

The Husking Bee at Maxwellton

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Illustrated by

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Title: The Husking Bee at Maxwellton

Date of first publication: 1918

Author: Jean Blewett (1862-1934)

Illustrator: Edward Jackson Dinsmore (1885-1936)

Date first posted: Mar. 9, 2023

Date last updated: Mar. 9, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230318

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The Husking Bee At Maxwellton

Which Decided The Location of A Church
and Caused Two Old Fashioned Courtships.

By
JEAN BLEWETT.

Illustrated by
E. J. DINSMORE.

Aunt Athol has told us so much about her beloved Maxwellton neighborhood that we begin to fear she has come to the end of her chronicles. But not so. The night the wood fire for the first time this autumn, crackles gleefully in the wide old fashioned grate she draws forward her rocking chair, takes up her knitting—the last of the two hundred and fiftieth pair her hands have turned out for the boys at the front—and there is that in her face which tells us she has a story ready. All she needs is the coaxing we are quite willing to supply.

“How would you like to hear about a husking bee?” she asks, and searches our faces with her shrewd eyes.

“It hasn’t a romantic sound,” comes in dubious tones from sweet sixteen on the hearth rug.

This particular husking bee settled a church quarrel, and, incidentally, the love affairs of four persons!

It seems only yesterday that Tracey came, stalking in as Drusilla was getting supper—an extra good supper on account of young Widow Darling being with us.

“The visitor has come,” says he, addressing himself to Drusilla, and giving the rest of us a careless nod.

“You mean the man who belongs,” speaks up Amy Darling, who is so pretty nobody minds her pert ways—unless it is Tracey. She surely seems to have the faculty of ruffling his feathers. Tracey, mind you, is nice-mannered as you’ll find, country born and bred, but well educated. Poor, like all the

Traceys and lately so touchy of temper I hate to see him heading for our house. He answers Amy Darling without taking his eyes off Drusilla, which is the most aggravating rudeness a woman can endure.

“I said visitor,” he persists—“spell it with a capital if you like.”

“Jealous old thing!” her laugh is so soft and merry it makes you forget she’s grown up, and accountable for the outlandish things she says. “You’re afraid the first thing that handsome cousin of yours will do after his long absence is to fall in love with Drusilla.”

When I see a big man angry with a little woman, especially a blue eyed little woman, I’m always sorry for him. He is bound to get the worst of it.

“You say too much,” he tells her, glaring at her.

“See too much, you mean,” she flings back at him quick as a flash.

“Dear me! Didn’t we have enough of war without you two fighting continually?” Drusilla wants to know. “I wish you wouldn’t flare up at nothing at all. Tracey,” she goes on, buttering one toasted muffin after another and putting them on the table. “Every time Amy comes for a nice little time with us you drop in and make yourself disagreeable. Ask her pardon like a good boy—and draw the chairs up.”

“I don’t want her pardon,” he fumes; “all I—”

“He has it anyway,” laughs Amy. “He can’t help his temper; it was wished on him.”

“Kiss and make up like good children,” goes on Drusilla in that nice drawly voice of hers, and with that Tracey looks at Amy. Amy looks out of the window, and both their faces get red. Properly ashamed of their bad manners, I suppose.



“It’s all over,” says Amy, giving me a vicious hug. “The church goes just where the old one did in the valley, and Drusilla marries the man who loves her.”

“I’m to blame,” when Amy pretends to be meek I always scent mischief. “I’ve an evil disposition and can’t help twitting on facts—when there are facts to twit on.” Tracey says a bad word under his breath, but not so far under that I do not catch it. And that boy had as good a mother as ever lived! When I tell Drusilla about it later she only laughs and says: “Oh, it’s just their fun! They don’t mean anything!” I let it go at that. Being the little old maid of the house, with nothing much to do but knit and look on, I see heaps more than busy Drusilla does.

