

AN UNSUCCESSFUL SCOUNDREL

David hesitated, then spoke. "But it is not right."

Reed laughed loudly. "My dear fellow, is anything right—from some one else's point of view?"

Then he grew earnest. "See here! There was Tompkins, Jed Dold, half a dozen others, all like you, working on a salary, afraid to get married or to call their souls their own. Look at them! Having a pretty good time of it, aren't they? And it's all from a few odd dollars spent in picking up tax lands."

"I tell you," Reed went on, warming to his subject, "a young man in a State like this is a fool to neglect such chances. Why, you never know what some hillside farm will pan out. I found a coal-mine on one, didn't I? And look at Jed—everything booming round those shanties in the bottom. Why, he can sell the ground to-day for a small fortune. As for Tompkins, he has an oil-well. I know every one doesn't get rich, but who loses? You can't lose."

"Oh, go along, Jimmy!" said David good-humoredly. "Think you're giving me news? Haven't you defamed me with your bragging ever since these things happened? I know it's nice to have money and a certain sort of power, but money isn't everything, and there's another sort of power."

"But it takes the money to make it effective, you bet!" said Jimmy Reed, cheerfully.

"That's where you're wrong!" retorted David, defiantly. "Get out, Jimmy! You'll make me late."

It was shortly after this that David fell in love, and began thinking how sweet it would be to make a home of his own. All young men who are worth anything at all have this thought sooner or later. It marks the time when they stop being boys. And now it had come to David. He began to want to make more money for this purpose, but it is hard to make money out of no money unless one is a professional financier.

David's eighty dollars a month represented the maximum wage for a stenographer in his town, and most of that went to his mother and sister. Clearly a home of his own was an unattainable luxury without leaving his dear people to shift for themselves, an impossible alternative in his mind.

One day, as he made these reflections for the thousandth time, his employer's voice broke in on his reverie.

"David, I wish you would stop at the clerk's office on your way from dinner and look up the titles to those delinquent tax lands I spoke of. The sale is to-morrow, you know."

He paused a moment, then added, "Why don't you invest a few dollars that way yourself? Tompkins has made a good thing out of it. So have some other youngsters."

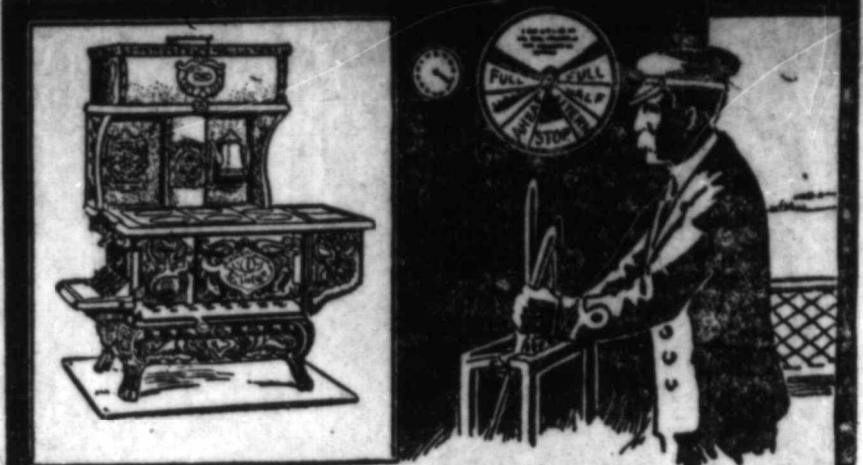
"That's what they tell me," answered David, non-committally. "Is there anything more, Mr. Black?"

He picked up his hat as he spoke. "I guess that's all," said the old lawyer. "I believe that boy has scruples," he confided to his partner, as the street door closed behind David. "I believe he disapproves of buying these lands."

David had no desire to be rich, but he did want enough to be able to live his own life in the country, with time to be happy with his wife and his books, doing a little gardening before breakfast—to provide the breakfast. For all he knew about farming he had gleaned from Thoreau and other philosophers.

"If we only had the farm we could live all right," David declared to the girl. When he should have the farm and enough money in the bank for them to live on with economy for three years, the girl had consented to try country life with him.

"That evening she startled her. "Ellen," he said, "I have decided to become an unscrupulous scoundrel."



