

A Bit of Old-Fashioned Business

Being a Comedy of Real Estate Values that Befell Mr. and Mrs. Lowry, not many Months Ago

By FRED JACOB

Illustration by Fergus Kyle

D R. DURKIN finished his breakfast, folded his napkin and brushed a few crumbs from the leg of his trousers. It was past the hour when, according to the brass plate on his door, patients were expected to arrive, but he had long since ceased to feel that his office hours tied him. He saw no reason for upsetting his routine for ailing persons who did not come, so he gave the sigh of one who had enjoyed his coffee and toast, and opened the morning paper.

"There is the gate," said Mrs. Durkin, as she tumbled a few crumbs into the slop bowl.

"It cannot be anyone for me," replied the doctor, brightly, "so you may as well go to the door."

By moving a few feet, Mrs. Durkin could see the pathway leading to the gate, and she announced triumphantly that it was a visitor for the doctor after all.

"Mrs. Lowry," she said. "Yes, and she has a basket."

The doctor's face fell.

"I know the contents," he declared. "Mrs. Lowry is a good soul, and she intends to be generous with her vegetables. But she knows that our garden has been a failure these last two years—I don't like to say she is rubbing it in."

The door-bell rang loudly, and the couple responded together. Summer visitors seldom got beyond the verandah.

"It is early to call," said Mrs. Lowry, as she squeezed herself into a rocking chair, "but it is so noisy down here in the afternoon that I decided to come into town with pa."

"It is not very noisy," objected the doctor. "Only your suburban ears have become accustomed to such deadly stillness."

"Well, my ears could never become accustomed to the clatter of the street-cars and the drays, and I am too much of a suburbanite to like the idea of having a factory sitting on my back fence," said the energetic lady as she stooped over to unpack several large cucumbers.

"Those are very fine," exclaimed Mrs. Durkin, for she saw that the doctor was not inclined to be enthusiastic.

"Do you remember the ones that I sent to the exhibition just fifteen years ago?" he asked. "They were the largest I ever saw."

"But yours have been a failure this year, my dear," said his wife, fearing that he sounded ungrateful. "Their flavour is so bad."

"I never knew my garden to be so troubled with insects," he went on, apologetically.

"Insects," sniffed Mrs. Lowry. "My dear man, I do not think anything could thrive in this atmosphere of smoke and dust and sewer gas—yes, sewer gas. Look at those trees. They are brown and dirty, not green. If you could come wandering along here out of the past, with the feelings of twenty years ago, you would not recognize the place."

"It cannot be the bad air that makes the holes in the leaves," said the little man, rather nettled; "only grubs could do that."

"Perhaps cinders burn them," suggested Mrs. Lowry. "Poor things, they must find it very discouraging trying to grow."

The trio walked around to the back of the house and stood gazing at the sickly beds of flowers and late vegetables.

"My sweet peas would be better," said the doctor, "but they grow so close to the fence that the girls from the factory pick them. I suppose that I should not begrudge them a bloom or two, but next year I intend to move the wires a little farther away and see if we cannot get a few flowers ourselves, occasionally."

"If things are a failure, it is not the fault of the gardener," said Mrs. Lowry; "you used to have the best flowers in the neighbourhood."

THE doctor seized the opportunity. "Lowry and you thought it was luck in those days. Ah, but I did know how to get the best out of a garden."

He liked to remember that there was one thing that the Lowrys envied him. They had been neighbours for many years, but it seemed to the Durkins that Dame Fortune always chose the same gate when she brought gifts—and it was not theirs. The Lowrys had paid for their house years before the Durkins managed to wipe off the last cent of their mortgage. Three little children flitted through the doctor's home, and left the lonely parents to watch the noisy Lowry boys and girls at play. The Durkins hardly liked to tell one another that it was unfair; that seemed like a wish to shift misfortune to the shoulders of their friends. So they went into the garden and expended their love upon flowers and vegetables. From the time they gathered the first early asparagus until the last blossom yielded to

the assaults of the frost, their neighbours came and wondered how they attained their results. Then the doctor would purse his lips and rub his hands; he felt that life had its compensations.

