

W. L. S.

LIFE’S LITTLE IRONIES are not always manifest. We hear distant rumbling sounds of its tragedies, but rarely are we permitted to witness the reality. Therefore the real incidents which I am about to relate may have some value.

I first called upon W. L. S——, Jr., in the winter of 1895. I had known of him before only by reputation, or, what is nearer the truth, by seeing his name in one of the great Sunday papers attached to several drawings of the most lively interest. These drawings depicted night scenes of the city of New York, and appeared as colored supplements, eleven by eighteen inches. They represented the spectacular scenes which the citizen and the stranger most delight in—Madison Square in a drizzle; the Bowery lighted by a thousand lamps and crowded with “L” and surface cars; Sixth Avenue looking north from Fourteenth Street.

I was a youthful editor at the time and on the lookout for interesting illustrations of this sort, and when a little later I was in need of a colored supplement for the Christmas number I decided to call upon S——. I knew absolutely nothing about the world of art save what I had gathered from books and current literary comment of all sorts, and was, therefore, in a mood to behold something exceedingly bizarre in the atmosphere with which I should find my illustrator surrounded.

I was not disappointed. It was at the time when artists—I mean American artists principally—went in very strongly for that sort of thing. Only a few years before they had all been going to Paris, not so much to paint as to find out and imitate how artists *do* and live. I was greeted by a small, wiry, lean-looking individual arrayed in a bicycle suit, whose countenance could be best described as wearing a perpetual look of astonishment. He had one eye which fixed you with a strange, unmoving solemnity, owing to the fact that it was glass. His skin was anything but fair, and might be termed sallow. He wore a close, sharp-pointed Vandyke beard, and his gold-bridge glasses sat at almost right angles upon his nose. His forehead was high, his good eye alert, his hair

sandy-colored and tousled, and his whole manner indicated thought, feeling, remarkable nervous energy, and, above all, a rasping and jovial sort of egotism which pleased me rather than otherwise.

I noticed no more than this on my first visit, owing to the fact that I was very much overawed and greatly concerned about the price which he would charge me, not knowing what rate he might wish to exact, and being desirous of coming away at least unabashed by his magnificence and independence.

"What's it for?" he asked, when I suggested a drawing.

I informed him.

"You say you want it for a double-page center?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll do it for three hundred dollars."

I was taken considerably aback, as I had not contemplated paying more than one hundred.

"I get that from all the magazines," he added, seeing my hesitation, "wherever a supplement is intended."

"I don't think I could pay more than one hundred," I said, after a few moments' consideration.

"You couldn't?" he said, sharply, as if about to reprove me.

I shook my head.

"Well," he said, "let's see a copy of your publication."

The chief value of this conversation was that it taught me that the man's manner was no indication of his mood. I had thought he was impatient and indifferent, but I saw now that he was not so, rather brusque merely. He was simply excitable, somewhat like the French, and meant only to be businesslike. The upshot of it all was that he agreed to do it for one hundred and fifty, and asked me very solemnly to say nothing about it.

I may say here that I came upon S—— in the full blush of his fancies and ambitions, and just when he was verging upon their realization. He was not yet successful. A hundred and fifty dollars was a very fair price indeed. His powers, however, had reached that stage where they would soon command their full value.

I could see at once that he was very ambitious. He was bubbling over with the enthusiasm of youth and an intense

desire for recognition. He knew he had talent. The knowledge of it gave him an air and an independence of manner which might have been irritating to some. Besides, he was slightly affected, argue to the contrary as he would, and was altogether full of his own hopes and ambitions.

The matter of painting this picture necessitated my presence on several occasions, and during this time I got better acquainted with him. Certain ideas and desires which we held in common drew us toward each other, and I soon began to see that he was much above the average in insight and skill. He talked with the greatest ease upon a score of subjects—literature, art, politics, music, the drama, and history. He seemed to have read the latest novels; to have seen many of the current plays; to have talked with important people. Theodore Roosevelt, previously Police Commissioner but then Governor, often came to his studio to talk and play chess with him. A very able architect was his friend. He had artist associates galore, many of whom had studios in the same building or the immediate vicinity. And there were literary and business men as well, all of whom seemed to enjoy his company, and who were very fond of calling and spending an hour in his studio.

I had only called the second time, and was going away, when he showed me a steamship he had constructed with his own hands—a fair-sized model, complete in every detail, even to the imitation stokers in the boiler-room, and which would run by the hour if supplied with oil and water. I soon learned that his skill in mechanical construction was great. He was a member of several engineering societies, and devoted some part of his carefully organized days to studying and keeping up with problems in mechanics.

