classical or technical; and in the settlement of that doubt lay the secret of the past of the one man in Plattville so unhappy as to possess a past. From that settlement and his own preceding action resulted his downfall, his disgrace with his wife's relatives, the loss of his wife, the rage, surprise and anguish of her sister Martha and Martha's husband, Henry Sherwood, and the separation from his little daughter, which was by far to him the hardest to bear. For Fisbee, in his own way, and without consulting anybody—it never occurred to him, and he was supposed often to forget that he had a wife and child—had informally turned over to the university all the money which the banks had kindly taken care of, and had given it to equip an expedition which never expedited. A new president of the institution was installed; he talked to the trustees; they met and elected to boome modern and practical and technical; they abolished the course in fine arts, which abolished Fisbee's connection with them, and they then employed his money to erect a building for the mechanical engineering department. Fisbee was left with nothing. His wife and her kinsfolk exhibited no brilliancy in holding a totally irresponsible man down to responsibilities, and they made a tragedy of a not surprising fiasco. Mrs. Fisbee had lived in her ambitions, and she died of heartbreak over the discovery of what manner of man she had married. But before she died she wisely provided for her daughter.

Fisbee told Parker the story after his own queer fashion.

"You see, Mr. Parker," he said, as they sat together in the dust and litter of the Herald office on Sunday afternoon, "you see, I admit that my sister-in-law has always withheld her approbation from me, and possibly her disapproval is well founded—I shall say probably. My wife had also a considerable sum, and this she turned over to me at the time of our marriage, though I had no wish regarding it one way or the other. When I gave my money to the university with which I had the honor to be connected I added to it the fund I had received from her, as I was the recipient of a comfortable salary as a lecturer in the institution and had no fear of not living well, and I was greatly interested in providing that the expedition should be perfectly equipped. Expeditions of the magnitude of that which I had planned are expensive, I should perhaps inform you, and this one was to carry on investigations regarding several important points very elaborately; and I am still convinced it would have settled conclusively many vital questions concerning the derivation of the Babylonian column, as whether the lotus column may be without prejudice said to—but at the present moment I will not enter into that. I fear I had no great experience in money matters, for the transaction had been almost entirely verbal, and there was nothing to bind the trustees to carry out my plans for the expedition. They were very sympathetic, but what could they do? they begged leave to inquire. Such an institution cannot give back money once donated, and it was clearly out of character for a school of technology and engineering to send savants to investigate the lotus column."

"I see," Mr. Parker observed, genially. He listened with the most ingratiating attention, knowing that he had a rich sensation to set before Plattville as a dish before a King, for Fisbee's was no confidential communication. The old man might have told a part of his history long ago, but it had never occurred to him to talk about his affairs—things had a habit of not occurring to Fisbee—and the efforts of the gossips to draw him out always passed over his serene and absent head.

"It was a blow to my wife," the old man continued, sadly, "and I cannot deny that her reproaches were as vehement as her disappointment was sincere." He hurried over this portion of his narrative with a vaguely troubled look, but the intelligent Parker read poor Mrs. Fisbee's state of mind between the sentences. "She never seemed to regard me in the same light again," the archaeologist went on. "She did not conceal from me that she was surprised and that she could not look upon me as a practical man; indeed, I may say she appeared to regard me with marked antipathy. She sent for her sister and begged her to take our daughter and keep her from me, as she did not consider me practical enough—I will substitute for her more embittered expressions—to provide for a child and instruct it in the world's ways. My sister-in-law, who was childless, consented to adopt the little one, on the conditions that I renounced all claim, and that the child legally assumed her name and should be in all respects as her own daughter, and that I consented to see her but once a year, in Rouen, at my brother-in-law's home.

"I should have refused, but I—my wife—that is—she was—very pressing—in her last hours, and they all seemed to feel that I ought to make amends—all except the little girl herself, I should say, for she possessed, even as an infant, an exceptional affection for her father. I had nothing; my salary was gone, and I was discomfited by the combined actions of the trustees and my relatives, so—I—I gave her up to them, and my wife passed away in a more cheerful frame of mind, I think. That is about all. One of the instructors obtained the position here for me, which I—I finally—lost, and I went to see the little girl every New Year's day. This year she declared her intention of visiting me, but she was persuaded by friends who were conversant with the circumstances to stay with them, where I could be with her almost as much as at my apartment at Mr. Tibbs'. She had long since declared her intention of some day returning to live with me, and when she came she was strenuous in insisting that the day had come." The old man's voice broke suddenly as he observed: "She has—a very—beautiful—character, Mr. Parker."

The foreman nodded with warm confirmation. "I believe you, sir. Yes, sir, I saw her, and I guess she looks it. You take that kind of a lady usually, and catch her in a crowd like the one showday, and she can't help doing the Grand Duchess, giving the tenants a treat—but not her; she didn't seem to separate herself from 'em some way."