When the Lowry children began to marry, they insisted that their parents should move into the



This picture shows Mr. and Mrs. Lowry having escaped from home to a street-car. "They told each other that they had been smart to avoid detection, and they actually laughed at the thought of Mr. Browne standing on the verandah, ringing, ringing, ringing."

suburbs. Other people were doing it, and as the city crowded in upon the house, even sentiment ceased to make them wish to protect the old home. At last the Durkins were left alone. They did not know the people who lived in the houses that still remained standing. These families were large and when they engaged a doctor, which occurred frequently, as the households grew larger, they accepted his services as a necessity which should be as free as the rain or the sunshine. But the Durkins had simple wants, so they tended their garden and stayed in their old-fashioned house.

"It seems to me," said Mrs. Lowry, "that your flowers would get more sunlight if you had the old stable and sheds removed."

"I have thought of that," said the doctor. "Indeed, it has been my intention ever since I sold my last horse."

"You will never require the buildings again," declared his emphatic friend.

"Mary would like an automobile," he told her, laughing, "but a man who has lived in the age that loved the horse does not care for the idea of riding by machinery."

"Mrs. Durkin never liked horses," remarked Mrs. Lowry.

"Oh, no. She lost her nerve when I drove the blood mare." That was one of the doctor's favourite subjects, and it did not require much encouragement to make him drag out all his anecdotes of the

days when men discussed their horses much as they now compare their cars. The little man did not recall that ill-luck followed him in those adventures, too. He remembered that all his acquaintances admired and coveted his blood mare; he forgot the numerous occasions when he came back from a drive battered and bruised while his friends scoured the country for his runaway animal.

"It may be that the old days bind you to the place," said Mrs. Lowry, as they parted at the gate, "but it would be much more healthy for you to move into the country."

"I sometimes think she is right," Mrs. Durkin remarked, at lunch. "Have you never thought that we might sell the old place and move away?"

"You are not much of a business woman," the doctor told her. "It is so easy to reckon out the position. This place cost us five thousand dollars, but the house has deteriorated in value a great deal since then. It would be poor policy for us to sell property at a loss when it will make us a home until we die."

His wife sighed. She wondered why their friends had all grown more and more comfortable while they—well, she knew no one else to whom the word "deteriorated" could be so constantly applied.

A TAXI-CAB drew up at the gate, and a man wearing a silk hat and clothes that did not make it look out of place, alighted. The driver of the taxi looked him over before turning to the indicator in front of him. He was an experienced chauffeur who always inspected his patrons twice and his indicator once before fixing his fare. Still he paused. He mistrusted men who waved the expense of their toilet in your face. Then he noticed that the doctor had come down the walk to see who was arriving at his door in a taxi. He asked three dollars. The man in the silk hat hesitated, glanced around and paid without a word.

The chauffeur smiled and drove away.

"He wants to impress the old gent. That's plain," he observed aloud for his own edification—when there was no one else to admire his astuteness he found himself a very satisfactory audience.

The gentleman in the silk hat presented his card. It told a great deal about him. His name began with the initial "J," and sandwiched between it and an unassuming "Browne" was the imposing "Merriton." He was a "broker, etc.," which seemed to Dr. Durkin to suggest a connection with a tremendous number of interests.

It was a long time since the doctor had entertained such a pleasant fellow as J. Merriton Browne. He seemed to have an eye for everything. No detail escaped him, and he even remarked on the quaint, old-fashioned stocks blooming in the front garden. He was very business-like as well, and came almost directly to his point.

He was investing a large amount of money in real estate and wished to secure some property in the centre of the rapidly-growing city.

"It would be a mistake to buy my land," the doctor told him, repaying candor with candor. "This part of the city has gone down hill very rapidly in recent years. People with money have ceased to live hereabouts."

"You believe in buying in the residential suburbs?" asked Mr. Browne.

"Decidedly," was the reply. "If I had money to invest, that is where I should go."

"This was once a residential suburb," said Mr. Browne, laughing.

"That was forty years ago. Then it became a boarding-house district and now you can see what it is." The doctor was launched into the past. "I can remember when a very aristocratic English family lived at the corner where the garage stands. I attended a distant relative of theirs who was visiting them—a most distinguished fellow whose elder brother had a title."

THE doctor had modified this story in course of time. He had been called in on several occasions before a piece of wreckage from a noble house ceased its drifting about in the shallows of life, but it seemed unnecessary to give unpleasant details about his most notable patient. Besides, to tell the story to the end would reflect upon his efficiency as a physician.

His visitor listened with interest. He even believed that he had once heard some old citizen speak of the family. Then he returned to property values. He had faith in the city and looked forward to the day when this valueless site would be worth a lot of money.

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