

Chance

In the summer of 1863 Sophia Maria Smith was teaching her second term of school about a mile from her home near Washington Center in Will County, Illinois. One evening after her pupils had left the schoolroom she was looking over the Chicago *Tribune* when she came upon this advertisement: "Three young men, who are not officers, would like to correspond with the same number of young ladies, those who believe that the rank is but the guinea stamp — a man's a man for all that." One of the three names signed to this request was "Richard Rolfe".

Advertisements of that kind were not unusual, inasmuch as there were numerous agencies to make the life of the soldier in camp less monotonous, and young women were urged to do what they could in this way through letters to the field. To do her part Miss Smith replied to Mr. Rolfe:

"Dear Sir,

I have read your advertisement and heartily endorse the sentiment expressed. If you wish to know more of me and will accept me as a correspondent address

Miss Sophie M. Smith."

She had consulted no one. Weeks passed without a reply. Then one night came a letter in a strange hand, postmarked Bridgeport, Alabama. To use her own words, Sophie was "honestly frightened". Perhaps she had done something very wrong indeed, for "what would Mother say?" It should be remembered that this was in 1863.

The letter was carried home and read to the family as an interesting report from the camp life of the soldier. Her action in undertaking such "war work" was approved and thereafter the mother's counsel was a regular part of the letter writing to Mr. Rolfe. In his first communication on August 3rd he described himself as the Sergeant-Major of the Eighty-eighth Illinois Volunteer Infantry in Rosecrans's army, an educated man, past the period of youth, then twenty-eight years of age, an editor by profession, an abolitionist in politics, and he had entered the army for the purpose of assisting to crush the rebellion and to kill slavery, the "proximate cause of it". For that purpose he had "subordinated friendship, ease, comfort, and cultured associations". Unless Miss Smith agreed with his views he felt sure that he would prove to be a "very uninteresting correspondent". Whether she agreed or not, she certainly found his letters full of interest.

On September 15th he wrote from the bivouac of the Army of the Cumberland on Lookout Mountain. "Last night at 9 o'clock, my dear friend Sophie, your favor of the 8th came to hand. We had been marching all day; climb, climb, climb, dust, dust, dust, ankle deep ever, knee-deep often, filling the air with a thick and horrible pall that blotted out the sun and that, ground to the finest powder by the tread of innumerable feet and the crush of myriad wheels, entered eyes, mouth, garments, lungs, ears, nostrils, choking, blinding, stifling, strangling, creating a maddening thirst, and not a drop of water for eight weary miles: all with the thermometer among the nineties, and you can have some faint conception of what, with the burden of blankets, haversacks, canteens, rations, equipment, and arms, our poor boys have to undergo during Southern dog-days."

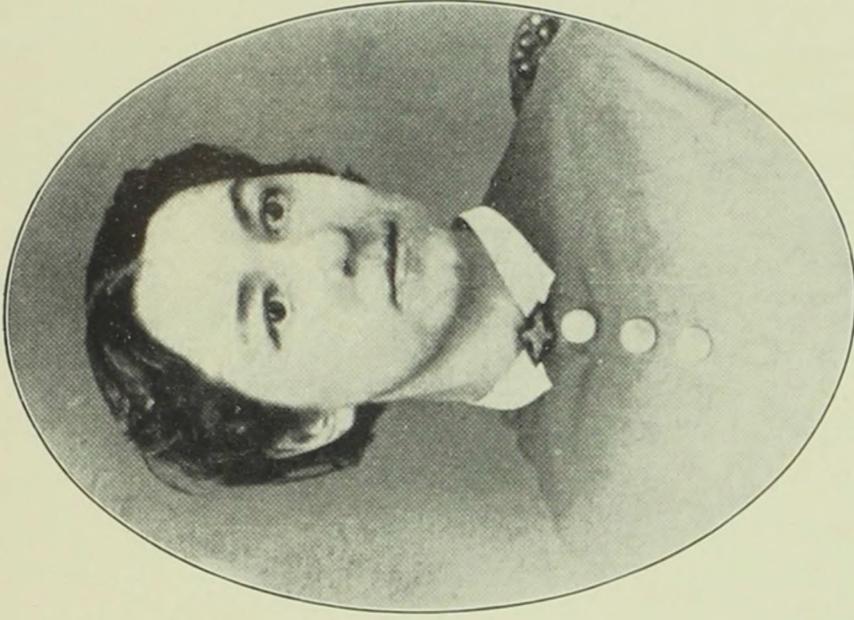
In October of the same year he was compelled to add this note to his letter: "I am under the necessity of mailing this *unpaid*. All my stamps are gone, and none can be purchased for love or money. When I get some I will enclose payment for this." The battle of Chickamauga had been fought since his last letter. "I lost many friends", he wrote, "chief of whom was Gen. Lytle, commanding our Brigade . . . It is true that I am only a Sergeant-Major while he was a General,

