

The Morganton Herald

VOL. IX.—NO. 19.

MORGANTON, N. C. THURSDAY, JULY 20, 1906.

PRICE THREE CENTS.

Length	Per Line	Per Column	Per Page
10 Lines	\$1.00	\$10.00	\$10.00
20 Lines	\$2.00	\$20.00	\$20.00
30 Lines	\$3.00	\$30.00	\$30.00
40 Lines	\$4.00	\$40.00	\$40.00
50 Lines	\$5.00	\$50.00	\$50.00
60 Lines	\$6.00	\$60.00	\$60.00
70 Lines	\$7.00	\$70.00	\$70.00
80 Lines	\$8.00	\$80.00	\$80.00
90 Lines	\$9.00	\$90.00	\$90.00
100 Lines	\$10.00	\$100.00	\$100.00

THE BALL-ROOM BELLE.

BY WITHERSPOON ERVIN.

I had never been in the company of Nettie Norris although she was the fiancée of Harry Lee Winston, my earliest and most intimate friend. We were both born on one of the coast islands of Carolina and in homes in a rifle shot of each other, where four generations of our ancestors had lived. Of very nearly the same age, we had been confidants and companions of each other from our earliest remembrance. We had read the same books, studied at the same institutions, and would have enjoyed the same life together, but for the ill health of Harry, which threw him a year behind me. During his last year at college, I was a graduate and remained at home giving a general superintendence to the family estate and devoting my leisure to reading and study. I missed the daily companionship with my very much, but toward the close of June he was home on his summer vacation, and we were thrown together daily, as in the old time.

One warm afternoon in July I walked over to Oakland for an hour's talk with Harry. In front of the old residence, and covering a space of about two acres was a magnificent grove of live oaks, the finest of which had been planted for at least a century. Low headed, wide spreading, with trunks of twelve or fifteen feet in girth, their huge arms spread out on every side interlocking together and overshadowing the whole area, so that only here and there a straggling ray of sunlight passed through the canopy of leaves, and tinged with gold the green velvet turf on which it fell. We had quit the house and were seated on rustic seats under this extensive grove, for the coolness and beauty of the spot. Miles away, through the summer haze, we looked out to where, indistinct and misty, without any sharply drawn line to dissect them, the sea and the sky seemed to flow together. In the distance, the light white sails of pleasure boats winging their way over the sportive waves. It was a pleasant spot for friends to sit in converse on a summer day.

There was a meditative and happy expression on Harry Winston's face. Well might he be happy. With a splendid island plantation, and a princely income, hosts of friends, youth, and a handsome person, well might he be numbered among the happy. "Roper," said he, after we had been silent many seconds, "you are something of a physiognomist: I wish to show you a face that I think divinely beautiful, and I think you will agree with me." And he handed me a small, but well taken photograph, glowing in a crimson-colored case of velvet. It was the photograph of a face I had seen before—seen at the ball given by our graduating class but six months before, when the pleasurable excitement had heightened whatever of beauty her face possessed. She was indeed a very pretty and attractive young woman, charming in the ball-room with her face lighted up with joy, with its rhythmic melody, and the dancers' feet kept time to its throbbings.

With Nettie Norris, the original of the picture, I had never conversed, but she was the reigning belle of the old city where our Aunt Mater was located, and there were many who delighted to bask in her smiles. But, at the graduating ball given by my class, a remark of hers which came to my ears did not tend to exalt her in my esteem. I was promulgating with a beautiful and intellectual girl whose conversation, at all times, had a great attraction for me.

"Look! Mr. Holmes," said she to one of a group of young men who were clustered around her, as bees around a drop of honey, "is not that your special friend Roper promulgating with Miss Brighton?" "Yes," Roper admires her very much." "How strange!" returned Nettie with a shrug of her white shoulders. "And Roper admires her as an aristocratic friend. I wonder if he knows—but he can't know—about the grandfather of the girl leaning on his arm was a common mechanic—a blacksmith?" and the pretty Nettie's face wore a look of commiseration and horror as she opened the closet door of the Brighton household and exhibited the skeleton of the family.

better than I, and he might have discovered noble traits in the character and disposition which were hidden away from me under the exterior of a frivolous woman of fashion.

"Isn't she beautiful, Roper?" "I have seldom seen a face so pretty and attractive; but are you sure, Winston, that you have really won the heart of this fashionable belle?"

