CALEB AND HIS WIFE.

THE STORY OF HANNAH'S FIRMNESS.

I.
A QUESTION OF MONEY.

Mr. Caleb Droppers was a large man with a small head. It had been said of him that there were the best of reasons why "Droppers couldn't have much brains, 'cause he hadn't any place to keep um." But, as it was "Poorhouse Jo" Garth who made this observation, Mr. Droppers tried not to be offended. He remarked in return that he didn't know's anybody but God was responsible for what Jo Garth chose to say, and he, for one, wasn't going to interfere with God. Then the speaker put his hand up to his forehead and drew it slowly down to his chin, pulling out the narrow tuft of hair which grew below his under lip.

His wife sat at the window "sortin' over the ironed clo'es," as she called her occupation. She laid on the stand all the garments that needed mending, and she returned to the basket all those that were whole. She glanced up at her husband as she put his flannel undershirt, with a great hole in the sleeve, on the stand.

She had never thought about the size of this man's head, but now she did notice that it was, as she would have described it, "monstrous small." Perhaps if it had been larger—but here she paused. She did not think that she ought, even in her thoughts, to wish there was a chance for Mr. Droppers to have more brains. "He was jest as he was," she sighed.

Her companion had stretched out his right leg so that he might thrust his hand into his trousers pocket. He pulled out into view a large, brown leather pocketbook which was encircled by a strap. Mr. Droppers, in a very leisurely manner, began taking the strap from its loops. Meantime his wife was gazing at him intently, and a pink color was gradually spreading over her face.

"Have you seen Dr. Forbes," she asked at last.

"I seen him this morning," was the reply.

"Has he paid you for that piece of my land?"

Mrs. Droppers felt the red coming deeply to her cheeks; it was beginning to burn her forehead.

"Yes," more in a grunt than a word.

Mr. Droppers had now opened his pocketbook at the compartment where the bills were arranged at length. He began to count these bills.

"Did he give you three thousand dollars?" she asked.

"Yes—or he shouldn't have had it. He's goin' to call for the deed this evening."

Mr. Droppers was holding a hundred-dollar bill and scrutinizing it.

The woman bent forward; she extended her hand.

"Kellup," she said, "lemme take the bill a minute."

"What for, I sh'd like to know?"

"'Cause I never had so much money in my hand. I'll give it right back to you."

"Pooh! That's a regular womanish notion."

"But do lemme, Kellup."

"I ain't no patience with womanish notions, I tell ye."

Mr. Droppers began to lay the money back in the book.

"You know I wouldn't try to keep it," said Mrs. Droppers. "I jest want to hold it a minute to see how it feels to have a hundred dollars in my hand."

"You're real silly, Hannah."

"Won't you, Kellup?"

"No; it's too foolish." The pocketbook was folded together.

"It's pay for my land that father left me," said Mrs. Droppers. Her eyes had bright drops in them. Her heart was beating in her throat. She was aware of an intolerable sense that would presently suffocate her.

In the midst of this emotion she wondered if her husband would have been different if he had had a larger head. How small it did look, set between those broad shoulders.

She sat back in the little low rocker and tried to be perfectly still. At that instant she wondered if she had ever loved the man who was strapping his pocketbook with the pay for her land in it.

Mr. Droppers crossed his legs and looked over at his wife. He spoke pleasantly, and he smiled a little.

"I know your father left you that land, Hannah, but I'm your husband, 'n' I can take care of your money better'n you can."

"But I only wanted to hold the bill a minute. I never held a hundred-dollar bill in my life."

"You're real foolish, Hannah, 'n' that's a fact."

Mr. Droppers rose and went to the window, gazing out of it.

"The wind's got round east, 'n' I'll bet we sh'll have snow 'fore mornin'."

He walked to the door and paused there to say: "Hannah, I wish you'd make some of them rye 'n' injin cakes for supper, 'n' have a bit of souse. I've been in the air s'much to-day that I feel powerful eatish."

Mr. Droppers passed on out of the house, and his wife saw him going across the yard to the barn. She gazed intently at him until he had gone from sight.

Then she took up the next article in the basket and turned it over and over in her hands, with her eyes fixed on it. The garment was her husband's white Sunday shirt.

Suddenly her hands closed on it tightly and there was a sound of tearing cloth. She had torn the shirt down its length. Or, rather, it seemed to her that her hands had done it without any command from her.

She glanced through the window toward the barn. The wide yard was empty. A pile of dry leaves from the two maples flew up in the air and went toward the west. Those leaves had been blowing back and forth all the fall. Some men would have raked them up. The yard was always "cluttered." But, deep in her heart, Hannah Droppers knew that she didn't care for that; it wasn't that which made her now suddenly press her hand to her side with a piteous gesture.

"So he wants rye 'n' injin cakes 'n' souse for supper," she said to herself. "Wall," rising, "I guess I c'n git um for him. But I can't eat no supper; 'twould choke me. I declare," now speaking aloud, "I jest wish 'twould choke me."

