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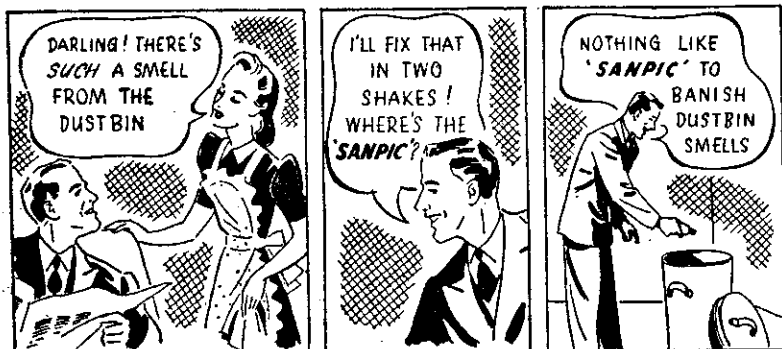
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SHORT STORY

Written for "The Listener" by
NANCY BRUCE

Weeds — Dad Burn 'Em!

GRANDPA took his ruffled feelings down to the bottom of the yard and lit a nice little rubbish fire. He grumbled in his beard as he piled on the dried leaves and shrivelled weeds, and his anger rose with the acrid blue smoke. The ground here, a waste patch between the last row of Tom's runner beans and the high board fence, was scarred by the marks of many fires.

Grandpa threw on another handful of twiggly bits and reached for his poker. It was a long, gaunt stick, black to the waist and veteran of many hobnobbing

garden and his beard began to bristle again. "Dad burn it!" he grunted, prodding viciously until the smoke eddied up fiercely and the grey flakes of ash blew out on the ground. "Dad burn it! Compost, is it? Pah!" He pulled his old felt hat down over his eyes and stamped about, hearing again the casual words Tom had tossed across the breakfast table.

"Well, Pop, no more garden fires from now on. I want all the waste for compost. My hat, when I heard that lecture last night I realised what we've been throwing away all these years."

Grandpa hastily swallowed a mouthful of porridge and opened his lips to



"Peering at Tom, sloshing happily about in his compost-heaps"

with Grandpa and his garden fires. The old man handled it lovingly; his gnarled fingers caressing its weatherworn smoothness and the queer little knobby bit that fitted comfortably into his horny palm. "Make the most of it, old timer," he muttered sorrowfully, thrusting its blackened point under the smouldering mass, "make the most of it." The glow woke suddenly to shoot up in small, licking tongues, and Grandpa fed them with more leaves and crooned over them lovingly, like a witch doctor at his mystic rites.

A thrush in the sun-speckled poplar lifted up his voice . . . three times through his melody, and a sharp break in the next repetition. "Funny, that," mused Grandpa, exactly as he had mused on many other sunny mornings, and he leaned back against his tree stump and took out his pipe. Something of the peace of out-of-doors began to sink into him, and the anger went out of his heart, leaving only the hurt.

* * *

HE squinted through the smoke haze at the waving banners of the beans, the soldierly rows of gooseberry bushes and the trim vegetable ranks. Then his gaze reached the house beyond the

retort, but Tom rushed on. "Great stuff, compost!" he declared, beaming exuberantly. "Nature's own method of putting the goodness back into the ground. Criminal to burn it, simply criminal!"

"Pah!" snorted Grandpa into his porridge, "criminal, is it? What's criminal about being neat and clean, I'd like to know?" He glared over his spectacles.

Tom took a bite of toast. "I'll tell you this," he said indistinctly, "some of the chaps at the compost club have had three times the crop since they've been using humus. No, Pop, no more garden fires for you!"

Grandpa's beard bristled and his face turned a delicate shade of beetroot. He banged the table until the china rattled and the spoons danced. "Compost my foot!" he bellowed, rather enjoying himself, "nasty, messy stuff! Insanitary, that's what it is, and you'll have the inspectors round to tell you so!"

Tom thrust his table napkin into its ring and gulped down his coffee. "Insanitary nothing," he retorted inelastically. "The scientifically built compost heap is as clean as a whistle. I've got all the data here." He began to search his pockets as he pushed back his chair.

"Keep your data!" roared Grandpa, slamming marmalade on his toast.