"Of course," said he in his strong, earnest tones, "or she never would have consented to marry me. She has position and wealth and all the best of admirers; and any mercenary consideration on her part is out of the question. No, Roper; she is a warm-hearted girl; and she loves me with her whole soul. It is a secret I now tell you; but our marriage is already arranged. It is to take place on the Wednesday before next Christmas in Grace church. You are to be my best man and Miss Katie Fisher is to be the bridemaid. Now don't whisper it even to the trees."

"Well, Harry, I can now congratulate you with sincerity. I confess I feared you were about to marry a butterfly of fashion; but I am so certain from you that your fiancée, in her heart, as utterly despises the frivolities of fashion as I do. But I lay claim, as your best friend and groomsmen, to give you a grand reception on your bringing the bride home. Greenwood shall be lighted up from cellar to garret, and the old bottles, madras of my grandfather's time, shall be brought out in honor of the occasion."

We had much more pleasant talk that afternoon; and, in about an hour, I left my friend and walked over to my own home at Greenwood; all the way under a broad sheltering avenue of live oaks, some of them as old as the discovery of the continent. I thought of Winston's marriage with something of growing confidence in the wisdom of his choice. Nettie, I indulged a hope, would at Oakland fall in love with the simple quiet pleasures of home-life, and get rid of the silly jargon of the fashionable world, that condemned all whose forefathers earned their bread by honest labor. I did not know how my own hopes might turn out; but if they came to fruition, Winston's wife might in a year's time have the sweet, intelligent, and premeditated Mary Brighton, the Blacksmith's granddaughter, as her nearest neighbor.

It was about a month after this period, that I sat in one of the lower chambers of Mrs. Winston's, looking near the hour of midnight out on the restless sea flashing under the light of the full moon. Harry Winston lay desperately ill of a fever. I sat by the open window looking out upon the beautiful night. The vast mass of foliage before me lay still, and the stars in the high sky fell moon, for there was not breeze enough to stir a single leaf. No sounds from without came to my ear but the lapping of the light combing waves as they broke and fell upon the hard, sandy beach. A lamp on the hearth burned with a soft, feeble light, behind a screen, and towards a corner of the chamber, out of the light, Harry Winston lay battling with disease. "The only son of his mother and she a widow," four days had passed since he was taken down with fever in his most violent form. I had hastened to his side as soon as informed of his illness, and there I had remained. This night his mother, wearied out by constant watching, had been prevailed upon to retire and, with servants within call, I alone watched by his side.

During the day his fever had risen to a great height and his mind had wandered continually. His eyes glowed and his lips were parched with heat. As the night came on, his fever began to abate, and he had at last fallen into a dozy sleep. From time to time I noted his pulse, waiting the moment when his fever had sufficiently declined to give the prescribed medicine with safety.

As the hands of my watch marked the hour of twelve, he turned in bed with a sigh and I knew he was awake. I hastened to his side to administer the medicine. He stared at me wildly for some seconds as though astonished at my presence.

"Ah! it is you Roper; and my mother?"

"She is sleeping now, Winston. But here—while your fever is down, drink this, and I hope that it may break up your fever altogether." He took the medicine without a murmur, but I noticed with pain, as I again lowered his head to the pillow, that in the narrow space of four days his cheeks had grown hollow and he had become as weak as an infant.

"Sit down by my bed, Roper," said he in a feeble voice. "While my mother sleeps, I wish to have my last talk with you."

"O no; not your last talk, Harry, for many years yet."

"Yes, Roper, it will be our last conversation on earth. All these years I have been dreaming—dreaming pleasant dreams; and I am just waking up to find that we live in a world of shadow. I have been thinking about Nettie;—poor dear Nettie! She and I will never meet again—here at least," he added after a short pause.

"The night before I was taken ill, I lay here, and I heard the sound of the waves as I have heard them at night from childhood; only they began to grow louder and clearer, and I found I was floating

away, without the power to stay myself, down to the sea. And Nettie stood on the veranda wild with wringing her hands and calling my name. I could turn my head and look back where she stood, distressed and broken-hearted; but was borne on and on, until consciousness left me and all was blackness and darkness, and I remember no more."

"Harry, dreams are but idle things; and they come and go like the wind."

