

Family Circle.

HOW THAT CUP SLIPPED.

"There's many a slip
Twixt the cup and the lip."

In Chicago. But who would ever think of locating a romance in Chicago? and not only using that prosaic city, but selecting for its hero a quite (except when in a "corner") coal merchant? My plea is this: romances locate themselves, and heroes are like murder—you never know when or where to prepare for them. So it was in Chicago that the cup was lifted, and quiet, bashful Mr. Strong, who knew far more about the different kinds of coal than he did about women, whose unsteady hand let it fall.

Mr. Strong at a date prior to the beginning of this romance, belonged to that army of middle-aged young men seldom visible to a lady save at a theatre, or occasionally on Madison Street, or going up the steps of some boarding-house. At the theatre they troop by twos and threes to their reserved seats in all the joyous freedom of unemployed hands, listen to the play, unless perchance they are distracted by the sight of some former companion who is detected stealing slyly in with a pretty smiling girl, upon whom he lavishes bonbons and attentions, and never once glances in the direction of his forsaken friends. They always hurry out between acts, not so much, I am convinced, for the sake of getting a drink, as to escape into the open air, and chuckle over the capture of Brown. Or (presuming my reader to be a lady) you are at another time indebted to one of this band for a seat in a crowded stage in crossing from one side of the city to the other. He cheerfully resigns his place, you are made comfortable, and he hangs on to a strap and bumps his expensive beaver against the stage roof. Or, as I said before, you may see him mounting the steps of his boarding-house.

It was in the latter case that Miss Jessie Bloomer first saw Mr. Strong. She had arrived in Chicago one summer day by an afternoon train, had taken a warm bath and a refreshing nap, had tossed her waving brown hair into an artistic mass, robed herself in a pale blue muslin, the delicate shade of which brought out every rose and lily of her pretty dimpled face, and at last had floated airily down stairs, and was standing at one of the parlor windows just as Mr. Strong, fanning himself with an evening paper, put his foot upon the lower step of his boarding-house. Some young fellows were lounging on the upper one, and a word from them caused him to look up. As he did so, the picture framed by the opened window with its shadowy lace drapery was so dazzling that it caught his eyes at once, and he was overcome with embarrassment, and shuffled clumsily up to the suppressed amusement of the fellows at the top, who remarked that "Strong seemed struck."

Now it may naturally be asked how Miss Bloomer came to invade the home of these commercial gentlemen. The answer is easily given. She was a young sister of Mrs. Jack Morin, who, with her husband, also boarded at No. 19. Now all the fellows in the house knew Mrs. Morin very well indeed, but when she was forty years old, had a double chin and easy manners, and it had not taken any courage to make her acquaintance. But it was a very different thing to have a dainty bud of a girl suddenly settle down in one of the rather worn easy-chairs of their parlor, and as she had come without warning, she was such a surprising apparition that she caused each one of the boarders to scuttle back from the parlor door, when he would have entered, and converse in unusually low tones on the front steps.

In the meantime Mr. Strong paused not to listen to the gibes of his companions, but hurried up to his room to re-arrange his dusty garb; for he was late, and the fumes of the dinner were already mounting the basement stairs in an overheated manner, and mingling with the still warm air of late afternoon.

When he re-appeared the scene was changed, and the household was assembled around the dinner table. As he entered the dining-room, Gordon, the wit of the house, had, with Jenkins and Smith, the other boarders, been introduced, and was giving the new arrival a humorous catalogue of the sights which Chicago offered, and which she must make a point of seeing.

Miss Bloomer was thinking, just as Mr. Strong took his seat, that it must be very funny indeed to drive under a river instead of over it, and she was thinking, too, that a tunnel must be rather a frightful place, especially at night, which gave Gordon a chance to get off one of his *mots* (not altogether new to his fellow-boarders), to the effect that although it was a good place for lurking robbers, they could hardly be called *highwaymen*, at which Miss Bloomer laughed sweetly, with her big eyes as well as her pretty lips.

Somehow Mr. Strong felt irritated with Gordon and his old jokes, and when he in his turn had been introduced to the young lady, he chose to turn the conversation into a grave, even a gloomy, channel. But fortunately gaiety was restored by the timely entrance of belated Jack Morin, who greeted his charming sister-in-law in a boisterous and brotherly fashion, giving her a hearty kiss and hug when she sprang from her chair to meet him—a proceeding which was watched with envious eyes by the boarders, and when he pulled one of the long curls which hung in her neck, and told her that every fork was silenced in rapt attention.

But I must not linger too long over this part of my story, since it is only the preface.