"She is a fine lady," said the other simply. "I did not accept her renunciation, though I acknowledge I forbade it with a very poignant envy. I could not be the cause of her giving up for my sake her state of ease and luxury—for my relatives are more than well to do, and they made it plain she must choose between them and me, with the design, I think, of making it more difficult to choose me. And, also, it seemed to me, as it did to her, that she owed them nearly everything, but she declared I had lived alone so long that she owed me everything also. She is a—beautiful—character, Mr. Parker."

"Well," said Parker, after a pause, "the town will be upside down over this; and folks will be mighty glad to have it explained about your being out there so much, and at the deepo, and all this and that. Everybody in the place has been wondering what in—that is—" he finished in some confusion—"that is—what I started to say was that it won't be so bad as it might be, having a lady in the office here. I don't cuss to speak of, and Ross can lay off on his till the boss comes back. Besides it's our only chance. If she can't make the Herald hum, we go to the wall."

The old man did not seem to hear him. "I forbade the renunciation she wished to make for my sake," he said gently, "but I accept it now for the sake of our stricken friend—for Mr. Harkless."

"And for the Carlow Herald," completed the foreman.

The morning following that upon which this conversation took place the two gentlemen stood together on the station platform awaiting the arrival of the express from Rouen. It was a wet, gray day; the wide country lay dripping under formless wraps of thin mist, and a warm, drizzling rain blackened the weather-beaten shingles of the station, made clear-reflecting puddles of the unevenly worn planks of the platform and dampened the packing cases that never went anywhere too thoroughly for occupation by the station lounger, and ran in a little crystal stream off Fisbee's brown cotton umbrella and down Mr. Parker's back. The bus driver, Mr. Bennett, the proprietor of two attendant "cut-unders," and three or four other worthies whom business or the lack of it called to that locality, availed themselves of the shelter of the waiting-room, but the gentlemen of the Herald were too agitated to be confined save by the limits of the horizon. They had reached the station half an hour before train time, and consumed the interval in pacing the platform under the cotton umbrella, addressing each other only in monosyllables. Those in the waiting-room gossiped eagerly, and for the thousandth time about the late events and the tremendous news concerning Fisbee. Judd Bennett looked out through the rainy doorway at the latter with reverence and a fine pride of townsmanship, declaring it to be his belief that Fisbee and Parker were waiting for her at the present moment. It was a lady, and a bird of a lady, too, else why should Cale Parker be wearing a coat and be otherwise dooded and fixed up beyond any wedding? Judd and his friends were somewhat excited over Parker. Fisbee was clad in his best shabby black, which lent an air of state to the occasion, but Mr. Parker—Caleb Parker, whose heart during his five years of residence in Plattville had been steel-proof against all the feminine blandishments of the town, whose long, lank face had shown beneath as long and lanker locks of proverbially uncombed hair; he who had for weeks conspicuously affected a single, string-patched suspender, who never, even upon the Sabbath day, wore a collar or blacked his shoes—what esthetic leaven had entered his soul that he donned not a coat alone, but also a waistcoat with checks?—and, more than that, a gleaming celluloid collar?—and, more than that, a brilliant blue tie? What had this iron youth to do with a rising excitement at train time and brilliant blue ties?

Also, it might have been inquired if this parade of fashion had no connection with the simultaneous action of Mr. Ross Schofield, for Ross was at this hour engaged in decorating the battered chairs in the Herald editorial-room with blue satin ribbon, the purchase of which at the Dry Goods Emporium had been directed by a sudden inspiration of his superior of the composing force. It was Ross' intention to garnish each chair with an elaborately tied bow, but as he was no sailor and understood only the intricacies of a hard knot, he confined himself to that species of ornamentation, leaving, however, very long ends of ribbon hanging down after the manner of the pendants of rosettes.

It scarcely needs the statement that his labors were in honor of the new editor-in-chief of the Carlow Herald. The advent and the purposes of this personage were, as yet, known certainly to only those of the Herald and to the Briscoes. It had been arranged, however, that Minnie and her father were not to come to the station, for the journalistic crisis was immoderately pressing; the Herald was to appear on the morrow, and the new editor wished to plunge directly, and without the briefest distraction, into the paper's difficulties, now accumulated into a veritable sea of troubles. The editor was to be delivered to the Briscoes at eventide and returned by them again at dewy morn; and this was to be the daily programme. It had been further—and most earnestly—stipulated that when the wounded proprietor of the ailing journal should be informed of the addition to his forces he was not to know, or to have the slenderest hint of, the sex or identity of the person in charge during his absence. It was inevitable that Plattville (already gaping to the uttermost) would buzz voluminously over it before night, but Judge Briscoe volunteered to prevent the buzz from reaching Rouen. He undertook to interview whatever citizens should visit Harkless, or write to him—when his illness permitted visits and letters—and forewarn them of the incumbent's desires. To-day, the Judge stayed at home with his daughter, who trilled about the house for happiness, and, in their place, the Herald deputation of two had repaired to the station to act as a reception committee.

Far away the whistle of the express was heard, muffled to sweetness in the damp, and the drivers, whip in hand, came out upon the platform, and the loafers issued, also, to stand under the eaves and lean their backs against the drier boards, preparing to eye the travelers with languid raillery.

