

"Flames from Ashes"

(Continued from page 5.)

assistance the whole woods would be in flames. Just then she saw, swiftly climbing over the wall, the tall figure of the man in whose despite she had set the fire. He swung a shovel above his head and with each whack the fire had ceased and a blackened area marked the place where the implement was brought down.

Grim and angry he worked away, breaking the line of fire and paying no attention to Mary, who followed after, stamping out the little flames which ever and anon started up where the fire had been checked.

As the fire reached the wall this obstacle checked the otherwise certain sweep, but there were bushes growing in and out which readily took fire and, burning in the crevices could not readily be smothered by impact of the shovel.

Dick dropped the implement and grabbing the pail rushed with all speed to a pond at a most uncomfortable distance and returning applied the water sparingly as possible to the wicked little flames he could not reach in any other way. Again and yet again he went for water. As he returned the third time, breathless and weary, he saw that the wind had changed and the flames were spreading in the other direction, toward Mary's house. Mary had taken up the shovel and was beating at the fire.

Up to this time neither had uttered a sound, but had silently fought the flames as if each had been alone and as far apart in person as they were in spirit.

Now silence was broken as Mary uttered a scream of terror and dismay. Her clothing was on fire.

Dick instantly flew to the rescue, catching the blazing skirts in his hands and smothering the flames against his own stout woolen garments. Then he seized the precious pail of water and bidding her lie down he succeeded in putting out the fire but not until her clothing was much burned and his own hands and face had received many a painful blister.

"Oh! Dick, this is dreadful!" were the words with which Mary broke her twenty years' vow.

Dick made no answer, but picked up his shovel and began whacking at the fire. He was angry at Mary, at Constance, at the Republican party, at Blaine, at the American electorate, at the whole world, including himself. He felt, too, a kind of unworthy satisfaction in being an injured innocent and in the certain knowledge that Mary could but recognize the fact.

For an hour they retreated before the flames, battling their way inch by inch. But they were steadily reducing the breadth of the front they had to fight and getting nearer to the spring which would prove their ally.

"Oh! Dick!" Mary suddenly exclaimed. "The fire is spreading over your field!"

Dick, with his teeth set, was whacking away at the fire and as before, he made no answer.

"Dick!" Mary cried again. "Go home and save your own house!"

"Bring out two pails," Dick commanded. "We can carry water now."

"But Dick! your own house will catch in a few minutes."

"Unless you want both houses burned down you will fetch the two pails!" was the rejoinder, between whacks of the shovel.

"Let my house go! It's all my fault!" Mary wailed. "Go and save your own!"

"Will you get the pails?" Dick demanded, with a mighty emphasis on the first word.

Marv departed on the run and soon returned with the pails and with these the fire was soon checked.

"Now run in the house before you catch your death of cold!" Dick commanded, turning to go.

"I'll go and help save your house!" Mary responded hopefully.

"Can't be done!" Dick responded shortly. "It will be on fire before I can get there. I will save what I can. You go in the house."

He jumped the fence and ran panting down the road without looking behind, where Mary, a sorry figure in burned and wet rags, followed in breathless haste after him.

A little brook ran between his house and the other buildings and here the fire was bound to stop. But it was clear that there was no chance of saving the house and Dick devoted himself to securing some of its contents.

First he carried out the pet birds, chasing out the cat and dog as he did so. Then came his legal and commercial papers, wisely kept in a convenient place for just such an emergency. Then came the family portraits and then the library. Mary had arrived and again they worked in silence, carrying out books and then odd pieces of furniture and the thousand and one little things whose loss would have been irreparable. As fast as every thing was carried out, it was carried across the bridge which spanned the little brook.

"Don't go again!" Mary exclaimed, as the flames swept over the roof, "It's dangerous!"

"I must go!" Dick said. "I haven't a third of the things yet!"

"Let them go! Your life is worth more than the things in there!"

"I don't know that my life is worth so much!" Dick said bitterly, thinking that his house and most of his goods were burned without insurance, that he was a miserable old bachelor without a near relative, that Blaine was elected and the country going to ruin.

"I'm going back for a few more things," he said, starting toward the bridge.

"Don't go! Please don't go!" Mary said, following after.

Dick paid no attention, moving toward the back door, the lintel of which already was ablaze. He was destined, however, never again to enter the house in which he was born. As he neared the door Mary threw both arms around his neck and tightly held him back.

"You shan't go in! You shan't!" she said and clung with a grasp which nothing short of extreme violence could have shaken loose.

Dick tried to utter some word of protest, but his utterances did not amount to much. For one thing, Mary had him nearly strangled. For another, while he was brave enough to have gone into the burning house, like many another brave man, he was not altogether displeased at being prevented, against his will, from running into danger. Finally his veins were jumping in a most unaccustomed way at having Mary's arms around his neck and knowing that Mary was concerned as to his safety.

His show of resistance did not last long. There was a crash and a roar and a column of sparks mounting to the sky marked the site where the Burton homestead had stood for a time exceeding the memory of any living man. The pair retreated in time to escape the flying embers and then Dick, seizing a pail, set himself to the further problem of preventing the fire from spreading into other fields.

