



Finding Private Suhre: On the Trail of Louisa May Alcott's “Prince of Patients”

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DURING the course of Louisa May Alcott's literary career, no life experience transformed her writing more profoundly than her brief stint as a Civil War nurse. Alcott volunteered for a nursing position in the Army of the Potomac on or near the day she became eligible for service—her thirtieth birthday. Before that time, her authorial persona had yet to assume a definite shape, and whatever form it was acquiring gave little indication that, in a matter of just six more years, she would become the most popular writer in America. She had thus far produced only one book, a collection of fairy tales titled *Flower Fables*, which had stirred only passing interest among the reading public. A small assortment of other pieces had appeared—principally short stories as well as poems for the *Saturday Evening Gazette*—and she had one bona fide literary triumph to her credit, a story for the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly* titled “Love and Self-Love.” She had a second book in the works, which would become the 1864 novel *Moods*. Yet, as Alcott herself was later to confirm, she had discovered neither her authentic voice nor the kind of material to which her gifts were best suited. She seemed to be on her way to a career hemmed in by the banal tropes and expectations of sentimental, melodramatic magazine fiction.

Despite its transience, Alcott's military service changed all that. In younger days, she had been no stranger to harrowing experiences. As an adolescent, she had braved her family's

grinding poverty. As a young woman, she had looked on as her beloved sister Lizzie succumbed to complications from scarlet fever. In her mid-twenties, Alcott had even entertained thoughts of suicide. Nevertheless, her experience of war exposed her as nothing had yet done to the farthest limits of human struggle and endurance. Confronted with extraordinary suffering, she also discovered that the same challenges that can end in despair when faced alone may lead to transcendence and affirmation when they are shared. Alcott based a book on her nursing experience, a lightly fictionalized memoir she called *Hospital Sketches*, published in 1863. The work was not merely her greatest popular success to that date; much more important, as Alcott put it, composing the volume "showed me 'my style,' & taking the hint I went where glory awaited me."¹

Narrated in the first person, *Hospital Sketches* arguably offers a truer self-portrait of Alcott, bearing the fanciful name Tribulation Periwinckle, than does Jo March. Apart from its narrator, however, *Hospital Sketches* presents few fully developed characters; though deftly drawn with a minimum of strokes, almost all the other figures in the book are, as the title announces, basically "sketches." Yet one startling exception stands forth from the rather ill-defined mass: a mortally wounded patient to whom the text refers simply as "John." Only in her journal did Alcott supply the man's last name, and even there somewhat inconsistently. In one place he is "John Sulie," in another, "John Suhre" (*J*, pp. 118, 113). Beyond question, the real-life John had a profound effect on Alcott's sympathies and memory. As he lay dying, Alcott told her journal that John possessed "all that I could expect or ask from the first gentleman in the land. Under his plain speech & unpolished manner I seem to see a noble character, a heart as warm & tender as a woman's, a nature fresh & frank as any child's" (*J*, p. 113). Thus combining the finest aspects of man, woman, and child, John appears to epitomize humanity's noblest possibilities. When the

¹*The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Joel Myerson et al. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), p. 124 n. 24. Further references to this edition will appear in the text, preceded by the designation *J*.

Commonwealth published her hospital memoir in serial form, Alcott told her journal that her “beautiful ‘John Sulie’ was the hero” of the serial’s most popular installment. She added that “the praise [for the piece’s success] belonged to him” (*J*, p. 118).

Alcott wrote in *Hospital Sketches* that, whereas John believed he was likely to recover, his surgeon was certain that John’s wound, a bullet through the lung, would prove fatal. Lacking the courage to do so himself, the doctor charged Alcott with the sad duty of informing John of his prognosis. Her news still undelivered, Alcott noticed great, silent tears rolling from her patient’s eyes. In what may have been the most memorable words she had yet written, she described what happened next:

[S]traightway my fear vanished, my heart opened wide and took him in, as gathering the bent head in my arms, as freely as if he had been a little child, I said, “Let me help you bear it, John.”

Never, on any human countenance, have I seen so swift and beautiful a look of gratitude, surprise, and comfort, as that which answered me more eloquently than the whispered—

“Thank you, ma’am, this is right good! this is what I wanted!”²

The scene was to become an archetype for Alcott’s later fiction, and of all the moments that influenced her thinking about human relationships, none was more important. It reflected what she came to regard as the highest good in life: the sweetness of sharing another’s suffering. In Alcott’s most striking and memorable scenes involving the death of a male hero, perhaps most notably in the 1873 novel *Work*, the spirit of John is distinctly present.