"Even so do we. My mother will miss me sorely. She is a strong christian woman, and her religion will bring her comfort; but Nettie, poor, light-hearted, loving Nettie! It will break her heart! Now, Roper, I know you will fulfill my last request. When I am gone, as soon as my eyes are closed, hasten away and break the news gently to dear Nettie. To hear it suddenly through the public prints would shock her fearfully. Will you go Roper?"

I gave Winston my solemn pledge that I would carry out his wishes, yet endeavored, but in vain, to remove his settled gloom. Then there was again silence in the chamber, unbroken by words. But there was the tossing of my friend on his bed as the burning Christmas candles flickered. By the dawn of day, I realized that Winston was in extreme danger. Before the sun rose, the physician was at his bedside to note the condition of his patient, and to order his treatment accordingly. Through the day he came and went, wearing the same grave face, but uttering no word either of apprehension or hope.

About sunset the fever began to decline, and the patient ceased to toss upon his bed or to matter out in his dreams. The fever was sinking and the fiery flush died from his cheeks. Others came in and took their places by the bed. I went back to my seat by the window and leaned my weary head upon the window sill. After awhile some one shook me gently by the shoulder and I found that I had been sleeping. I arose and staggered to Harry's bedside. He was lying very still. I thought he was sleeping and would do well. They told me he had been dead more than an hour.

It was the first time I had stood in the chamber of death, and a terrible feeling was upon me. I never, before that day, realized that death was in the world. Now I had felt the awe of his terrible presence.

Wearied as I was with my long protracted vigils in the sick room, nevertheless, in two hours time, I was on the train hurrying on my way to execute the mission committed to me by the dead.

I had taken no thought as to the manner in which I should perform that delicate duty. I was like a man stunned and reeling under the shock of a severe blow, and who blindly statters on mechanically, in the discharge of his duty.

Strange as it may seem, my thoughts were at times stupefied and incoherent, that it required an effort to enable me to recollect where I was, and with what purpose I was hastening on through the chamber of death. The men and women on the train, who were passing along the street, seemed like moving automata with only a spectral existence, and I myself, but a disembodied spirit, having no portion with them in the world in which they moved.

For the first time in my life, I had realized the presence of death in the world, and the horror of his presence, so clearly, seem gave a spectral hue to every thing around me.

My special mission in that old city, after I reached the hotel and changed my dress, he gave greatly to disquiet me. I had no fitness for discharging the duty I had undertaken. I tried to think of some lady friend on whom it might be devolved, but could call to mind no one in the city whom I could with propriety ask to become my substitute.

It was about twelve by the city clock that I mounted the wide flight of steps leading up to the porch of the family mansion where Miss Nettie Norris resided. I rang the bell and a servant came and conducted me to the parlor. I sent up my card asking for Miss Norris, and a tall, stately lady, whom I had never seen before, came down to receive me, and introduced herself as Mrs. Norris. Here was presented an unexpected opportunity of avoiding a painful and embarrassing interview with Miss Norris, and of entrusting the business in hand to the very person best fitted to discharge it.

Mrs. Norris heard my story through most calmly and politely. If it touched her feelings her manner did not betray it. She withdrew, but invited me to be seated as her daughter might desire to communicate with me in person.

I had in a great measure recovered my equanimity and self-control, and began to take notice of my surroundings. The furniture of the parlor was of a showy and striking character. It was even costly but intended for show rather than for comfort. The walls were overlaid with hangings, but failed to satisfy the taste as well as two or three good paintings would have done.

While I was looking around I became aware of the opening of the door, and heard the light rustling of a woman's dress, and turning I stood face to face with Nettie Norris. There she stood, all the fascinations of her loveliness and grace of manner, the smile of welcome on her lips, and in her bright eyes!

Had her own mother shrunk from telling her of the errand on which I came, and left to me the hard task of making the painful disclosure?

I advanced and she took my hand in her own bright, pleasant manner.

"I am very happy, Mr. Roper, at meeting you again, though you have brought us some very unwelcome and distressing news. And so poor Harry Winston is dead?"

"He died at twelve o'clock last night, Miss Norris, and I hastened to his bedside that you might not be shocked on seeing the notice of his death in the public prints."

"I am sure I should feel deeply grateful to you, Mr. Roper, but I read of the death of some acquaintance every few days. My circle of acquaintances is quite large."

