

Fair Enough by Jack Lait

SWEET are the blessings of matrimony. With all the lampooning and all the cartooning, still there is no estate within the reach of woman one-half so satisfying as the serene security of wifehood. It is so respectable—and every woman, no matter who she is or what she is, yearns for respectability. It is so "staple"—for it is recognized as the conventional situation by church, state, newspapers, playwrights, neighbors, tradesmen and even relations.

The single woman who is not fortunate enough to be living with her "folks" feels this most of all. The eye of suspicion is slanted at her everywhere. Her life is almost entirely an apology or an alibi—for not being married. Whether she prefers to remain unwed—which is rare—whether she is so unattractive that she isn't asked to, or whether she has some individual excuse, not common to any class or species, she is up against the burden of proof.

But, be she a widow, she is up against a presumption of guilt. Especially if she be a grass widow. The unthinking world winks and smiles—if it doesn't sneer—over the grass widow. She is held forth in comedies and in table-talk as "wild" per se. In truth, for every woman who is divorced because she has transgressed, a thousand are divorced because their husbands have turned out cads and liars. But the "wise" chuckle over any defense of the divorcee.

The sad widow, who has been dethroned by death from the high and safe position in which she was sitting pretty yesterday—be that death through collision, old age or wood alcohol—is immediately regarded as gay, giddy, a lure for young men and unfair competition to young girls. She isn't even given the immunity allowed business firms, exempted from blame and liability when visited by "an act of God."

No; only the woman who has a man safely hooked, with a ring on her fourth finger, a husband living—with her—a Mrs. tacked before her name and a Mr. tacked to her breakfast table, must be proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, and enjoys the constitutional privilege of an American citizen—life, her husband's liberty, and the pursuit of less happy women.

Caroline Dewy was unmarried. That is, no husband was in sight.

She was a stranger, so no one exactly knew whether she was a spinster, a widow or a scandal. She was old enough to have been a wife, and she was young enough to be dangerously attractive. So she was with her back up against the concrete wall of private public opinion from arrival. That she was a stranger made her the more vulnerable. That she was blonde thickened the logical circumstances against her.

She was a trained nurse by profession. That settled it. Nurses are always pictured by romantic artists as having the seraphic expression of the little mother, the big sister, the patient guardian, the velvet-handed restorer. But it doesn't go down. Women are dead set against nurses. They will tell you nurses are the champ vamps of the sex, for they soothe their way into men's hearts when those men are sick and crave sympathy, and when they are too weak to defend themselves. They wear those supposedly saintly caps, which are really devilishly fetching, and they affect the painfully plain uniforms, which are actually most becoming get-ups—"working clothes." I have heard them called by a sarcastic frail who had no reference to the work of measuring medicine or reducing the patient's fever.

Therefore, Caroline was about as far out on a limb—and a decidedly charming limb, at that—as any newcomer to Millersville had ever been. The new hospital had brought her on—had brought her on from New York, if more were needed to provide for her the welcoming hand of Millersville—winn a brick in it.

Caroline went along, tending to her trade while Millersville seethed. She didn't pick her patients, but several young married men fell her way—and so did several young single ones; and some older married men and some older unmarried ones—all sorts of men. Each one was discussed as shameful: the marriageable ones this brazen hussy was trying to hornswoggle into marrying her and giving one of Millersville's cleanest names to a vamping tramp from heaven knew where; the husbands she was cunningly trying to drag away from their wives—the poor, faithful wives whom these husbands had always adored until this indecently good-looking adventuress had forced her way into the town.

If the men were young, she was taking advantage of their youth; if they were old, she was trafficking on their old age.

To be truthful, a good many of Millersville's most prominent yokels were smitten. She had entertained several proposals—and been entertained by more propositions. She had no intention of settling in Millersville. She may have had some attachments in New York. It was all part of the grind to her—as it is to every pretty girl who works for a livelihood, and, therefore, cannot be entirely selective against those who may converse with her.

It wasn't quite so bad while she boarded. At least, the good-bits knew where she slept—and took pains to see that they did. But when it grew noised about that the snappy-looking nurse had taken a little house of her own, toward the edge of town, there was a clacking that rose above the normal hum of the busy little industrial burg.

A house, eh? Not an apartment, where respectable Christians could hear and see something. No—a house—a detached house. What did she want with a whole house? Sure enough, it was only a tiny house, but it was a house! And why on the outskirts? To save rent? Not that woman; she had been seen at the Bon Ton, buying a silk nightgown—and in Winter. Economy wasn't gnawing at her—much.

It wasn't long after that that the Dewy invasion cracked Millersville wide open. The community had been all set for the explosion, but when it came the bang knocked the villagers off their tip-toes.

Dr. Clint Craig had fallen!

Young Craig was everything in Millersville that goes with the tortured word "scion." His father owned the stoneyard; his mother was a Gurney, and the Gurneys were the snobs of Hillary County, being direct descendants of the men who had robbed the Indians—in person—of the very ground Millersville stood upon. And Clint, who had chosen medicine for his vocation, was heir to the Craig money and the Gurney blood. He had brought glory to the remote center as a football player of national recognition. He was handsome, he was popular, he was so refined, he was single.

