

The Library of America • Story of the Week
Reprinted from *American Pastimes: The Very Best of Red Smith*
(The Library of America, 2013), pages 101–04.

Originally collected in *Out of the Red* (Knopf, 1950).
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The Strongest Lady in the World

Miss Dorcas Lehman, Weightlifter



FOR A few hours yesterday New York wore, like an orchid in her hair, a flower of femininity named Miss Dorcas Lehman, who is the strongest lady in the world. Miss Lehman is a red-haired saloonkeeper of York, Pennsylvania, and a Dunkard—a member of one of those Pennsylvania German sects whose members paint hex marks on the barn and wear somber black sunbonnets if they are women and spade whiskers and porkpie hats if they are men. Miss Lehman, however, is a nonconformist in costume and custom. Her clothes, lips, and fingernails have a good deal of red in them, and her hobby is letting large gentlemen jump on her stomach.

NEW YORK, N.Y., May 22, 1947

It amuses the lady to form a bridge by placing her feet on one wooden bench and her head on another, whereupon a 230-pound man sits on her abdomen and swings his feet. York, which is a nest of weightlifters, has a 132-pound Hawaiian named Emerick Ishikawa, national featherweight champion. When Dorcas is making like the Triborough Bridge, she permits little Emerick to leap upon her diaphragm from a height of five or six feet.

“I feel good when I get through exercising,” she explained cordially.

This durable vessel was accompanied here by a bald weightlifter named Bob Hoffman, proprietor of the York Barbell Company and of a stable of musclemen. They were met by appointment, and this bureau, arriving tardily, found Miss Lehman standing in the middle

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of the room hoisting a hundred-pound barbell aloft again and again with what appeared to be a mere flip of the wrists. Mr. Hoffman sat by, silent with admiration. This, it was to turn out, was the only moment when that adjective could be applied to him.

Dorcas was trig as a trip-hammer in a dress of soft gray with a bow at the throat, a beige jacket, red shoes, a rather frivolous hat of red and white, and harlequin spectacles with red plastic frames. She had diamonds on both brightly manicured hands. Turned out she was in town to buy contact lenses.

She weighs 160 pounds, is five feet six inches tall and comely in a strapping, healthy sort of way. To a timid question she replied readily that her age was thirty-two and smiled, adding: "Don't mind being asked; only sometimes they think I'm forty, and that burns me up."

Five years ago she weighed 210 pounds. She attended a weightlifting demonstration and was smitten with admiration for the physiques on display. So she bought a fifty-pound dumbbell and went home and started lifting it. It was some time later that she encountered Mr. Hoffman's appraising eye.

"She was already sensational," Mr. Hoffman said. "A little skinny in the chest at 149 pounds, but with a pair of legs you wouldn't see anywhere outside a show. I always say Dorcas should have been an artist's model. I call her a female John Grimek, and he has the greatest body you ever saw. You've seen pictures of these peasant women, entirely undeveloped, but perfectly proportioned? That's Dorcas. A little excess weight around the hips, but thin women often have that."

Dorcas sat looking at her hands folded in her lap.

"Stand up and show how you can make your waist smaller than your leg," Mr. Hoffman said.

Dorcas stood up, placed a palm against her stomach, and inhaled. Her abdomen receded, making a hollow over which her short ribs hung like eaves. There was no opportunity to measure for the suggested comparison.

As operator of a bar called Ted's Place, the lady has found it unnecessary to employ a bouncer.

“Dorcas doesn’t like to talk about herself,” said Mr. Hoffman, who makes it unnecessary, “but when they put the Big Inch pipe line through York, they brought an awful tough gang from the Southwest. They killed the bartender in the Union Hotel one night when they were cutting up. Well, one night they came to Dorcas’ looking for trouble. She threw one man bodily into the street and the rest ran.”

He laughed. “The other night a man she had barred tried to come in. She started around the bar and he took out and ran for his life; funniest thing I ever saw. And then the other night when a fellow took a swing at her—”

“Did he hit you?” Miss Lehman was asked.

“Tapped me on the cheek,” she said. “I took off my glasses and got him outside. Gettin’ ready to hit him, but he ran. Oh, well. Don’t like to be hitting ’em too much. Means always having to be going down to court.”

“Do you lose your temper?”

“Once in a while. If they call me names.”

“And to show she is a complete woman,” Mr. Hoffman said, “she has two hundred pairs of shoes, size nine and a half, lots of which she’s never worn.”

“I just like shoes,” the lady said. “Lots of times I just stop in a store and buy four, five pairs without trying ’em on. Just give the size.”

“Furthermore,” Mr. Hoffman said, “she is a wonderful cook and a marvelous dancer. That’s her only dissipation—dancing. She loves to eat and she’s a pretty good beer-drinker.”

Miss Lehman said she had no suitors, muscular or puny. “Guess I prefer to be an old maid,” she said. Meanwhile Mr. Hoffman was reciting her achievements.

She can break a chain by expanding her chest. She can fit her feet into straps anchored to a wall, place a forty-pound dumbbell on each shoulder and bend backward until her head touches the floor, then straighten up. She can swing seventy-five pounds overhead eighteen times with one hand. She can lift 375 pounds of dead weight. With a bar across her shoulders and a man hanging on each end, she can

support six hundred pounds. She can do a deep knee-bend with a 216-pound man and a hundred-pound barbell on her back. She can do a thousand-pound leg press—that is, lie on her back and hoist that weight with her feet.

When this recital was complete, the lady was ready to depart. Walking downstairs, she said she liked to visit New York, but hankered for York after about four days here. Said she guessed she was just a small-town girl. She smiled good-bye and strode off, shoulders squared.