"I must say in apology for coming at all to make the announcement, that I have done so in obedience to Harry's last dying request."

"Was he sick long," asked Nettie as one might have asked about the death of an utter stranger.

"Only four days, Miss Norris. It was quite a sudden summons."

"I am so sorry," returned Nettie in her smooth, flute-like voice.

"Harry was my partner in many a social hop. I really liked Harry. His walking was perfect, and then he was so watchful of his partner! If he could wait at all, his suppers were perfect, and his social deficiencies. I really liked him and we had many pleasant evenings together. But why, Mr. Roper, was it thought necessary to break the news to me in particular? He had many other friends."

"But none, Miss Norris, that he held so dear as yourself. The relations between you and Harry were very intimate, I suppose, and I thought it right to account for that."

"The relations between us?" exclaimed Nettie, with a musical laugh. "Your words seem to imply that our relations were somewhat peculiar. I am not aware that there is any reason for thinking so."

"He expected you, Miss Norris, to be his bride as soon as he had finished college life was ended."

"Indeed! Well, a few kind friendly words between us—a mere light and meaningless flirtation—you know how it is, Mr. Roper—doesn't amount to an engagement. O no; that is quite another matter. I never thought about marrying Harry, though I liked him very much—that is as a like you and the rest of my friends but, still, I regret his death very much—very much indeed, I assure you."

Disgusted and indignant, yet striving to hide all exhibition of my feelings, I rose to take my leave.

"Oh, no, Mr. Roper, not yet; have faith in me to-day with you!" asked Nettie in her sweetest tones and most engaging manner. I thanked her politely and bowing, took my departure with a heart swelling with indignation at her feebleness, duplicity and utter heartlessness.

I loathed and abhorred the woman, in spite of her power of fascination. Poor Winston! far better for him that it was to be taken away by death in the dew of his youth, than to bind himself for life to a woman who gave no tear—not even a sign—to his memory.

The heart that has no capacity for sorrow can never know what love is.

Two years after that time, the country was trembling under the tyrant's iron hand, and I was at my post in Virginia, as Captain in Company D of the 4th Infantry. Our Colonel was as noble a specimen of manhood as ever lived. I had no acquaintance with him, and had never heard his name until the call of the country summoned us into service. He was a compassionate and warm-hearted man, and there was a reserve about him as to his personal history. He never spoke of his home-life. On his face there was a settled expression of sadness that was never absent, except when his regiment was ordered to the front to meet the enemy; and then his eyes were lighted up, and his face wore a boyish expression. He was noted for his care of the men under his command, his devotion to their interest, his gentleness, his quiet, self-contained manner, and his courage in battle. His men idolized him—there was not one of them but would have died for him. I never knew a man who had, in so great a degree, the gift of winning and keeping hearts.

"Leslie," said I to him one day, "you have one great gift which I would give much to possess."

"And what is that, Roper?"

"The faculty with which you

win all hearts?"

"Ah, no! Roper," replied he, "you don't know how I have failed in that very respect," and he reposed into silence, while a deeper sadness settled on his face.

"An unfortunate love affair," thought I.

His desperate courage in battle soon had its natural result. The end came sooner than was expected. We had been fighting against greatly superior numbers when the left of his regiment, under the heavy pressure brought to bear against it, was driven back and seemed on the point of being broken. Col. Leslie rode rapidly to the point of danger, where his men were mingled in a hand-to-hand conflict with the enemy. Plunging into the midst of the melee with drawn sword, his men quickly returned their ranks and expelled the enemy, but their beloved Colonel had fallen dead in the field, his breast pierced by a bullet.

In the same engagement, I too received a painful wound in the shoulder that would disable me for many days. The next day, with many other wounded men, I was put aboard the train on my way home. The same train also bore the body of Col. Leslie, enshrouded in a rough box of pine.

At a junction with a branch road, the body of our Colonel was deposited on the platform of the depot, to be transferred to a train due in about two hours time, bound for the city so often referred to in these pages. Here also I, and some four or five wounded soldiers of the regiment, to which I belonged, had to wait two hours to board the train. We found resting places on boxes or bales near the spot where the box containing the body of our Colonel was deposited. His old soldiers formed a self-constituted guard of honor to watch by his remains until they were turned over to the keeping of his relatives.

