

222 The Northern,
Wichita, Kansas, September 30, 1919.

Miss Ida M. Tarbell,
New York City.

My dear Miss Tarbell:

I suppose that you are at home, though I haven't seen any announcement of your return to this country. Your sister has doubtless told you that I inflicted a long poem on you last winter just after you left for France. It was sent then to my daughter who has read it and has promised to make me some illustrations which I hope she will soon have done. She is now up in the White Mountains and I am not sure just what time she will be back in New York.

But I am sending you herewith a revised copy of the poem. I found so many errors that I had overlooked in the former copy that this has been gone over carefully and I believe is now correct. I know I am asking a great favor of you when I beg that you will read this and advise me as to its possible publication. Indeed, I think my nerve has got up to the point where I would dare to ask you to hand it to a publisher yourself, for I am very sure that a word from Miss Tarbell will go far toward mollifying the ogre that stands at the inner door to shoo away ambitious literary aspirants who are so cordially invited in by the publisher -- a great system, isn't it?

I wonder if you would be interested in the story of the story? I think that you must wonder at my doing such a stunt as this. I really don't know how the thing began. It is a long time ago, at least five years, but I believe that one day I was thinking over, dreaming over some events of my childhood and there came into my mind the figure of a little waif whom my father brought home with him one night and I was told that this child, about my own age but much smaller, as if stunted, had no home. I think he was the first one that I ever saw that had no home and I remember the feeling of dismay with which I regarded him and the curiosity with which I observed his uncanny alertness of expression which is sometimes seen in children that are roughly world-handled. He was dirty and ragged and his hair was matted. I remember my mother combing it out with great difficulty and many shakes of the head and expressions of sympathy and her washing the diseased scalp with the varicolored castile soap that was supposed to have great medicinal virtues. But he did not stay long for there were many of us, but when he went away he was cleaner and better clad and had some coins or "shin-plasters",-- for I think this was during the War -- in his pocket.

And so I got to dreaming about that little chap finding a home. Now, I have seen a great many cabin homes in Illinois and I have slept under the clapboard roofs and I have partaken of their matchless hospitality, and I determined to find a home for that child of the fancy. When the First Part was done, or what is now the First Part and which I thought at the time would be all of the poem, I submitted it to my friend, Miss C., Professor of English at Fairmount College, and she pronounced it good and asked me what I should do with it. I didn't know and so told her, remarking that it was too long for a magazine and too short for a volume, and I believe that she suggested that I carry it on and make a story of it, but I am not sure of that. However, the suggestion was made and I began to look about for a plot.

I talked the matter over with my step-son one evening at his house and asked him for a plot. Now, if I had asked him anything about the price of lumber, present, past or the probable future, I think he could have told me, but plots -- he knew nothing about plots. In the course of the evening I told him something of the history of my old friend, Dr. Fabrique, now a retired physician of Wichita where he practiced for nearly half a century, -- how he had run away from home as a boy, to California where he panned out gold with Lucky Baldwin and later, coming back to New Orleans, had lived there for several years as a pharmacist in a big drug store. One afternoon he stood under the balcony of the St. Charles Hotel and heard bulletins read every fifteen minutes describing the firing on Fort Sumter. He went to his lodgings, sent his trunk down to the boat and a few minutes before the boat left, slipped down and took passage for the North.

He reached home, his old home in Indiana, in due time; enlisted, and having learned something of Hardee's Tactics during his long absence, drilled his company and was chosen lieutenant. He was present at the siege of Vicksburg and to him was assigned the task of commanding the first flotilla of transports to run the batteries in April, I believe, 1863. He got through without mishap except that one of the boats was hit and sank the next day but it got through with the others and lost no man. He was afterward on McPherson's staff and following McPherson's death was on Sherman's staff. A very interesting history it was. When I finished it, Charlie said, "There's your plot." And so it was, at least the backbone of it.

Aside from that it has just grown. It was not written consecutively. The cry of Abner to Ben after his return to the cabin home, after his grandfather's death, was written long, long before his grandfather died, and the death of Ma was written a long time before the return of Ben. The last part to be written was the unconscious disclosure of himself by the old school teacher as Abner's grandfather, and his description of the death of Abner's father who proved to have been the stranger-guest. I didn't know until the old teacher revealed himself, that the stranger-guest was Abner's father,

but then I knew that he had to be, so I explained it as well as I could and submitted the explanation to a friend of mine, an eminent neurologist in Kansas City for his opinion as to the adequacy of the explanation of the lack of memory on the part of the artist, and his verdict was that it was entirely adequate. Then I felt better.

But you see it has been a series of pictures and was a sort of patch-work quilt or crazy quilt. I hope it is not without merit and I shall be very glad indeed for you to read it and write me candidly what you think of it.

My sister, Frances Graves, will probably be in New York City to attend a section of the League of Women Voters, running from October 17 to 24. I believe it is not absolutely certain that she is to go as a delegate from Wichita but that was the understanding, at least the probability when I left home a few days ago. I have asked her to call on you and I have written my daughter today that if she is not returning to New York by that time, to be good enough to send you the illustrations for The Cabin Home.

The poem was begun about five years ago at a time when I was unable to read. I do not know whether you know of my affliction or not, but my vision is very much impaired. I have since found a glass that enables me to read some but for a long time I was deprived of that and I am not sure but this little poem has kept me out of the "foolish house" with the employment that it has given me, and at various times it has grown and grown until now I believe it is concluded.

It may interest you to know that when I got ready to have it transcribed, I called the stenographer down to his office one evening and dictated half of it to him, finishing the poem on the following evening. He scanned it for me and it was corrected, but I can repeat the entire poem and that was the first time that the poem was put on paper except for a few lines of the first and some that I had written to my daughter in letters to her.

The school teacher who proves to be Abner's grandfather is Mr. Melindy, a man whom I knew slightly in my childhood. Mr. Melindy was a retired business man of Jacksonville, Illinois, when I knew him -- a man of culture, of sufficient means to meet his moderate wants, very highly esteemed in the community. I was going along the street one day and was surprised to see ahead of me a block or two away, Mr. Melindy, with his back to the fence, talking very earnestly to a couple of ragged street urchins who were listening to him with equal earnestness, indeed with the deepest attention. I wondered what he could be saying to such little gutter snipes that would interest them. I was soon to know, for as I came up, he was telling them of the honor and dignity of American citizenship, of the great and

glorious privilege of living in a free country and the privilege that would be theirs later on of exercising the duties of the citizen, and he was telling them that a boy who had such a future as that before him ought to be a good boy, an honorable boy, so that he might be a good and honorable citizen when he grew older. I think it was the greatest lesson in patriotism that I ever heard or heard of.

The death of Ma is the death of "Aunt" Frances Cartwright, the widow of Peter Cartwright, the famous Methodist pioneer preacher of Illinois. I knew her slightly. I taught school in that neighborhood the winter following my twentieth birthday and lived first in the family of one of her sons and then in that of one of her daughters. She was a gentle, sweet, very dignified old lady and I was always a little bit afraid of her, though there was no ground for it, really. And this description of Ma's death is a literal description of Mrs. Cartwright's death.

But this letter I am afraid has grown to too great proportions already, and I will not longer weary your patience. I could talk all night about the various incidents and observations that have gone into this alleged poem. But I shall be very much interested indeed to know your opinion of it.

Very sincerely,

Walter Graves.

Walter Graves,
(222 The Northern,
Wichita, Kansas.)