A step came along the passage that ran from the woodhouse to the kitchen. The door opened into this passage.

"Hello; you alone?" asked the woman who entered; "thought I heard you talkin'; thought I heard you wantin' to be choked."

Mrs. Droppers turned quickly and gathered up the torn shirt, rolling it tightly. She was pale now.

"I've been feelin' kind of discouraged lately, somehow," she responded; "I guess my stomach must be out of order."

"Likely's not. Take a little sweet tincture; sweet tincture's first rate for women 'n' babies, I tell um."

"I b'lieve I will take some. Won't you se' down, Mis' Blair?"

"No, I can't stop a minute. I want 'bout half a cup of empt'ins. Mine didn't turn out well, 'n' I don't dare to use it."

Mrs. Droppers took the cup extended to her and left the room. The neighbor stared about her; she saw the shirt flung into the basket; it had unrolled as it fell, and now showed the long torn place.

"That's mighty odd," thought Mrs. Blair; "I don't see how any man could tear his shirt in that way."

Mrs. Droppers came back with the cup.

"Have poor luck dryin' your clo'es, Mis' Droppers?" she inquired, glancing pointedly at the garment.

Hannah's eyes followed the glance. A curious spark came into them. She looked full at the woman before her.

"No, I didn't have poor luck," she answered. "I tore that myself jes' now."

"Oh!"

Mrs. Blair grasped the cup. She stood holding it a minute, her good-natured, sympathetic gaze on the face before her. She was thinking that she "didn't see how any woman could stan' it with Kellup Droppers. And yet," in after clause, "you couldn't bring nothin' special against him. He was a good provider; he didn't drink nor gamble, nor run after women."

Here Mrs. Blair, who was a great deal older than Caleb Droppers's wife, took a step forward and touched Hannah's arm.

"Now, don't ye go 'n' git all down to the heel," she said gently. "I can't bear to see you look so. Ain't you got everything a reasonable woman wants?—a good home, a respectable man, 'n'—'n' so forth?"

The speaker laughed a little at the ending of her sentence.

The strain of something that seemed almost like tenderness in her visitor's voice broke Mrs. Droppers down. Without the least warning she put her hands to her face and began to cry aloud, swaying back and forth as she did so.

Mrs. Blair hurriedly set her cup of "emptyings" on a chair and took hold of her companion's shoulders with a firm grip. She backed her toward the lounge and pushed her down upon it.

"There, there," she said, placing herself also on the lounge, and speaking as if she were addressing a child. "Sh—sh—don't take on so. I s'pose you've be'n overdoin' on them hog's leaves 'n' sassages. It's dretful hard work puttin' up pig, I always thought. I dread it more 'n' more every year. 'N' Mr. Droppers killed two this fall, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did," was the smothered answer, "but 'taint tryin' out leaves—I'd be willin' to try out leaves all my life if—if Kellup 'd only be dif'runt," with an explosive finishing to her sentence.

Mrs. Droppers had never in her life before spoken of her husband in such terms. But to think that he wouldn't let her touch that hundred-dollar bill—her own money, too! And the worst of it was that it was just like him. He had never allowed her to handle any money. She didn't know the feel of it. He bought everything; and he had every cent of the butter and egg money, though she made the butter and took care of the hens—and she was willing to do it. Sometimes she saw women with purses that had silver and bills in them. The sight of them made her blood grow hot with longing. She knew that she was lodged, and clothed, and fed as well as any of her neighbors. Some of these neighbors were allowed to have a small sum per week.

Once she asked her husband to allow her something, if only 10 cents a week; she promised to be careful of it; she would not be extravagant.

Mr. Droppers had looked at her in amazement. Then he had said mildly that he guessed she must be crazy, and didn't know what she was talking about.

She had lived fifteen years with her husband, and why should she expect him to change? She didn't expect it, and yet—

As she lay sobbing on the old lounge she had a terrible feeling that "things had got to be different."

"There! there!" she heard Mrs. Blair repeating, as she softly patted her back. "You're all wore out, 'n' your stomach ain't right."

Hannah Droppers suddenly sat up; her hands had fallen from her face. Her eyes were flashing.

"I ain't wore out neither," she cried, "'cept as I'm used up with him treatin' me 's if I was a child, 'n' not fit to handle money—'n' what belongs to me, too. I won't bear it! I've borne it long enough! I want to git a few things into the house. I want to git a flowin' blue dinner set. I'd give anything to have a flowin' blue dinner set; 'n' 'twouldn't cost very much. I shouldn't spend but little. 'Taint that I want to spend, I was always savin'. Mar used to say I was real savin'. I won't stan' it! and my own money!"

These words rushed and almost tumbled over each other as Mrs. Droppers sat up on the lounge and kept pushing her hair back from her face with both hands as she spoke.

Mrs. Blairs took one of those hurrying hands and held it closely. She was trying not to show that she was frightened.

"Now don't you git excited," she said entreatingly; ain't you got no soothin' stuff of any kind in the house? Shan't I put on some catnip to steep? I s'pose you dry some catnip every year, don't ye? It's a good plan."

