

# THE FREE AGENT

By Edward Hungerford.

**BEING** the Drama of a Man's Life in Which at the Beginning, Amid Humble Surroundings, Are Mingled Love, Little Things and Big Resolves.

BY EDWARD HUNGERFORD.

Copyright, 1910, by the New York Herald Co. All rights reserved.  
THE FIRST CHAPTER.

WHEN David Gordon was eleven he decided to be a brakeman upon the railroad; when he was seventeen he had made up his mind to be a millionaire. At other times in his tender years he had picked out a variety of entertaining professions—driving a mail coach through the Far West, biring out with a circus as clown or acrobat, becoming captain of one of the great freighters that ploughed the waters of the lake. But at seventeen he had two opinions about his future. He was going to be rich—rich far beyond the wildest dreams of other boys in Northfield.

You see, things happened between eleven and seventeen. David had learned to paddle his own canoe out on the broad river of life, and one great disaster had almost completely overturned it. His mother had died when he was sixteen. The doctor had hinted—David never needed more than a hint—that she might have been saved if she could have gone to one of those big city hospitals. That was out of the question, and the little canoe had all but turned turtle. When the boy was earning \$6 a week clerking at Abbott & Bassford's—Groceries and Provisions—he felt that his hands were tied behind him. It made it no easier for him, however, to see the last of his kith and kin go away from him. The little canoe was sailing quite alone.

Never again, he found himself saying to himself, would he be caught without money. He was going to be rich, but being rich when he grew up could not undo that tragedy of his sixteenth year. It might, however, prevent a repetition of calamity. There might be another time—another woman. His blood tingled a wee bit. Rhoda, his soul sang to his keen and calculating mind.

Rhoda Clark was closer to him than kith or kin—you are forbidden to hate your relatives. She lived a little further up the street, and somehow David could not look far enough back to remember the time when she had not been almost part and parcel of his life.

If this were a novel, written to be a best seller in a gay red cover and not merely the record of a few years of a man's existence, I might have described Rhoda Clark as beautiful beyond all measure of ordinary standards, and so have whetted the interest of the reader. But Rhoda Clark was not beautiful. She was not even good looking in the easy going use of the word in the North Country. She was a slim, tired looking girl, with a heavy head of sandy hair. Her eyes were blue and dull behind the heavy lenses of her glasses. But there were redeeming qualities.

Her mouth, her nose, her chin were as gentle and as daintily formed as if some sculptor had formed them. She had—but what is the use? David Gordon loved her—loved her as only a friendless boy might love a sympathetic girl—and when, spurred by that love, he descended upon Abbott & Bassford with a firm demand, the firm raised his salary to seven dollars a week. Seven dollars a week, and Abraham Bassford said that David Gordon ought to start a saving-bank account now that his salary had been raised.

David Gordon did not answer—not then. He walked out from the dingy store, and when he was well out of the hearing of his employer—who, being a deacon, had tight scruples—he swore. He cursed Abbott & Bassford, and decided for the nine hundred and ninety-ninth time that he was going to be rich.

And he was not going to be rich as Northfield knew wealth. Jed Burnett was Northfield's richest man, and David Gordon had reason to know that precious old skinflint. If being rich meant that he would have to be like Jedediah Burnett—thank you, the good looking young clerk in the grocery preferred to stay as poor as a church mouse. He would be different when he was rich—that was all.

## Rhoda His Confidante.

That was all he said to Rhoda as they walked home one evening after the close of his day's work. Their path lay up through Dexter street, chief residence thoroughfare of the little city. It was a tree shaded way, quickly gathering the shadows of the oncoming evening and here and there and everywhere back on the steps of the houses in the lawns were splashes of white—the girls in their summer dresses on the porches—and they could catch the faint chatter and the hum of a banjo or a mandolin. Sometimes the porches would be deserted and the houses brightly lighted. Snatches of piano music would come out of the open window. They were dancing in there—these boys and girls of Northfield.

It made David Gordon sick—sick at heart—and heart sickness is the most damning ailment that may descend upon a strong framed, keen witted man. They halted at a street corner to let a carriage pass by. It was Harry Fendler, the supervisor's son. Beside him in the smart red and black runabout sat Marjorie Wells, the prettiest girl in all of Northfield. David could remember the days when he had convoyed the Fendler cow back and forth between their house and her mooring ground on the edge of the town. In those days he had thought the Fendlers the equivalent



"Zee garleec," he laughed to David Gordon. "I haf not had ze likes of zis seence I left the south of France."

of wealth—they kept a cow. He turned quickly to Rhoda, but he only spoke of Marjorie.