While Tracey is still glaring at Amy, and the girl at the grate toasting the very last muffin, who comes sauntering up the path and in at the side door—side door, mind you—but the Visitor. He shakes hands with me first, telling me I haven’t changed an atom in dear knows how long.

“Neither have you, Amy Rohan—I beg pardon, Mrs. Darling—unless to grow prettier.” Then he walks on to the fireplace. “Hello, neighbor!” says he, laughing down at Drusilla. “You’re the changeling. Where’s the braid that hung down your back, the braid you decked with bows? Now that I get a good look at you, I don’t believe you’re you at all.”

“You haven’t set eyes on me for ten years,” she reminds him, and puts on an extra plate and cup in her slow, quiet fashion; “that’s a long time.”

“I was home before starting for South America, six years ago,” he argues.

“But I wasn’t,” says she. “I was studying music in Toronto, a good fifty miles away.”

“Do you mean to tell me I was fool enough to go off without hunting you up? I was so full of business—at thirty a chap is sure there’s nothing under heaven so important as making a fortune. Here’s Tracey so full of work he refuses point blank to go shooting to-morrow. He’ll be older and wiser some day. I’m going to sit by Auntie. Serve us first, Drusilla. Age should be respected—what?”

It is pleasant to have him round again. He is a good talker—a good looker, too, in spite of the fact that his bushy hair is white as wool. Drusilla reminds me later that all the Murrays turn white under thirty. He doesn’t exactly make eyes at Drusilla, but he looks at her often enough and long enough to make poor Tracey scowl, and Amy Darling smile. You never saw two people with so much to talk about. She’s read volumes on South America, and he—well, when a man has been five years in a strange country, he can tell lots of queer yarns without any danger of being contradicted. Like the poet’s Travelled Parson, he sets sail for other shores, toting Drusilla along, or rather towing her behind, leaving the rest all gaping after them. I never notice how put out Tracey is till Amy begins to wave her handkerchief and call: “Good-bye friends! Bon voyage! Let us know when you land!”

Everyone laughs at her sauciness, that is, everyone but Tracey, who looks as if his supper disagreed with him. By and by he goes off home, hardly saying a civil good-night to any of us.

This is the beginning of lively times at our house. With Tracey as good as engaged to Drusilla it is only natural he should be around a lot, though I must say he doesn’t get much ahead of Bob Murray. We’re expecting the latter to return to Montreal, where he’s the head of a big grain business, but he seems in no hurry; says he wants to see a country autumn once more, when the chestnut burrs are opening and the maples on parade.

“I believe Tracey’s jealous,” I tell Drusilla, who only smiles. I tell the same thing to Amy, who doesn’t smile—no, indeed—but flies off in a way that takes my breath.

“Of course, he is,” she flames. “Any man proud as Lucifer and poor as he is, and always will be on that worn-out old hundred acres the Traceys have held for three generations, can’t help being jealous. Drusilla is a catch—money to burn, and a lovely dear besides,” she ends up with a sob.

“You don’t think he’d marry for money, do you?” I ask, quite scared. “It seems such a low-down thing to—”

“And Druse with a complexion of peaches and cream! Oh, don’t be silly, Aunt Athol!” she breaks in as cranky as you please. But right off kisses me and begs my pardon. She’s a lovable little thing, in spite of her tantrums. She seems to sympathize with Tracey, but listen as I may—and I do listen—I never hear her give him a decent word.

However, I’ve not much time or thought to give to lovers’ quarrels, jealousies and such foolishness these days. Maxwellton has a row on, a positive feud. The cause, I blush to say it—at least, I would blush only that I know I’m on the right side—is the new church. The old one was so badly damaged by lightning last summer it had to be torn down. Had served its day, anyway. The question is, shall the new one stand on Hardy’s hill or in the hollow where the old one stood?

On the hill, declares the Hardy faction, which is composed principally of young folks. Naturally, we older and wiser folk aren’t going to be dictated to by these hot-headed youngsters. In the valley the old church stood, and the old spot is full of tender associations, besides having the advantage in point of beauty.

