

A Piece of Red Calico

Frank Stockton

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Before beginning the relation of the following incidents, I wish to state that I am a young married man, doing business in a large city, in the suburbs of which I live.

I was going into town the other morning, when my wife handed me a little piece of red calico, and asked me if I would have time, during the day, to buy her two yards and a half of calico like it. I assured her that it would be no trouble at all, and putting the piece of calico in my pocket, I took the train for the city.

At lunch-time I stopped in at a large dry-goods store to attend to my wife's commission. I saw a well-dressed man walking the floor between the counters, where long lines of girls were waiting on much longer lines of customers, and asked him where I could see some red calico.

"This way, sir," and he led me up the store. "Miss Stone," said he to a young lady, "show this gentleman some red calico."

"What shade do you want!" asked Miss Stone.

I showed her the little piece of calico that my wife had given me. She looked at it and handed it back to me. Then she took down a great roll of red calico and spread it out on the counter.

"Why, that isn't the shade!" said I.

"No, not exactly," said she. "But it is prettier than your sample."

"That may be," said I. "But, you see, I want to match this piece. There is something already in my house, made of this kind of calico, which needs to be made larger, or mended, or something. I want some calico of the same shade."

The girl made no answer, but took down another roll.

"That's the shade," said she.

"Yes," I replied, "but it's striped."

"Stripes are more worn than anything else in calicoes," said she.

"Yes. But this isn't to be worn. It's for furniture, I think. At any rate, I want perfectly plain stuff, to match something already in use."

"Well, I don't think you can find it perfectly plain, unless you get Turkey red."

"What is Turkey red?" I asked.

"Turkey red is perfectly plain in calicoes," she answered.

"Well, let me see some."

"We haven't any Turkey red calico left," she said, "but we have some very nice plain calicoes in other colors."

"I don't want any other color. I want stuff to match this."

"It's hard to match cheap calico like that," she said, and so I left her.

I next went into a store a few doors farther up Broadway. When I entered I approached the "floorwalker," and handing him my sample, said:

"Have you any calico like this?"

"Yes, sir," said he. "Third counter to the right." I went to the third counter to the right, and showed my sample to the salesman in attendance there. He looked at it on both sides. Then he said:

"We haven't any of this."

"The floorwalker said you had," said I.

"We had it, but we're out of it now. You'll get that goods at an upholsterers."

I went across the street to an upholsterer's.

"Have you any stuff like this?" I asked.

"No," said the salesman, "we haven't. Is it for furniture?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Then Turkey red is what you want."

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"Is Turkey red just like this?" I asked.

"No," said he, "but it's much better."

"That makes no difference to me," I replied. "I want something just like this."

"But they don't use that for furniture," he said.

"I should think people could use anything they wanted for furniture," I remarked, somewhat sharply.

"They can, but they don't," he said quite calmly. "They don't use red like that. They use Turkey red."

I said no more, but left. The next place I visited was a very large dry-goods store. Of the first salesman I saw I inquired if they kept red calico like my sample.

"You'll find that on the second story," said he.

I went up—stairs. There I asked a man:

"Where shall I find red calico?"

"In the far room to the left," and he pointed to a distant corner.

I walked through the crowds of purchasers and salespeople, around the counters and tables filled with goods, to the far room to the left. When I got there I asked for red calico.

"The second counter down this side," said the man. I went there and produced my sample. "Calicoes down—stairs," said the man.

"They told me they were up here," I said.

"Not these plain goods. You'll find them downstairs at the back of the store, over on that side."

I went down—stairs to the back of the store.

"Where can I find red calico like this?" I asked.

"Next counter but one," said the man addressed, walking with me in the direction pointed out. "Dunn, show red calicoes."

Mr. Dunn took my sample and looked at it. "We haven't this shade in that quality of goods," he said.

"Well, have you it in any quality of goods?" I asked.

"Yes. We've got it finer." He took down a piece of calico, and unrolled a yard or two of it.

"That's not this shade," I said.

"No," said he. "The goods is finer and the color's better."

"I want it to match this," I said.

"I thought you weren't particular about the match," said the salesman. "You said you didn't care for the quality of the goods, and you know you can't match without you take into consideration quality and color both. If you want that quality of goods in red, you ought to get Turkey red."

I did not think it necessary to answer this remark, but said:

"Then you've got nothing to match this?"

"No, sir. But perhaps they may have it in the upholstery department, in the sixth story."

I got into the elevator and went up to the top of the house.

"Have you any red stuff like this?" I said to a young man.

"Red stuff? Upholstery department—other end of this floor."

I went to the other end of the floor.

"I want some red calico," I said to a man.

"Furniture goods?" he asked.

"Yes," said I.

"Fourth counter to the left."

I went to the fourth counter to the left, and showed my sample to a salesman. He looked at it, and said: "You'll get this down on the first floor—calico department."

I turned on my heel, descended in the elevator, and went out on Broadway. I was thoroughly sick of red calico. But I determined to make one more trial. My wife had bought her red calico not long before, and there must be some to be had somewhere. I ought to have asked her where she bought it, but I thought a simple little thing like that could be procured anywhere.

I went into another large dry-goods store. As I entered the door a sudden tremor seized me. I could not bear to take out that piece of red calico. If I had had any other kind of a rag about me—a pen-wiper or anything of the sort—I think I would have asked them if they could match that.

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But I stepped up to a young woman and presented my sample, with the usual question.

"Back room, counter on the left," she said.

I went there.

"Have you any red calico like this?" I asked of the lady behind the counter.

"No, sir," she said, "but we have it in Turkey red."

Turkey red again! I surrendered.

"All right," I said. "Give me Turkey red."

"How much, sir?" she asked.

"I don't know—say five yards."

The lady looked at me rather strangely, but measured off five yards of Turkey red calico. Then she rapped on the counter and called out, "Cash!" A little girl, with yellow hair in two long plaits, came slowly up. The lady wrote the number of yards; the name of the goods; her own number; the price; the amount of the bank-note I handed her; and some other matters—probably the color of my eyes and the direction and velocity of the wind—on a slip of paper. She then copied all this in a little book which she kept by her. Then she handed the slip of paper, the money, and the Turkey red to the yellow-haired girl. This young girl copied the slip in a little book she carried, and then she went away with the calico, the paper slip, and the money.

After a very long time—during which the little girl probably took the goods, the money, and the slip to some central desk, where the note was received, its amount and number entered in a book; change given to the girl; a copy of the slip made and entered; girl's entry examined and approved; goods wrapped up; girl registered; plaits counted and entered on a slip of paper and copied by the girl in her book; girl taken to a hydrant and washed; number of towel entered on a paper slip and copied by the girl in her book; value of my note and amount of change branded somewhere on the child, and said process noted on a slip of paper and copied in her book—the girl came to me, bringing my change and the package of Turkey red calico.

I had time for but very little work at the office that afternoon, and when I reached home I handed the package of calico to my wife. She unrolled it and exclaimed:

"Why, this doesn't match the piece I gave you!"

"Match it!" I cried. "Oh no! it doesn't match it. You didn't want that matched. You were mistaken. What you wanted was Turkey red—third counter to the left. I mean, Turkey red is what they use!"

My wife looked at me in amazement, and then I detailed to her my troubles.

"Well," said she, "this Turkey red is a great deal prettier than what I had, and you've bought so much of it that I needn't use the other at all. I wish I had thought of Turkey red before."

"I wish from my heart you had!" said I.