"I wish you could have one of those fancy hats with the—um—um—um—" He halted. He was not adept in describing women's finery.

"That's white tulle," she said. "It costs."

He looked sharply into her eyes.

"Some day"—he began. She interrupted him.

"I don't care for those things, David—that is, not an awful lot. There are other things"—she began.

Then she was disappointed, for he did not respond as quickly as was ordinarily his way.

"When I am rich," he said, "you shall have Marjorie Wells wondering what you are going to wear next."

Manlike, he had expected her give a little thrill of delight at that promise, to catch his hand in a single, quick embrace, in the way she had. But she only turned her head from him and did not answer for the moment. When she did she said:

"That hurts, David. You seem to think of nothing, dear boy, but money these days."

And then he told her for the first time of how his mother had died because he could not afford to send her for long months into a big city hospital.

A little later David Gordon came into his patrimony. There had been a fearful amount of litigation, a huge number of sealed papers tied in red tape, in order to hand him the \$110 that came to him as the little remnant of that which was by courtesy called his mother's estate.

But \$110 was \$110, no matter how you might count it, and David Gordon had never held so much money in his life before. He took \$10 and bought a new fur for Rhoda—a gaudy, glittering thing, such as she had never owned before or never would again.

She had to bite her lip when he gave it to her—it was really a horrid thing—but she thanked him as if he had offered her a king's ransom and bade him never be as foolish again. Then, woman like, she asked him what he was going to do with the \$100.

"I am going to make each of those dollars earn ten for me, Rhoda, girl," he said to her, with an assumption of gayety unusual to him, "and then I am going to make each of those other dollars earn ten more for me—and then—then—"

## To Be His Wife.

She laughingly evaded his caress and pursed her brows in computation. She was versed in figures—was the bookkeeper down in the Boston store.

"Ten thousand dollars, David. Do we have to wait till then?"

He nodded assent.

"I'm not going to have you do your own work. You're going to be a lady. Do you understand, Rhoda,

girl? You are going to be a lady—the very finest lady in all Northfield."

"No, that is not the thing, boy," was her reply. "I am going to be your wife, praise God."

But he was blind or did not wish to see.

John Merkel had been David Gordon's companion behind the counter at Abbott & Bassford's, and John Merkel, tiring of the firm's petty tyrannies, had left them and set up in business by himself. John Merkel had capital—nearly a thousand dollars—and he could start out on an ambitious scale—with a store of his own.

David looked up to him as a capitalist, then sought his advice. When it was given David left his job at the grocery store, but Abraham Bassford predicted that he would be back after it inside of a month.

The hundred dollars bought a little pack of gewgaws and David set out as a pedler up the military road that ran lonesome miles to north of the county seat. Rhoda looked dubiously upon the entire project. She would have preferred him to invest his inheritance without forfeiting his position, but David in his headstrong way was never to be gainsaid. He started bravely forth, and she, dear girl, kissed him goodby—three—once for health, once for success, once because of the very depth of her love.

The story of that expedition remains locked within David Gordon's memory. There is a town twenty-five miles up the military road from Northfield called Cuterville, and to this day David Gordon cannot pass through Cuterville on the train and look out of the car window at the place without wincing. It was from Cuterville that he returned as Napoleon returned from Moscow—defeated. But there was something Napoleonic in his heart. That beating organ of his had not acknowledged defeat.

He went back to his old job, while Abraham Bassford told Abbott that he had calculated the return to the very day. They gave him his job readily—he was always popular with the trade, and good grocery clerks did not grow on every Northfield tree—but his salary went back to six dollars a week. Bassford said that discipline was good for fresh and high handed young men. He was all that time trying to break down John Merkel, who had had the audacity to leave them and start in business for himself.

It would have been possible right here for nine men out of ten to fit their canoe into a serene channel of the river of life and float softly there until the day came when they crossed the last bar and went drifting off into the unknown seas. Nine

David Gordons out of ten would have buried their ambitious after such an experience, would have trusted Abraham Bassford to forget that expedition and to gradually raise the weekly stipend, would have married their Rhodas, thrown away such hopes as hired girls and carriages and lived happily at the head of a large brood of delightful children. In such a case there would have been no life drama worth the telling.