and yet he loved me as a brother while I would have died to save him. . . . His death is the bitterest sorrow and loss I have known in years . . . I do not often write for the journals now. I am glad enough to escape from the drudgery of *thought-grinding* for a little while, but I do sometimes write a letter to the *Chicago Tribune* over the signature 'Ex-Orderly'. . . . I have traveled quite a little; paying my expenses with my pen; and I shall be very glad some day, when the hurry and bustle of the campaign is over, to give you inklings of what I have seen, heard, felt, and been a part of. I have fought border ruffians in Kansas, clambered over the steep mountains of Switzerland, taken part in the 'fandangoes' of the Mexicans, drunk lager with the jolly oleaginous Germans of 'Faderland', stumped it among the Hoosiers of the West, lectured to cultured audiences in the East, am not quite ignorant of Paris, while England is pretty familiar to my remembrance." As to himself: "Proud, poor (this in its most literal and absolute sense; when was there a rich scribbler?) educated, after a sort; fond of books, more especially old ones, thinking a good deal more of Homer and Shakespeare, Bacon and Macaulay, with their kindred, than of farms and factories and merchandise and stocks and bonds."

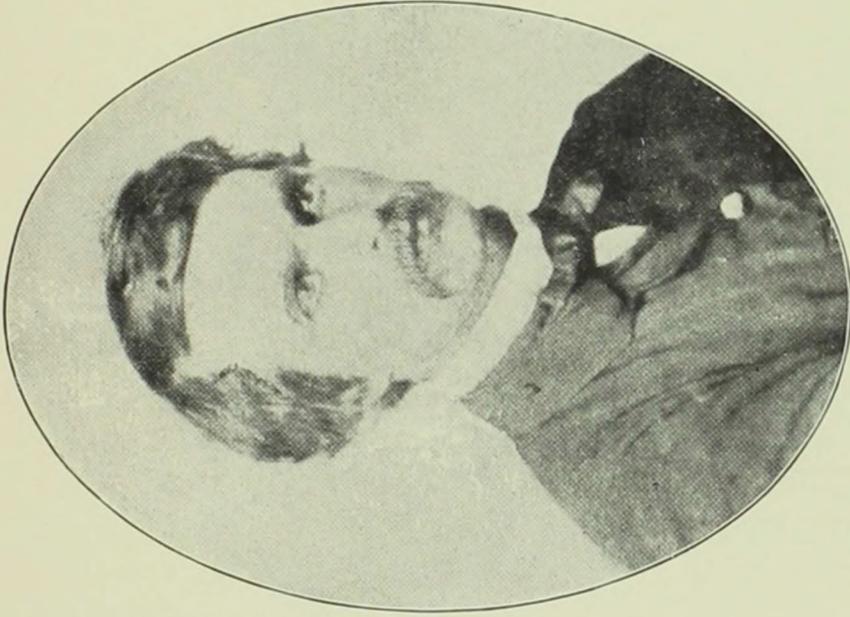
In reply Miss Smith gave him a full description

of the every-day life on the prairies of Illinois seventy years ago. Unfortunately none of her letters was copied and she can recall them only in a general way. He asked for socks and forthwith she secured the yarn and brought in some of her young friends to knit for the soldiers. In due time they were forwarded to him and his letters show his keen interest in their arrival. Disappointment awaited him, however, since they must have been lost in the mails. Or possibly some other soldier was glad to have them.