Mr. Parker, very nervous himself, felt the old man's elbow trembling against his own as the great engine, reeking in the mist and sending great clouds of white vapor up to the sky, rushed by them and came to a standstill beyond the platform.

Fisbee and the foreman made haste to the nearest vestibule and were gazing blankly at its barred approaches when they heard a tremulous laugh behind them and an exclamation.

"Upstairs and downstairs and in my lady's chamber! Just behind you, dear."

Turning quickly Parker beheld a blushing and smiling little vision, a vision with light-brown hair, a vision enveloped in a light-brown raincloak and with brown gloves, from which the handles of a big brown traveling bag were let fall, as the vision disappeared under the cotton umbrella, while the smitten Judd Bennett reeled gasping against the station.

"Dearest," the girl cried to the old man, "you were looking for me between the devil and deep sea—the parlor car and the smoker. I've given up cigars and I've begun to study economy, so I didn't come on either."

There was but this one passenger for Plattville; two enormous trunks thundered out of the baggage-car on the truck, and it was the work of no more than a minute for Judd to hale them to the top of the omnibus (he well wished to wear them next his heart, but their dimensions forbade the thought), and immediately he cracked his whip and drove off furiously through the mud to deposit his freight at the Briscoes'. Parker, Mr. Fisbee, and the new editor-in-chief set forth, directly after, in one of the waiting cut-unders, the foreman in front with the driver, and holding the big brown bag on his knees in much the same manner he would have held an alien, yet respected, infant.

CHAPTER XIV.

The drizzle and mist blew in under the top of the cut-under as they drove rapidly into town, and bright little drops sparkled on the fair hair above the new editor's forehead and on the long lashes above the new editor's cheeks.

She shook these transient gems off lightly, as she paused in the doorway of the office at the top of the rickety stairway. Mr. Schofield had just added the last touch to his decorations and managed to slide into his coat as the party came up the stairs, and now, perspiring, proud, embarrassed, he assumed an attitude at once deprecatory of his endeavors and pointedly expectant of commendation for the results. (He was a modest youth and a conscious; after his first sight of her, as she stood in the doorway, it was several days before he could lift his distressed eyes under her glance, or, indeed, dare to avail himself of more than a hasty and fluttering stare at her when her back was turned.) As she entered the room, he sidled along the wall and laughed sheepishly at nothing.

Every chair in the room was ornamented with one of his blue rosettes, tied carefully (and firmly) to the middle slat of each chair-back. There had been several yards of ribbon left over, and there was a hard knot of glossy satin on each of the ink stands and on the door knobs; a blue band, passing around the stovepipe, imparted an antique rakishness suggestive of the charioteer; and a number of streamers, suspended from a hook in the ceiling, encouraged a supposition that the employes of the Herald contemplated the intricate festivities of May Day. It needed no genius to infer that these garnitures had not embellished the editorial chamber during Mr. Harkless' activity, but, on the contrary, had been put in place that very morning. Mr. Fisbee had not known of the decorations, and, as his glance fell upon them, a faint look of pain passed over his brow; but the girl examined the room with a dancing eye, and there were both tears and laughter in her heart.

"How beautiful!" she cried. "How beautiful!" She crossed the room and gave her hand to Ross. "It is Mr. Schofield, isn't it? The ribbons are delightful. I didn't know Mr. Harkless' room was so pretty."

Ross looked out of the window and laughed as he took her hand (which he shook with a long up and down motion), but he was set at better ease by her apparent unrecognition of the fact that the decorations were for her. "Oh, it ain't much I reckon," he replied, and continued to look out of the window and laugh.

She went to the desk and removed her gloves and laid her rain cloak over a chair near by. "Is this Mr. Harkless' chair?" she asked, and, Fisbee answering that it was, she looked gravely at it for a moment, passed her hand gently over the back of it, and then, throwing the rain cloak over another chair, said cheerily:

"Do you know, I think the first thing for us to do will be to dust everything very carefully."

"You remember I was confident she would know precisely where to begin?" was Fisbee's earnest whisper in the willing ear of the long foreman. "Not an instant's indecision, was there?"

"No, siree!" replied the other; and, as he went down to the pressroom to hunt for a feather duster which he thought might be found there, he collared Bud Tipworthy, who, not admitted to the conclave of his superiors, was whistling on the rainy stairway. "You hustle and find that dust brush we used to have, Bud," said Parker. And presently, as they rummaged in the nooks and crannies about the machinery, he melted to his small assistant. "The paper is saved, Buddie—saved by an angel in light brown. You can tell it by the look of her."

"Gee!" said Bud.

Mr. Schofield had come, blushing, to join them. "Say, Cale, did you notice the color of her eyes?"

"Yes; they're gray."

"I thought so, too, show day, and at Kedge Halloway's lecture; but, say, Cale, they're kind of changeable. When she come upstairs with you and Fisbee, they were jest as blue!—near matched the color of our ribbons."