Mrs. Blair was trying to "distract Hannah's mind."

Mrs. Droppers became a little more quite. She smiled slightly, as she replied:

"Yes," she said, "I've got a lot of catnip up in the attic. I always throw away the year before's; we don't never use none, but I save it. I save everything. I don't want none now. You're real kind, Mis' Blair. I ain't never spoke out before. I hope you won't tell nobody. I ain't one to complain of my husband. You won't mention it, will you?" beseechingly.

"Not a syllable," was the response; and Hannah knew she could trust this woman; she had known it when she "give 'way," though she had not meant to act like this. But already she was conscious of a slight relief, and of a longing for still more. There was a curious sensation of strangeness and triumph in her pulse, as if she had loosened her shackles.

She fixed her shining eyes upon the large, anxious face before her.

"'Tain't fair," she said, "and I ain't goin' to bear it. Jest 'cause he's my husband he needn't act so. I ain't goin' to bear it, I tell ye!"

Mrs. Blair was silent. She was thinking that she didn't want to meddle between man and wife; she didn't believe in it. All the same, she was conscious of a feeling of thankfulness if there was any prospect of "Kellup Droppers gittin' his come-uppance."

She gazed in some admiration at the woman beside her.

"Hannah," she said, "you look ten years younger this very minute! and," admiringly, "you're jest as pretty 's you c'n be."

Hannah blushed.

"No, I ain't pretty no more; I know that well enough."

The two sat silent a moment. Then Mrs. Droppers rose and looked from the window toward the barn.

"'Taint time for him to come in yet," she said, "'n' now I've broke the ice, I might's well say a few things." She faced round toward Mrs. Blair as she went on.

"You know they've got 'bout through settlin' father's property," she said.

"Yes, so I heard," was the response.

"They're goin' to pay over the last of it next week," went on Mrs. Droppers. "I met 'Squire Lorin', 'n' he told me so. There'll be over four hundred dollars apiece comin' to each of us children. Now, I've made up my mind to have that. Don't you think I've got a right to have that, Mis' Blair?"

"I do," solemnly from Mrs. Blair.

"So do I, 'n' I will. You see if I don't. It's from my own father; 'n' I've worked here jest as hard as Kellup has, year in 'n' year out. I'm goin' to have it."

"How'll you manage, I sh'd like to know?"

"I can't tell. I've got to think it over, 'n' decide on some plan. You won't lisp a word of how I've been jes' now?"

"No, no, I won't. Don't you worry 'bout that. But there's one thing, Hannah Droppers, that I must say," impressively.

"What's that?" eagerly.

"Jest this: If you start on anything, don't you give in—mind what I say—if you start, don't you give in. If you do, you'll be worse off'n you ever was."

"I shan't give in."

"You take notice I ain't advisin' you either way."

"Oh, I know that."

"I don't believe in meddlin' between man and wife. But, if you start, be firm, Hannah Droppers."

"You'll see," said Mrs. Droppers.

Mrs. Blair turned to the chair where she had placed her cup. She took the cup and hurried from the house.

She had gone a few rods down the road when she felt impelled to turn back. She retraced her steps and again entered the house she had just left. She did not know that Mr. Droppers had come from the barn and was standing at the sink mixing shorts and meal and water in a pail. The open door hid him from Mrs. Blair's view; but she saw Mrs. Droppers putting wood in the stove.

"Hannah," she said with great impressiveness, "be firm."

She hastened away without waiting for any reply.

The stick with which Mr. Droppers was stirring his meal and shorts suddenly ceased its motion.

"What in thunder's the matter with Mis' Blair?"

"She's jest be'n over here to borry some cmun'ins," replied Mrs. Droppers.

"What's that to do with you bein' firm?" was the next question.

"Nothin' that I know of," was the answer.

Mr. Droppers turned and gazed at his wife.

"Sims to me you look brighter'n common," he remarked.

"Do I?"

"Sims to me you do."

Then Mr. Droppers took his pail to the barn and Hannah went to the north buttery and cut off some slices of souse. She mixed the brown-bred cakes, and warmed the souse, feeling an exhilaration that she did not understand. But her hand was not quite steady, and she let one cake fall on the stove when she essayed to turn it. She whipped off the dough into a plate and put it in the pig's pail; and she felt no compunctions as she did so; she was sustained.

Supper was ready when the head of the house came in. The two sat down opposite each other, and Mr. Droppers began to eat hungrily while his wife was pouring his tea. But when Hannah essayed to swallow some of the food she found that she could hardly do it. She drank her tea and buttered a cake.

After a while her husband raised his eyes from his plate. He held out his cup for more drink.

"Ain't you eatin' nothin'?" he asked. "Be you sick?"

"No, but I ain't got much appetite to-night."

The shining of her eyes caught his glance. He sucked up his tea with some noise, then he said:

"I'm sure I d' know what's come over ye, Hannah, but I ain't seen ye look s' much 's you did when I was courtin' ye 's you do to-night."

