

A Great Picture and Its Story "Now, Pa; do be careful!"

By E. W. Kemble

"TOMORROW," remarked Mr. Mitchell, mildly, "will be the Glorious Fourth."

"Lizzie says her wisdom tooth's been aching her dreadfully," rejoined Ma Mitchell, with apparent irrelevance.

But it wasn't irrelevant by a long shot, as Pa Mitchell's answer evidenced at once:

"Well, my wisdom tooth ain't achin' a darned bit, and it tells me that there old gun has got to be fired off tomorrow morning at 9 o'clock, same as always."

Ma looked at his lean old nutcracker face with all the majesty she could add to her portly figure.

"We'll see about that," she remarked grimly.

"Uh-huh!" groaned Lizzie, adding a twinge to her tooth by sheer power of the imagination.

"Can't she git it yanked out?" inquired Charles, Fannie's oldest, hopefully.

His grandmother reduced him to terrified silence with one look. At that his mother, who submitted meekly to her dependent position of a widow with three children earning their bread in her parents' house, bridled on the one provocation which could inspire her to defy Ma.

"You needn't try to kill him, Ma, with them eyes of yours," she announced. "If Lizzie had the sense she was born with, she'd have that old tooth out long ago."

"Fannie," returned Ma, "for an old married woman you seem to have the shortest memory about who's head of the house, of any impudent thing I ever saw. When I was your age my children didn't dast put their oar in when grown folks was talking: I don't wonder you never could get along with your husband, if you run your house that way."

"My husband," retorted Fannie, with a nice adjustment of the barb that aimed it to rankle in some wholly unexpected place, "had a happy home, and that's more than yours ever had, so far as I can remember."

"You let me out of this!" interposed Pa, rising and making for the front door.

Behind his tired old form, as he sought the cool stillness of the evening, the raucous quarrel rose to its due climax; then broke in daughter Fannie's usual rush of sobs and tears. The scene and the words would not pass from his thoughts, as commonly such incidents did.

Fannie's pitiless blow had struck him more deeply than it did Ma. A flash of recollection illuminated the two-score years of the taming his high spirits had suffered at Ma's relentless hands.

For Pa Mitchell, when he wooed and won his wife, was a game sport and a rousing, cheerful liver. He had taken his sedate bride by the gallant attacks of a dashing lover, and, until Fannie was born, he had never suspected the steady, changeless, unyielding force of character that lay dormant in her, awaiting, as in Fannie, only motherhood to assert itself in every phase of her existence.

Perhaps if he had fought her from their first small dispute over the ruling of their lives, he might have preserved at least joint authority. But he was one of your fond, good-natured, admiring souls who fall in love once and for all, and accept any fresh facet of the jewel they prize as another ray of beauty. Ma, to him, was all the more adorable in her firmness and her dignity. Thus had his simple nature helped to rivet his shackles upon him.

He still clung to the fiction of his independence, still told himself that he need only assert his authority to run things his way. But he never did it—except on the Fourth of July. And he had descended to base subterfuge, unworthy of man, for that.

Down in his serene old heart Pa Mitchell hadn't the smallest belief that burglars would ever honor their poor little dwelling with a visit. But when Ma put her broad, unyielding foot down on all fire-crackers, squibs and even torpedoes he liked to crack on the doorstep with Charles and Horace and Daisy, he had the sensation that he was reduced at last, to the mere apology for a man. And he rebelled to the extent of insisting that the salute to the Glorious Fourth from the deep barrel of the old cap-and-ball gun must be observed.

It hung, always loaded, over the dining-room mantelpiece. Ma regarded it with mingled horror and trust. She relied on it, in Pa's expert hands, to blow any gang of burglars into kingdom come; but she lived in chronic apprehension that it would go off, or blow up, or do one or all of the countless other dreadful things a loaded gun can do if you so much as look at it.