“Oh, that’s nothing,” he observed, when I marveled at the size and perfection of the model. “I’ll show you something else, if you have time some day, which may amuse you.”

He then explained that he had constructed several model warships, and that it was his pleasure to take them out and fight them on a pond somewhere out on Long Island.

“We’ll go out some day,” he said when I showed appropriate interest, “and have them fight each other. You’ll see how it’s done!”

I waited some time for this outing, and finally mentioned it.

"We'll go tomorrow," he said. "Can you be around here by ten o'clock?"

Ten the next morning saw me promptly at the studio, and five minutes later we were off.

When we arrived at Long Island City we went to the first convenient arm of the sea and undid the precious fighters, in which he much delighted.

After studying the contour of the little inlet for a few moments he took some measurements with a tape-line, stuck up two twigs in two places for guide posts, and proceeded to fire and get up steam in his war-ships. Afterwards he set the rudders, and then took them to the water-side and floated them at the points where he had placed the twigs.

These few details accomplished, he again studied the situation carefully, headed the vessels to the fraction of an inch toward a certain point of the opposite shore, and began testing the steam.

"When I say ready, you push this lever here," he said, indicating a little brass handle fastened to the stern-post. "Don't let her move an inch until you do that. You'll see some tall firing."

He hastened to the other side where his own boat was anchored, and began an excited examination. He was like a school-boy with a fine toy.

At a word, I moved the lever as requested, and the two vessels began steaming out toward one another. Their weight and speed were such that the light wind blowing affected them not in the least, and their prows struck with an audible crack. This threw them side by side, steaming head on together. At the same time it operated to set in motion their guns, which fired broadsides in such rapid succession as to give a suggestion of rapid revolver practice. Quite a smoke rose, and when it rolled away one of the vessels was already nearly under water and the other was keeling with the inflow of water from the port side. S—— lost no time, but throwing off his coat, jumped in and swam to the rescue.

Throughout this entire incident his manner was that of an enthusiastic boy who had something exceedingly novel. He did not laugh. In all our acquaintance I never once heard him

give a sound, hearty laugh. Instead he cackled. His delight apparently could only express itself in that way. In the main it showed itself in an excess of sharp movements, short verbal expressions, gleams of the eye.

I saw from this the man's delight in the science of engineering, and humored him in it. He was thereafter at the greatest pains to show all that he had under way in the mechanical line, and schemes he had for enjoying himself in this work in the future. It seemed rather a recreation for him than anything else. Like him, I could not help delighting in the perfect toys which he created, but the intricate details and slow process of manufacture were brain-racking. For not only would he draw the engine in all its parts, but he would buy the raw material and cast and drill and polish each separate part.

Upon my second visit I was deeply impressed by the sight of a fine passenger engine, a duplicate of the great 999 of the New York Central, of those days. It stood on brass rails laid along an old library shelf that had probably belonged to the previous occupant of the studio. This engine was a splendid object to look upon, strong, heavy, silent-running, with the fineness and grace of a perfect sewing-machine. It was duly trimmed with brass and nickel, after the manner of the great "flyers," and seemed so sturdy and powerful that one could not restrain the desire to see it run.

"How do you like that?" S—— exclaimed when he saw me looking at it.

"It's splendid," I said.

"See how she runs," he exclaimed, moving it up and down. "No noise about that."

He fairly caressed the mechanism with his hand, and went off into a most careful analysis of its qualities.

"I could build that engine," he exclaimed at last, enthusiastically, "if I were down in the Baldwin Company's place. I could make her break the record."

"I haven't the slightest doubt in the world," I answered.

This engine was a source of great expense to him, as well as the chief point in a fine scheme. He had made brass rails for it—sufficient to extend about the four sides of the studio—something like seventy feet. He had made most hand-

some passenger-cars with full equipment of brakes, vestibules, Pintsch gas, and so on, and had painted on their sides "The Great Pullman Line." One day, when we were quite friendly, he brought from his home all the rails, in a carpet-bag, and gave an exhibition of his engine's speed, attaching the cars and getting up sufficient steam to cause the engine to race about the room at a rate which was actually exciting. He had an arrangement by which it would pick up water and stop automatically. It was on this occasion that he confided what he called his great biograph scheme, the then forerunner of the latter day moving pictures. It was all so new then, almost a rumor, like that of the flying machine before it was invented.

"I propose to let the people see the photographic representation of an actual wreck—engine, cars, people, all tumbled down together after a collision, and no imitation, either—the actual thing."