In November, 1863, the Eighty-eighth Illinois Infantry was at Chattanooga and a letter from there gave some of his personal history. "Did I ever tell you that I was an Englishman and only a citizen of 9 years duration? . . . I was in Europe at the outbreaking of the war. I gave up a good many things pleasant to the sense and to the soul, when I came back to fight, . . . and endured a good deal of obloquy and ill-feeling from my countrymen, but I do not at all regret having done so, because I know that what I did was wise and right. . . . I should have hated myself alike for cowardice and inconsistency, had I stood aloof when the battle of liberty began to rage. . . . I am sorry that the first 'article' of mine with which you have met should be so mangled by the printers as was 'After the Battle'. It



SOPHIA MARIA SMITH



RICHARD REALF

is a little singular that you should have seen none of my letters before, as I have corresponded occasionally with the Tribune for 15 months."

Just after Christmas, 1863, he wrote from camp near Knoxville, Tennessee. "It is dark and I scribble only by the occasional glare of a gusty fire that almost smokes my eyes out in the effort. A friend of mine leaves for Chattanooga in the morning, and has promised to mail a letter for me. . . . I shall be glad to receive the socks, . . . I shall prize them very greatly, indeed."

For some time he had been anticipating a furlough and had threatened to come to Illinois to visit his correspondent. He declared that he was developing a great affection for her. The prospect was really alarming to Sophie, however, inasmuch as such an outcome of her venture had not been expected. But to her relief, he was just then promoted to the rank of first lieutenant and adjutant which required his services on the field. The furlough was postponed indefinitely.

On January 10, 1864, he wrote from the winter camp at "Blane's X Roads" in Tennessee, where "cooped up in the midst of these bleak mountains, separated from everything, home, friends, books, papers, and even the mail, you cannot imagine how horribly tedious and dull it is. To make matters worse, we are on half rations,

without tents, insufficiently clad, and the weather is as cold as the climate of Greenland. The snow falls fast as I write, and last night I was nearly frozen in bed. . . . What a magnificent fight that of ours at Missionary Ridge was — do you not think so? Have you ever read, in any history, of a charge more gallant, an assault more desperate, a victory more complete and thorough?"

"Camp of 88th Ill. Vol. Inf.

Loudon, Tenn., Feb. 23, 1864.

"You have grievously misjudged me if you have entertained a suspicion that because you are an 'Irish girl instead of an American, and a farmer's daughter instead of an heiress,' I should suffer the correspondence to cease, or lose my interest in whatever concerns you. On the contrary, I should have been ashamed of you had you yourself been ashamed to acknowledge either your social status or your native land. I do not know that honest poverty and labor involve any degradation, and the country of O'Connell and Sheridan, and Burke and Grattan, and Curran and Moore, and later of Meagher and Corcoran and a thousand other wise and brave men is not to be ignored or despised. I have already told you that I am an Englishman; let us shake hands across St. George's Channel; let the British rose claim

fellowship with the Irish shamrock. You are no poorer than myself."

And so the correspondence ended; Richard Rolfe was on the way with Sherman toward the sea and there were no more letters to Illinois, after one of March 20, 1864. Miss Smith wondered about the long silence until she read of the march through Georgia, the severance of contact with the North, and the consequent interruption of mail service.

Sophia Maria Smith was born ninety years ago on May 1, 1842, in Ballintrain, Ireland. In 1849, after six weeks on the ocean, having sailed in the *Patrick Henry*, she landed with her parents in New York and went at once to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 1855 they moved west to Will County, Illinois, where eight years later she read and reflected on the events of the Civil War.

In 1867 she became the wife of Henry Lee Leonard who, after hearing his neighbor tell of the land in Iowa as the most beautiful "that ever lay out of doors", decided to move there. This neighbor had bought all the land that lies now between Waukee and Ortonville in Dallas County, and to that section of the "beautiful land" the Leonard family came in 1869; and there they have been ever since, and there on May first of this

year Mrs. Sophia M. Leonard celebrated her ninetieth birthday with her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

The first forty acres grew into a large farm; the first "shack", as Mrs. Leonard calls it, grew into a commodious farm house. Furthermore, the common herd gave way to blooded cattle as early as 1884, although it was considered almost a scandal forty years ago when Mr. Leonard paid \$800 for a pure bred Hereford cow. Being a progressive farmer he adopted modern methods early, even tiling his farms when such a practical device had not been thoroughly tested. Later he was "selecting seed corn and judging live stock with a shrewd eye", years before the "Holden Seed Corn Special" and individual stock judging teams came into public notice.

