

DICK BURTON and Mary Cummings had lived side by side and had not spoken to each other for twenty years.

"I will never speak to you again," had been her last words which fell upon his car, and that had been twenty years ago.

There had been no good reason. So Dick thought. Mary thought there was. Anyway, the quarrel had taken place, and Mary had kept her word.

Mary's father had died and her mother had died, and Dick's father and mother had died, and first Mary and then Dick had become the owner of a big stony farm and a century-old house. They had gone on their accustomed ways, and had ignored each other's existence as much as if they had been living on separate planets instead of on farms the boundaries of which wound in and out of each other after the fashion of boundaries of farms which date from old colonial times.

Never by any chance did either mention the other's name except when forced to do so, and then it was with a casual indifference which made their studious avoidance of each other's mention seem the merest chance.

It was election day and Dick had been to the polls and voted the straight Democratic ticket, after the fashion of his father and grandfather and great-grandfather. His road led past Mary's house. It was 1884, when Cleveland and Blaine were the contending candidates and when the opposing partisans advertised their preferences by wearing preposterous plug hats of felt—the Republicans black and the Democrats white. Dick had invested in one of these foolish hats and proudly wore it to the polls.

Constance Matthews was Mary's niece, and she was at the window when Dick went by. She began to laugh.

"Come to the window, Aunt Mary," she called out.

"What for?" answered Mary, who was deep in the mystery of pumpkin pies.

"Dick Burton is going by on his way to vote for Cleveland," was the response.

"Much good it will do him!" said Mary, with a disdainful sniff.

Mary was a Republican, partly because her father had been one, but chiefly because she had been one, and she was determined to save the life of the man, seeking to save the life of the man, his own. He persuades Brewster maliciously insinuated. He wears a white plug hat. This condition.

"I wouldn't care to see a man makin' a fool o' himself," Mary snapped.

"Uncle Morris wears a black plug," Constance said.

"Well, that's different," Mary began.

"It isn't so—so—"

"And father wears a white one," Constance continued.

"Well, he can do it and welcome!" Mary said wrathfully. "He won't wear it very long after he knows Blaine is elected."

"But Dick told me yesterday," said the girl, "that Cleveland is sure to be elected."

"That's all he knows about it," said Mary, red with indignation. "He'll change his mind later."

"He told me," said the niece, with keen enjoyment of her aunt's displeasure, "that he was going to pay the expense of having a brass band come out at the head of the Democrats who will march from the village to his house and have supper as a celebration two nights after the election."

"Won't it be fun to see them march past here, with their banners and torches, and playing 'Hail Columbia' or something like that?"

Mary was white with wrath.

"He wouldn't dare do such a thing!" she panted.

"Why not?" Constance queried.

"Uncle Morris will sic Bull on them as they go by," Mary suggested as a desperate remedy for impending evil.

"Fred English has sent him word that if he does he will shoot Bull full of fourteen holes," Constance cheerfully replied.

"Well, if they come past here, I'll—I'll—"

Mary said, choking with anger. "But there is no use. They will not come. They are going to be beaten."

"Dick says not," Constance maliciously insisted.

Mary was too angry to reply. Anybody less privileged than Constance would have heard something decidedly to her disadvantage.

Constance went to the window and chuckled. Her chief interest in politics came from the fact that there was no school on that day and that it gave her opportunity to tease her Aunt Mary by quoting Dick's antagonistic opinions.

She sat by the window until Dick returned, when she mischievously called Mary to the window, ostensibly to see a red squirrel on the wall but actually to see Dick riding by with his white plug hat. Mary retreated swiftly and nursed her wrath until dinner, when her plan of revenge was fully matured.

"I think there are still some hickory nuts over on the hill opposite," she said to Constance, when the meal was finished. "Don't you want to go over there with me and see if we can't pick up a few?"

Of course Constance did and the basket was soon filled. Then, as it seemed that there were no more nuts to gather, Mary wanted to know if Constance didn't think it would be fun to pile up some brush for a future fire.

Constance thought it would. According to Constance's idea, the activities of this world could be classed under the general headings of study, piano-practice, dishwashing and fun. As piling brush did not come under any of the other headings, it must be fun.