Not many days passed before Miss Jessie was adored by the four bachelors. Not one would

have owned that he was doing more for her than he would cheerfully do for any lady visiting the city for the first time, when each vied with the other in making her visit agreeable. But, oh, Messrs. Gordon, Strong, Jenkins, and Smith, did you do as much for quiet, plain Miss Wyman when she, only twelve short months before, visited her cousin, your landlady, in this very house? Where then was this lavish display of hospitality on your part? Did she not "crib," and also see the interior of the shot-tower? And did she not say plainly that she was not afraid of horses, when you, Mr. Gordon, made a sham show of regret that your swift trotters were not safe for a lady to drive behind? And did not you, Mr. Jenkins, trumpet up a business visit to St. Louis rather than wait upon the ladies to the opera? And as for Smith, he ought to blush to his dying day when he recalls the far-chood concocted about the perils of a trip out to the city. And when did you, Mr. Strong, ever lay aside your evening paper and tantalize Miss Wyman to beat you at a game of chess? Shame, shame upon you all! You know very well that you all wad that poor young lady to have a dismal visit in the city you are now making so lively for this rosy girl, with her bewitching smile and eyes.

But to resume my chronicle. For the first few evenings Mr. Strong was, to all outward seeming, true to his paper but a close observer might often have caught him looking over the top of the central figure of the group around the card table. Especially was he *distracted* when a light, happy laugh called him away from politics and current prices, and a pretty white hand reached out with a childish penulience after a lost "trick." And he gave up all semblance to reading when a girlish figure perched itself upon the piano stool and waited patiently while that froward Jenins tortured the strings of his violin, and prepared to squeak out a villainous accompaniment.

Then came an evening when he stood back of Miss Bloomer's chair and gave her some useful hints on euchre-playing, which were most gratefully received. After that he was often one of the four around the ever-present euche table.

About this time a certain world-renowned prima donna began an engagement at M'Vick's, and one evening Smith came home unusually early, and spent an unusually long time over his toilet. A little later, a gorgeous and expensive bouquet arrived, and was sent up to his room. At dinner, Miss Bloomer, always prettily dressed, had added several touches to her dress, which, taken with the sympathy in Smith's case, threw the other three bachelors into a high state of excitement, and they anxiously awaited further developments. They were not kept long in suspense, for soon after dinner a carriage drew up before the door, and the driver announced that he had called for Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith was notified, and was soon waiting in rather a nervous manner, in the hall. Presently Miss Jessie Bloomer tripped lightly down stairs, wrapped in a fleecy opera cloak, and carrying the mysterious bouquet in her hand, and together the forsaken trio of bachelors gloomily watched Smith hand her into the carriage, and drive away to the opera. They all regretted what they felt to be shabby, underbanded behavior on his part, and had they been Englishmen, they would have joined in voicing him "a c-d." But being merely good citizens of Chicago, they contented themselves with the remark that Smith was sometimes a little tricky on "Change," which fact really had no bearing upon the case in hand, as his present behavior was certainly straightforward and above-board. He had asked Miss Bloomer to be his guest for the evening, and she had accepted; and it had never once crossed his mind that it was a duty he owed to his fellow-boarders to acquaint them with his intentions. But it was tacitly agreed that Smith's conduct was such that it could not be overlooked nor meekly borne. If he could whisk Miss Bloomer away to the opera, why, so could they, and then and there each to himself vowed a vow, the carrying out of which rolled gold—or rather good greenbacks—into the coffers of that prima donna, and into the pockets of florists and hackmen. And never before did a little village maiden have such a feast of opera, or accumulate bouquets and librettos at such a rate. This opera business was but the beginning of her dissipation. There were drives out to Lincoln Park; Gordon's skittish beast flew along "the Boulevard" with the brave little belle sitting beside their owner; an excursion was arranged offhand for herself, Mrs. Morin, and one of her admirers out to Hyde Park, when she was heard to express a wish to go there and gather fringed sentinels; and as for bouquets, they flew up to her room in a perfect procession of costly satin, gilt, and inlaid boxes. So altogether Miss Bloomer was having, as she wrote to a friend at home, "a perfectly lovely time."

But in the natural course of events there came a time when she had to cease revolving in this round of gayety.

One soft autumn evening, as she was driving beside Mr. Strong along the lake shore, there came a lull in the conversation, and they silently watched the full moon as it began to burnish the tranquil waters of Lake Michigan. The carriage rolled softly along, and the horses stepped evenly over the damp drive, and every thing combined to enhance the quietude of the hour. Finally Miss Bloomer spoke, and there was a tone of earnestness in her voice which her state of mind scarcely seemed to warrant. She said: "I had a letter from mamma to-day." Mr. Strong was puzzled by the tone of her manner, but hoped her mamma was well.

"Yes, thank you, she's quite well; but—"

"Your papa is not ill, I hope?"