A few well-dressed persons were hanging about the station, awaiting transportation to their various destinations. Among them were two newly made officers, as might be seen by their fair and unadorned uniforms, conspicuously free from the dust of the long march and the smoke of the camp fires. They were looking at the soldiers, without ever having seen a day's service on the field, they had received commissions and were now on their way to headquarters in Virginia to play at soldiering on the staff of some prominent patron. They kept studiously aloof from the group of soiled and shabby soldiers, as if there were some distinction in status between them.

One of them with a budding mustache, happened, in his march up and down the platform, to pass near the group of wounded veterans, one of whom, with a grunted halloo, had drawn forth a pipe of tobacco, and, placing it on the box on which he sat, opened his knife with the intention of his teeth, and was about to light it, when a wounded hand held up a small quantity to fill the pipe that lay beside it. It was easily seen that he found the attempt both difficult and painful. He appealed to the newly made officer, in a timid but respectful manner, for his kindly aid.

"It is too much for a one-armed man. Will you, sir, do me the kindness to cut me enough of tobacco to fill up my pipe? My left arm is in pain, and a little smoking, I find, eases it somewhat." He held forth his knife as if consulting subtly on the little assistance asked for; but the smartly dressed officer passed on and treated his request with supercilious disregard. Patient I looked on, and watched the services, a newly-dressed military body, with a fresh, blooming complexion, who had been sitting near in silence, stood by the soldier's side.

"Let me help you." There was a word of sweetness and gentleness in her tone and manner. I knew at once that she was a thorough bred lady moving in the higher walks of life. There, on the platform of her fare, I recognized her as Mrs. Leslie, a widow lady, foremost in every good work, one who had been a frequent guest at my mother's home, and whom in my boyhood I had known well.

"O madame!" said the soldier, looking up, "this is no work for a lady such as you." But, notwithstanding his protestations and his reluctance to permit her to perform such a service for him, Mrs. Leslie possessed herself of the knife and tobacco, and setting down with a newspaper spread open on her lap, she showed up his tobacco like an expert, engaging him at the same time in pleasant conversation.

"You need not protest against it, for I am only doing what it is a pleasure as well as a duty to do. I feel for a soldier, for I have two boys of my own in service. What I would wish others to do for them, that I do gladly for you. Here is your tobacco, all cut up. And now give me your pipe. O no, you need not refuse me that privilege," and, taking the pipe from his reluctant hands, she filled it for her duty's sake, and handed it to him, together with the remainder of the tobacco neatly done up in a fragment of the newspaper. The brave fellow was overcome by her kindness. There was a tear on his cheek as he reverently lifted his hat and uttered

his heartfelt thanks.

About this time I came forward and made myself known to Mrs. Leslie. I secured a comfortable seat for her, and, engaging in pleasant, familiar conversation, we sat apart on the shaded platform which, on this sultry day, was far more comfortable than the ladies' waiting room which opened upon it.

Soon the typical soldiers, who had passed a dull day at the office's appeal, came forth from the waiting room, wearing a most fashionably dressed lady, and they seated themselves side by side on the box containing Colonel Leslie's body. For many minutes we were witnesses of a lively conversation, in which the silliness of the young man and the levity and vanity of his companion were especially conspicuous. It was a strange scene for persons so engaged. There were frowns and sneers on the faces of the independent soldiers, but the gay couple heeded them not.

"Captain Roper," asked Mrs. Leslie in a low tone, "does not that box, over which that silly dandy is going on, contain the body of some soldier?"

"Yes, madame; of our brave commander, James Leslie, who fell in battle two days ago."

"And is James Leslie indeed dead? I know him so well and esteemed him so highly?"

"Yes; he will be sorely missed from his place. His men almost worshipped him; and in our brigade he was styled the King of Hearts. He was the friendship of every one with whom he came in contact."

"Yet there was one whose heart—if she really had a heart—she utterly failed to win, and that was his own wife. She was given up to amusement and pleasure, and was incapable of attachment to any one."

"I know one such person," replied she, after having waited and played with the box, "the wife of a jet d'essai would have been flattered by more than the death of a plighted lover."

"And, if the question be not impertinent or improper, pray who was she?"

"A Miss Susan Stone," answered she with some hesitating.

"Miss Stone, the beautiful ball-room belle? Why she became poor Leslie's wife. Some day you would have your own husband's name on her lips, and she would have been a good wife."