More snafes had been laid for Dr. Clint than his ancestors had planted for the Indians. There wasn't a maiden's mother

within Fording distance who hadn't sighed—and tried.

And this paragon, this demi-deity, this lion of the social set and bearcat of the matrimonial skyline, had been snaked into the tenuous coils of that blonde alien, that big-town stray who had been pot-hunting without any license, in and out of season, with her double-barreled blue eyes: those innocent-looking eyes. Innocent, nothing! Charged with dumdums and dynamite, blazing away from behind her ambushes of a tender calling and a womanly profession.

Dr. Clint hadn't married her, or anything like that. But it had been whispered about for some time that he was more attentive and solicitous toward the Dewy woman than seemed entirely necessary, in the hospital. The house she had leased was one of the Craig properties, and Dr. Clint had arranged the renting with the agent, do-what-ya-will. All that might have been orderly, though it wasn't gratifying. But now—

He was seen entering her house after dark. He had remained there for more than an hour.

Of course, Mrs. Craig, his mother, knew of it within the five minutes. As the tale spread through the town every shocked and law-abiding woman in Millersville phoned Mrs. Craig as soon as she heard of it. The bell rang all that evening. The episode had taken on the magnitude of a public sensation.

When Dr. Clint returned home that night, both his parents were sitting up. He greeted them cheerily, though surprised to find them on watch after he had made his night rounds of the hospital and some scattered calls which brought him home past midnight.

It didn't take them long to get to the point. Old man Craig was a business man, who believed in speaking his mind; Mrs. Craig was a social tyrant who had never met anyone, including her husband, whom she felt it needful to spare when she had an utterance to get off her considerable chest.

Dr. Clint, though he had been born and reared in Millersville, and knew the spirit

notorious, that is the fault of a lot of narrow and acidulated scolds and dirt-mongers in this town, who resent everyone but themselves, who suspect everyone but themselves, who hate everyone but themselves.

"I have observed her probably more closely than any other person in Millersville. She has been under my scrutiny for weeks."

"I dare say," interpolated his mother.



It Struck Him as Such a Domestic Picture.

of the Jay tank as well as anyone did, was amazed at the degree of earnest indignation with which his parents treated the gossip that associated him and Caroline.

"Why—I just went up to help her arrange her furniture; a neighborly turn to a very pleasant and deserving stranger. What's the row about?"

Mrs. Craig answered him.

"Son,"—and when she said "Son" that way it meant business—"I will not permit you to soil the good name of the Craigs—and the Gurneys, on whose family pages there is not a single blot—by getting mixed up with this common woman, this notorious flirt, about whose past no one knows a thing."

"Mother is absolutely right," added Craig.

"Just a moment," ventured Dr. Clint. "I don't want to be offensively independent, but I'm over seven. While I respect your wishes and even your whims, let me point out to you that you're a little—well, at least, hasty. Miss Dewy is not a common woman; she is uncommonly uncommon."

"What do you know about her? What does any of us know about her? She may be—goodness knows who—or what. She may be an ex-convict."

"Mother—don't be childish. Caroline is just like any other girl of her age and circumstances and disposition—only a whole lot more lovely. I know very little about her, that's true; but I'll bet on her, and bank on her."

"If she is a flirt, I have never seen her at it. If she is

"For weeks. I have seen her at day work and I have seen her at night work."

"You've seen quite a lot," observed his father.

"And I think she's one of the finest, squarest, sweetest girls I have ever seen. In truth, I'm very fond of her—very."

The mother arose.

"Good Lord, son—you don't mean that you—that you aren't going to—marry her!"

"Heaven and earth—if he does, I'll be ashamed to hold up my head on Gurney Street," exclaimed the father, also arising. "I don't know," said Dr. Clint. "I haven't asked her yet. Maybe she won't have me."

"Don't be an imbecile," commanded his mother. "You either have asked her—or she asked you and made you think you'd asked her—and she grabbed you, of course, or—"

"Or—what?" asked Dr. Clint.

"Or you've married her already, for all I know."

"No, mother—nothing like that."

"Or maybe she can't marry you—right at present, anyway. Maybe she has a husband somewhere, and you and she only—"

"I don't think so. She never mentioned one to me. We never discussed such a possibility. Gee—I hope not."

For hours after they had retired, the father and mother hawked the perilous visitation which had come upon them and

threatened their honored names; while Dr. Clint slept beatifically, a smile upon his lips and a beautiful, soft, blonde dream before his closed eyes.

There was some attempt at continuing the discourse at the breakfast table. The mother, red-eyed and fortified with her smelling salts, the father grumpy and faking an interest in the morning paper, Dr. Clint merry and effervescent, came to no amended conclusion. Dr. Clint did reassure his mother that

he wasn't secretly married to Caroline, and did promise her that he would do nothing rash—would do nothing decisive without first telling her.