But David Gordon was the tenth man? His canoe was grooved into a swift-moving channel. The river of life held much for him; it promised to float him through great sunny wide waters, ahead were more

"You find it hard to wait, girl?" he said to her. "But you do trust me?"

"With all my faith and soul," she replied.

The little store in Bank street prospered more after it went into David Gordon's control than ever it had done in the fairly capable hands of John Merkel. David was a deep thinker and a good thinker. He was a broader man than John Merkel, a man capable of doing clever things in a more clever way.

In the weary hours that he had stood behind the counter at Abbott & Bassford's he had been planning all the while, planning for the comfort and the convenience of customers, and these must have been good plans, for customers passed the big sunny front of the old store to find the rather humble little competitor around in the side street. He sent bigger checks up to the Merkels at Saranac than ever he had promised, and he began to dream the great dream. He figured long hours over stray slips of paper. Another twelvemonth of this business and he—they could have the horse and carriage—the hired girl out in the kitchen.

As Merkel & Gordon prospered the business of Abbott & Bassford began to slowly decline. Abraham Bassford prepared for battle. He was a doughty old warrior, and John Merkel had never been more than a feeble to him. Gordon was different. Northfield was beginning to talk. Gordon was a clever advertiser—a thing that had been beneath the dignity of the older concern. It had other methods.

It began the use of those methods. But there were weeks before David Gordon knew that the screws were being set upon him.

Rhoda rejoiced in his prosperity and inwardly wished that he might see his way toward early marriage. She baked him a glorious cake and wondered why he need wait for a hired girl after that. And then when he told her "a little longer, girlie," she was angry—human flesh and blood do have ways of turning after a while.

"Some day, David," she said to him (laughing with her delicate mouth and her eyes, but never a bit with her heart), "some day I am going to run away and leave you."

But he was blind still, or did not wish to see.

Some time along in the spring John Merkel wrote him and asked for an extra check—just \$20 to meet some upspring emergency. David Gordon sent it to him—he could have refused the invalid nothing—but he said his watch to do it.

## The Grinding Screws.

The screws were set hard upon him. The Merkels did not know it; even Rhoda, who was beginning to be piqued and angry most of the time, did not know it. Abraham Bassford knew it. He began howling to David Gordon with a more elaborate politeness than ever before, all the time keeping his veiled hands upon those grinding screws. And David Gordon kept a stiff upper lip.

He saw what Bassford was doing. Bassford had big influence with the wholesalers. He was supposed to possess a big interest in a house down in Syracuse that supplied the greater part of the north country. Bassford was under-buying him. What was far, far worse, Bassford was under-selling him. Bassford had credit and the wholesalers were pressing. On the top of his little desk, facing his very eyes, rested a letter from the Syracuse house—a polite letter, told as it was— which stated that little account of \$125 were paid within three days the house would be compelled, regretfully, of course, to seek a judgment.

One hundred and twenty-five dollars! It was as nothing in the business world. Yet for lack of that little sum David Gordon's canoe was tumbling.

He read the letter over and over and over again. How he did hate that Syracuse concern! He might have been able to send them that check and with it a scathing letter that would have made them shiver for a time if it were not for—

He let his head turn slowly toward the rear of the store. Piled there within his ice box was \$200 worth of butter. Butter, did he say? David Gordon had not learned the art of the grocery business. He had bought the butter from a sample tub and was good butter—the sort that the groceryman took real pride in setting before his trade.

But when that butter had come and the farmer, after the manner of some farmers, had gone over to Abraham Bassford to tell the whole story and to put a tub of oleomargarine under his buggy seat to cart back to his family, David Gordon had found that there were more chapters to the grocery business than those that he had mastered. His customers sent it back as fast as it went out upon their orders. He was perplexed—angry. He cut deep into a tub—another, still another. They all told the same story.

He had been cheated—"sold" was the word the farmer had used to Abe Bassford. Those cows had strolled off into an onion patch. The butter was beyond redemption. And on top of that had come the "dun" from Syracuse. No wonder his eyes would not keep from that refrigerator door.

