

noon an' git tea! You leave that fire out, ye hear!"

Mary Ann heard. She wrapped her square about her well built shoulders, took up her knitting and sat obediently in the kitchen window at her work. Her gray, straggling hair was combed straight back, her eyes, a little too closely set, squinted over her knitting and fine lines gathered in her forehead between her eyes. Her fingers were stiff with chill.

She had been at her knitting perhaps half an hour when her next door neighbor, Miss Delilah Carpenter, the tailorress, "peeked" in on her way down town to the "shop" with the newly finished coat she had made. She was powdered, as Mary Ann's straightforward New England speech would have put it, "to be fair'n a lily," and her false front was primly crimped. "Delily," as she was known in Saegers, never wasted anything herself, she bought her cheese by the two cents' worth and then, to quote the old rhyme, "put it on the shelf," but charity for others like her was not one of her saving virtues, and it was a favorite item of gossip with her how "old Jerry Mushrush stints his wife on fire an' vittles."

"Look kind o' like a picked chicken, Mary Ann," said she, her inquisitive eyes roaming the kitchen over. "Cold as a barn in here, ain't it?"

The "picked chicken" answered meekly. Mary Ann never called old Jerry anything but "he" in speaking of him.

"He don't want as how I should have a fire these fall days. Seems like I can't git warm, but he says time enough when snow flies. Seems like if I had my way I'd like to git this here whole yard full o' wood an' cobs fur burnin'. Seems like I

"Do you want I should light the fire fur you, Mary Ann?" I asks her, but she shakes her head. Appears like she don't rightly realize.

"I dunno," she says. "Wait till he comes home."

During the three days when old Jerry Mushrush lay dead in his own cheerless best room, Mary Ann, his wife, scarcely stirred from her chair. The neighbor women who came to sweep and dust the speckless house and prepare it for the funeral, built a big fire in the kitchen range. The widow had sat listless, seemingly dazed by the abrupt taking off of "him," but something roused to life in her eyes at the crackling of the flames. She partly rose from her chair and sent the quick, frightened glance behind her at the door opening into the best room as if somehow she half expected old Jerry himself to emerge on tiptoe and voice a cracked and angry protest. Always in life when she thought him farthest away, he proved nearest and would pounce in on her with no more noise than a cat at the most unexpected moments, till she had grown superstitious about him; she could not believe even now but that he might be lurking behind a door or just inside the cellar way, waiting to "ketch her at it."

She tried timidly to express her fears to the matter-of-fact neighbor women who were busy at work in her kitchen and bedroom, getting things "ready."

"Better not build a fire, Mis' Peck. He'll not like it, there bein' so hot a fire an' it not December yet . . . What'll he say . . ."

But though the neighbors in Saeger were thrifty souls and saving of their own wood, now that old Jerry was gone, they



Sheep Shearing Season

would. Dunno what he'd say. . . . I'd like to see so much there'd be no end . . ."

Her voice droned on monotonously. "Land o' mercy!" shrieked the horrified "Delily." "Mary Ann Mushrush don't let your mind dwell on things like that! The whole yard full! He ain't a millionaire! It's sinful . . ."

Mary Ann's eyes in which no expression dawned beyond that anxious, furtive look they always wore, were fixed on Delilah Carpenter's amply powdered visage. The subject of wood was dear to her heart and she would have gone on talking about it, "sinful" though it was, had not her neighbor cut her short. She had oceans of gossip to retail and oceans more to gather, and must be about it.

"Well, I must be movin'. Mebbe I kin git something fur you in town, Mis' Mushrush?"

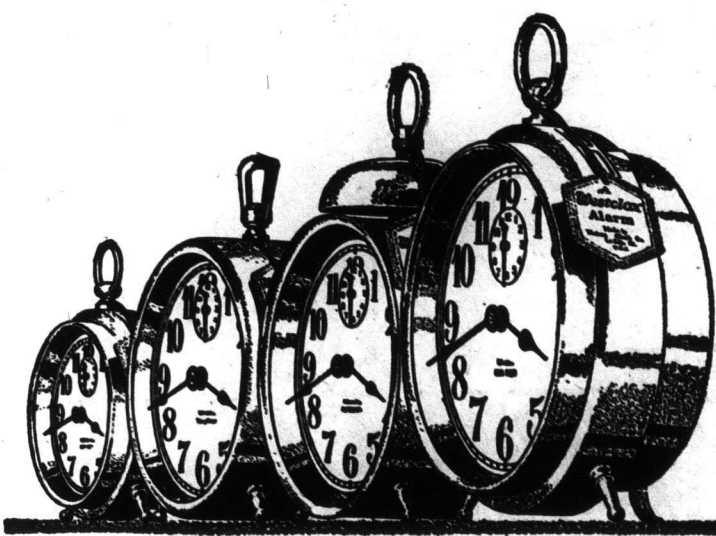
It was fated that Delily, not fifteen minutes after her parting with Mary Ann, should be the first to see old Jerry Mushrush fall on Main Street as he stepped from Brown's harness shop toward his own rickety little wagon. He had just had a passionate altercation with Hi Brown over the price of the harness he had mended and apparently his heart had failed him. When they reached him old Jerry was dead; he had bickered for the last time and saved his last penny. Delily herself ran home to Mary Ann with the announcement.

"She didn't appear to know what to say," said Miss Carpenter in telling over the story to inquisitive housewives of Saeger. "She give me one look an' then ups and piles all the wood from the bin right into the stove. Then she sets down again."

seemed to think little of saving his. It might well have furnished the fanciful housewife—if any such rare species existed in Saeger, Indiana—with food for speculation to wonder just what Jerry Mushrush would have said, if he could by chance have seen his cherished wood-pile diminishing by leaps and bounds and in his honor, at any rate while he lay in state in the cool front room which in real life he had scarcely ever entered. The very daring of it might have struck him speechless, who knows. Still, old Jerry without his sharp tongue and caustic jibe? No, imagination could not picture it.

So small wonder it was that poor plucked Mary Ann glanced about her with apprehension as each fresh stick of wood went in. But when nothing happened and the first day had worn on toward night, when after the long night of vigil and wood ablaze the night through, not even the ghost of an old Jerry bestirred itself to fume and rail, Mary Ann's look lost some of its apprehensiveness. The second day she approached the cheerful blaze and on the third, the morning of the funeral, she actually with her own hands reached out to put a good sized limb of hickory over the hot embers. To be sure, the next moment, blazing as it was, she had caught it out again, but the thought had penetrated her dull brain at last: she could, if she would, have now all the fire she wanted. She could use all the wood she wanted. But even old Jerry dead was a factor to be reckoned with while he lay in the house.

That night the fire went out, but a new resolution came with the morning. Mary



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