Dick sat within his latticed porch with a spy-glass directed toward the pair. He would have died before he would have let anybody else know of his occupation. But he kept up the watch for hours while the brush heap grew bigger. He had given all his help a holiday and there was no danger of his being caught at his clandestine employment. So he laid down the glass and looked and then raised it and looked again. Trim and slim the two figures moved gracefully about, alike, yet so different. Dick could not help thinking further deliriously. Constance was now Mary's twenty years before, still in short skirts and full of fun and life.

Boy and girl they had been, with manhood and womanhood just before them. He was very certain that he had been in love but he had never admitted it to any one else and now he was equally certain that his love had long been cold. But he thought it would be pleasant if they could be friends once more and talk of those old days and the confidences that had been exchanged so long ago. But he was not going to meet repulse again. He was sorry that Mary was so unforgiving and he would hold naught against her on that account. But that did not mean that he should expose his head to fresh wounds from the metaphorical broomstick.

At last the brush heap was of sufficiently colossal proportions to suit Mary's vindictive intentions.

"There!" she said triumphantly, "that will make a big enough bonfire to celebrate Blaine's election!"

"Oh! Aunt Mary!" exclaimed Constance, whose exceedingly small stock of politics was of the Democratic persuasion. "And I helped pile it! What will father say? What will Dick say?"

If Constance had rested with the first question Mary might have felt conscience-stricken, but the last hardened her heart. And, to speak the truth, Constance asked the question with no other purpose than that of getting a rise out of Aunt Mary.

"What do I care?" Mary savagely demanded, while Constance turned aside to hide a laugh.

"You can tell them to look out for it about midnight!" Mary went on. "By that time I will know for sure, though I have been perfectly certain all along. I have sent Abner to the village to get the news as fast as it comes in. As soon as he hears that Blaine is elected he is going to hang a lantern in the gable of Widow Mason's barn."

"And what when he hears that Cleveland is elected?" Constance innocently inquired.

"Cleveland isn't going to be elected!" Mary emphatically responded. "But Abner asked me some such foolish question as that and just to satisfy him I told him he could borrow a couple of lanterns—a red and a green one—and put up the green one when he hears Blaine is elected and—but that's all there is to it."

Constance gave her aunt several more of Dick's confident predictions as to the result of the election and then mounted her pony and started home. She stopped



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in front of Dick's gate and the owner, with whom she had maintained an odd and jolly friendship as long as she could remember, came out to chat with her.

"Aunt Mary says that Blaine is sure to be elected," she announced.

"Not in a thousand years!" Dick emphatically returned. Cleveland is elected just as sure as that sun is going down in the west!"

"Aunt Mary says not."

"Well, of course," said Dick, keeping in his temper as well as he could, "she doesn't know anything about politics. She reads the Tribune and believes it."

"Yes," said Constance, "and she says she is sorry for anybody who will believe anything the World says."

"She does, eh? Well, she will believe something different from what she does now in a few more hours."

"She has a big heap of brush over on the hill which she is going to light as a bonfire when she hears that Blaine is elected," Constance said, delivering the information which had been the express reason for her stopping at the gate.

"Well, if he doesn't light it until she hears that," Dick spoke with grim confidence, "the pile will rot away right where it is."

"She has sent Abner to town," Constance said, "to hang a lantern up when he hears Blaine is elected and she will light the fire at once."

"Good Heavens!" Dick exclaimed. "Surely she isn't thinking of setting such a fire with the wind blowing like it is now! She will set the whole country on fire!"

"But you say that Blaine isn't going to be elected!" said Constance.

"He isn't!" Dick insisted with passionate conviction. "But that fool of an Abner may hear and believe anything that isn't so—he's a Republican—and he may hang out a lantern without any reason for it. Go back, Constance, like a good little girl, and tell your aunt that it will be extremely dangerous to start a fire on a night like this. She will be almost certain to lose her house if she does."

Constance turned her pony's head and trotted back to Mary's house. "Dick says that you had better not set that fire tonight!" was the not particularly diplomatic manner in which she announced her message.

"He does, does he?" Mary answered furiously. "Well he can attend to his own business and I will attend to mine."

"He says that you will set the whole world on fire," Constance continued sweetly. "He says, though, that if you wait until Blaine is elected, you'll be lots older than you are!"

"Did he say that?" Mary asked in a voice choking with indignation.