Yet for more than a century, the identity of Alcott’s saintly John has remained largely hidden. Apart from a description of his last moments in the journal of Hannah Ropes,³ the matron

²Louisa May Alcott, *Hospital Sketches* (1863), ed. Alice Fahs (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004), p. 52. Further references to this edition will appear in the text, preceded by the designation *HS*.

³Hannah Ropes, *Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes*, ed. John R. Brumgardt (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), pp. 117–18.

at the Union Hotel Hospital, we have known no more about him than what *Hospital Sketches* and Alcott's journals chose to tell us. The situation has been further complicated by the fact that much of what Alcott wrote in those documents was, quite simply, false. Having no better information at their disposal, Alcott biographers (the author of this article included) have gamely reiterated Alcott's errors, and the trail leading to the real John has remained disappointingly cold. But now, at long last, the mystery is solved.

The Background

For almost six weeks, from 13 December 1862 until 21 January 1863, Alcott was in residence at the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown in the District of Columbia, where she had been commissioned as a nurse to attend to the needs of the sick and wounded of Major General Ambrose E. Burnside's Army of the Potomac. Her duty, as she phrased it, was "not a bed of roses" (*HS*, p. 69). The volumes of Dickens she had brought with her in hopes of reading aloud to her patients lay too often untouched; almost at the moment she arrived, she was placed in charge of a ward of forty beds, where she passed her "shining hours washing faces, serving rations, giving medicine, and sitting in a very hard chair, with pneumonia on one side, diphtheria on the other, [and] five typhoids on the opposite" (*HS*, p. 69). Alcott's first seventy-two hours of service were, however, relatively placid; her fortitude would soon be severely challenged. As her third day at the hospital dawned, the first casualties began to arrive from the battlefield at Fredericksburg.

The battle's principal action had occurred the same day Alcott arrived in Georgetown. On that raw December day, General Burnside set his sights on driving Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia from its position to the west of Fredericksburg. Burnside's planning in framing his objective was horrendously ill advised. To cross the Rappahannock River into the town, he needed to construct pontoon bridges, but

because the materials required to build them had been slow in arriving, the Confederates had had ample time to fortify their ranks. The left side of the grey-coated line, under the command of James Longstreet, had dug in behind a stone wall at the top of a ridge called Marye's Heights. The defenses were impregnable. Longstreet exaggerated only slightly when he predicted, "If you put every man now on the other side of the Potomac on that field to approach me over the same line . . . I will kill them all before they reach my line."⁴ Undeterred by the massive firepower concentrated behind the wall, Burnside ordered wave after wave of hopeless assaults, ceasing only when the coming of nightfall, mercifully early in that season, foreclosed any additional madness. The slaughter—the official tally was 12,653 Union casualties—was appalling even by Civil War standards.⁵ The battle sent such a shock across the North that some believed President Lincoln would yank the Emancipation Proclamation, slated to take effect on 1 January, off the table.⁶

When the first ambulances arrived at the Union Hotel Hospital, Alcott mistook them for market carts. When she heard a young African boy shout, "They's comin' in I tell yer, heaps on 'em!" (*HS*, pp. 69–70), she quickly realized the gravity of the situation. The following days were a blur of hurry and confusion. Alcott scrubbed and dressed wounds, served huge trays of bread and meat, and poured out rivers of water and coffee. After the chaos subsided, she made beds, washed feverish faces, wrote letters for those who could not write, and sang lullabies to soothe her distressed charges (*HS*, pp. 78–79).

If *Hospital Sketches* can be trusted, Alcott first saw John Suhre around 17 or 18 December, "a day or two" after the first

⁴James Longstreet, "The Battle of Fredericksburg," in *Retreat from Gettysburg: Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel (New York: Castle Books, 1956), p. 81.

⁵George C. Rable, *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg! The Classic Account of the Battle and Its Place in Civil War History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 288.

⁶Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), p. 497.

mass of casualties arrived (*HS*, p. 86). Among "3 or 4 hundred men in all stages of suffering, disease & death" (*J*, p. 113), she quickly singled him out. Her first intelligence of him impressed her greatly. Shot through the lung, Suhre had nevertheless chosen to delay his evacuation from a field station near Fredericksburg in deference to more desperately wounded men. His physical appearance raised her opinion of him still higher. He was "a large, fair man, with a fine face, and the serenest eyes [she] ever met" (*HS*, p. 86). Despite the searing pain of his wound, Suhre "uttered no complaint, asked no sympathy." In his natural stoicism and grace, he became, in very short order, Alcott's "prince of patients" (*J*, p. 113). Alcott told the readers of *Hospital Sketches*, "No picture of dying statesman or warrior was ever fuller of real dignity than this Virginia blacksmith" (*HS*, p. 86).