"No papa is very well too? but—"

"Yes?"

"I have to go home."

"Go home? Oh no. Why you've only just come."

"Oh, Mr. Strong, I've been here ten weeks next Saturday."

"Ten weeks! It doesn't seem that many days."

"And I've had such a perfectly lovely time. I only wish I had just come; then I'd still have my visit to make."

"But why need you go home? Write and ask your mother to let you stay all winter."

"It would be of no use; and what is worse, I don't expect ever to see dear, lovely Chicago again. You know Jack is going to live in St. Louis after this; and the suggestion of a visit to Miss Jessie's voice as she finished her sentence."

Mr. Strong mused, and at last said, "that's too bad."

It was some time before either spoke again, and during the interval the gentleman was feeling sincere regret that the lively little girl was going away. He would probably never know another "swell"; indeed, he never would have known her if she had not walked right into his home, and, as it were, forced him to make her acquaintance. Never before had he asked a lady to drive with him or go to the opera; and although he had had faintest idea that he would verily, he had not the faintest idea that he would ever repeat it, for, as I hinted before, he was a bashful man, and he trembled at the thought of presenting himself before any lady through the usual avenues of society. The result of all this retrospection was merely a repetition of his first avowal, that it was too bad.

"Do you mean it is too bad for you, or for me?"

"Why, for—f-r me, of course," Mr. Strong had really up to that instant not known which side his sympathies were on.

"Oh, now, Mr. Strong, don't tell fibs; you know you don't care in the least whether I go or stay; you'll forget that I ever existed after I am gone a month;" and the big eyes looked a merry reproach up in his.

"You are too hard upon a fellow, Miss Jessie—indeed you are;" and after Mr. Strong had commenced his protest it was easy to go on. "You can't guess how much I'll miss you—all of us—and, especially, you may be sure, I'll be lonely enough when you are gone."

"You are very kind to say so."

"Kind! How could a fellow help missing such a—a—" (Be careful, Mr. Strong; Miss Jessie looks very sweet in the moonlight, as she sits waiting for you to finish your sentence.)

"Such a—a—what?" asked a saucy, mocking voice.

"Such a lovable little thing as you are;" and before he realized what he was doing, he had bent down and taken a kiss from the smiling lips.

"Oh, Mr. Strong!" drawing back.

"You are not angry, are you, Miss Jessie? Please forgive me. I deed I couldn't help it."

"I am very, very angry, and you could have helped it if you had wanted to."

"Perhaps I could if I had wanted to."

The young lady preserved a severe and silent demeanor, and the culprit grew uneasy.

"You will forgive me, won't you, Miss Jessie? If we have to part, let us part friends," in a very contrite tone.

No answer. What was he to say to make his peace? What would Gordon probably have said under similar circumstances?

A sob from Miss Jessie. "I'm just as unhappy as I can be. Mr. Strong, and I'm very sorry I told you I was going away. I never thought it would make—make you kiss me."

This was encouraging, and her companion's spirits grew lighter, and he became fluent in expressions of regret for his conduct and his remorse. He at last succeeded in gaining forgiveness for the "first," and in assuaging her grief at leaving "dear, darling Chicago;" for so perfect was the reconciliation that when their drive was ended, Miss Bloomer was the promised wife of Mr. Strong.

Now a well-conducted romance ought to have gone on smoothly from this point; out, instead, this one sought out the roughest paths through which to wander. In the first place, Mr. Strong found awaiting him at a telegraph which called him to Pennsylvania, and while he was away the father of Miss Bloomer made an unexpected appearance in Chicago, got very homesick, after the manner of old gentlemen unaccustomed to leaving home, and spirited that young person away to the farthest corner of Minnesota, only the day before her lover returned. Had she known of his nearness, she might have persuaded her father to wait twenty-four hours; but I am forced to confess with shame that my hero had never once written to his little fiancée during the ten days of their separation. He would gladly have done so, and had even saved numerous sheets of paper, but after the date was once written he was at a loss how to continue. The address was the stumbling block; if he could have settled that to his satisfaction, he might have gone on, but he could not. Since Miss Jessie was not present, his engagement became so vague a thing that he was only half certain that he had not dreamed it that night in the searing car. When he had started upon that eventful drive, no idea that he would return from it her promised husband had ever crossed his mind. Then, in less than two hours after, he said a hurried farewell in the hall, had stolen a couple of kisses when they were out of range of the open parlor—wherein reigned an ominous silence—had promised to be back the moment business was over, and had taken his valise and rushed away to catch the night train going East. So, after the many vain attempts I have noted the letter was given up, and he depended upon forgiveness, when he should reach Chicago, by eloquently and truthfully stating the case.