

THE WESTBRIDGE EPISODE.

A Narrative of Feminine Deliverance from Masculine Injustice.

BY JENNETTE LEE.

[New York Evening Post.]

Westbridge is a thriving New England town. Until six months ago it was also a conservative town. There is a favorite saying among neighboring and less aristocratic centers that while Boston may be the "Hub of the Universe," Westbridge is the "Little Nut inside the Hub."

Until six months ago there might have been a grain of truth in this estimate of the self-importance of Westbridge. But six months ago certain events took place. They affected materially both the conceit and the customs of this conservative town.

On the morning of the eventful day Richard Downing of the firm of Downing, Broad & Co., brokers, was half awake. He ought to have been wide awake. It was nine o'clock, and he was due at his office at 8:30. He was blissfully unconscious of the hour. The extra sleep had put him in good humor. He stretched out his arms, yawning, and thinking lazily that for once his wife would not have to call him. He was awake—that is, almost—he would be soon—as soon as he had his—No, this was too childish! He would wake up—

Keeping his eyes open might help. He opened them once more to their widest extent. The first object they rested on put him wide awake. It was a new broadcloth gown, dark red, with rich satin trimmings.

Downing eyed it approvingly. "Awfully swell taste, Mary has. Won't she look stunning in it! Pretty bill with it, I'll warrant. Just home from the dress-maker's evidently."

His eyes wandered lazily to the little clock on the mantel. Then something suspiciously like an oath was thrown back with the bed-clothes.

"What could Mary be thinking of!" He cast a wild glance about the room. He rushed to the door and called down the stairway.

There was no reply. His voice came back with a suggestion of emptiness from the rooms below. He looked about the chamber perplexed, exasperated.

"Where in thunder are my trousers?" he muttered.

His eye caught a slip of paper on the pillow—near the place where his head had rested a moment before. He would not own the start that he gave, nor the hand that seemed to clutch at his throat as he tore open the paper.

"Dear Richard: I cannot endure our present way of life—"

Yes, it had come. As he read, a dozen thoughts were coursing through his brain. This was what Dick Crawford's wife did. He remembered the look on Dick's face the next day. He groaned and hurried on:

"The only way out of it that I can see is for you to change places with me for a day. Perhaps then you will know how I feel about living such a cramped, shut-in, buried alive life. I am sure you will, Richard; you are so sensible in most things, and a dear husband. You cannot really understand my misery unless you have to wear the same kind of clothes. So I have had a nice gown and shoes and other things made for you. I hope you will like the gown, dear. I picked it out myself. The day will not seem long, darling, for I shall be coming back to you at night. Your Affectionate Wife and Protector.

"P. S.—Don't worry about the office. I will attend to everything."

He sat, half-dazed, trying to take it in. His mind ran back, catching up phrases in the note, fitting them into the past. "I picked it out myself, dear." He often picked out Mary's dresses. It was only last week, he recalled hazily, they had differed—almost quarrelled—about her dress. She had wanted to have a different style—some "hifalutin," aesthetic make. He had set his foot down pretty promptly on that. His wife was not going to make a frump of herself for any "common sense" foolishness. All well enough for a man, who has the hard work of the world to do. But a lady should be elegantly clad. He glanced at the gown with its velvet collar and embossed vest. How charming Mary always looked! And how proud he was when she came gliding into the office.

His heart gave a leap—and stood still. The office! He must be there, and inside of ten minutes. That famous deal was to be made today. It meant a clear five thousand. It would be a costly joke for Mary if he issued that!

He sped up the attic stairs in search of a last year's suit. The rafters were swept as bare as your hand" of all masculine attire. Only gowns and petticoats hung in mocking, unified folds before him. He turned and fled back to the closet—not so much as a necktie to reward his search!

Then first the enormity of the joke came over him. He was a prisoner in his own home! It was like being smothered—buried alive. He raged across the room. He stormed. He caught up the red dress and glared

at it. He shook it fiercely. It may be well to close the door.

When it opened again a tall, well-formed woman, dressed in a broadcloth gown, swept out across the threshold and tripped lightly down the stairs. On the bureau lay a soft pile of curly, blond hair. It was Richard Downing's moustache. Behind the bureau lay one mangled, discarded article of attire—a stiff, unyielding corset.

A cheerful fire was burning in the dining-room grate. The table was bright with linen and silver. Only one place was laid—behind the coffee-urn. Downing glanced at it. He started and frowned, and attempted to run his hands into his trousers' pockets. They slid ineffectually down the smooth cloth. He crossed them behind him and stared gloomily into the fire.

The sombre look lightened; the servants—they were in the house, of course. He seated himself behind the coffee-urn and rang the bell sharply. Thank Heaven, the morning paper was there and it was big. He buried himself behind it and listened eagerly to the step that entered the room. Ah, it was James—a great relief. It would have been awkward to have one of those giggling maids come in.

"James!" from behind the paper.

"Yessir."