The Search

Yet vital details regarding Suhre have been scarce, and again, much of the information that Alcott recorded has proved misleading. Indeed, her journals betray an uncertainty about even the most basic facts. As already noted, she gives John's surname variously as "Suhre" and "Sulie." In *Hospital Sketches*, John says he turned thirty in May 1862. He mentions the names of two siblings, Lizzy and Jack, and in both *Hospital Sketches* and in her journal, Alcott characterizes him as a "Virginia blacksmith." Virtually every grain of data just recited was, in truth, Alcott's invention and, intentional or not, a trap for the credulous biographer. Alcott muddied the waters still further by placing her recollections of Suhre at the start of her journal for January 1863, at which point he had been dead nearly a week. Anyone searching for evidence about a thirty-year-old Virginia man named Sulie who passed away in 1863 was certain to get nowhere, and over the years, Alcott's fictionalizations have duped one biographer after another. The great Madeleine B. Stern dutifully recorded that Suhre was a "thirty-year-old Virginia blacksmith," and Harriet Reisen and Eve LaPlante both

followed suit.⁷ Equally taken in was the author of this article, who, in *Eden's Outcasts*, also unwittingly spread the misinformation regarding Suhre's age and state of origin.⁸

Alcott scholars might forever have remained off the scent had it not been for a brief passage by military historian George C. Rable in his spectacular book *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!* At the very end of his chapter on "Wounds," Rable takes brief notice of a letter he believed to have been drafted by an army nurse who was working at a Georgetown hospital. Writing to the mother of "John Shure," the ostensible nurse reports that she had not found his name on the official roster but had, after a lengthy search, tracked him down. Evidently John Suhre was, sadly, elusive even in his own time. Rable quotes a line from the letter: "He thinks he is getting well but does not know his condition."⁹ That line, to an Alcott aficionado, is a smoking gun, for it precisely matches John's prognosis and state of mind in *Hospital Sketches*. The fact that Rable identified the correspondent as a nurse raised the thrilling possibility of a double find: might the letter be in Alcott's hand? To Rable, "John Shure" was just another tragic casualty of Fredericksburg. An expert on war, not literature, he did not seize upon the Alcott connection. The variant spelling of Suhre's last name was a small puzzle, but Rable had said just enough. The trail leading toward Alcott's John, ice cold for more than one hundred fifty years, was warm again, and it led to the archives of the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

One wishes that the file mismarked "Shure Letters" at the War College were a good deal thicker. It contains but two items. Both letters, unfortunately, turned out to be typed transcriptions, not original documents. The first of the two is from

⁷Madeleine B. Stern, *Louisa May Alcott: A Biography* (1950; repr. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), p. 122; Harriet Reisen, *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women* (New York: Picador, 2010), p. 217; Eve LaPlante, *Marmee and Louisa: The Untold Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Mother* (New York: Free Press, 2012), p. 206.

⁸John Matteson, *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008), p. 277.

⁹Rable, *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!* p. 322.

Suhre to his sister, written on 6 October 1862 from a Union encampment near "Sharpesburgh," a locale that even casual Civil War buffs will know as Sharpsburg, the Maryland town adjacent to the battlefield at Antietam. The text of that letter is set forth in the next section of this article.

Suhre's letter, like so many from soldiers at the front, complains about having had no word from home, though he is willing to assume that the army's mail delivery, not his family, is at fault. He reports having been paid and promises to send some money home. As cooler weather descends over the Potomac, he asks his sister to send one of their mother's old quilts, as the regiment has been compelled to leave its wool blankets in Washington. Again, Suhre's unusual last name befuddles a researcher: the transcription at Carlisle records the signature as "John F. Suhrie." Knowing Suhre's middle initial brings one a trifle closer to him, but the real clues to the biographer's search begin to come in a series of names. Suhre mentions corresponding with "George," "Anna," and "Mike," and he asks whether "Emanuel" is at home or "still at Bethany." But the most telling find is the last. It is Suhre's return address: "Company D, 133 Regt." At long last, to learn the particulars of John Suhre's military service, I now had only to walk across the reading room. In volume 4 of Samuel P. Bates's *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers*,¹⁰ the regimental roster for the 133rd Pennsylvania Volunteers lists as having died of his wounds at Fredericksburg a soldier from Company D: Private "John Shure." The misspelling was now explained: Professor Rable, knowing only his military sources and not Alcott, had gone with the spelling in Bates's compilation. John Suhre had finally been coaxed out of the historical shadows.

