

**STORIES BY  
AMERICAN  
AUTHORS. VOL. VI**

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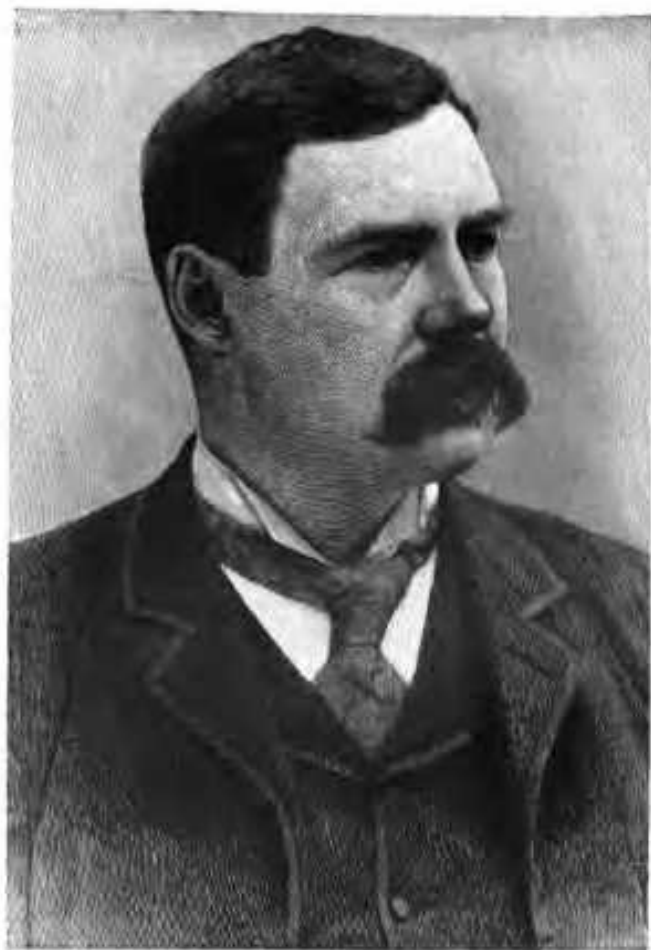
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**VARIOUS**

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Faithfully Yours  
Harold Frederic

Stories by  
American Authors

VOLUME VI

*THE VILLAGE CONVICT*

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By HAROLD FREDERIC

NEW YORK  
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1899

## THE VILLAGE CONVICT.

BY C. H. WHITE.

"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 earrings ; "he come on the stage to-noon. Wouldn'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 allus 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. 'Taint 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 henhouse 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 fellow 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, jewsharps, and gum-drops—dear to the eyes of his 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 couldn'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, and 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 doesn'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