Mrs. Droppers colored, but she made no other reply to her husband's remarks, and presently he rose, lighted his lantern and went back to the barn to finish his evening tasks.

Hannah's excitement and exultation continued through the night, and prevented her from sleeping. Her own wakefulness seemed accentuated by the deep, snoring slumber of the man beside her. She was glad when it was morning and she could go about her work.

At half past 8 Mr. Droppers drove off with a load of cider apples. He went down the road. At a quarter to 9 Mr. Droppers's wife walked off toward the village. She went up the road. She passed by the home of the Blairs. Mrs. Blair was at the open door shaking a mat. The two women said good morning to each other. Mrs. Blair restrained her desire to express the surprise and curiosity she felt at sight of her neighbor at this hour. She stood for some minutes watching the slight figure hurrying along the road.

"I do wonder what she's got in her head," she thought. "Of course she can't amount to nothin'. I wish I'd told her again to be firm."

She asked herself whether it was too late to shout that advice, and she concluded that it was.

The woman who had thus started forth did not slacken her quick walk until she came to a large white house on the outskirts of the village. A small L projected from this building, and on this L was a sign stating that here was 'Squire Loring's office. The 'squire opened the door to his visitor, and, as he ushered her in, he remarked gallantly that Mrs. Droppers seemed to be growing young. "Not," he added, "that she is so old as to need to grow young."

But Hannah did not notice this compliment. She would not sit down. She took hold of the top of the chair the 'squire had placed for her.

"You know you said you were 'bout ready to pay the last installment of father's prop'ty," she said abruptly.

"Yes; by next week, I think."

"I called to ask you to give it to me 'thout lettin' Mr. Droppers know. I c'n sign the receipt 'thout lettin' him know, can't I?"

"Certainly."

"That's all I wanted to say." Mrs. Droppers turned and walked out of the office. She almost ran, being suddenly possessed by an unreasonable fear that her husband would return and discover that she was not at home. She had gone by the Blair house when she heard a window thrown up violently, and then a voice crying:

"Hannah, be firm!"

She paused long enough to nod her head in an emphatic affirmative.

Mrs. Blair closed the window, saying in a whisper that she, for one, did not believe in meddling between man and wife. Then aloud:

"I do hope that woman won't begin nothin' she can't carry out."

As the next few days passed Mrs. Droppers's inability to eat continued in a noticeable degree, and she drank a good deal of tea. She also kept looking so bright and young that her husband was again reminded of the time when he was courting her. Perhaps this fact made him notice her somewhat more, and one day he brought home from the store sufficient calico, of a red and green pattern, to make a gown. It was a hideous pattern, but Hannah professed to like it, and when she was alone she shed a few tears over it.

"But I'm goin' to be firm jest the same," she said, rolling up the calico with a steady hand.

It was on Thursday of the following week that Mr. Loring's horse and buggy came into the Droppers yard, and the 'squire presently entered.

"I knew Mr. Droppers was away, and I'm read to pay over that money," he said when he had seated himself in the kitchen, where Hannah was making cider applesauce.

She resolutely suppressed an inclination to tremble. She could not speak, so she only looked at the 'squire.

"I've brought you the bills instead of a check," he went on. "I thought you'd like the bills better."

"Yes, I should," she answered. She watched him count them. There were four one-hundred-dollar notes, three tens and sixty-five cents in change.

He gave her a piece of paper to sign. She was obliged to try three times before she could control her hand sufficiently to dare to put the pen to the paper, and, when she did so at last, her signature looked like that of an old woman.

Mr. Loring said something, she did not know what. Then he rose and felt her aone.

He had put the money in a little pile on the table. She had not yet touched it. Now she hastily drew the curtains and locked the doors. Then she sat down and took the money in her hands. She counted it; she stroked the crisp paper; she jingled the change. She raised her glittering eyes and said boldly, in a loud voice:

"I don't care; it's mine—it's mine; 'n' I've a right to have it."

She spoke defiantly. Presently she said again:

"It's mine—every cent of it."

And after a time:

"I'll have that flowin' blue dinner set bime-bye."

Her cheeks were very red. She put the back of her hand up against one cheek and then another.

The clock seemed to tick more rapidly than ever, and before she had thought ten minutes had passed an hour had gone by. There was a knock at the front door.

"Some pedler!" she cried. She rose hurriedly, with the money in her apron, and went to the door. She opened it a crack and shook her head to a man who said he had a new kind of needles to sell. She watched him go away.

She had begun to try to think where she should hide this treasure. Her mind ran over places, at the barn and house, and rejected them all.