"Gee!" repeated Mr. Tipworthy.

When the editorial chamber had been made so neat that it almost glowed—though it could never be expected to shine as did Fisbee and Caleb Parker and Ross Schofield that morning—the editor took her seat at the desk and looked over the few items the gentlemen had already compiled for her perusal. Mr. Parker explained many technicalities peculiar to the Carlow Herald, translated some phrases of the printing-room, and enabled her to grasp the amount needed to fill the morrow's issue.

When Parker finished the three incompetents sat watching the little figure with the expression of hopeful and trusting terriers. She knit her brows for a second—but she did not betray an instant's indecision.

"I think we should have regular market reports," she announced, thoughtfully. "I am sure Mr. Harkless would approve. Don't you think he would?" She turned to Parker.

"Market reports!" Mr. Fisbee exclaimed. "I should never have thought of market reports, nor, do I imagine, would either of my—my associates. A woman to conceive the idea of market reports!"

The editor blushed. "Why, who would, dear, if not a woman, or a speculator, and I'm not a speculator, and neither are you, and that's the reason you didn't think of them. So, Mr. Parker, as there is so much pressure, and if you don't mind continuing to act as reporter as well as composer until after to-morrow, and if it isn't too wet—you must take an umbrella—would it be too much bother if you went around to all the shops—stores, I mean—to all the grocers', and the butchers', and that leather place we passed, the tannery?—and if there's one of those places where they bring cows, would it be too much to ask you to stop there?—and at the flour mill, if it isn't too far?—and at the dry goods store? And you must take a blank-book and a sharpened pencil. And will you price everything, please, and jot down how much things are?"

Orders received, the impetuous Parker was departing on the instant, when she stopped him with a little cry: "But you haven't any umbrella!" And she forced her own, a slender wand, upon him; it bore a cunningly wrought handle and its fabric was of glistening silk. The foreman, unable to decline it, thanked her awkwardly, and, as she turned to speak to Fisbee, bolted out of the door and ran down the steps without unfolding the umbrella; and as he made for Mr. Martin's emporium, he buttoned it securely under his long "Prince Albert," determined that not a drop of water should touch and ruin so delicate a thing. Thus he carried it, triumphantly dry, through the course of his reportings of that day.

When he had gone the editor laid her hand on Fisbee's arm. "Dear," she said, "do you think you would take cold if you went over to the hotel and made a note of the arrivals for the last week—and the departures, too? I noticed that Mr. Harkless always filled two or three—sticks, isn't it?—with them and things about them, and somehow it 'read' very nicely. You must ask the landlord all about them, and, if there aren't any, we can take up the same amount of space lamenting the dull times, just as he used to. You see I've read the Herald faithfully; isn't it a good thing I always subscribed for it?" She patted Fisbee's cheek and laughed gayly into his mild, vague old eyes.

"It won't be this scramble to 'fill up' much longer. I have plans, gentlemen," she cried, "and before long we will print news. And we must buy 'plate matter' instead of 'patent insides'; and I had a talk with the Associated Press people in Rouen—but that's for after a while. And I went to the hospital this morning before I left. They wouldn't let me see him again, but they told me all about him, and he's better; and I got Tom to go to the jail—he was so mystified, he doesn't know what I wanted it for—and he saw some of those beasts, and I can do a column of description besides an editorial about them, and I will be fierce enough to suit Carlow, you may believe that. And I've been talking to Senator Burns—that is, listening to Senator Burns, which is much stupider—and I think I can do an article on national politics. I'm not very well up on local issues yet, but I——" She broke off suddenly. "There! I think we can get out to-morrow's number without any trouble. By the time you get back from the hotel, father, I'll have half my stuff written—'written up,' I mean. Take your big umbrella and go, dear, and please ask at the express office if my typewriter has come."

She laughed again with sheer delight, like a child, and ran to a corner and got the cotton umbrella and placed it in the old man's hand. As he reached the door she called after him: "Wait!" and went to him and knelt before him, and with the humblest, proudest grace in the world turned up his trousers to keep them from the mud. Ross Schofield had never considered Mr. Fisbee a particularly sacred sort of person, but he did from that moment. The old man made some timid protest at his daughter's action, but she answered: "The great ladies used to buckle the Chevalier Bayard's spurs for him, and you're a great deal nicer than the Chev—you haven't any rubbers! I don't believe any of you have any rubbers!" And not until both Fisbee and Mr. Schofield had promised to purchase overshoes at once, and in the meantime not to step in any puddles, would she let her father depart upon his errand. He crossed the square with the strangest, jauntiest step ever seen in Plattville. Solomon Tibbs had a warm argument with Miss Selina as to his identity, Miss Selina maintaining that the figure under the big umbrella—only the legs and coattails were visible to them—was that of a stranger, probably an Englishman.

In the Herald office the editor turned, smiling, to the paper's remaining vassal. "Mr. Schofield, I heard some talk in Rouen of an oil company that had been formed to prospect for kerosene in Carlow County. Do you know anything about it?"

