

## SHORT STORY

(continued from previous page)

all her thoughts. She was aware, from time to time, of George's worried face hovering over her.

But in a week she was sitting up. It was Monday morning again. The hospital was built on a hill and overlooked the small town. From the window by her bed, Mrs. Larkin had quite a view. At the foot of the hill was her own street, and Mrs. Larkin looked interestedly at all the backyards, which didn't look so familiar from this angle.

"Now, which is our house?" Mrs. Larkin thought, "third from the end." She could tell by the walnut tree which flourished in the right-hand corner. Then her eyes popped out as she noticed that the clothes-lines were hung with snowy linen. Surely George couldn't have got up early and done the washing! Yes, that was certainly her backyard—the only one with the washing on the line by seven-thirty. Good old George.

But when George came in to see her that night, he had to confess that it wasn't he who had done the washing. Mrs. Robyns next door and Mrs. Brown from over the road had come along

early and had done it between them, and they sent their love and this pot of lemon honey, and some home-made biscuits; and when she felt well enough, George relayed, they would come in and see her.

AND come in they did. Mrs. Larkin hadn't realised what nice people her neighbours were. They came in twos and threes and brought gifts of fruit and magazines, and little packets of home-made cakes.

When Mrs. Robyns and Mrs. Brown came in together, she thanked them for their kindness in doing her washing.

"Think nothing of it, my dear," said Mrs. Brown. "I quite enjoyed getting up early for once. Think I'll have to make a practice of it."

"I thought you had started the habit," said Mrs. Larkin, "when I saw your light go on before five o'clock last week."

Mrs. Brown looked blank for a moment, then she laughed comfortably. "Oh dear, no. That must have been the morning Bob woke up early with a headache and I got up to make him a cup of tea and bring him an aspirin. I'm afraid I'll be an unreformed char-

acter to the end of my days." She laughed her merry laugh again.

When her visitors had gone, Mrs. Larkin lay and reflected about them. For the first time in her busy life, she had nothing much to do but think. Things began to get into their true perspective. She was amazed to find herself thinking that it didn't matter a jot if she wasn't the first out with the weekly wash. And who cared whether or no she made the best cakes or had the thickest pile on her carpet?

"Fool that you've been," Mrs. Larkin admonished herself, "wasting all these years trying to go one better than your neighbours. And where did it get you? You certainly weren't any better liked for it." Mrs. Larkin realised suddenly that the esteem and affection of her neighbours were something to be cherished.

IN three weeks Mrs. Larkin was allowed to go home. It was lovely to be back in her own place, she thought, as she went from room to room. Someone had put flowers in the vases, there was a fruit cake in the pantry, and a meat pie, big enough for two days, in the safe.

"Well!" said Mrs. Larkin to her husband, "I would never have thought people could be so kind."

"Yes," said George, "we're lucky to have such decent neighbours."

Mrs. Larkin still got very tired. It took her a long time to get over the shock of the burns. She sent her washing out to the local laundry. She kept the house reasonably clean, but she didn't fuss if there was a bit of dust under the sideboard. George found he could relax in front of the fire, evenings, and not be everlastingly on his guard about his cigarette ash. If he accidentally spilt some, Mrs. Larkin never said a word.

But one morning, a few weeks later, George woke up early. Something had disturbed him. He sat up, and in the dim light he saw his wife walking round the room.

"What's the matter, dear? Don't you feel well?" he asked.

"Of course I'm well. Never felt better," said Mrs. Larkin briskly. "It's Monday." Her voice was full of zest. "I'm going to get the washing out early. Can't have anyone else beating me to it."

George flopped back on the pillows and stifled a groan.

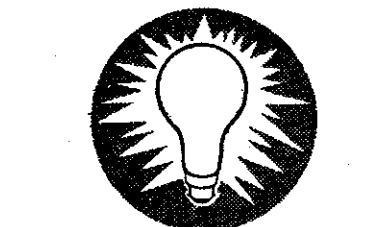
Mrs. Larkin was herself again.

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