Fifteen years after the events of 1863 the farm life in Iowa had been well established in comfort and prosperity, a fine family was growing up to carry on the Leonard traditions, while the days of adventure and war correspondence were almost forgotten. And then in 1878 the newspapers reported the suicide of Richard Realf, a resident of Oakland, California. Circumstances revealed that he was the Richard Rolfe of the Eighty-eighth Illinois Infantry who had written the eleven letters to Sophie M. Smith of Washington

Center, Illinois. He had never used the name "Realf" then; nor did he refer to his association with John Brown's band in the winter of 1857-58 at the Maxson home near Springdale in Cedar County, Iowa. Only once did he suggest any connection with the contest in Kansas where he joined Brown just before coming to Iowa for that winter's training.

In order to know more of her former correspondent, Mrs. Leonard, in 1878, wrote to the *Chicago Tribune* for information. It came in due time and was substantially as it appears in the *Cyclopedia of American Biography*. Luke Parsons, the last survivor of the men that wintered with Brown at Springdale, says of Realf: "He was small of stature, dark, black hair and eyes; always neatly clad and he would make a good impression anywhere". And, he added, "He was a poetic genius."

Richard Realf was popular that winter in the community about the Maxson farm in Cedar County, where there was study and training for the adventure at Harper's Ferry that failed in 1858 only to be executed in 1859. He was known as the poet of the company, although, at the same time, he was able to stir his audiences by his fiery addresses. Before coming to the United States he had been recognized by a "brilliant circle of

literary people at Brighton". It has been generally said, also, that he was at one time a protégé of Lady Byron and was favored by a brother of Lord Alfred Tennyson. A collection of his poems prefaced by a nephew of Thackeray was published in Brighton in 1852. His verses descriptive of the struggle against the slave power in Kansas won for him the epithet of "Kansas free state poet". It is said, too, that some of his best lyrics were written in the field while a soldier.

Realf was not with John Brown at Harper's Ferry. After the failure in 1858 he had gone to England. Later, returning to Texas, he was found and brought before the Senate committee that investigated the Brown conspiracy. Having enlisted as a private in 1862, he served in the Union army until the end of the war, participating in the Chattanooga campaign and Sherman's march to the sea. While convalescing from wounds in 1865, he contracted an unfortunate marriage, but presently secured a divorce and was married again in 1867. Poverty, misfortune, and his former wife followed him for a decade and eventually drove him to suicide in San Francisco.

Just before swallowing the laudanum that caused his death he expressed his melancholy disillusionment in a farewell poem. "Speak nothing but good of the dead", he pleaded.

"De Mortuis nil nisi bonum", when
For me the end has come and I am dead,
And the little voluble, chattering daws of men
Peck at me curiously, let it then be said
By some one brave enough to speak the truth:
Here lies a great soul killed by cruel wrong.
Down all the balmy days of his fresh youth
To his bleak, desolate noon, with sword and song,
And speech that rushed up hotly from the heart,
He wrought for liberty, till his own wound
(He had been stabbed) concealed with painful art
Through wasting years, mastered him and he swooned
And sank there where you see him lying now
With the word "Failure" written on his brow.

But say that he succeeded. If he missed
World's honours and world's plaudits, and the wage
Of the world's deft lacqueys, still his lips were kissed
Daily by those high angels who assuage
The thirstings of the poets — for he was
Born into singing — and the burthen lay
Mightily on him, and he moaned because
He could not rightly utter to the day
What God taught in the night. Sometimes nathless
Power fell upon him, and upright tongues of flame,
And blessings reached him from poor souls in stress,
And benedictions from black pits of shame,
And little children's love, and old men's prayers,
And a Great Hand that led him unawares.

So he died rich. And if his eyes were blurred
With big films — silence! he is in his grave.
Greatly he suffered; greatly, too, he erred;
Yet brake his heart in trying to be brave.

"De Mortuis Nil Nisi Bonum" was published with the account of his death. On June 10, 1928, it was reprinted on the book page of the Des Moines *Register*, together with some account of the strange career of the man who wrote it. There it came to the attention of Mrs. Leonard whose recollection of her old correspondence was again revived. The original letters she received from Richard Realf (Rolfe), now yellowed with age, are in the care of her daughter, Mrs. Walter Packard, Menlo Park, California.

CLARENCE R. AURNER