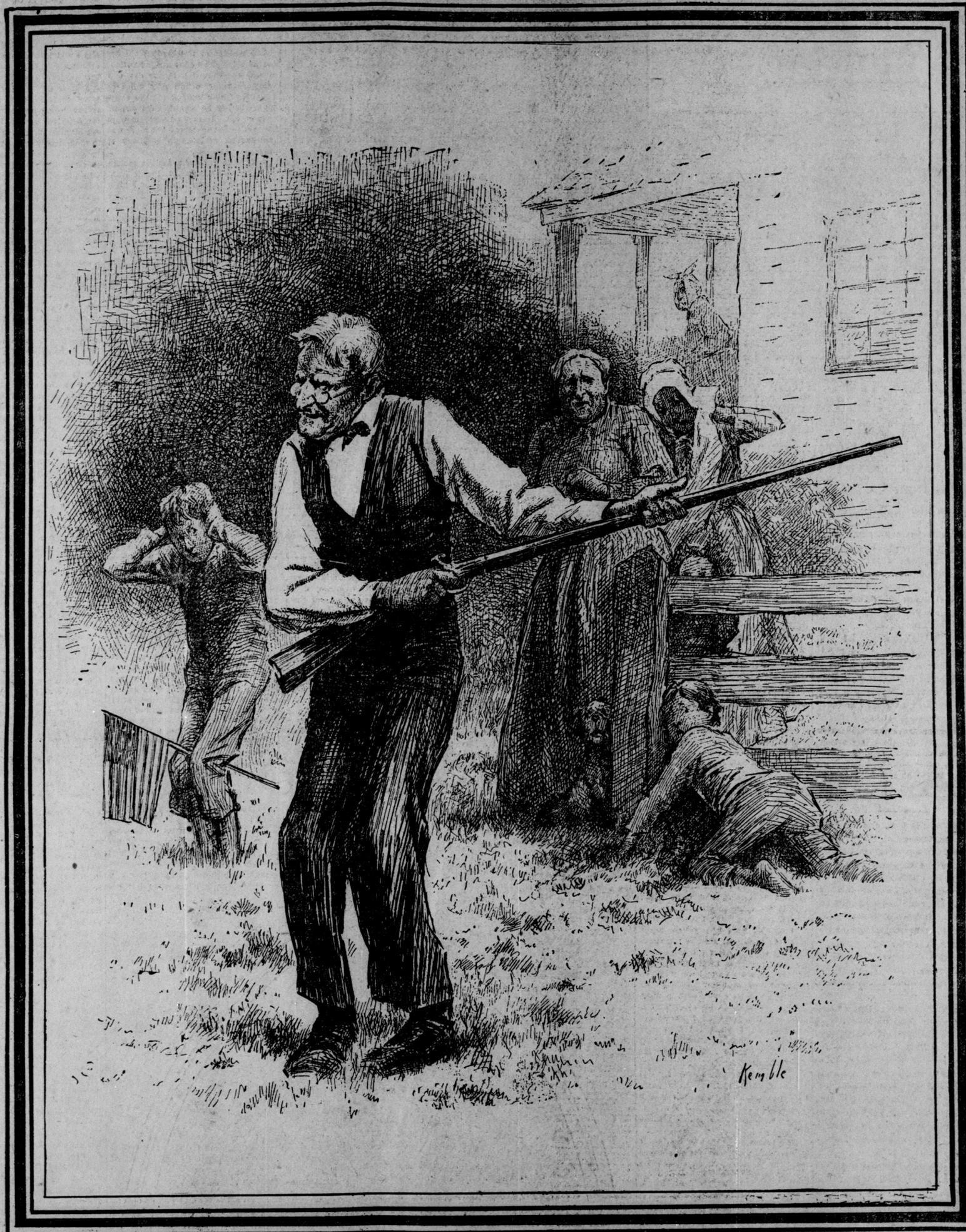
Pa's secret—often poignant—shame was that he had never told her no burglars would apply. What he did aver, his conscience clear, was that every firearm must be shot off at least once a year, to make sure it's in working order. And, although he had to wage battle for his rights and the gun's on every occasion, once a year he did fire it off, the Fourth of July being the appropriate occasion. Between Fourths Ma called his attention sternly to such items in the newspapers as recorded the fatalities incident to the discharging of guns that hadn't been fired for a generation.

This year their second daughter's toothache was putting into Ma's hands a powerful argument. Pa Mitchell realized its force only too well. How like an unnatural father he would appear if he raised such a racket next morning and strained poor Lizzie's already tense nerves to breaking pitch! For a man who all his life had cherished a sublime faith in Providence he was dangerously near to infidelity when, with a sigh, he trudged back into the house at bedtime thinking of the raw deal his Providence was giving him.

