

"You'll never convince me with your facts and figurings. The proper place for garden rubbish is on a good rubbish fire and nowhere else!" And he clamped his teeth down savagely on an unoffending square of toast. The area immediately surrounding him seemed alive with atmospheric agitation, and every hair of his beard appeared to be separately charged with electricity.

Ethel rose from behind the coffee pot as Tom dashed into the hall and came back struggling into his coat. "You can still burn the pine needles and hedge clippings, Grandpa," she soothed, trying to ram Tom into his coat and dig him in the ribs at the same time, but her husband swung round indignantly.

"Indeed, he can't!" he retorted hotly. "Clippings go to make excellent humus. . . . hedge clippings, lawn clippings, peelings, everything goes in. And pine needles can be used, too. Rot quickly enough given the right heat. Goo-bye." He pecked absently at his wife's cheek and dashed out, leaving silence to settle like a blanket upon the room.

* * *

ETHEL stole a glance at Grandpa. He drooped in his chair like a suddenly deflated balloon, all the fight gone out of him. She had never felt so sorry for anyone as she did in that moment for her father-in-law. "Have another cup of coffee, Grandpa," she urged, reaching a persuasive hand, but Grandpa was past being cheered, even by coffee. Slumped over the table, he gazed out of the window with sorrowful eyes that saw none of the beauty of sunlit garden. Saw only a procession of days stretching ahead with never a promise of even one little rubbish fire to potter blissfully about. He supposed, with a sarcastic quirk of his grey moustache, that he would still be allowed to clip the hedge and rake up the leaves. He would still tidy the borders and lumber up and down the paths behind the wheelbarrow, but all his spoils would be destined to moulder in a compost heap, not to go up in a glorious flare on the fragrant altar of a garden fire, attended by a happy old high priest in a battered felt hat.

Grandpa's sigh came from his very toes as he got wearily to his feet, and Ethel's already softening heart melted a further six degrees. "Now, Grandpa, don't you fret," she said kindly. "You know how Tom is when he gets these ideas. Likely as not he'll tire of the compost bug before long, and you'll be trundling down to burn the rubbish again."

Grandpa looked at her. If he had been younger he would have tossed her a derisive, "Oh, yeah?" But he was only a ruffled old man, so he merely said, "Hmmmnn?" very gloomily and sighed again. He knew that some of Tom's ideas had a way of sticking for life, and he had a feeling that the compost bug would be one of the stickiest.

"Anyway," continued Ethel, "I don't see why you shouldn't have a final fling with one last little fire. Tom'll never know. Go on, Grandpa, it's a lovely morning and you'll feel better outside."

* * *

SO Grandpa went down the yard and lit his fire. And for a while, poking and pottering, he was happy. Then he remembered that this was the last time.

He wished fiercely that Tom had not been an only child, that he had been only one of six. That would have meant five other homes where he, Grandpa, would have been welcome to live and potter and light garden fires. He sighed dismally and shifted as the tree stump bored into his back. There would be no need for the tree stump now. It might as well be dug out. He might even do it himself. If he died from the results of over-exertion Tom might be sorry for this thing he was doing. He prodded at the stump, felt the tough solidity of it, and decided to leave it for another day. It was a bluegum trunk, cut off at about three feet, and it had served Grandpa faithfully and well for years. On its scarred, flat top he had stripped many a branch, lopping off the leafy twigs read for burning. He was durned if he was going to prepared them for sacrifice upon a compost heap.

Half-an-hour later he watched his fire die. Gathering up his black stick and his worn chopper, he carried them to the little shed that was his own private sanctum. In it he kept a weird collection of odds and ends, and to it he retired at frequent intervals to potter over his last, tacking bits of leather on his garden boots, or to dream over his fishing lines. On hot days he sat in its cool dimness and shelled peas or sliced beans for Ethel, and often he sat in the sun on the step and smoked his pipe, hat well down over his contented eyes.

He retired to it often in the months that followed, especially at week-ends, when he peered through the netting-screened window at Tom, sloshing happily about his compost heaps. There were three of them, all built according to scale, and the first was ready for use. Even Grandpa could note the fine, black soil, though he would have died rather than admit it. But in his inmost thought he began to revise some opinions, and even decided he wouldn't mind giving Tom a hand, if he would only leave him a little bit of something to burn just occasionally.

* * *

ANOTHER spring was close enough to send Tom into a whirl of garden-planning when Ethel, opening her mail at the Saturday lunch table, gave a sudden exclamation of horror. Grandpa looked at her in alarm, and Tom glanced up from his chart on How to Plant by the Moon. "Huh?" he grunted. "What's the matter?"

"Aunt Henry's the matter!" wailed Ethel, allowing the letter to fall from her nerveless fingers. "Oh, Tom!" Her voice rose in a thin squeak of agitation.

"Eh?" A hopeful gleam shot into Tom's eye. "You don't mean she's kicked the—um—passed on at last?"

"No." Ethel was too upset to rebuke him. "She's—she's coming here—for a holiday!"

"Murder!" Tom dropped the chart into his plate in his agony. "When?"

Ethel went back to the letter. "Saturday," she said shakily. "Saturday!" Her eyes widened. "That's to-day! Good heavens, she must have forgotten to post the letter for nearly a week—it was written on the 10th."

There was a heavily-laden silence. Then Tom sighed and pushed away his

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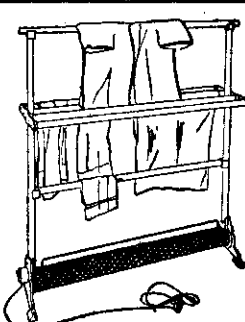
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