A few more revelations were in store. Bates avers that Company D of the 133rd was recruited exclusively from Somerset County, which sits on Pennsylvania's southern border, above western Maryland. An internet search for John Suhre of

¹⁰Samuel P. Bates, *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861–1865*, 5 vols. (Harrisburg: B. Singerly, State Printer, 1870; repr. Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing Co., 1994), 4:272.

Somerset County initially yielded nothing. Then I tried “George Suhre,” presuming that the George mentioned in John’s 6 October letter was his brother. The query promptly took me to a genealogical site: the Stahl-Murphy family tree, compiled using Reunion for Macintosh on 14 June 2013. The information discovered there can now be released to Alcott enthusiasts: John Suhre, Louisa May Alcott’s “Prince of Patients,” was born on 29 October 1841, in New Baltimore, Somerset County, Pennsylvania. His parents were the German-born Joseph Suhre (1799–1860) and the Pennsylvania-born Sarah Suhre (1806–1889).¹¹ His siblings were not named Lizzy and Jack, as *Hospital Sketches* records, but Johanna (1845–?) and George H. (1848–1935).¹²

The Battle

The following narrative of John Suhre’s final months has been assembled from a variety of sources.

John F. Suhre, the elder son of a German Catholic immigrant, was less than three months shy of his twenty-first birthday when he joined the Union army. He hesitated to leave home, not because he harbored any extraordinary fear of what lay ahead but because of his family’s precarious state. His father, Joseph, had died two years earlier, and his younger brother, George, was only fourteen, not quite old enough to carry the responsibilities of the man of the house. John may also have been reluctant to depart just a month before the wedding of his half-brother Emanuel at the Church of St. John the Baptist in New Baltimore. However, according to *Hospital Sketches*,

¹¹In *Hospital Sketches*, John tells Trib Periwinkle (Louisa) that his mother is a widow. In this particular, at least, Alcott told the truth.

¹²Jacob Miller of the Historical and Genealogical Society of Somerset County, located in Somerset, Pennsylvania, has been able to add the following information: “John’s mother was Sarah Suhr(i)e nee Meyer/Moyer. Her first husband was Michael Lowry who died in 1839. She had 5 children with him; Maria, Samuel, Anna (mentioned in John’s letter), Emanuel, and Michael Conrad. She remarried to Joseph Suhre around 1840 and had three children with him; John, Johanna (Joannah), and George H.” Miller places Joseph Suhre’s death date at 1856. E-mail from Jacob A. Miller to the author, 25 September 2014. Members of the Stahl-Murphy family, whom I contacted as I was preparing this article, had no further information to add.

John's widowed mother pressed a ring into his hand, a talisman for safekeeping, and said "Go." And so he had gone. The fictionalized John in *Hospital Sketches* tells Trib Periwinkle, "I didn't want the glory or the pay; I wanted the right thing done" (*HS*, p. 90). The real John Suhre was not quite as indifferent to being compensated for his service, for his one known letter reports that he had just received the twenty-five-dollar enlistment bounty he had been promised as well as a two-dollar premium. He cared enough about the money not to want to risk its being stolen by sending it home in a letter.

The regiment into which Suhre was recruited, the 133rd Pennsylvania Volunteers, under the command of Colonel Edward M. Schrock, was brought together at Camp Curtin in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, over the first ten days of August 1862. Suhre, inducted a few days later on 14 August, signed on, like all the regiment's personnel, for a nine-month enlistment. On 19 August, the regiment went to Washington, where it was brigaded with the 123rd, 131st, and 134th Pennsylvania Volunteers under the leadership of Mexican War veteran Colonel Peter H. Allabach. By 27 August, the brigade was encamped at Alexandria, Virginia, where it remained until the thirtieth, thereby missing the Union defeat at Second Bull Run.¹³

Suhre and the rest of his regiment then spent almost two weeks performing picket duty and digging entrenchments, after which they were sent back to Washington. There they exchanged their original weapons—an assortment of defective and virtually useless Austrian-made rifles—for Springfield muskets, traded their company tents for lighter shelter tents, and were issued sixty rounds of ammunition apiece. On 17 September, near Sharpsburg, Maryland, came the horrific bloodbath at Antietam. Suhre's regiment again drew a lucky card; initially held back to protect the city of Frederick, Maryland, the regiment's division did not receive orders to advance until 3:30 P.M. on the day of the battle. The division's commander, Brigadier General A. A. Humphreys, drove his men on a twenty-three