At last she folded the sum carefully in a thick brown paper, emptied the contents of the sugar-box into a tin pan, placed the package in the bottom of the box, and then poured the sugar back. She set the box in its place. As she stood gazing at it she heard the sound of wheels in the yard. That was old Charley's trot; she would know that trot anywhere. Mr. Droppers had come home more than hour earlier than she had expected him. Instantly the sugar-box assumed a suspicious appearance to her—more than that, it even seemed to proclaim, somehow, that there was the sum of $430.65 in the bottom of it, under the sugar. She hurriedly placed a folded tablecloth in front of the box, and she was pumping water rather aimlessly into the sink when her husband entered. He had a couple of squashes in his hands, and he remarked, as he put them on the table, that Zeb Bates was always braggin' that turban squashes were better than Hubbards; 'n' Zeb had made him take these to try.

"When you use um, Hannah, I wish you'd save the seeds. I declare," noticing what his wife was doing, "you must like to pump better'n I do. If 'twas a dry time there wouldn't be no water left in the well."

Mrs. Droppers let fall the handle of the pump. She glanced toward the buttery door, which was open. She saw the tablecloth in front of the box. Then it occurred to her that her husband might think it was odd that the cloth was in that place. She was sorry she had left it there. She wanted to hurry and remove it; but she did not do so. She moved deliberately, took off the teakettle cover, and looked in.

Mr. Droppers was unwinding a brown comforter from his neck.

"It's gettin' awful chilly," he said. "Every day I think it's goin' to snow, 'n' every day it don't. I met 'Squire Lorin' between here 'n' the Corners. I ast him if 'twant 'bout time for the last payment on your father's prop'ty."

Mrs. Droppers stopped to see if there were any chips in the bottom of the woodbox, behind the stove. With her head thus bent she inquired:

"What d' he say?"

"He said 'twas time. He 'peared to be in such a hurry that I couldn't put any more questions; he drove right on. 'Squire's all right, but he's terrible slow 'bout bringing anything to pass. I wish you'd git that teakettle to boilin', Hannah, for I want to give the hoss a warm mash. He's a little off his feed."

Mr. Droppers went out to unharness; his wife filled the stove with wood. From being red, her cheeks had gone pale. She leaned her hands on the table, staring down at the turban squashes.

"I don't see why I should feel exactly 's if I'd stolen that money," she whispered. "I couldn't feel no different if I'd broke open somebody's house 'n' taken $430.65. It makes me mad to feel so, when it's mine."

She glanced up at the buttery. "I'll take that tablecloth away from that sugar box."

She removed the cloth, and she gave the box a careless push "to make it look natural." But, strange to say, she could not make it look natural.

When Mr. Droppers came in for the hot water he reverted to 'Squire Lorin' and expressed a wish that somebody else had been executor of that will.

"Why," said Mrs. Droppers with some spirit, "you've just got $300 from father's prop'ty."

She wanted to spur herself on to a little more courageous state of mind.

The next week passed with great apparent calmness, the only incident being a call from Mrs. Blair, who came ostensibly to return the cup of emptyings. During this call Mrs. Droppers informed her friend that she felt as if she were "settin' on a keg of gunpowder with a slow match burnin' up toward it."

"'N' it makes me mad, when it's my own money," with some fierceness.

"You don't mean you've got it, Hannah Droppers?" cried Mrs. Blair.

"Yes, I do. 'N' it's jest as bad as if I'd stole it. I declare, I d' know what I shall do."

The speaker sat down opposite her guest and gazed at her in a way, as Mrs. Blair afterward said, "that made her backbone creep 'n' crawl."

"I shouldn't do nothin'," promptly responded Mrs. Blair. "All you've got to do is jest to be firm."

"I know it; I'm all the time I'm tempted to go 'n' git that money 'n' give it to Kellup, 'n' say, 'There, take it; I feel 's if I d committed the unpardonable sin, keepin' it from you.' It's dretful the way I am in my mind."

Mrs. Blair made no reply. She sat in silence, wondering how it could be this way between man and wife. Mr. Blair, she was thinking, gratefully, wasn't any such kind of a person as Kellup Droppers; and thanked the Lord for that.

She rose after a few minutes.

"Somehow, you don't look natural," she said. "I'm 'raid you don't sleep, Hannah."

"I sleep some," was the answer. "You see, I'm expectin' all the time when Kellup'll find out 'Squire Lorin's paid."

"What'll you do then?"

"I don't know."

Mrs. Droppers's dilated eyes were fixed on space.

"You know I told you not to begin if you couldn't amount to nothin'," said Mrs. Blair. "I guess I'd better be goin'."

When Mrs. Blair had reached the door Mrs. Droppers opened her dry lips and said resolutely:

"I mean to amount to something. I ain't goin' through all this for nothin', I tell you."

II.
HOW HANNAH REMAINED FIRM.

It was only two days later that she saw by her husband's face, when he came home from the village, that he knew she had the money. She wished now that she had boldly told him, and then asserted that she intended to keep the sum.

Mrs. Droppers did not mention the subject until he had come in from his night work at the barn. He sat down, with his feet on the stove hearth, and looked at his wife, who had a stocking of his pulled on over her hand. She was drawing very thick woolen yarn across a hole in this stocking. Her face was in the dusk, above the shadowed lamp, but her hands were in the full light.