The excitement of the Hardy crowd grows higher, and the rest of us are feeling like the Covenanters and martyrs of old, being harried and driven from the spot we love to worship in. You know how it is in a country neighborhood, where the church is about all people have to quarrel over. Every last one takes sides in the matter. The trustees call a meeting of the men, and the minister calls a meeting of the women—at least, he calls a prayer-meeting, which is the same thing. Also, he preaches a lovely sermon on peace and kindness, which those who need pass along to the rest of us. If anyone told me that friends of a lifetime would act like they do, I wouldn’t credit it. And over a church!

A committee, made up of three men from each party, meets to talk the matter over calmly, by way of arriving at a peaceful solution of things. Peaceful! The meeting ends with the dear old minister feeling obliged to call a trustee “a stumbling block,” and young Hardy telling the valley men he

would fight them singly or all at once, if they weren't so blamed old and childish. Think of it!

Tracey is head man with the hill people, and has more to say than becomes him. He and I are none too friendly these days, though he still continues to court Drusilla in his moody way. Mostly I absent myself when he comes to the house.

Things get worse instead of better. Mr. Harper threatens to withdraw his subscription if the new church is built on the hill. So does Richard Hoidge; so do the Letson brothers and several more. This is at a public gathering, and Lawyer Sayers stands up and reminds them that nothing was said about hill or valley in the "promise to pay" notes when they affixed their signatures, and they'll have to pay. "We'll go to law," they threaten, and we feel there is trouble ahead, the others being so stubborn, and we so determined to uphold our principles.



"It'll end up with us not having a church at all," whimpers Miss Reid. "For land's sake, let 'em put it on the hill—anywhere at all, so long as we're not left heathens."

Right here a lull occurs, and, gazing 'round to find the reason, I see it is the Visitor. He is a beautiful speaker, and like most quiet men, not a bit bashful once he gets started. There were those among us (Maxwellton has a few Pharisees as well as other places) who had a lot to say about this last one of the Murrays, hinting he was next door to an infidel, but when he is through, they know better. He begins by telling how near the old home and the old church keep to the heart of a fellow who's out in the world, and goes on to remind them of the neighborliness which has prevailed ever since the first log house went up on the Squire farm in the valley, and the mate to it on the Maxwell farm up the hill, and how this same neighborliness has been left as a sort of sacred trust to us, along with the good name of the place.

Most of the folks are looking softened and a few 'shamed, but Tracey faces his cousin, spiteful as you please, and flings at him:

"We don't need any stranger's interference. You 'tend to your affairs. Bob Murray, and we'll 'tend to ours."

“Listen to me,” says I to Amy Darling, on my left. “I cast that evil-tempered Tracey out of my heart, and—”

“Oh, what’s the use of doing that,” she interrupts with a queer break in her voice, “when he will be back in before you know it?”

Without letting on to hear the interruption, Bob Murray draws a picture of Maxwellton’s first church meeting; of himself, a little lad between his father’s knees, listening to the planning and praying (we’ve clean overlooked the praying at this gathering, the minister being absent, and nobody else in the humor); the sayings and doings of men and of women related to a lot of us, and loved by all of us; things—tender, heavenly things—said; worth-while things done; and how they fought the good fight and kept the faith. Then his big, earnest voice breaks in the lines:

“And with the morn those angel faces smile
Which I have loved long since and lost awhile.”

Women are crying openly, and men on the sly. Young Hardy doesn’t lift his head for awhile. His father was at that first meeting, and—

“There was a row that time,” calls out Tracey, who seems possessed. “Half the people wanted the church to be built on the hill instead of—”

“So they did,” breaks in his cousin gently, “and I’m going to ask a man we all look up to and love to tell us how they settled the matter in the good old days—Richard Maxwell.”

Richard gets to his feet with difficulty, being in his eightieth year, and everybody begins to clap like mad. The emotion kind of sweeps us away from the fact that a quarrel is in progress. He turns his gentle old face on us, and we see there’s grief in it and love in it.