Ross, surfeited with honor, terror, and possessed by a sweet distress at finding himself tete-a-tete with the lady, looked at the wall and replied:

"Oh, it's that Eph Watts' foolishness."

"Do you know if they have begun to dig for it yet?"

"Ma'am?" said Ross.

"Have they begun the diggings yet?"

"No, ma'am, I think not. They've got a contrapshun fixed up about three miles south. I don't reckon they've begun yet, hardly; they're gittin' the machinery in place. I heard Eph say they'd begin to bore—dig, I mean, ma'am, I meant to say dig——" He stopped, utterly confused and unhappy; and she understood his manly purpose, and knew him for a gentleman whom she liked.

"You mustn't be too much surprised," she said; "but in spite of my ignorance about such things, I mean to devote a good deal of space to the oil company; it may come to be of great importance to Carlow. We won't go into it in to-morrow's paper, beyond an item or so; but do you think you could possibly find Mr. Watts and ask him for some information as to their progress, and if it would be too much trouble for him to call here some time to-morrow afternoon, or the day after? I want him to give me an interview if he will. Tell him, please, he will very greatly oblige us."

"Oh, he'll come all right," answered her companion, quickly. "I'll take Tibbs' buggy and go down right off. Eph won't lose no time gittin' here!" And with this encouraging assurance he was flying forth when he, like others, was detained by her solicitous care. She was a born mother. He protested that in the buggy he would be perfectly sheltered; besides, there wasn't another umbrella about the place; he liked to get wet anyway; had always loved rain. The end of it was that he went away in a sort of tremor, wearing her rain cloak over his shoulders, which garment, as it covered its owner completely when she wore it, hung almost to his knees. He darted around a corner, and there, breathing deeply, tenderly removed it; then, borrowing paper and cord at a neighboring store, wrapped it neatly and stole back to the printing office on the ground floor of the Herald building and left the package in charge of Bud Tipworthy, mysteriously charging to care for it as for his own life and not to open it, but if the lady so much as set one foot out of doors before his return to hand it to her with the message, "He borrowed another off J. Hanks."

Left alone, the lady went to the desk and stood for a time looking gravely at Harkless' chair. She touched it gently, as she had touched it once before that morning, and then she spoke to it as if he were sitting there and as she would have spoken had he been sitting there.

"You didn't want gratitude, did you?" she whispered, with sad lips.

Soon she smiled at the blue ribbons, patted the chair gayly on the back, and, seizing upon pencil and pad, dashed into her work with rare energy. She bent low over the desk, her pencil moving rapidly, and, except for a momentary interruption from Mr. Tipworthy, she seemed not to pause for breath; certainly her pencil did not. She had covered many sheets when her father returned; and, as he came in softly, not to disturb her, she was so deeply engrossed she did not hear him; nor did she look up when Parker entered, but pursued the formulation of her fast-flying ideas with the same single purpose and abandon; so the two men sat and waited while their chieftainess wrote absorbedly. At last she glanced up and made a little startled exclamation at seeing them there, and then gave them cheery greeting. Each placed several scribbled sheets before her, and she, having first assured herself that Fisbee had bought his overshoes, and having expressed a fear that Mr. Parker had found her umbrella too small, as he looked damp (and indeed he was damp), cried praises on their notes and offered the reporters great applause.

"It is all so splendid!" she cried. "How could you do it so quickly? And in the rain, too! This is exactly what we need. I've done most of the things I mentioned, I think, and made a draught of some plans for hereafter. And about that man's coming out for Congress, I must tell you it is my greatest hope that he will. We can let it go until he does, and then— But doesn't it seem to you that it would be a good notion for the Herald to have a woman's page—'For Feminine Readers,' or, 'Of Interest to Women'—once a week?"

"A woman's page!" exclaimed Fisbee. "I could never have thought of that, could you, Mr. Parker?"

"And now," she continued, "I think that when I've gone over what I've written and beat it into better shape I shall be ready for something to eat. Isn't it almost time for luncheon?"

This simple, and surely natural, inquiry had a singular devastating effect upon her hearers. They looked upon each other with fallen jaws and complete stupefaction. The old man began to grow pale, and Parker glared about him with a wild eye. Fortunately, the editor was too busy at her work to notice their agitation; she applied herself to making alterations here and there, sometimes frowningly crossing out whole lines and even paragraphs, sometimes smiling and beaming at the writing; and, as she bent earnestly over the paper, against the darkness of the rainy day, the glamour about her fair hair was like a light in the room. To the minds of her two companions, this luster was a gentle but unbearable accusation; and each dreaded the moment when her work should be finished, with a great dread. There was a small "store room" adjoining the office, and presently Mr. Parker, sweating at the brow, walked in there. The old man gave him a look of despairing reproach, but in a moment the foreman's voice was heard: "Oh, Mr. Fisbee, can you step here a second?"

"Yes, indeed!" was Fisbee's reply; and he fled guiltily into the "store room," and Parker closed the door. They stood knee-deep in the clutter and lumber, facing each other abjectly.