"Well, those were not his exact words," Constance admitted. "But that was what he meant. He said that the pile would rot just where it lies. But he said that Abner was a fool of a Republican and that you were another—no he didn't say that—he said that Abner would believe any fool thing that he heard about Blaine being elected and would hang up his lantern and then you would believe it too and go burning up the whole country."

Mary could scarce speak for anger. "You just go back and tell him," she said as soon as she could speak, "that he may look toward the Widow Mason's barn and when he sees a green light he will know that Blaine is elected. And then he can look over here and see a big bonfire burning in celebration of the victory over him and all the other mean, contemptible Democrats in the country."

"But, Aunt Mary, Dick says—"

"Don't mention his name to me again!" Mary exclaimed in passionate anger.

Constance saw that her teasing had gone too far and she now tried to soothe her

aroused relative and persuade her not to set the dangerous fire. But she might as well have talked against the sweeping wind which threatened danger in case the angered woman persisted in her determination.

Back the pony went again and Dick was duly informed by a very much frightened and penitent Constance that Mary was determined to set her fire as soon as the green light appeared.

"Well, that settles it," Dick said. "I was going to the village to hear the news, but I'll stay here now to fight fire if she should set one going. Be sure to tell your father as soon as you get home to hurry over and see your aunt and reason with her."

"I'll send Uncle Morris," Constance said. "He is a Republican and Aunt Mary is too mad now to listen to any Democrat."

But when Constance got home her father and Uncle Morris and every other man and boy in the neighborhood had made for one or other of the villages to get the election news. Telephones were not common then as now and there was no way of reaching them. There was nothing to do but await the issue of events.

Dick, chafing with impatience, went in and out of his house, pacing around and around the yard, then back by his parlor fire, where he made an ineffectual effort to interest himself in a book. Each time he went forth he cast a dreadful glance in the direction of the Widow Mason's barn, but nothing was to be seen. The hour of midnight came and still he looked only into darkness. But from the window of Mary's house shone a light which showed that the owner was still keeping vigil. He grew miserably depressed and when he went out for the fiftieth time his face felt flying particles of ice, which the sweeping winds carried along, betokening the start of a snow.

"If a snow comes there will be no danger," he said to himself; but at that moment he looked again and saw the green light shining from the gable of Widow Mason's barn.

He turned a quick glance toward Mary's house and saw a lantern moving toward the edge of the wood. Without waiting to lock his door he hastened across his own field in the direction where the fire might be expected to spread.

He had with him a water pail and a shovel with which to beat back the flames. There was no water near the place where the fire was starting, but if it spread it might come within reach of the supply. The shovel was the best thing he could think of for beating out the fire as it spread through the dry grass.

He hurried over to his own line not far from where the brush heap stood, just in time to see Mary apply a "blazer" to the dried leaves at the base of the heap. She was on the windward side and the flame at once drove into the heart of the heap. A sharp snapping of twigs was heard, then the steady roar of the rising flames and the odor of burning bark rose pleasantly upon the air.

Dick stood by the stone wall which marked the boundary of the two places. He spoke no word and Mary knew nothing of his presence. In the strong light thrown by the brilliant fire Dick could see her features as clearly as if it were day. Hers was still a face of great beauty, though it had lost the youthful prettiness of twenty years before. There was in her face none of the exultation he had expected it to show. He saw her turn and look toward where his own light still burned, but she looked back with an expression of sad weariness which took away much of the resentment of the man, gray and grim, who stood watching outside the circle of light.

The wind came only in heavy gusts and during one of the periods of calm the flame rose in a perpendicular sheet which stood high as the neighboring tree-tops. Now was heard the sound of wind coming through the forest like the rushing of a distant train. The next moment it was upon them. There was a scurry of leaves, the trees shook and bent and the great flames, yielding to the mighty onrush of air, lay almost level with the earth. When the wind had passed, the fire was everywhere for many yards to leeward of the heap, burning fiercely among the dried grass and underbrush.

Mary stood for a moment in dazed fright, then picked up a crooked stick and began beating futilely at the advancing edge of flame. But the fire responded to her strokes only by a shower of sparks and she was forced to retreat step by step, while the area of flame went by leaps, in the direction of her neighbor's wall.

She dropped the stick and turned with the thought of running for help, but she realized that long before she could call

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