"At this juncture, however, our attention was attracted to the lady and her friend.

"Do tell me, Captain Roper, what a strangely shaped box like this is intended for? No ordinary goods, I am sure. Can it be made of gold?"

"Really, I cannot tell you. Those ragged fellows have been watching it so closely that they may become suspicious, and then the whole party would be broken up."

"Look at the dandy on this end, and I reckon you will find out," replied she, and she turned to the soldier who had overheard the question.

The young man snatched and kept his seat; but the lady rose and stepped over to read the inscription printed on the box and, after that, turning up her hands in surprise and expressing a little concern, she hurried into the ladies' waiting room.

"That was a strange freak," remarked Mrs. Leslie to me, after she had returned.

"Yes, madame," observed a gentleman who happened to be near the remark, "I saw her face and she looked mighty disconcerted."

"She just found out she was sitting over a dead body," remarked another, "and it was a kind of shock."

In a few minutes a colored waiting woman, attended by a porter, came out on the platform and pointed out to him a trunk among the baggage, which he should unload and convey into a lady's private dressing room and withdraw, while the servant entered and closed the door. Half an hour afterwards the porter brought out the trunk and deposited it with the baggage to be shipped.

Ten minutes afterwards the whole of our train was bound in the distance. All who had been waiting its coming gathered up their effects and hastened to the platform.

Mrs. Leslie made a final visit to the dressing room and soon appeared, followed by a lady in deep mourning whose face was hidden from me under the folds of her black veil. The young officer was propped up by her side and she took his arm. I saw her face for a moment only as she went to her room, and she turned to bid him good-bye. There was a melancholy smile upon it. She was evidently sorry and her face seemed not unkindly.

"Did you recognize her?" asked Mrs. Leslie, turning to me eagerly.

"No; who is she?" enquired I.

"Nettie Norris—poor James Leslie's wife—his widow now. I met her here. And only to think, she was sitting on his coffin being with a stranger when she never saw him!"

"Did you recognize her?" asked Mrs. Leslie, turning to me eagerly.

"No; who is she?" enquired I.

"Nettie Norris—poor James Leslie's wife—his widow now. I met her here. And only to think, she was sitting on his coffin being with a stranger when she never saw him!"

ing before the mirror in the dressing room, arranging every fold of her mourning dress in the most approved style. Ah! Captain Roper, when devoted to light pleasure and giddy dissipation of all the three indulgences being to human nature. They have no heart to grieve."

We then entered the coach and the train rolled on its way.

Oh James I found in after days, when the gray city where she dwelt was given up to the flames; and weath, in one night, took to itself wings and fled away. She too was that of the story told by the flowers as fallen. Even her grave has no long struggle, but now no one can point out the spot where the lady of the Ball-Room Belle was laid in the last place of rest.

From Hill, N. C.
THE END.

THE END.

THE END.

THE END.

THE END.

THE END.

THE END.

THE END.

THE END.

THE END.

THE END.

THE END.

THE END.

THE END.

THE END.



A crown of royal baking powder. Lightest of all in becoming strength—Largest United States Government Food Report.

Royal Baking Powder Co., 100 Wall St., N. Y.

FOR TRAVELERS.

Those who contemplate a trip to the World's Columbian Exposition, or to our Mountain Resorts, are recommended to have generously provided themselves with articles adapted for those who will leave home.

Dress Goods, BLAZER AND STEEL SUITS, SHIRT WAISTS, WALKING SHOES, WATERPROOF OVER COATS, UMBRELLAS, GLOVES, Small Wares of every description.

Trunks, Bags, CANNAS TELEPHONES, TRAVELING CASES, GRIPPS.

W. H. & R. S. TUCKER & CO., RALEIGH, N. C.

What is Life Assurance?

An easy means of securing your wife and family against want in the event of your death.

A creditable means of securing a better financial standing in the business world.

The most safe and profitable means of investing your savings for use in after years.

All Life Insurance is good. The Equitable Life is the best.

W. J. BODDEY, Manager, COLUMBIA, ROCK HILL, S. C.

F. W. TYLER, Photographic Artist.

MOUNTAIN HOUSE, MORGANTON, N. C.

DR. I. P. JETER, DENTIST, MORGANTON, N. C.