¹³Bates, *Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 4:263.

mile trek toward Sharpsburg. “The men were unaccustomed to marching, and were foot-sore,” Humphreys reported, “but I marched all night.” The 133rd arrived on the scene the morning after the fighting.¹⁴ Fortified by a brief rest and coffee, Suhre and his fellows prepared for a resumption of the struggle, but no resumption came. Alcott writes in *Hospital Sketches* that Fredericksburg was Suhre’s first battle (*HS*, p. 90). Such was indeed the case.

That afternoon, the two armies were under a brief, informal truce, declared so that both sides could tend to their casualties. It is likely that the first implement John Suhre saw employed on a battlefield was not a rifle but a shovel; burial details were organized to dig graves, marking them with forlorn-looking headboards improvised from hardtack boxes and ammunition cases.¹⁵ The Union commander, George B. McClellan, intended to resume fighting on 19 September, at which time Suhre and his comrades would have taken part in a bitter struggle. However, their luck still held. Lee’s army slipped back to the south of the Potomac River during the night, and McClellan chose not to pursue his adversary.

The 133rd settled into camp a mile outside Sharpsburg, on Shepherdstown Road, where they engaged in company and battalion drill and where, on 6 October, John Suhre wrote his one known letter. It is published here for the first time:

Camp near Sharpesburgh
Oct, 6th 1862

My Dear Sister

You will see by the heading of this letter that we are still in the vacinaty of Sharpesburgh. i do not know how long we will remain here. Perhaps we will make our winter quarters here. i am so ancious to here from home. It is almost three weeks now or quiet since we got our last mail. i cannot account for this unless it is through the

¹⁴Bates, *Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 4:263.

¹⁵Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), p. 304.

in Suhre's regiment declared that he would have paid five dollars for the grand improvement of sleeping in his father's hog pen.¹⁶ Once in Falmouth, Suhre's unit remained for almost a month. It was here that the new commander of the Union's Army of the Potomac, Major General Burnside, chose to mass his forces for an attack on Fredericksburg, Virginia, a town on the far side of the Rappahannock River—the river along which Laurie, in the “Letters” chapter of *Little Women*, playfully reports that all is “serene.”¹⁷ Shure and his fellow soldiers were kept waiting at Falmouth for the materials for the needed pontoon bridges that seemed never to arrive.

On 11 December, under heavy fog and in spite of determined harassment from Confederate sharpshooters and infantry regiments, Burnside succeeded in spanning the Rappahannock and capturing the largely evacuated town. For the next two nights, Union soldiers, many of them intoxicated, pillaged Fredericksburg. They broke into deserted homes, smashed what they could not steal, and hauled pianos out into the streets.¹⁸ Suhre's regiment took no part in the plunder. Suhre spent his last night of good health bivouacked on the far side of the river within sight of Burnside's headquarters.¹⁹

The 133rd's great test took place on Saturday, 13 December 1862, the day of Burnside's repeated, doomed attacks on Marye's Heights. As they moved out of the town and toward the Heights, the Union forces were compelled to cross a canal via a pair of bridges to make their assault. They were thus forced to move in solid columns of fours—of all formations, the most vulnerable to enemy fire. Before traversing the canal, the bunched and helpless columns had to march two hundred yards squarely into Confederate artillery and musket fire. Beyond, at a distance of four hundred more yards, stood a four-foot-tall stone

¹⁶Rable, *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!* p. 71.

¹⁷Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women, or Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy* (1868–69), *A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004), p. 140.

¹⁸Thomas Francis Galway, “An Irishman's View of the Battle,” in *The Battle of Fredericksburg! A Special Edition of Civil War Times Illustrated* (Gettysburg, Pa.: Historical Times, Inc., 1965), p. 48.