Late that afternoon he began to prepare his letter asking for more time from the wholesaler—hopeless appeal. As he swept the very corners of his weary mind for its phrasings a new customer entered the door. This customer was not of the sort that ordinarily found their way into the little store in Bank street. He was a foreigner—a Frenchman evidently. He introduced himself as a buyer from a big commission house down in Greenwich street, New York. He wanted butter, and David thanked his lucky stars that he had received that day the beginning of another consignment.

The Frenchman took the tryer with the light touch of experience, thrust it down into the tub, brought out a long tube of yellow butter, tasted it as delicately as a woman. David rolled out another tub. The Frenchman thrust the tryer into it. Then he shook his head. David was perplexed. Then, with inspiration born of desperation, he went back to the big ice box and rolled out one of the condemned tubs. It was rank foolhardiness, but he chanced it.

The Frenchman for a third time dived in with the slender tryer. He passed the butter under his keen nose. A smile began to suffuse his face. He eagerly bit into it. The smile broadened into a laugh.

"Zee garleec," he laughed to David Gordon. "I haf had ze likes of zis seence I left the south of France."

"That," said David Gordon gravely, "is our extra fine triple X brand."

Abraham Bassford peering out from the window of his store saw the commission house man turn out of Bank street and chuckled to himself.

"I wonder," he said half aloud, "if Gordon showed him that onion butter?"

Gordon had. David Gordon had sold the entire consignment at a clean profit of two hundred and fifty dollars. At that moment he was writing the scathing letter—the check enclosed—to the Syracuse firm and he did not have to sweep his mind for its phrasings.

That night David Gordon took the cars for Buffalo. A drummer to whom he had once given a good order had hinted that there was a Buffalo house anxious to broaden its territory, that was looking with hungry eyes upon the pickings of that fat North Country that the Syracuse houses had held so tightly in the hollow of their hands.

He had few resources, but unbounded enthusiasm. He felt sure of success, and that was half the game. He was going to be successful, rich—nothing could stop him. He felt that the feters were beginning to fall from him.

"I am going to be a free agent," he kept saying to himself that night as he tossed in the bed of a Syracuse hotel that rose right above the tracks of the railroad.

One thing troubled him.

Rhoda had sent word to him at the store through her cousin, Stella Burgess, that she wanted to see him that evening about a very particular matter. In the excitement of his new possibility he had forgotten to go up there.

Still, he reflected, as he tossed upon his bed in the noisy hotel room above the railroad tracks, he could go to her when he returned successful from Buffalo and make the entire matter right.

rapids—the danger signs might well have been planted close together.

He kept his temper and he almost held his breath through five long, hard years at Abbott & Bassford's. Abbott died, and Abraham Bassford seemed to take a new hold on life—he grew madder each year. David Gordon's life grew the harder. There was another thing that set hard upon David Gordon's heart. Time was telling a wee bit with Rhoda. He could see her lose her girlishness; her slim figure was acquiring the faintest sort of stoop. He would swear inwardly at every thought of that and demand that Bassford raise his pay—Bassford did—a dollar a week a year—and Rhoda could not see what David did with the money.

## The Woman Waits.

There were many, many things that she did not see—and at least her mental vision was clear. She could only wait till he was ready. That has been woman's rôle for ages past—the waiting posture.

She gave a little cry of joy one night when David Gordon came to her and said that he was to be John Merkel's partner around in Bank street. John Merkel, after the hard fight that his old employers had given him, had finally succeeded in establishing his business. But his triumph was short lived. A cough had developed—Masterson, the best surgeon in the whole north country, was ordering him off into the hazy Adirondack peaks. Before he could look around for some one to help him David Gordon stood before him. David Gordon was talking investment again, as if he had not been scorched already. But David Gordon talked investment with money—he had his savings bank book in his fingers, and John Merkel looked upon him as a savior in a crisis.

"A store of your own, David? It seems like a fairy dream come true," Rhoda told him, after she had finished her little mimic of joy.

"It sure does," he answered. They were again walking in Dexter street under the arching maples. The languor of August was once more upon Northfield and the boys and girls were sitting out upon the steps. It all seemed so much closer now. Rhoda gave him a little squeeze of very ecstasy. He must have divined her thoughts, for he said—

"It will keep me closely tied—tied for time and capital—for a long time. And you know that we must have the hired girl and the pony cart."

She did not answer, but his mind must have been troubled, for he continued—

"I am only twenty-two. Think of the long years ahead of us."

Again she did not answer. And he continued—