"Well, we're both done, anyway, Mr. Fisbee," remarked the foreman.

"Indubitably, Mr. Parker," the old man answered; "it is too true."

"Never to think a blame thing about dinner for her!" Parker continued, remorsefully. "And her a lady that can turn off copy like a rotary snowplow in a Dakota blizzard! Did you see the sheets she's piled up on that desk?"

"There is no cafe—nothing—in Plattville, that could prepare food worthy of her," groaned Fisbee. "Nothing!"

"And we never thought of it. Never made a single arrangement. Never struck us she didn't live on keeping us dry and being good, I guess."

"How can I go in there and tell her that?"

"Lord!"

"She cannot go to the hotel"——

"Well, I guess not! It ain't fit for her. Lum's table is hard enough on a strong man. Landis doesn't know a good cake from a Fiji missionary pudding. I don't expect pie is much her style, and, besides, the Palace Hotel pies—well!—the boss was a mighty uncomplaining man, but I used to notice his articles on field drainage got kind of sour and low-spirited when they'd been having more than the regular allowance of pie for dinner. She can't go there, anyway; it's no use; it's after 2 o'clock, and the dining-room shuts off at 1. I wonder what kind of cake she likes best."

"I don't know," said the perplexed Fisbee. "If we ask her——"

"If we could sort of get it out of her diplomatically we could telegraph to Rouen for a good one."

"Ha!" said the other, brightening up. "You try it, Mr. Parker. I fear I have not much skill in diplomacy, but if you——"

The compositor's mouth drooped at the corners, and he interrupted gloomily: "But it wouldn't get here till to-morrow."

"True; it would not."

They fell into a despondent reverie, with their chins on their bosoms. There came a cheerful voice from the next room, but to them it brought no cheer; in their ears it sounded weak from the need of food and taint with piteous reproach.

"Father, aren't you coming to have luncheon with me?"

"Mr. Parker, what are we to do?" whispered the old man, hoarsely.

"Is it too far to take her to Briscoes'?"

"In the rain?"

"Take her with you to Tibbs'."

"Their noon meal is long since over; and their larder is not—is not—extensive."

"Father!" called the girl. She was stirring; they could hear her moving about the room.

"You've got to go in and tell her," said the foreman, desperately, and together they stumbled into the room. A small table at one end of it was laid with a snowy cloth and there was a fragrance of tea, and amid various dainties one caught a glimpse of cold chicken and lettuce leaves. Fisbee stopped, dumfounded, but the foreman, after stammeringly declining an invitation to partake, alleging that his own meal awaited, sped down to the printing-room and seized upon Bud Tipworthy with a heavy hand.

"Where did all that come from, up there?"

"Leave go me! What! 'all that'?"

"All that tea and chicken and salad and wafers—all kinds of things; sardines, for all I know!"

"They come in Briscoes' buckboard while you was gone. Briscoes sent 'em in a basket; I took 'em up and she set the basket under the table. You'd seen it if you'd a looked. Quit that!" And it was unjust to cuff the perfectly innocent and mystified Bud, and worse not to tell him what the punishment was for.

Before the day was over system had been introduced, and the Herald was running on it; and all that warm, rainy afternoon the editor and Fisbee worked in the editorial rooms, Parker and Bud and Mr. Schofield (after his return with the items and a courteous message from Ephraim Watts) bent over the forms downstairs, and Uncle Xenophon was cleaning the storeroom and scrubbing the floor.

An extraordinary number of errands took the various members of the printing force up to see the editor-in-chief, literally to see the editor-in-chief; it was hard to believe that the presence had not flown—hard to keep believing, without the repeated testimony of sight, that the dingy room upstairs was actually the setting for their jewel, and a jewel they swore she was. The printers came down chuckling and gurgling after each interview; it was partly the thought that she belonged to the Herald, their paper. Once Ross, as he cut down one of the temporarily distended advertisements, looked up and caught the foreman digging to himself.

"What in the name of common sense you laughin' at, Cale?" he asked.

"What are you laughing at?" rejoined the other.

"I dunno!"

The day wore on, wet and dreary outside, but all within the Herald bosom was snug and busy and murmurous with the healthy thrum of life and prosperity renewed. Toward 6 o'clock, system accomplished, the new guiding spirit was deliberating on a policy as Harkless would conceive a policy, were he there, when Minnie Briscoe ran joyously up the stairs, plunged into the room, waterproofed and radiant, and caught her friend in her eager arms and put an end to policy for that day.