Something in the tone—guarded, non-committal, and deprecating—caused Downing to peep around the corner of the paper. What he saw caused him to retire more quickly than he had emerged. James, the tall, the dignified, the imperturbable, stood there expressionless, in a spotless dimity gown, a muslin cap topping his solemn countenance.

"James!" Downing's voice was sharp, with a barely perceptible quiver in it, "what is the meaning of this nonsense?"

There was no answer. A dimity arm-carefully arranged the egg-cup and prepared cream and sugar for his coffee. Downing sipped the coffee cautiously. Confound it! How was he to eat any breakfast with that Punch-and-Judy show standing behind him! He could feel it through the back of his head arms folded, solemn gaze straight ahead, cap, by this time, slightly awry.

Whatever sense of humor Mary might have indulged in arying her butler, she had communicated none of it to James. To him the affair was serious. Downing was driven to meet it with like seriousness.

"James," he said sternly.

"Yessir."

"Go down to Cole & Thompson's and bring me a complete suit of clothes—everything from the ground up. Hurry now."

There was no reply. But the dimity skirt rustled and was gone.

Downing breathed a sigh of relief. Really it was absurd—he was getting hysterically nervous. The combination of James and solitary confinement was too much for any one. Mary must have lain awake nights to think of anything so preposterous. She should suffer for this. No, he would let her off easy. She would be a good deal surprised to see him walk in. Downing chuckled. He began to eat with a relish.

James's step sounded outside the door. The handle turned. Downing looked up with a pleased smile. It turned to wrath.

In the doorway, starched and immaculate, stood James, a plate of steaming muffins in his hand.

Downing glared. He cleared the table at a bound, scattered the muffins with a blow, and seizing the wooden James, shook him until cap, apron, and dimity sleeves stood in three separate directions.

Before he could recover breath his victim had retreated behind the heavy oak door. The conversation that followed was carried on through a cautious crack, at which appeared now one wary eye, now a crumpled cap frill, and now a degenerate ear. Downing longed to thrust the toasting-fork down it, but restrained himself. Through that long, uninvolved ear lay his only avenue of escape.

"James, what does this mean?"

"Missus told me to."

"To what?"

"Keep an eye on you, sir."

"Well, you'd better come inside where you can keep two." There was deep sarcasm in the tone.

"O, thank you, sir," respectfully.

"James"—after an eloquent pause—"if a fiver would be of any use to you—"

"No, sir; missus said you try it."

"Try what?"

"To bribe me, sir."

"Did she, perhaps, tell you why I am caged up here like a lunatic?" sarcastically.

The watching eye gleamed intelligently through the crack, and one long, bony finger appeared under the rakish cap and tapped significantly on the expanse of forehead.

"Oh!" Downing gasped. He sank back speechless. So that was it? Mary had told James that he was out of his head, had she? And she had shut him up? For what? Perhaps he was insane. He laughed aloud. The eye disappeared hastily from the crack.

"See here, James, you are all right. You do what your mistress told you to—only clear out of my sight and hearing. And shut the door. I'll be quiet."

Downing smiled grimly. Mary had chosen a good tool. She knew, by bitter experience, the thickness of James's skull, and that if an idea were once lodged there another could not possibly enter. If she had told James that his master was insane and must be humored—even to dressing up like an imbecile wax-doll—nothing could drive the idea out of his head.

"And my actions have not been altogether sane," reflected Downing candidly.

There was a sliding click of the latch and the sound of scurrying feet.

Downing did not at once avail himself of his liberty. He sat looking moodily into the fire, pondering on the situation. What could Mary mean by it? She was a sensible woman—Ugh. What was the matter? He felt sick, and compressed, and choking. Why would women have their dresses made so tight? He pulled impatiently at the offending buttons, already stretched to the last degree of tension. At a touch they popped merrily across the room. Downing drew a deep, full breath. With the inspiration came a brain-wave of memory. He had always insisted on Mary's wearing shapely, tailor-made gowns. He had pooh-poohed the short-waisted, aesthetic ones she sighed for. "Bags," he had called them, he remembered penitently, as he crawled around the floor after escaping buttons.

When the ravages of digestion had been repaired as skillfully as masculine fingers could accomplish, he prowled about the house, a restless spirit. He could not sit still; but neither, after a time, could he move about with any comfort. The eternal swish-swish, twist-twist of the heavy skirts about his ankles drove him wild.

He limped at last to a couch, and, throwing himself down, lay staring miserably at the ceiling. His head ached. His back ached. No wonder women were sick! He would be a confirmed invalid before night.

He had not ventured to look out of the windows. Some one might see him. But at last, about three o'clock in the afternoon, he limped miserably to the front window and looked up and down the quiet street. Not a soul in sight. How good the sunshine looked, and the dusty pavement!

He raised his languid eyes to the window across the street. What a very peculiar-looking woman! Her profile was strong and fine; but there was something awkward in her bearing—Jenkins! Good heavens; it was Jenkins!

As Downing doubled up with laughter, he became aware of a similar mirth on the part of Jenkins. He bethought himself of his own unmanly garments, and beat a hasty retreat.