Breakfast on the morning of the Fourth was a grewsome feast. Lizzie appeared with her jaw bound up in a towel and the odor of arnica riotous. Fannie, as the hour neared when the die of ceremony should be cast, gazed with apprehension on the flags provided for her brood by Pa, as noiseless, tasteless substitutes for the tumult children relish. Those flags signified excitement and carnage. Ma loomed portentous and forbidding, waiting her chance to issue her awful decree. And Hannibal, the pup, named by Pa in heroic remembrance of the days of his conquering youth, wore his tail between his legs and wondered what cataclysm of domesticity must ere long harry him forth to the solitude of the straggly woods.

Pa, in the sympathy that was always his, invited destruction. "How's your tooth today, Lizzie?" he inquired.

"It's just hopping up and down and swelling and aching so I can hardly see; that's how it is,"



mumbled Lizzie, in a fair flow of descriptive phrase, despite her anguish.

"And no gun's going to be fired off today!" declared Ma, at the opening of the breach in Pa's defenses.

Lizzie's words had smitten him sorely, and his resolution, at that very instant, was wavering. But Ma's words were the call to battle.

"It ain't, ain't it?" he demanded.

He rose and, reaching above the mantelpiece, took the weapon down.

"Pa Mitchell," said his wife, "I command you to let that gun be!"

"Ma," returned the rebel, grinning now, as his spirit rose at the touch of man's natural ally, "you come on outside and see me let it be."

Ma was always at a disadvantage when it came to action. She knew it only too well. Long ago, when her weight began to be a burden and she changed from agreeable buxomness to the slow stoutness of age, she had realized the necessity of ruling by moral suasion, because she was no longer able to catch offenders, young or old. It was a magnificent testimony to her qualities of intellect and character that, by the time it became an effort

to rise from her chair, she had her entire household obedient to her nod.

"Pa," she remarked, in a voice that was terrible in its very quietness and restraint, "I haven't ever yet had occasion to use my authority to the limit with you. I won't talk any more. I'll act."

Pa was duly, anxiously impressed.

"What'll you do, Ma?" he inquired, looking at her, really worried.

"You just leave this house with that gun in your hands," she answered slowly, portentously, "and then you'll see what I'll do."

Pa withdrew his gaze, as one does who would think hard before standing pat on three of a kind and a pair in a poker game. Those early cronies of his, all lost to him since his marriage, would have known that introspective look and made ready for trouble.

"Well, Ma," he observed, in a voice which was even lower than hers had been, "I'm goin'—now. What are you thinkin' of doin' about it?"

Ma's voice responded, suddenly going up in the air, shrill in its excitement and irritation:

"You'll see, Pa Mitchell. Just you go, and you'll see!"

Pa gazed at her with what was almost a twinkle in his eye.

"Ma, dear," he remarked pleasantly, "I've called many a bluff when I was younger; I ain't too old to call one now."

He marched to the door. The children pelted after him. Hannibal, in spraddling haste, beat all of them to it; then ran in circles and canine indecision, pending further developments. Fannie pursued her offspring. Ma, once more suffering the pangs of annual defeat, surged out to the fence, resigned to perish with the rest and hoping that some warning words might still avert catastrophe. Even Lizzie, for all her certainty that her wisdom tooth would jump out of her head, came to the porch and stayed there, presumably out of the line of fire.

The stillness that fell as Pa elevated the awful weapon to clear the roof of the distant woodshed made a time of sudden awe. Charles and Horace lost their youthful courage and trembled where they crouched. Little Daisy clung to her mother's skirt. Hannibal sat appalled.

"Now, Pa; do be careful!" called Ma, her hands clutching in apprehension.

The old gun roared—and, as ever, remained intact. Pa, in victory's elation, jumped up in the air and cracked his heels together—once; not three times, as he did in the days of his youth.

He bore the gun to the woodshed, there fondly to clean and oil and reload it. While he worked he thought.

Again he had declared his independence. Why not make it a revolution? Why not? The first American Revolution had lasted about seven years after that first, most memorable Fourth of July; how long must this one of his last before independence could be assured and peace would brood over the home?

"Considering the kind of fighters the Brits were," he muttered, calculating, "and considering the kind of fighter Ma is, I'd say about fourteen years. And I'm an old man now."

He rose, again the bent and broken figure, to return to the house. His glance took in Ma, portly, near the step. The old, fond, quizzical grin contorted his kind, nutcracker face; and he said to himself, very gently:

"Ma's a good soul, anyway. She always means well."

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