But policy and labor did not end at twilight every day; there were evenings, as in the time of Harkless, when lamps shone from the upper windows of the Herald building. For the little editor worked hard, and sometimes she worked late; she always worked early. She made some mistakes at first and one or two blunders which she took more seriously than any one else did. But she found a remedy for all such results of her inexperience and she developed experience. She set at her task with the energy of her youthfulness and no limit to her ambition, and she felt that Harkless had prepared the way for a wide expansion of the paper's interests; wider than he knew. She had a belief that there were possibilities for a country newspaper, and she brought a fresh point of view to operate in a situation where Harkless had fallen, perhaps, too much in the rut; and she watched every chance with a keen eye and looked ahead of her with clear foresight. What she wanted and yearned for and dreaded was the time when a copy of the new Herald should be placed in the trembling hands of the man who lay in the Rouen hospital. Then, she felt, if he, unaware of her identity, should place everything in her hands unreservedly, that would be a tribute to her work—and how hard she would labor to deserve it! After a time she began to realize that, as his representative and the editor of the Herald she had become a factor in district politics. It took her breath—but with a gasp of delight, for there was something she wanted to do.

Above all, she brought a light heart to her work. One evening in the latter part of that first week of the new regime, Parker perceived Bud Tipworthy standing in the doorway of the printing-room, beckoning him silently to come without.

"What's the matter, Buddie?"

"Listen. She's singin' over her work."

Parker stepped outside. On the pavement people had stopped to listen; they stood in the shadow, looking up with parted lips at the open, lighted windows, whence came a clear, soft, reaching voice, lifted in song; now it swelled louder, unconsciously; now its volume was more slender and it melted liquidly into the night; again it trembled and rose and dwelt in the ear, strong and pure; and, hearing it, you sighed with unknown longings. It was the "Angels' Serenade."

Bud Tipworthy's sister, Cynthia, was with him, and Parker saw that she turned from the window and that she was crying, quietly; she put her hand on the boy's shoulder and patted it with a forlorn gesture which, to the foreman's eye, was as graceful as it was sad. He moved closer to Bud and his big hand fell on Cynthia's brother's other shoulder, as he realized that red hair could look pretty sometimes; and he wondered why the editor's singing made Cynthia cry; and at the same time he decided to be mighty good to Bud henceforth. The spell of night and song was on him; that and something more, for it is a strange, inexplicable fact that the most practical chief ever known to the Herald had a singularly sentimental influence over her subordinates from the moment of her arrival. Under Harkless' domination there had been no more steadfast bachelors in Carlow than Ross Schofield and Caleb Parker, and, like timorous youths in a graveyard, daring and mocking the ghosts in order to assuage their own fears, they had so jibed and jeered at the married state that there was talk of urging the minister to preach at them; but now let it be recorded that at the moment Caleb laid his hand on Bud's other shoulder his associate, Mr. Schofield, was enjoying a walk in the far end of town with a widow, and it is not to be doubted that Mr. Tipworthy's heart also was no longer in his possession, though, as it was after 8 o'clock, the damsel of his desire had probably long since retired to her couch.

For some faint light on the cause of these spells we must turn to a comment made by the invaluable Mr. Martin some time afterward. Referring to the lady to whose voice he was now listening in silence (which shows how great the enthralling of her voice was), he said: "When you saw her, or heard her, or managed to be around anywhere she was, why, if you couldn't git up no hope of marryin' her you wanted to marry somebody."

Mr. Lige Willetts, riding by, drew rein in front of the lighted windows and listened with the others. Presently he leaned from his horse and whispered to a man near him:

"I know that song."

"Do you?" whispered the other.

"Yes; he and I heard her sing it the night he was shot."

"So!"

"Yes, sir. It's by Beethoven."

"Is it?"

"It's a seraphic song," continued Lige.

"No!" exclaimed his friend; then, shaking his head, he sighed: "Well, it's mighty sweet."

The song was suddenly woven into laughter in the unseen chamber, and the lights in the windows went out, and a small lady and a tall lady and a thin old man, all three laughing and talking happily, came down and drove off in the Briscoe buckboard. The little crowd dispersed quietly; Lige Willetts clucked to his horse and cantered away to overtake the buckboard; William Todd took his courage between his teeth, and, the song ringing in his ears, made a desperate resolve to call upon Miss Bardlock that evening, in spite of its being a week day, and Caleb Parker gently and stammeringly asked Cynthia if she would wait till he shut up the shop, and let him walk home with her and Bud.

Soon the square was quiet as before, and there was naught but peace under the big stars of July.

That day the news had come that Harkless, after weeks of alternate improvement and relapse, hazardously lingering in the borderland of shadows, had passed the crucial point and was convalescent. His recovery was assured. But from their first word of him, from the message that he was found and was alive, none of the people of Carlow had really doubted it. They are simple country people, and they know that God is good.

CHAPTER XV.

NETTLES.

Two men who have been comrades and classmates at the alma mater of John Harkless and Tom Meredith; two who have belonged to the same club and roomed in the same entry; who have pooled their clothes and money in a common stock for either to draw on; who have shared the fortunes of atheletic war, triumphing together, sometimes with an intense triumphancy; two men who were once boys getting hazed together, hazing in no unkindly fashion in their turn, always helping each other to stuff brains the night before an examination and to blow away the suffocating statistics like foam the night after; singing, wrestling, oancing, laughing, succeeding together, through the four kindest years of life; two such brave companions, meeting in the after years of life, are touchingly tender and caressive of each other, but the tenderness takes the shy, United States form of insulting epithets, and the caresses are blows. If John Harkless had been in health, uninjured and prosperous, Tom Meredith could no more have thrown himself on his knees beside him and called him "old friend" than he could have danced on the slack-wire.