Jenkins did the same.

The curtain fell chastely between them. The temptation was too strong to be resisted. Cautiously after a time, Downing raised a corner of the curtain and peered out.

Jenkins was doing the same.

They grinned. Communications began—signs, deaf-and-dumb letters and gestures.

"What is it all about?" telegraphed Jenkins. "Morton next door, in same fix."

Morton appeared and grinned.

Presently no less than five gowned men discovered themselves peeping from behind sheltering curtains. The whole street was in a state of petticoat siege.

Downing's mind leaped further. It was probably the whole town. He knew Mary's grasp of intellect. Once started, she would not stop with a petty street. The men of Westbridge were to be taught a lesson.

Swiftly Downing telegraphed to Jenkins. They would keep quiet until evening. They would not expose themselves to the ridicule of day. But when the friendly shades of night should fall—indicated by closing his eyes and falling into exaggerated sleep—they would steal forth and confer.

Once more the curtains fell, and Downing crawled miserably back to the couch to await Mary's return. The stillness and loneliness of the house were unbearable. Was it thus, he wondered, that she waited for him to come at night? Even the wooden James, who had become invisible, would have been welcome. At times Downing heard a swish of starch or a ruffled scuttle that told him he was still under faithful guard.

There was a quick key in the door, a hurried step in the hall, a snatch of song. The portieres parted.

Downing lay on his side, one arm protecting his face. He watched her from beneath it. Zounds! She was stunning!

The gray business suit seemed to belong on her. How graceful she was in trousers! Downing's legs ached under their feminine swathings.

She came swiftly down the room.

"Tired, dear?" She dropped gracefully to

(Concluded on Third Page.)

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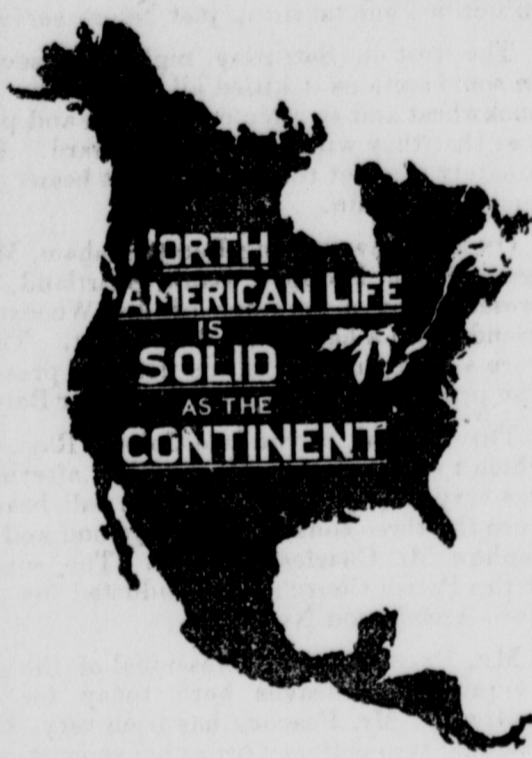
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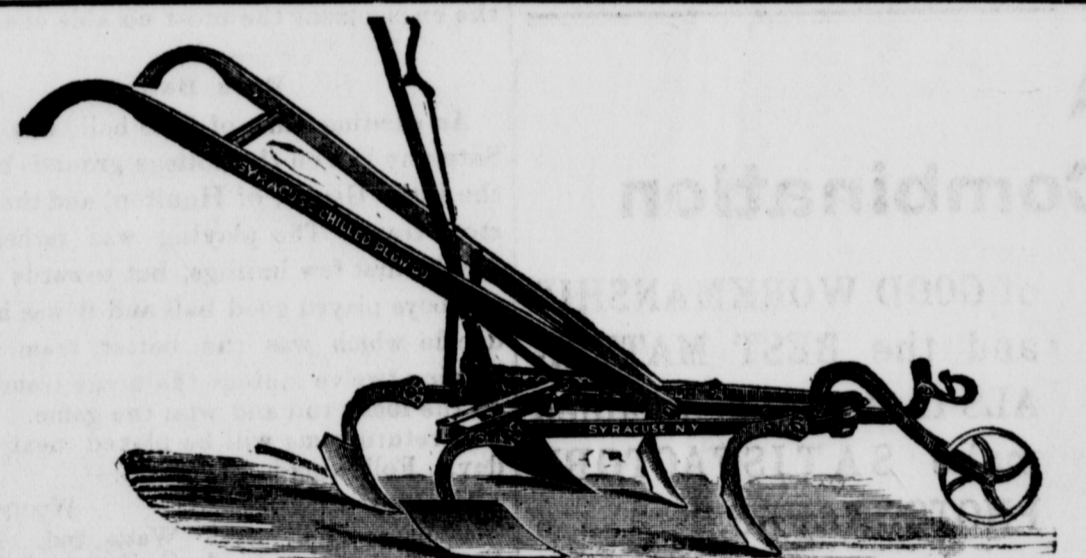
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