"Hannah," said Mr. Droppers, "I seen your brother David to-day. He told me that 'Squire Lorin' had paid him the balance from your father's prop'ty. I said the 'squire hadn't paid you, 'n' he said he guessed he must have—he wouldn't pay one heir 'tnout payin' the other."

Mrs. Droppers laid her stockinged hand on her lap, and folded the other closely over it.

"He has paid me," she said distinctly.

She was looking down at her hands.

"When?"

"A week ago day before yisterday."

A silence, during which the woman thought her heart stopped beating, and was rather glad that it had done so. If it should not begin to beat again she would be saved all the trouble of being firm.

"Where is it?"

Another silence. Hannah now became aware that her heart had not stopped permanently, but that it was at present throbbing all through her, and making it difficult for her to speak. But she must speak; and she must be firm.

"It's my money, ain't it?" she asked.

"Where is it?"

"You don't tell me half the time when you have money paid to you—you know you don't."

"Where is it?"

"And you wouldn't let me even touch that hundred-dollar bill—and that was mine, too."

Her voice did not waver, but it was high and shrill.

She clasped her free hand tightly over the one covered with a stocking. In doing so the darning needle pierced her palm. She was rather glad to feel the sudden, stinging pain.

Mr. Droppers leaned forward.

"I'm going to ask you once more. Where is it?" he said.

His wife was impelled to glance up at him. It seemed strange to her that her only vivid thought at the instant was that she had never seen his head look so small.

She made no reply. She supposed that her husband was about to burst out into savage invective; he was usually as wordy as a woman when he was angry.

He threw himself back in his chair; he opened his lips and made some inarticulate exclamation. Then he pulled himself up and said slowly:

"I guess I won't say nothin' to-night. I'll think it over. I shan't let it pass; no, I shan't let it pass."

No more conversation occurred between the two that evening.

Mrs. Droppers compelled herself to go on darning with an assumption of calmness. She wondered what kind of an appearance she presented. As for herself, she felt that she was half flame and half ice. But she sat still and finished mending the pair of stockings.

Mr. Droppers, at five minutes to 9, rose and locked the outer doors and wound the clock. A few minutes later his wife heard the bed creak heavily in their bedroom.

Presently she hurriedly prepared for bed. She was shocked and indignant to find her companion sleeping soundly. To her own hazy surprise she herself soon fell asleep. She did not waken until the clock was striking six. That was an hour later than she usually rose. Of course Mr. Droppers was up long ago. She turned her head. She dimly saw a head on the other pillow.

"Kellup," she said in surprise, "ain't you made a fire yet?"

"No, I ain't."

"Ain't you goin' to?"

"I can't 'thout gettin' up."

Hannah rose on her elbow.

"Ain't you goin' to get up?"

"Not till you've given me that money 'Squire Lorin' paid you."

"You goin' to lay abed till then?"

"I be."

Mrs. Droppers sank back again on her pillow. She was perfectly still for a time. Her first impulse was to go immediately and pour the sugar from the sugar box and bring the package to her husband. She combatted that impulse as being weak and slavish, and she had been weak and slavish all her life.

"I guess you'll get real tired," she remarked.

"Mebby I shall," came the response from the pillow.

Mrs. Droppers dressed more quickly than she had ever done. She was strengthened by her sleep and by a high resolve to be firm.

In a short time Mr. Droppers heard the clatter of the cook stove, and then, after a time, he smelled the odor of coffee and frying sausage; and probably Hannah was making johnny cake. A half hour passed, and the bedroom door opened to admit his wife. She brought a tin "wash dish" of water, a cake of yellow soap and a towel.

"I thought you'd want to wash 'fore I fetched in your breakfast," she said cheerfully.

The gentleman on the bed was astonished. He had heard his wife coming, and was positive that she was bringing the money. He had immediately decided that he would forgive her and be very pleasant. He thought also that he would get her some kind of a present; she'd been wanting a comb to put in the back of her hair when she went to sewing circle. Yes, he would get her one of those combs that looked like tortoise shell, but that were not tortoise shell.

"Yes," he said grimly. "I do want to wash 'fore I eat breakfast."

So he raised himself in the bed and applied soap and water to his face and hands.

After this process a bounteous meal on a waiter was put before him. It was his habit to be hungry for breakfast, and he was hungry now. As he broke his fast he heard his wife jingling the dishes in the kitchen. Presently he called for more coffee. It was immediately brought.

"Have I sweetened it all right?"

"It's right enough."

Very soon he was lying back in bed again with the blankets drawn up over him. The clock would soon strike eight. Mr. Droppers was astonished. Was his wife going to let him lie there?

When the tray was taken from him there was silence in the kitchen.

"Hannah!" he called; "Hannah!"

There was no answer. It seemed a long time before he heard some one come through the woodhouse. Then there was the sound of milk falling into tin pans.

"Hannah!" he shouted.

His wife appeared at the open bedroom. She had a handkerchief tied on her head and a small shawl pinned tightly over her shoulders. Her cheeks were red from exercise.

"What you be'n doin'?" he asked.