"How do you propose to do it?" I asked.

"Well, that's the thing," he said, banteringly. "Now, how do you suppose I'd do it?"

"Hire a railroad to have a wreck and kill a few people," I suggested.

"Well, I've got a better thing than that. A railroad couldn't plan anything more real than mine will be."

I was intensely curious because of the novelty of the thing at that time. The "Biograph" was in its infancy.

"This is it," he exclaimed suddenly. "You see how realistic this engine is, don't you?"

I acknowledged that I did.

"Well," he confided, "I'm building another just like it. It's costing me three hundred dollars, and the passenger-cars will cost as much more. Now, I'm going to fix up some scenery on my roof—a gorge, a line of woods, a river, and a bridge. I'm going to make the water tumble over big rocks just above the bridge and run underneath it. Then I'm going to lay this track around these rocks, through the woods, across the bridge and off into the woods again.

"I'm going to put on the two trains and time them so they'll meet on the bridge. Just when they come into view where they can see each other, a post on the side of the track

will strike the cabs in such a way as to throw the firemen out on the steps just as if they were going to jump. When the engines take the bridge they'll explode caps that will set fire to oil and powder under the cars and burn them up."

"Then what?" I asked.

"Well, I've got it planned automatically so that you will see people jumping out of the cars and tumbling down on the rocks, the flames springing up and taking to the cars, and all that. Don't you believe it?" he added, as I smiled at the idea. "Look here," and he produced a model of one of the occupants of the cars. He labored for an hour to show all the intricate details, until I was compelled to admit the practicality and novelty of the idea. Then he explained that instantaneous photography, as it was then called, was to be applied at such close range that the picture would appear life size. The actuality of the occurrence would do the rest.

Skepticism still lingered with me for a time, but when I saw the second train growing, the figures and apparatus gradually being modeled, and the correspondence and conferences going on between the artist and several companies which wished to gain control of the result, I was perfectly sure that his idea would some day be realized.

As I have said, when I first met S—— he had not realized any of his dreams. It was just at that moment that the tide was about to turn. He surprised me by the assurance, born of his wonderful virility, with which he went about all things.

"I've got an order from the *Ladies' Home Journal*," he said to me one day. "They came to me."

"Good," I said. "What is it?"

"Somebody's writing up the terminal facilities of New York."

He had before him an Academy board, on which was sketched, in wash, a midnight express striking out across the Jersey meadows with sparks blazing from the smoke stacks and dim lights burning in the sleepers. It was a vivid thing, strong with all the strength of an engine, and rich in the go and enthusiasm which adhere to such mechanisms.

"I want to make a good thing of this," he said. "It may do me some good."

A little later he received his first order from Harper's. He

could not disguise that he was pleased, much as he tried to carry it off with an air. It was just before the Spanish war broke out, and the sketches he was to do related to the navy.

He labored at this order with the most tireless enthusiasm. Marine construction was his delight anyhow, and he spent hours and days making studies about the great vessels, getting not only the atmosphere but the mechanical detail. When he made the pictures they represented all that he felt.

"You know those drawings?" he said the day after he delivered them.

"Yes."

"I set a good stiff price on them and demanded my drawings back when they were through."

"Did you get them?"

"Yep. It will give them more respect for what I'm trying to do," he said.

Not long after he illustrated one of Kipling's stories.

He was in high feather at this, but grim and repressed withal. One could see by the nervous movements of his wiry body that he was delighted over it.

At this time Kipling came to his studio. It was by special arrangement, but S—— received him as if he were—well, as artists usually receive authors. They talked over the galley proofs, and the author went away.

"It's coming my way now," he said, when he could no longer conceal his feelings. "I want to do something good on this."

Through all this rise from obscurity to recognition he lived close to his friends—a crowd of them, apparently, always in his studio jesting, boxing, fencing—and interested himself in the mechanics I have described. His drawing, his engine-building, his literary studies and recreations were all mixed, jumbled, plunging him pell-mell, as it were, on to distinction. In the first six months of his studio life he had learned to fence, and often dropped his brush to put on the mask and assume the foils with one of his companions.

As our friendship increased I found how many were the man's accomplishments and how wide his range of sympathies. He was an expert bicyclist, as well as a trick rider, and

used a camera in a way to make an amateur envious. He could sing, having a fine tenor voice, which I heard the very day I learned that he could sing. It so happened that it was my turn to buy the theater tickets, and I invited him to come with me that especial evening.

"Can't do it," he replied.

"All right," I said.

"I'm part of an entertainment tonight, or I would," he added apologetically.

