

The Perfectionist

MRS. LARKIN always liked to go one better than her neighbours. And this she generally managed to do. Her cakes were the ones that were always adorned with the "First Prize" ticket at the annual fair of the little country town in which she lived. Her windows shone the brightest, her bottled fruit was so symmetrical that it seemed a shame to eat it, her children, before they married, were the best dressed, her towels always hung neatly, edge to edge, on the rails, dust was polished off the furniture almost before it had time to settle, and she always had the weekly wash out on the line earlier than anyone else in the street.

Although Mrs. Larkin was respected, she was not popular. She was not invited very often into the homes of the other women. The strain of getting ready for a visit from Mrs. Larkin, they said, was too much. If there was so much as a speck of dust in a corner, or a fly spot on a window, or a cobweb on the ceiling, Mrs. Larkin's eyes would seem to be riveted to it. You could see she was itching to get at it with a cleaning cloth.

It was galling to the neighbours, too, that no matter how early they arose on a Monday, there, billowing and flapping on the line, would be Mrs. Larkin's washing. Mrs. Jenkins at the end of the street declared that Mrs. Larkin must boil up the clothes on Sunday night. But this was not so. On a Monday, Mrs. Larkin rose even before the lark.

On this particular Monday morning, Mrs. Larkin eased her plump form stealthily out of bed so as not to wake George, her husband. But George stirred.

"Wassar time?" he muttered sleepily. "Twenty to five," said Mrs. Larkin. "Plenty of time for you to have another sleep, George."

George squinted at the dim shape of his wife as she buttoned on her starched print frock. "What's the idea, getting up in the middle of the night?"

"Monday," said Mrs. Larkin succinctly.

"Ah!" said George comprehendingly, and closed his eyes thankfully for another two hours' sleep.

In the laundry Mrs. Larkin lit the copper fire which she had laid the night before. The clothes were soaking in the tub, and she drained out the cold water and turned on the hot tap. There was a glimmer of daylight in the east, and while she waited for the tub to fill, she peered eagerly out of the window. There was no sign of life in any of the other houses down the street



Written for "The Listener" by
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and Mrs. Larkin turned with satisfaction to the tub. Yes, she would be first again with her washing.

SHE hummed a tune happily as she rubbed the clothes. It was a pity that Mrs. Robyns next door didn't get up earlier, she thought, as she popped a sheet into the copper. With four children she certainly needed to. She was always in a muddle. Worked too late at night and said she was too tired to get up before it was light. No method, Mrs. Larkin decided.

She stoked up the fire and the water started to boil. She glanced out of the window again. Good gracious, there was a light in the Browns' window across the street. Surely Mrs. Brown wasn't getting up this early to do her washing! After boasting that she never got up until half-past seven! Said early rising made the day too long.

The water in the copper was boiling hard, and Mrs. Larkin vigorously applied herself to the business of washing the clothes and getting them into the copper. She put in the last pillowcase, and then looked out of the window again. The light in Browns' bedroom was still on. Mrs. Brown couldn't have gone out to the wash-house yet, Mrs. Larkin thought complacently.

The water in the copper boiled over, and Mrs. Larkin reached for the copper stick and poked at the clothes. Suddenly her foot slipped on the wet floor, and she fell forward, her arms plunging into the boiling water.

The pain shot up her arms, ice-cold and then red-hot, and Mrs. Larkin got somehow to her feet and stumbled into the house.

In the bedroom she said, "George," and fainted.

FOR the first few days in hospital Mrs. Larkin took no interest in anything. When she wasn't in a drugged sleep, the pain in her arms absorbed

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