"Milkin'," she answered; "I used to milk for father sometimes, 'n' you know we never forgit how. That black 'n' white cow would keep liftin' her foot, but I got 'long well enough."

"Have you fed the pigs?"

"No; I'm going right back to do it. I know jest how you feed um. You see I'm later'n common this mornin', 'cause I overslept. I sh'll get up real early after this."

She turned away. Mr. Droppers kicked under the bedclothes.

"Oh, the devil!" he cried, his voice somewhat smothered by the blanket.

Mrs. Droppers hurried back to the door.

"What say?" she asked.

"Nothin'," her husband answered.

Mrs. Droppers returned quickly to the barn. She finished the rest of the chores without hurrying. She liked to be in the barn. The odor of hay and the breath of the cows and horse was somewhat comforting. She stood at the head of the Jersey cow and stroked its face, looking into its large, calm eyes. It was pleasant to lean against the horse when she carried the measure of grain to the manger.

"I'm glad Kellup knows I've got the money," she said aloud. "That's kind of a relief, anyway."

She sat down for a moment on the milking stool and leaned against the barn wall.

"It's my money. Still I'd be willin' to let Kellup have 'most all of it. But he'd want it all."

She shut her lips together. "I guess I'll see how long he'll stay abed."

She went into the house, carrying the eggs from the henhouse in her apron.

She peeped into the bedroom. Mr. Droppers seemed to be asleep.

When she had washed the dishes and swept the kitchen she thought she would run over to Mrs. Blair's. The need of speaking to some one was imperative. Before she had finished combing her hair she saw Mrs. Blair entering the yard.

Mrs. Droppers hurried to the back door. It was now 10 o'clock.

"Hush," said Mrs. Droppers, conducting her guest through the entry. "Don't speak loud. He ain't up. If twa'n't so cold I'd ask you to se' down in the parlor."

"Ain't up? Is Mr. Droppers sick?"

"No."

Mrs. Droppers gazed steadily into her neighbor's face. She did not smile; but her eyes had a curious glimmer in them.

"Why ain't he up, then, I should like to know?" asked Mrs. Blair in a hoarse, half tone.

"He's layin' abed 'cause I won't give him my money that 'Squire Lorin' paid me," answered the other.

"What?"

The reply was repeated solemnly.

Mrs. Blair stared an instant; then she bent forward and clasped her hands over her knees, beginning to laugh silently, swaying herself up and down as she did so. As soon as she could speak she made this announcement:

"Oh, I shall die!" Then she laughed again.

Mrs. Droppers's eyes continued to have the same glimmer in them, but she did not smile.

"I should let him lay," said Mrs. Blair when she was more calm. "I call that childish enough. He'll have the worst of it, I reckon. Hannah," gazing seriously, "be you goin' to be firm?"

"I guess," said Hannah, "that I've finally come to my firm streak. If Kellup wants to stay in bed I'm willin' to take care of him."

"If you want my son Willie to help 'bout chores I'll send him over," offered Mrs. Blair. "It happens, luckily, that the harvestin' 's all done. It's kind of a lull on the farm this time of year."

"I know it. I don't think I sh'll need Willie; if I do, I'll let you know. You must remember 't I was brought up on a farm, 'n' always used to help father."

The two women sat for awhile whispering to each other. When Mrs. Blair rose Mrs. Droppers begged her not to say anything yet. "Let the neighbors find out by degrees," she concluded.

"Oh, lor'," returned Mrs. Blair, "Mr. Droppers 'll be up 'fore night. He can't stan' it to stay there."

"I d' know; he's kinder stubborn."

"No matter if he is; he'll soon have enough of layin' still."

As Mrs. Blair walked through the yard she heard the voice of Mr. Droppers from the bedroom crying:

"Hannah! Hannah!"

She hesitated, a broad grin on her face. She wished to go back and hear what he was going to say. But perhaps it was as well that she did not, for this is what the gentleman said when his wife promptly appeared at his door:

"What you 'n' that cussed old woman whisperin' about?" he asked.

"She ain't quite so old's you are, Kellup," was the reply.

"No matter," furiously; "she's a cussed old woman, any way. What was she sayin'?"

"She told me that her Willie might help me do the chores."

Mr. Droppers snarled.

"And I said," went on his wife, "that I could git along first-rate myself."

"Oh, you did, did you?"

"Yes. Do you want nothin', Kellup? If you don't I guess I'll make some of them pancakes 't you like so well."

"No, I don't want nothin'. You needn't stan' there any longer."

Mrs. Droppers made the pancakes. In the next few days she cooked many things that her husband particularly liked; and he ate them, for his appetite continued good.

One or two neighbors dropped in; and when they found Caleb abed they spread the news. Callers became frequent. The people of the hamlet talked over the case. Some of them advised the man and some the wife.

As for Mrs. Droppers she did not mention to any one save to Mrs. Blair the cause of the bed-ridden state of Mr. Droppers.

"I should think such an active man's your husband's always been 'd miss his exercise terribly," remarked Deacon Ricker.