One day they thought the patient sleeping; the nurse fanned him softly, and Meredith had stolen in and was sitting by the cot. One of Harkless's eyes had been freed of the bandage, and when Tom came in it was closed; but, by and by, Meredith became aware that the unbandaged eye had opened and that it was suffused with a pathetic moisture; yet it twinkled with a comprehending light, and John knew that it was his old Tom Meredith who was sitting beside him, with the air of having sat there very often before. But this bald, middle-aged young man, not without elegance, yet a prosperous burgher for all that—was this the slim, rollicking broth of a boy whose thick auburn hair used to make one a streak of flame as he spun around the bases in a home run? Without doubt it was the stupendous fact, wrought by the alchemy of seven years.

For, though seven years be a mere breath in the memories of the old, it is a long transfiguration to him whose first youth is passing, and who finds unsolicited additions accruing to some parts of his being and strange deprivations in others, and upon whom the unhappy realization begins to be borne in, that he is no particular case, and that he of all the world, is not to be spared, but, like his forbears, must inevitably wriggle into the disguising crucible of time. And, though men accept it with apparently patient humor, the first realization that people do grow old, and that they do it before they have had time to be young, is apt to come like a shock.

Perhaps not even in the interminable months of Carlow had Harkless realized the length of seven years so keenly as he did when he beheld his old friend at his bedside. How men may be warped apart in seven years, especially in the seven years between 23 and 30! After the latter age you may return to the inseparable of seven years before and speak not the same language; you find no heartiness to carry on with each other after half an hour. Not so these classmates, who had known each other to the bone.

Ah, yes, it was Tom Meredith, the same lad, in spite of his masquerade of flesh; and Helen was right; Tom had not forgotten.

"It's the old horse thief!" John murmured, tremulously.

"You go plumb to thunder," answered Meredith between gulps.

When he was well enough they had long talks; and at other times Harkless lay by the window and breathed deep of the fresh air, while Meredith attended to his correspondence for him and read the papers to him. But there was one phenomenon of literature the convalescent insisted upon observing for himself, and which he went over again and again, to the detriment of his single unswathed eye, and this was the Carlow Herald.

The first letter he had read to him was one from Fisbee stating that the crippled forces left in charge had found themselves distraught in their efforts to carry on the paper (as their chief might conclude for himself on perusal of the issues of the first fortnight of his absence), and they had made bold to avail themselves of the services of a young relative of the writer's from a distant city—a capable journalist who had no other employment for the present, and who had accepted the responsibilities of the Herald temporarily. There followed a note from Parker, announcing that Mr. Fisbee's relative was a bird and was the kind to make the Herald hum. They hoped Mr. Harkless would approve of their bespeaking the new hand on the sheet; the paper must have suspended otherwise. Harkless, almost overcome by his surprise that Fisbee possessed a relative, dictated a hearty and grateful indorsement of their action, and soon after received a typewritten rejoinder, somewhat complicated in the reading, because of the numerous type errors and their corrections. The missive was signed "H. Fisbee," in a strapping masculine hand that suggested six feet of enterprise and muscle spattering ink on its shirt sleeves.

John groaned and fretted over the writings of the Herald's headless fortnight, but, perusing the issues produced under the domination of H. Fisbee, he started now and then, and chuckled at some shrewd felicities of management, or stared, puzzled, over an oddity, but came to a feeling of vast relief; and when the question of H. Fisbee's salary was settled and the tenancy assured, he sank into a repose of mind. H. Fisbee might be an eccentric fellow, but he knew his business, and apparently he knew something of other business as well, for he wrote at length concerning the Carlow oil field, urging Harkless to take shares in Mr. Watts' company while the stock was very low, two wells having been sunk without satisfactory results. H. Fisbee explained with exceeding technicality his reasons for believing that the third well would strike oil.

But with the case of mind regarding the Herald Harkless found himself possessed by apathy. He fretted no longer to get back to Plattville. With the prospect of return it seemed an emptiness glared at him from hollow sockets, and the thought of the dreary routine he must follow when he went back gave him the same faint nausea he had felt the evening after the circus. And, though it was partly the long sweat of anguish which had benumbed him, his apathy was pierced at times by a bodily horror of the scene of his truggle. At night he faced the grotesque masks of the Cross-Roads men and the brutal odds again; over and over he felt the blows, and clapped his hand to where the close fire of Bob Skillett's pistol burned his body.

And, except for the release from pain, he rejoiced less and less in his recovery. He remembered a tedious sickness of his childhood and how beautiful he had thought the world, when he began to get well, how electric the open air blowing in at the window, how green the smile of earth, and how glorious to live and see the open day again. He had none of that feeling now. No pretty vision came again near his bed, and he beheld his convalescence as a mistake. He had come to a jumping off place in his life—why had they not let him jump? What was there left but the weary plod, plod