

Pa Finds It Out

Written for The Western Home Monthly by Mary Agnes Jackson



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Now you'll see," said Pa, when ma came in with the milkpails, and found him scorching his slippers by the kitchen fire, with the "Farmer's Recorder" in his lap, "you'll see that this will be one of the swellest affairs our local has had yet. A banquet costing three dollars a plate, and such a list of after dinner speakers, the Premier and the Minister of Agriculture, and the mayor—say, all these fellows are just proud to hobnob with us farmers nowadays."

Ma had heard all this before, so she continued to let the streaming milk drown the monotone. Yet she caught the next—

"Mrs. McKechnie on 'Woman's Rights'—say, there's a woman we're proud to have in our neighborhood. It's worth a cream check to hear her dressing down the men—not a bit nervous or anything. And isn't she a looker too!"

Ma was ready to turn the separator. "But what'll I wear?" she said irrelevantly.

Pa snorted "Now isn't that just like a woman! What'll she wear! I expect when Gabriel's trumpet sound there'll be a great rustling among the women, and they'll all be saying, 'But what shall I wear?' Wear anything, woman; it doesn't matter a hoot what you wear, nobody will ever look at an old woman like you," and with the scathing rejoinder Pa took himself off to the sitting room where he could finish the "Recorder" undisturbed.

Ma started the separator. The boys had been on the land since early morning, so she wouldn't permit them to do the chores. But as she turned with unnecessary vigor the tears began unbidden to roll down her wrinkled cheeks.

"He doesn't realize how he hurts me," she thought, "but he's just getting more selfish and thoughtless every year; he lets me overwork and slights me, and says such cutting things. I've spoiled him, that's all. He needs a good jolt to bring him to his senses and"—ma wiped her tears, and set her jaw determinedly—"by the unholy red-nosed profiteer," this unusual form of profanity made ma's lips twitch a little. "I'll see that he gets it. If it doesn't matter what I wear I'll go dressed just as I am, and mortify him to death before all his important friends. He'll find out if just anything will do, and if nobody notices me."

Ma visualized the sensation she would make entering the banquet hall in her milking attire, thumping along in heavy cowhide boots, laced almost to the knee, short-skirted blue duck dress with its long zigzag patch of darker stuff, checked gingham apron soiled with the grime of tasks innumerable, the whole surmounted by a faded wool cap from which wisps of dingy grey hair tufted out damply and despondently. And pa's horror stricken face—"well, he deserves it, he's getting so careless and niggardly," said ma, with adamant resolution, "shades of suffering sisterhood, 'twill be poetic justice with a vengeance."

But by the time the cream had been set in the cooler, ma's flare of courage and resentment had quite burned itself out; she knew she'd never, never do it, never shame pa so publicly and openly. "I'll just stay at home and try not to mind," she whispered, having a great disappointment under an assumed cheerfulness.

Early next afternoon Pa ran the car out of the garage, looked it over, polished it, and got it in shape for the drive. Then he hustled into the house, with the haste and importance befitting a man of great affairs.

"Jump into your togs, ma," he commanded, "we must be off soon. As one of the directing committee I'm supposed to be on hand early to see that nothing slips on us. How soon can you be ready, Nancy—ten minutes?"

"You need not delay for me," ma

spoke tiredly, "I'm not going."

"What!" roared Pa, "you're not going! Now isn't that just like a woman! After all the trouble we've gone to to give you a bang-up dinner that you don't have to cook yourself, and all the fine speakers we have to improve your mind—dod-gast it," said Pa, "the harder you work to please a woman the more ungrateful she is. Well, if you're not going," resignedly, "just see that the cattle don't break into the oat field; you can't depend on mere hired men."

As Pa took himself off in the car he heaved a sigh of relief—a fellow could leave with a feeling of security when ma was at home on the job.

Only after the car had rounded the corner did ma realize how much she had counted on this affair, a social event with a political slant of greater magnitude than any other this community of prosperous farmers and farmers' wives had undertaken. "He might have coaxed me a little," thought ma, remembering Pa as a young and ardent lover, "he doesn't care for me any more."

Ma had prepared for a long and lonely evening when the telephone bell startled her with its nerve jangling summons.

"Yes?" said ma, taking down the receiver.

"Oh, Mrs. Gessup, I'm so glad you haven't gone yet. This is Mrs. McKechnie speaking. I'm going to ask you a tremendous favor. My husband has just come home from town very ill indeed. I'm afraid of ptomaine poisoning. Yes, the doctor is on the way out. And, dear Mrs. Gessup, you know I was to speak at the banquet to-night, but I can't possibly go. I thought of you, you read so beautifully. I've heard you at Sunday school. Would you read my speech for me? I know it's short notice, but Irene is typewriting it now, so you won't have the difficulty of deciphering my handwriting."

A sudden panicky faintness assailed ma, while the deep contralto voice went on:

"It's on the new Dower Law, and I feel this is a most auspicious occasion, with the male of the species full-fed and all his social and chivalric instincts aroused, to present our case and drive home the justice of it. Will you do this great favor for me, Mrs. Gessup?"

"Oh, said ma, I wasn't even going."

"Surely—why not?"

"Well, you see—the eternal feminine reason—nothing to wear. Pa wanted to have a beautiful new dress sent out from Restways," ma lied loyally, "but I just wouldn't hear of it, with the tractor to pay for and everything so high. I go so seldom, it seemed a terrible extravagance just for one night."

"That suits me all the better, Mrs. Gessup. I had a whole lovely outfit made just on purpose to go with that speech. Really it needs the dress to make the speech convincing. And we're both perfect thirty-sixes. Take both the costume and the address, and you're sure to make a hit, please, Mrs. Gessup."

"Oh," quavered ma, "if I only dared—"

"Then it is all settled; that saves the situation. You've just time to bath and shampoo your hair, and Irene will bring curling tongs and powder and everything, and help you dress. Good-bye, and thanks, and good luck, my friend."

The great banquet hall was crowded to the doors. Scores of tables, inviting under snowy linen, sparkling silver and glass and china, had been arranged in two parallel rows down the long room, and the guests sat facing the speaker's table, which stood on a dais at one end of the hall. They had dined sumptuously and well, and for an hour had given themselves up wholeheartedly to the enjoyment of the wit and eloquence of the entertaining speech

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