"What do you do?" I inquired.

"Sing."

"Get out!" I said.

"So be it," he answered. "Come up this evening."

To this I finally agreed, and was surprised to observe the ease with which he rendered his solo. He had an exquisitely clear and powerful voice and received a long round of applause, which he refused to acknowledge by singing again.

The influence of success is easily observable in a man of so volatile a nature. It seems to me that I could have told by his manner, day by day, the inwash of the separate ripples of the inrolling tide of success. He was all alive, full of plans, and the tale of his coming conquests was told in his eye. Sometime in the second year of our acquaintance I called at his studio in response to a card which he had stuck under my office door. It was his habit to draw an outline head of himself, something almost bordering upon a caricature, writing underneath it "I called," together with any word he might have to say. This day he was in his usual good spirits, and rallied me upon having an office which was only a blind. He had a roundabout way of getting me to talk about his personal affairs with him, and I soon saw that he had something very interesting, to himself, to communicate. At last he said,—

"I'm going to Europe next summer."

"Is that so?" I replied. "For pleasure?"

"Well, partly."

"What's up outside of that?" I asked.

"I'm going to represent the American Architectural League at the international convention."

"I didn't know you were an architect," I said.

"Well, I'm not," he answered, "professionally. I've studied it pretty thoroughly."

"Well, you seem to be coming up, Louis," I remarked.

"I'm doing all right," he answered.

He went on working at his easel as if his fate depended upon what he was doing. He had the fortunate quality of being able to work and converse most entertainingly at the same time. He seemed to enjoy company under such circumstances.

"You didn't know I was a baron, did you?" he finally observed.

"No," I answered, thinking he was exercising his fancy for the moment. "Where do you keep your baronial lands, my lord?"

"In Germany, kind sir," he replied, banteringly.

Then in his customary excitable mood he dropped his brushes and stood up.

"You don't believe me, do you?" he exclaimed, looking over his drooping glasses.

"Why, certainly I believe you, if you are serious. Are you truly a baron?"

"It was this way," he said. "My grandfather was a baron. My father was the younger of two brothers. His brother got the title and what was left of the estate. That he managed to go through with, and then he died. Now, no one has bothered about the title——"

"And you're going back to claim it?"

"Exactly."

I took it all lightly at first, but in time I began to perceive that it was a serious ambition. He truly wanted to be Baron S—— and add to himself the luster of his ancestors.

With all this, the man was really not so much an aristocrat in his mood as a seeker after life and new experiences. Being a baron was merely a new experience, or promised to be. He had the liveliest sympathies for republican theories and institutions—only he considered his life a thing apart. He had a fine mind, philosophically and logically poised. He could reason upon all things, from the latest mathematical theorem to Christian Science. Naturally, being so much of an individualist, he was not drifting toward any belief in the latter, but

was never weary of discussing the power of mind—a universal mind even—its wondrous ramifications and influences. Also he was a student of the English school of philosophy, and loved to get up mathematical and mechanical demonstrations of certain philosophic truths. Thus he worked out by means of a polygon, whose sides were of unequal lengths, a theory of friendship which is too intricate to explain here.

From now on I watched his career with the liveliest interest. He was a charming and a warm friend, and never neglected for a moment the obligations which such a relationship demands.

I heard from him frequently in many and various ways, dined with him regularly every second or third week, and rejoiced with him in his triumphs, now more and more frequent. One spring he went to Europe and spent the summer in tracing down his baronial claims, looking up various artists and scientists and attending several scientific meetings here and there at the same time. He did the illustrations for one of Kipling's fast express stories which one of the magazines published, and came back flushed and ready to try hard for a membership in the American Water-Color Society.

I shall never forget his anxiety to get into that mildly interesting body. He worked hard and long on several pictures which should not only be hung on the line but enlist sufficient interest among the artists to gain him a vote of admission. He mentioned it frequently and fixed me with his eyes to see what I thought of him.

"Go ahead," I said; "you have more right to membership perhaps than many another I know. Try hard."

He painted not one, but four, pictures, and sent them all. They were very interesting after their kind. Two were scenes from the great railroad terminal yards; the others, landscapes in mist or rain. Three of these pictures were passed and two of them hung on the line. The third was *skyed*, but he was admitted to membership.

I was delighted for his sake, for I could see, when he gave me the intelligence, that it was a matter which had keyed up his whole nervous system.

Not long after this we were walking on Broadway, one drizzly autumn evening, on our way to the theater. Life,

ambition, and our future were the *small* subjects under discussion. The street, as usual, was crowded. On every hand blazed the fire signs. The yellow lights were beautifully reflected in the wet sidewalks and gray wet cobblestones glistening with water.