Fortunately it had been hemmed in by stone walls and the winding brook and only here and there was his attention required. Mary still worked by his side in spite of his repeated injunctions to go home lest she take her death of cold. They had

not worked long when further effort was rendered unnecessary by a sudden passing shower which effectively dampened the dead leaves; and the fire which Mary had kindled was a thing of the past, save for the smoldering ruins which marked the spot where late the Burton home had stood.

The shower brought another necessity—that of hastily carrying into the barn the rescued goods which had been dumped helter-skelter upon the ground. The work was soon accomplished, for the amount saved was not large. Then, in utter weariness, they sat down within the shelter of the barn and gazed at the smoking ruin before them.

Mary, who had been too full of excitement and occupation before, now found time to begin to cry. Covering her face with her hands she bent her head and sobbed aloud.

"Never mind, Mary," said Dick, speaking kindly for the first time. "It was all an accident and can't be helped now."

"Oh! Dick!" Mary sobbed, "you are too good, too kind. I have acted dreadfully, and oh! it's too bad, too bad!"

Dick looked steadily at the ruins of the house in which were bound up the recollections of a lifetime and could not trust himself to speak.

"I will pay you for all this," Mary said. "Of course, I can't restore the old home, but I can pay all the money cost, whatever it is. I have more than twenty thousand in notes and bonds and I will agree to pay you anything you say. I will sign an agreement right now," she concluded pitifully.

"I won't take a cent," Dick responded energetically. "I will sell the farm for whatever it will bring and go out West and start life anew."

"You can't do it," Mary said. "You are too old."

"What!" exclaimed Dick with a jump. "I'm not forty years old yet."

"I know that," said Mary. "You are only two years older than I am, but you are old and I am old and everybody is old who ever had any part in the only days of my life I ever cared for. Everything is gone like that home which now lies in ashes."

"Ashes!" exclaimed Dick. "Ashes! What has my life but ashes? Every near relative I have had has been dust and ashes these many years. My friends have died, gone away, grown into new interests—what remains of those friendships but ashes? The home of my childhood is ashes. Once, early in life I felt about my heart the flames of as pure and ardent a love as ever man or youth has felt. That was long ago. For many years I have had—ashes. As you have said, I am now old."

"It was I who laid your home in ashes," said Mary, crying. "I will give you a deed to my house and the farm with it and go away myself. I was foolish and wrong, but you know I did not mean any real harm."

"I know it, Mary," said Dick, with a little husky catch in his voice. "Don't say anything more about it. It hurts me more to see you feel bad than it did to lose the house."

"How can you ever say that," Mary said, sobbing afresh, "after the way I have treated you for so many years?"

"Those years are past now, Mary," said Dick, with an unsteady voice, "and if we can be friends once more, I will think it has cost me little enough. Why," he suddenly and irrelevantly added, "there is a red lantern burning where the green one was. What does that mean?"

"It means," said Mary, rising and looking "that Abner was mistaken when he hung out the green light and that those awful Democrats have won, after all."

Then, her face still wet with tears, she gave a little laugh so like that he had heard twenty years before in their thousand bantering arguments that Dick stood still, trembling with emotion.

"I had invited the marching club to come out and have supper Thursday night," he said, after a moment's pause. "But I guess I'll have to cancel the invitation."

"Don't," said Mary. "Let them come to my house and I'll see that they are taken care of."

Dick nearly fell over in his astonishment.

"Why!" he exclaimed, "Constance said that you were furiously angry because I proposed inviting them to my own house."

"I was," Mary admitted. "But I am going to try never to be foolish and narrow again. Haven't I a dozen cousins and lots of friends among them? Why shouldn't I entertain them? Besides, it will be your house then. I am going to make out a deed and have it recorded, whether you will or not and I will announce the fact when they come, together with an unsparring account of my foolish-

ness and spite in setting that fire. They will come, if not on your invitation, then on mine."

Mary's face had brightened as she spoke, for she felt that she had found a way out of the difficulty. Her house was far finer than Dick's had been and she was giving up her childhood's home as he had lost his. Surely he would now know that she was doing what she could to atone.

"I don't want your deed," Dick cried. "I won't take it. I want more than that."

"I will do anything I can," said Mary, hurt and trembling once more.

"I don't want your house, your land or your money," Dick said very deliberately. "I want you."

No true woman ever takes a chance of making a mistake. "You mean—" she said falteringly.

"I mean to ask you the question which for years I longed to ask. Then for other years there were ashes where once were flames. Now from the ashes the flames have sprung anew. I ask you, will you be my wife?"

"I will."

"And you will marry me when I say?" he asked.

"I suppose so."

"Then I will say to-day. We have let too many years go by as it is."

They went to Mary's house for breakfast just as the alarmed and mystified servants were preparing to search for their mistress.

Later in the day the minister and a very few friends were called, including the overjoyed and hilarious Constance, and the next evening the marching club received the surprise of their lives. Dick and Mary still live merrily and contentedly on their now united farms and one voter additional is relied upon to carry the traditional Burton politics. But his father and mother never weary of telling him never to be bigoted and always to remain good-natured in matters political, as well as in all other matters.

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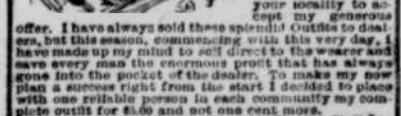


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