Then he made for the hospital. He nodded to a few of his townsmen and townswomen on the way, and he noticed in them all an outraged air of distance. He smiled at it. Smiles were just in Dr. Clint's constitution that morning.

At the hospital he caught a glimpse of Caroline. She gave him a friendly beam and went on. And all day her duties kept her from any opportunity for extended dialogue with Dr. Clint.

At 6 o'clock she went home. It was the Craig dinner hour, and dinner was a function, a ceremony. Very rarely was Dr. Clint out when his father said grace. But this evening he made it a point to be at the door, as Caroline came out. And, as a dozen people looked on out of the corners of their offended eyes, he invited her into his roadster. She stepped in and he drove her home. They entered the little house. By that time half of Millersville knew that they were there—together.

There was still a lot of fixing up to do. Caroline got a scrub-pail and started on the floor of the little living room. Dr. Clint got busy unpacking a few crates of books, knickknacks and miscellany.

He came through the door and saw her on her knees, wringing the soapy rag into the bucket. It struck him as such a domestic picture. Many a man's heart has bounded at the sight of a pretty girl in a wifely task, and it has given him the impulse to speak, because he could already fancy her his wife, pattering about their little home.

"Caroline," he said, and she looked up. "It's going to be pretty lonesome up here, all by yourself, isn't it?"

"Oh, I'll have my books," she smiled.

"Yes. But books have their limitations. What you need here is a—you won't mind if I say this?—a man."

She smiled again, but there seemed sadness in this one.

"N-no. I guess I'll manage alone, thank you."

"It's surprising that a beautiful girl like you, Caroline—"

She looked at him more closely. Was this upright, fine chap going to chance it, too? Was he going to wreck this friendship which had come to be the only bright relief against the dull grey of the work and the intolerant inhospitality of this town?

"Isn't—well, married?"

She let the rag slide into the pail and lose itself with a gurgle in the water.

"I am married," she said, simply.

Dr. Clint almost dropped his armful of books.

"You—you never told me, Caroline. You—"

"It was hard enough, here, without telling my troubles to Millersville and being even more discussed than I have been. Oh—I know just how I stand here. I don't know why, but I know how."

"Yes. I have a husband. He isn't of much account, but he's my husband. I married him in New York. He had another wife then. I didn't know it at the time, of course. But she sued him for divorce and named me as co-respondent. Then he married me to quash a charge of bigamy. But by that time he had found another woman that he wanted—and got."

"But—you can divorce him now," said Dr. Clint, with a ray of hopefulness through an expression of pain.

"I suppose so. But—what's the use?"

"So you can marry again."

"I never thought of that. Whom could I marry?"

"Me, Caroline, I!"

She stopped him.

"No, Dr. Clint. It's very fine of you. I wish it could be like that. But I wouldn't dare."

"Why not? You have a perfect right to—"

"No, I couldn't. Millersville is up in arms and peeping through my windows and all but stoning me now because I've let you come past that door. And no one here, except you, knows I've had marriage troubles. Can you see this outfit, if Dr. Clint married a woman who had married a man who couldn't marry her, then married him when she could, then divorced him after ramping the grandest catch in this township, and carrying him off before the eyes of the gathered clans?"

"We'll leave here, then?"

"No, Dr. Clint. This is great for you. You have your home here, your practise; you have position; you are in right. If you want to know what being a long way from home, among strangers, means, look at me. It would be out of all proportion if you left all that you have and are sure to have for me. You could scarcely build another Millersville around yourself anywhere. But you can find a lot of girls more attractive than I am—and with less to answer for—though my conscience is clean."

"Thanks a thousand times, Dr. Clint. I guess I wasn't even meant to be a good man's happy wife."

"It seems I was just born to be always the 'other woman.' My husband had a wife; then he had a sweetheart. I was the outsider, once by law and then by circumstances, because he craved her more than he did me."

"But it's all different now."

"Not so different. Here I would be in competition with hundreds, with generations, with set prejudices. Wife or not, I would be the outsider again. And if we did move elsewhere, I'd cut you off from everything and both of us would be outsiders."

"You don't know how I'd love to have the beautiful security of a decent married woman's life. You don't know what it would mean to me to have a husband I could love, and who could love me."

"It's for you I'm doing it. I think I know the world better than you do, Dr. Clint. You'll forget me soon, and you'll find another girl, and you'll be happy. And you'll be comfortable—and that's eighty per cent of happiness. Love is great—I've tasted it, enjoyed it, been walloped by it—but comfort, respectability, serenity, are so much of it, and this passionate romance portion is such a small portion, and keeps growing smaller."

"No. In this world, Dr. Clint, it seems to me that whenever anyone is happy, some one else is paying for it. Think it over. And maybe that's fair enough."

"Don't put down those books, Dr. Clint. Please slip them back in the crate. I'm going to New York in the morning. There's nobody there I want to see—but at least it's the place where I belong—that's something."

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