“When I hear our people talk of going to law, I feel I have lived too long,” he begins, and Miss Reid’s whimper grows to a bleat. “We pioneers had our differences of opinion on this same matter, but we were honest men, and settled it in honest fashion. It was in the fall of the year, just such a fall as this. Over on the Laidlaw place a ten-acre field of corn stood in shock, and the hill people and valley people agreed to hold a husking match, the side winning out to have the deciding voice. The valley people beat us fair and square, and both sides shook hands and went to work. We had no time for bickering and bitterness; we had a church to build before winter, and we built it. This has been a peaceful spot, with the blessing of God resting on it.” He held up a trembling hand. “May we have that blessing still!” he ended up, as though pronouncing a benediction.

"I notice that the Laidlaw corn is in shock," one of the women remarks meaningly, and in a minute the young people are crying: "Husking match! Husking match!" Our folks catch the fever, too, and "Husking match!" is all we can hear for awhile. Finally it is settled that each faction shall be represented by one man, the winner to name the site of the new church.

"Tracey!" yell the hill people. "We choose Tracey. He's the one to wake you up!" Whereupon ensues a halt in affairs, nobody seeming to care to face the champion corn-husker of Maxwellton.

"Well, I've about forgotten how to work on a farm," speaks up Bob Murray, "and am not so young as I used to be, but," with a grin, "I'll champion the valley side—at least. I'll give Tracey a try."

We're a little dubious. Bob looks too big and easy-going to be much of a hustler—all but Richard Maxwell. "You've a foeman worthy of your steel, Tracey," he exclaims, laughing to himself. "I remember a thing or two about Bob Murray."

The afternoon of the great match arrives, a fair one, with a breeze full to the brim of dried berry bushes, golden rod and all the pungent, pleasant autumn smells which make one's nose smart and eyes water. I'll never forget the yellowness of that day; between the sky, the corn, and the Balm of Gilead trees, the whole world is golden. The committee appointed to run the match is reinforced by the whole neighborhood. The principals are to husk the length of the long field and back. When they are half through the first row our man is behind, but he gains, and by the time they pull down their first shocks on the second row we all realize he hasn't forgotten his early training. My! how he rustles those long ears of yellow Dent out!

"He looks like a boy to-day," I remark to Amy.

"What else is he but a boy?" she snaps, looking at Tracey instead of Bob. "Poor chap!"

When they are half way down the second row Tracey is leading. "Wait," cries Richard Maxwell, "he will show you what he can do."

He does. All at once he gathers speed. There is a perfect whirlwind of corn about him. And he keeps it up, keeps it up! There is no staying with him. He comes up to Tracey, passes, leaves him farther and farther behind. Oh, how excited everyone is! It is too much for me. I slip off home, and shut myself in the back garden with the frosted morning glory vines and wizened asters.

At sundown the gate clicks, and Amy Darling comes in. "It's all over," says she, giving me a real vicious hug. "The church goes just where the old one did in the valley, and Drusilla marries the man who loves her."

"Which of 'em?" I says grimly.

"There's only one, you blind old dear!" she laughs, and makes to hug me again, but I ward her off. "There was another who, thinking money meant more than happiness, tried to make himself believe he loved her, but couldn't, because his heart belonged to somebody else, somebody not half so dear and lovely as our Drusilla."

"Why, you've never used him decent!" I scold.

"I know it," she returns shamefacedly. "You see, I thought so much of him, and he—he—" She breaks off, for the gate clicks again, and enter Drusilla, looking perfectly happy and perfectly lovely, and exclaiming:

"Bob wants your cream biscuits for supper, so please come and get the bake-board out, Aunt Athol. Don't go, Amy."

"I must," she answers with a laugh so sweet the brown sparrows stop quarreling and cock their heads to listen to it; "the vanquished one is coming around to my place for a cup of tea—and condolences."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Husking Bee at Maxwellton* by Jean Blewett]