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ferred no advice. David made his way in a trifle out of temper. "Good morning!" he said. Receiving no recognition of his greeting, he continued, curtly, "I bought this lot at the last sale of delinquent lands. It was not redeemed, and I have come to see about it. From whom do you rent?"

The man turned quite white. He was tanned, and the grime of his trade, that of blacksmith's helper, was grained in the skin, but he turned quite white.

"It's mine," he said, in a stammering voice, "my home. I paid for it."

He stopped as if summing up a past of forged-labor.

"I worked for it," he went on, in that stammered tone, "and now that State has sold it for \$25, all the home I've got."

David looked through the door again. The woman in the back room coughed as she stooped over her stove. The squalid children clamored. The one fresh and lovely thing in the poor home was a blue-eyed child of two years, perhaps, peeping over her father's shoulder.

"It's your home still," spoke David of the hardened heart.

Involuntarily he expected the man to look astonished and grateful. He did not. He merely looked relieved, blessedly relieved.

Then he got up and held out his hand to David. "I'll pay you back," he said. "Times ain't always so bad. It's both of us having the fever that got us in this hole. Don't you be afraid, Mr. —"

"Moore," said David. "Yes, Mr. Moore, you shan't lose your money, if you don't mind waiting a bit."

"That's all right," said David. "Don't you bother." He was going away with this, but the man insisted on his address. After a moment's reflection, during which he put himself in the man's place, David gave it to him.

"I would rather pay it," he thought as he strode off to the next address. "Besides," he added, "as an unscrupulous scoundrel I can't afford to lose that money. I'm not a very good scoundrel yet. I'm afraid. Hello! Here's the place, I guess."

"Who lives here?" he asked, politely, of a schoolgirl just passing. "Mr. Oleson, the carpenter, but the house belongs to Granny Downs," said the girl, yielding to the impulse of her sex to give gratuitous information.

"Much obliged," said David, hurrying in. He pointedly declined to know more about "Granny" Downs. But he could not curb the tongue he had loosed.

"Nelly," said David, that evening, "suppose a poor laboring man had a lot of children and a sick wife and hard luck, could you turn him out of house and home?"

"Of course not, David!" she cried, with wondering eyes on his face.

"And," he went on, "suppose a neat old woman, with a cane and a cap and a black apron, had a tidy old cottage, with window-boxes and a rose bush, and a hard-working carpenter for a tenant, while she lived round the corner with a married daughter, could you deprive her of her one source of income?"

"You know I couldn't, David," said Nelly, with an inkling of the truth, "but the farm?"

"On the farm," said David, "lives a young woman whose patriotic husband has gone to defend his native land in the Philippines. She hasn't heard from him lately, and something may have happened to him. Billy is rather indifferent about him."

"And who is Billy?" "The children's uncle."

"Oh, are there children on the farm, too?" "Any number. Well?" "Well what, David?" "What would you have done?" "Exactly what you did, David."

"Nelly," said David, "I can't make people miserable, that's all. You can't, either. That's why we suit each other."

Nelly looked thoughtfully in the fire across the chessboard, on which the "scoundrel" was shamelessly giving her the game. She could not play chess the least little bit, but she thought she could, and he hardly ever had the heart to beat her. Sometimes she felt sorry for him and tried to give him games.

"What is it?" he asked. "I've some news for you," she answered. "It's a secret, but Bruce won't mind you."

"Bruce?" "Elizabeth?" "You blind boy! Haven't you seen it?" "How could I, over here?" "Bruce wants her to marry him at Easter."

"The blessed children!" cried David. "Little Lizzie—the idea!" He still wore his air of amazement when Bruce looked in on his way to see Elizabeth.

"I've told David," announced Nelly, and he came forward, blushing boyishly.

"You and Nelly set us a good example," he said. When they had speeded him on his way Nelly and David continued their game, or rather David continued to give away men and Nelly to take them pityingly. As she reluctantly captured his queen, her hand lingering on the board, David caught it gently.

"Never mind the game," he said. "It's yours, anyway. Don't let's wait for the farm, Nell. Come home and take Lizzie's place to mother. You'll love mother."

"I love her now," said motherless Nelly. She patted David's hand as it clasped hers on the demoralized chess-board.

"We'll save for the farm together, boy," she said. "It will be sweeter to get it that way, won't it?" "You dearest!" cried the unsuccessful "scoundrel."

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