"I guess," said Hannah, "that he gits more exercise than he's ever had. He ain't still a minute, 'cept when he's asleep. He kicks awful."

"What 'pear to be his sym'toms?" was the next inquiry.

"You better ask him; he c'n tell you better 'n I can."

A week had gone by. Mrs. Droppers did the barn work and the housework, and found time to cater to her husband's palate. Things had now begun to go on as if they had always been going on that way—with the head of the house lying in bed, and the woman attending to indoor and outdoor affairs. Mrs. Blair saw her neighbor every day, and every day she said:

"Hannah, be firm. Don't you begin nothin' you can't carry out."

On the morning of the eighth day the patient's appetite failed him. He desired neither sausage, nor ham, nor souse.

When his wife had taken away the tray he called her back.

"I wish you'd se' down a minute," he said; "you look 's if you'd dart off 'fore I could speak."

Mrs. Droppers sat down.

"How you gittin' along with the work?"

"First rate."

Mr. Droppers appeared to hesitate. Then he asked with a slight timidity of manner:

"Do you feel jest the same 'bout givin' me that money?"

"Yes. You ain't treated me right."

Hannah grew pale. She tried to keep the tremor from her voice.

"Hannah"—Mr. Droppers paused; then he began again. "Hannah, I've be'n thinkin' that mebbe I ain't took jest the best course. You were always a good wife—'n' savin'. P'raps we can—p'raps we can kinder compermise some way."

"How?"

Hannah's lips quivered.

"Mebbe you'll let me have part of that money. If you will, I'll git right up off this bed this minute."

Something in his wife's face made Mr. Droppers suddenly put his hand out toward her.

She seized the hand in a strong grip.

"You sh'll have half of it," she said tremulously, "but I do think, Kellup, that it belongs to me 'much 's it does to you."

"So do I—so do I," was the magnanimous response.

So Mr. Droppers rose from his bed and went about his business.

If you should dine with the Droppers I think the table would be decorated with a dinner set of flowing blue.

Mrs. Blair always says that "that layin' abed done Mr. Droppers a lot of good."

—Maria Louise Pool, in New York Tribune.

OUT OF THE ORDINARY.

The singular punishment for bigamy in Hungary is to compel the man to live with both wives in one house.

The people of the United States read and support as many newspapers as England, France and Germany combined.

Charleston, S. C., has a commission on shade trees, and in four years it has planted more than 1,000 trees in the city streets.

Fourteen ballooniists were either killed or badly injured during 1896. Two of these unfortunates were women and both were killed.

Old glass bottles, which are more or less useless, are now ground up and employed as a substitute for sand in the preparation of mortar.

Eighteen and one-half hands is the height of a horse owned at Plymouth, Neb. The horse is said to be the largest west of the Mississippi river.

A gentleman who would not give his name paid the postage on all the Christmas packages which were held at the Boston postoffice because of insufficient postage.

When a person steps on a wire doormat which has been placed before the entrance of the new city market of Springfield, Mass., the doors are opened by electricity.

There are still living in Connecticut twenty-four daughters of soldiers who fought in the Revolutionary war. They are enough to make a small society all by themselves.

In Greece teachers contribute 5 per cent. on the salaries, and the State finds the remainder in order to superannuate teachers after twenty-one years of service, regardless of age.

The Congregational Church Building Society has no debt and has a building loan fund of $315,571.07. During the past year 119 churches have received aid from this fund.

The Roentgen rays have a new sphere of usefulness. By their aid chalk can be detected in flour, brickdust in Cayenne pepper, sand in spices and many other similar sophistications.

The wife of a California millionaire has taken five little girls to rear as her own children, believing it to be her bounden duty to open her home to those in need of a mother's care.

The introduction of the new quick-firing artillery in the French army will cost $50,000,000. The new Canet gun delivers five 140-pound shells at a range of four and a half miles in one minute.

An agent of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals daily parades the streets of Boston this winter bearing aloft the appropriate banner: "Please Blanket Your Horses."

Walter Nichols, twelve years old, has been sentenced to nine years' imprisonment at Suffolk, Va., on two charges of grand larceny, one of safe-breaking and the other for robbing a jewelry store.

The island of Pueto Rico is more populous than Cuba, quite as rich and productive and almost as disaffected. The Spanish government has been obliged to increase its forces there, for fear of an outbreak.

The biggest and most successful hog sale ever attempted in the United States was held on the Illinois State fair grounds at Springfield, Jan. 15. Forty-four Poland China hogs brought the high average of $251.50 each.

Fair-haired people are becoming less numerous than formerly. The ancient Hebrews were a fair-haired race; now they are, with few exceptions, dark. So it is in a lesser degree with the Irish, among whom 150 years ago a dark-haired person was almost unknown.

The National League of Commission Merchants, in session at Boston, adopted the following standard for apple barrels: "Seventeen and one-half inches in diameter at the head and twenty-eight and one-half inches in the length of stave, with the regular bulge in the center."

The majority