

NOW REUBEN SPARKS WAS A JUST MAN

By Jacob Holdfast
Illustrated by
Dudley Ward.

HUSKING corn a couple of weeks before this time of year in 1886 or thereabouts I did a power of cogitating. Husking and plowing always made me feel as though I was a philosopher; especially husking with no horses to disturb me, nothing but blackbirds and drumming partridges and quail scurrying about in the back ends of the stubble close to the jagged woods where the fall colors were all in a blaze.

My boss, Reuben Sparks, the just man, was away to market a good deal those days with wheat and beans. I remember that accurately because we got into the habit of cleaning up the loads by lantern light in the barn and heaving the bags on to the wagon as it stood in on the barn floor.

"Husking don't tire yeh like cutting corn or spreading manure, Jacob," remarked Reuben now and again when I seemed to dawdle a bit on holding bags while he scoop-shoveled the wheat.

"Nope," said I. "Husking rests me."

"Don't prevaricate," says he like a local preacher—which he was and powerful exhorter to boot. "What I wanted to git at was that you ain't exhausted after throwing out thirty bushel o' corn an' tying up the fodder."

Reuben was so exacting a person on himself that I never had the audacity to impose on his good nature, which was the cold storage variety based upon the square deal. I always got a square deal from this tall, powerful built man with the raw-boned frame, the hedge-clip whiskers and the steel-grey eyes. And whenever in my enthusiasm for his fat-fieldded farm I worked overtime, which I often did to get in the grain and clean up the loads for market and so forth, he rigidly docked himself my time on days when it didn't matter much whether I worked or not—on the principle that one day was as good as another for me to loaf.

And I guess it was. A hired boy had no particular use for spare time anyway.

Did I say he ever paid me overtime? Nay verily, as Reuben would have said in one of his plug-horse powerful sermons. He had never heard of labor unions.

So while my unimpassioned boss of the hundred-acre farm went teaming away twenty miles to market to get a cent a bushel more for his wheat and two cents more for beans than he could get in the neighbourhood of Jericho. I sat in the cornfield and shucked away at White Dent corn that averaged a hundred bushels the acre. And as I tossed out the ears I did a pile of calculating on the efficiency and the wealth and the citizenship of Reuben Sparks, who had worked his way up in the township temple of fame from pathmaster and poundkeeper to tax collector and reeve of the township without spending a ten-cent piece for a vote or carling a copper for any man's influence.

That hundred-acre farm, with seventy cleared, was run on a hydro-electric system of moral ideas, rotation of crops and eternal industry, the price of wealth. As I cogitated over Reuben Sparks in the cornfield those hazy days of Indian summer I realized that for an agricultural chump like me ever to climb to the serene height of R. Sparks, Esq., was a case of ridiculous emotion. It was all a dream built on realities.

AND the realities were 445 bushels of wheat retailing from the fanning-mill at 76 cents a bushel, minus what he kept out for grist and seed; his 140 bushels of beans going at \$1.03 a bushel—after he and I and the women-folk on rainy days picked out the black ones by hand in the kitchen, boiling the culls for the hogs. There were the hogs also, fat as circus seals by the end of November on corn and pumpkins. He had twenty fattening hogs, and the price of those would be not less than \$3.10 per cwt. not on the hoof.

Pardon me while we all drop a tear or two at these sacred memories, which began twenty years before the high cost of living became a problem in everybody's algebra. If Reuben Sparks had ever got 1916 prices for his wheat, his beans, his hogs, his clover-seed, his hay, and his apples and his miscellaneous sundries like buckwheat and sorghum

and fat steers, he would have been wealthy enough to have started a private bank.

So far as Reuben knew I intended to become a farmer. With such a splendid example before me as R. Sparks, Esq., it would have been ingratitude to have any other ambition.

"When y're done hiring out rent a fifty-acre farm, git a woman and strike out," he advised now and again.

