeem the reputation of that desperado of a month. Eph was leaning on his fence, looking now down the bay and now to where the sun was sinking in the marshes. He knew that all the other men had gone to the town-meeting, where he had had no heart to intrude himself,—that free democratic parliament where he had often gone with his father in childhood; where the boys, rejoicing in a general assembly of their own, had played ball outside, while the men debated gravely within. He recalled the time when he himself had so proudly given his first vote for President, and how his father had introduced him then to friends from distant parts of the town. He remembered how he had heard his father speak there, and how respectfully everybody had listened to him. That was in the long ago, when they had lived at the great farm. And then came the thought of the mortgage, and of Eliphalet's foreclosure, and—

"Hullo, Eph!"

It was one of the men from whom he took fish,—a plain-spoken, sincere little man.

"Why wa'n't you down to town-meet'n'?"

"I was busy," said Eph.

"How'd ye like the news?"

"What news?"

There was never any good news for him now.

"Hain't heard who 's elected town-clerk?"

"No."

Had they elected Eliphalet, and so expressed their settled distrust of him, and sympathy for the man whom he had injured?

"Who is elected?" he asked harshly.

"You be!" said the man; "went in flyin',—all hands clappin' and stompin' their feet!"

An hour later the doctor drove up, stopped, and walked toward the kitchen door. As he passed the window, he looked in.

Eph was lying on his face, upon the settle, as he had first seen him there, his arms beneath his head.

"I will not disturb him now," said the doctor.

One breezy afternoon, in the following summer, Captain Seth laid aside his easy every-day clothes, and transformed himself into a stiff broadcloth image, with a small silk hat and creaking boots. So attired, he set out in a high open buggy, with his wife, also in black, but with gold spectacles, to the funeral of an aunt. As they pursued their jog-trot journey along the Salt Hay Road, and came to Ephraim Morse's cottage, they saw Susan sitting in a shady little porch at the front door, shelling peas and looking down the bay.

"How is everything, Susan?" called out Captain Seth; "'bout time for Eph to be gitt'n' in?"

"Yes," she answered, nodding and smiling, and pointing with a pea-pod; "that's our boat, just coming to the wharf, with her peak down."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE VILLAGE CONVICT ***

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