When we reached Greeley Square (at that time a brilliant and almost sputtering spectacle of light and merriment), S—— took me by the arm.

“Come over here,” he said. “I want you to look at it from here.”

He took me to a point where, by the intersection of the lines of the converging streets, one could not only see Greeley Square but a large part of Herald Square, with its then huge theatrical sign of fire and its measure of store lights and lamps of vehicles. It was a kaleidoscopic and inspiring scene. The broad, converging walks were alive with people. A perfect jam of vehicles marked the spot where the horse and cable cars intersected. Overhead was the elevated station, its lights augmented every few minutes by long trains of brightly lighted cars filled with changing metropolitan crowds—crowds like shadows moving in a dream.

“Do you see the quality of that? Look at the blend of the lights and shadows in there under the L.”

I looked and gazed in silent admiration.

“See, right here before us—that pool of water there—do you get that? Now, that isn’t silver-colored, as it’s usually represented. It’s a prism. Don’t you see the hundred points of light?”

I acknowledged the variety of color, which I had scarcely observed before.

“You may think one would skip that in viewing a great scene, but the artist mustn’t. He must get all, whether you notice it or not. It gives feeling, even when you don’t see it.”

I acknowledged the value of this ideal.

“It’s a great spectacle,” he said. “It’s got more flesh and blood in it than people usually think. It’s easy to make it too mechanical and commonplace.”

“Why don’t you paint it?” I asked.

He turned on me as if he had been waiting for the suggestion.

"That's something I want to tell you," he said. "I am. I've sketched it a half-dozen times already. I haven't got it yet. But I'm going to."

I heard more of these dreams, intensifying all the while, until the Spanish-American war broke out. Then he was off in a great rush of war work. I scarcely saw him for six weeks, owing to some travels of my own, but I saw his name. One day in Broadway I stopped to see why a large crowd was gathered about a window in the Hoffman House. It was one of S——'s drawings of our harbor defenses, done as if the artist had been sitting at the bottom of the sea. The fishes, the green water, the hull of a massive war-ship—all were there—and about, the grim torpedoes. This put it into my head to go and see him. He was as tense and strenuous as ever. The glittering treasure at the end of the rainbow was more than ever in his eye. His body was almost sore from traveling.

"I am in now," he said, referring to the war movement. "I am going to Tampa."

"Be gone long?" I asked.

"Not this first time. I'll only be down there three weeks."

"I'll see you then."

"Supposing we make it certain," he said. "What do you say to dining together this coming Sunday three weeks?"

I went away, wishing him a fine trip and feeling that his dreams must now soon begin to come true. He was growing in reputation. Some war pictures, such as he could do, would set people talking. Then he would paint his prize pictures, finish his wreck scheme, become a baron, and be a great man.

Three weeks later I knocked at his studio door. It was a fine springlike day, though it was in February. I expected confidently to hear his quick aggressive step inside. Not a sound in reply. I knocked harder, but still received no answer. Then I went to the other doors about. He might be with his friends, but they were not in. I went away thinking that his war duties had interfered, that he had not returned.

Nevertheless there was something depressing about that portion of the building in which his studio was located. I felt as if it should not be, and decided to call again. Monday it was the same, and Tuesday.

That same evening I was sitting in the library of the Salmagundi Club, when a well-known artist addressed me.

"You knew S——, didn't you?" he said.

"Yes; what of it?"

"You knew he was dead, didn't you?"

"What!" I said.

"Yes, he died of fever, this morning."

I looked at him without speaking for a moment.

"Too bad," he said. "A clever boy, Louis. Awfully clever. I feel sorry for his father."

It did not take long to verify his statement. His name was in the perfunctory death lists of the papers the next morning. No other notice of any sort. Only a half-dozen seemed to know that he had ever lived.

And yet it seemed *to me* that a great tragedy had happened—he was so ambitious, so full of plans. His dreams were so near fulfillment.

I saw the little grave afterward and the empty studio. His desks revealed several inventions and many plans of useful things, but these came to nothing. There was no one to continue the work.

My feeling at the time was as if I had been looking at a beautiful lamp, lighted, warm and irradiating a charming scene, and then suddenly that it had been puffed out before my eyes, as if a hundred bubbles of iridescent hues had been shattered by a breath. We toil so much, we dream so richly, we hasten so fast, and, lo! the green door is opened. We are through it, and its grassy surface has sealed us forever from all which apparently we so much crave—even as, breathlessly, we are still running.