"And then what?" says I.

"Clear the farm all yeh kin and then buy your own improvements," he said knackily.

"Carried," I admitted. "I'll be a self-made farmer and Sparks is the kind of a farmer I'll be."

In order to convince Reuben that I wasn't a mere hectic youth without a moral backbone I plunked down my two month's wages in front of him, and I says to him:

"Mr. Sparks, sell me that Holstein two-year-old bull and I'll pay you fifty cents a month for pasturing him till I quit the place."

He what he called thunk it over a day or two, somehow as I could see rather wishing that after chore time I'd sit on the fence and haggle with him dollar by half till I climbed up close to twenty and he clomb down to near eighteen. But I didn't. R. Sparks' own blunt ways of concluding any transaction, except steers, taught me to come down on the nail with my price and stick to it. I never hinted so much as a fifty-cent raise. He never coaxed me. Two days later he took me up. I paid over the cash and took over the bull. That day I vividly remember the just man took a violent fit of something in the front part of his right side that made him bellow aloud like a bull and caused me to gallop away bareback for the doctor. He had two of these attacks that summer. So far none in the fall. I always dreaded those spasms of the just man.

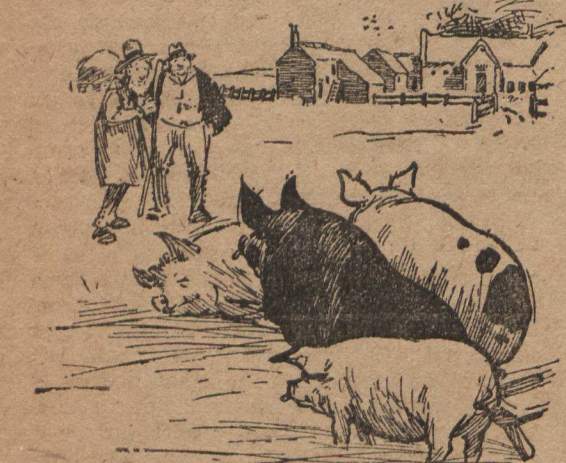
ONCE I got possession of Barney the bull, I got a new impetus in slaving for Reuben Sparks, the just man. I guess he figured on that. His moral mentality was all pretty well exposed to me. I felt that Sparks could never conceal his ways and byways from me, even though any average neighbor admitted that it was easier to drive hogs out of a clover field by the same hole in the fence they got in than to back R. Sparks up into any sort of moral or financial corner.

"You can't fool me, Mr. Sparks," I softly said to myself in the rustle of the cornstalks and the clatter of the blackbirds. "I ain't been hiring out four years to more or less shysters to be taken in on a moral person. No siree, Bob."

Going up to dinner at noon I purposely took a detour back to the cow lot to have a look at my personal Holstein. The beast knew me better than any of the other cattle did. I had been cultivating his acquaintance. He knew I was his lord and master, and not Sparks. And any time I found him in any doubt about it I took him by the horns just for the pleasure of having him take me down.

In fact, this young bull became to me a sort of savage counterfoil to Reuben Sparks with his eternal weigh-scales justice. The bull was all temperament. My boss, the just man, had none. Barney was an extravagant, rambunctious lump of heathen wickedness, who delighted to boss all the other cattle, even to lock horns with his own mother and push her into a fence corner. He had once squared off at Reuben, with the consequence that he got a terrifying kick in the fore part of his cylinder that made him see stars. I believe the animal bore Reuben a grudge ever afterwards. Or he may have borrowed the grudge from me. Anyway, I found myself nursing resentment against the boss who had never betrayed any emotion except when local preaching or when he got a pain in his region of compassion that made him forget the divine origin of man.

The fat fruits of the fall were all garnered and most of them sold, and I sympathized with Sparks when he came nigh to cursing the apple-packers who culled two-thirds of the apples that he and I had picked so carefully by hand. I had myself done



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