¹⁹Galway, “An Irishman's View of the Battle,” p. 18.

wall, behind which waited four ranks of veteran riflemen, with ample reinforcements nearby.²⁰ Surveying the ground, Confederate artilleryman E. Porter Alexander predicted, "A chicken could not live on that field when we open on it."²¹

Starting around noon, impervious to the impossibility of the task, Burnside ordered brigade after brigade up the slope. Under the Confederates' fire, the blue-clad soldiers melted "like snow coming down on warm ground."²² The slaughter had gone on for hours when Burnside sent forward the Third Division of Brigadier General Daniel Butterfield's Fifth Army Corps. That division, led by Brigadier General Humphreys, had, up to that point, been waiting in relative safety on the other side of the river. In the second brigade of Humphreys's division were the 133rd Pennsylvania and John F. Suhre. Colonel Franklin Bailey Speakman, who led the 133rd into the fray, wrote the following lines in his official report:

Between two and three o'clock P.M. . . . the regiment, in common with the other regiments of the brigade, was ordered to cross the river. This was successfully done, although the shells from the enemy's batteries were falling thick and fast, and exploding over us. I advanced my regiment as directed, through Fredericksburg, crossed the canal, or race, just outside of the city, and filing to the left formed line of battle under cover of a small hill. The regiment was placed on the right, and in the advance, the fourth battalion, Colonel Allen, being on our left.²³

Around that time, General Butterfield directed Humphreys that he was to take his order to advance from Major General Darius Couch. Presently, Couch received word that the Confederates were retreating from the Heights, and he informed Humphreys, "Hancock reports the enemy is falling back; now is the time for you to go in!" Now was emphatically *not* the

²⁰Bruce Catton, *Glory Road* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Inc., 1952), pp. 50–51.

²¹Longstreet, "The Battle of Fredericksburg," p. 79.

²²Darius N. Couch, "Sumner's 'Grand Right Division,'" in *Retreat from Gettysburg*, p. 113.

²³Bates, *Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 4:264.

time for Humphreys to go in. Hancock's report was wholly in error; the Confederates were merely moving some tired men off the front line and replacing them with fresher units. Yet Humphreys accepted the order with a determined look that Couch recalled a quarter-century later. He and his men were ready.²⁴

Humphreys had seen what happened to soldiers who stopped to fire while charging the Heights, and he concluded that the only way to carry the position was with bayonets. Accordingly, Suhre's comrades unslung their knapsacks and fixed bayonets. They moved forward about two hundred fifty yards until they came upon a line of troops pinned down by enemy fire. Speakman's report neglected to include a disquieting footnote: the 133rd was one of the last regiments to attempt Marye's Heights. It was almost dark. As the regiment passed over the place where survivors of the previous attacks were sheltering, some of them grievously wounded, the prostrate men clutched at the shirts and trousers of the advancing troops, begging them not to continue on toward a certain death. Speakman's men paused, not sure whether they were supposed to move ahead, and "covered themselves as well as they could in the rear of this line." Having received a second order to press on, Speakman urged his men forward again, but struggling against deepening mud, their lines became disordered. As a staff officer galloped into view, shrieking at the men to re-form their ranks, a blast erupted from behind the stone wall, cutting down nearly half the division. "The stone wall," Humphreys wrote, "was a sheet of flame."²⁵

At this point, John Suhre was probably still untouched, a point that can be inferred from the letter sent to his mother from the Union Hotel Hospital, which states that Suhre had exhausted his ammunition firing at the enemy. As yet, the 133rd had been under orders not to discharge their weapons. Despite

²⁴Couch, "Sumner's 'Grand Right Division,'" p. 115.

²⁵"Report of Brig. Gen. Andrew A. Humphreys," 16 December 1862, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 53 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1888), ser. 1, vol. 21, p. 432.

their tremendous casualties, the remnant of Suhre's regiment had made it to within fifty yards of the wall, where the enemy fire was at last too intense for them to continue on. Suhre and his comrades fell to the ground and, "under a most terrific fire from the enemy's infantry and artillery," proceeded to hold their position for an hour, returning fire as often as they were able, until the sky turned pitch black.²⁶ Finally, the men were ordered to withdraw.

His ammunition gone, John Suhre's luck was soon to follow; during that insufferable hour in the cold, the dark, and the mud, he likely received his mortal wound. The letter sent to his mother states that he was struck not once but twice, one bullet lodging in his breast and the other passing through his lung.²⁷ Days later, at the Union Hotel Hospital, the hospital matron counted a third wound under Suhre's shoulder.²⁸

Precisely what became of Suhre from the moment he was shot until he appeared at the Union Hotel Hospital is uncertain. During the night, the 133rd sent out squads to recover those killed and wounded.²⁹ Confederate sharpshooters did not allow them free rein, however, and General Couch recalled that many died where they lay, victims of either their injuries or exposure. Those who died stiffened in the wintry air. Desperate to protect themselves, survivors rolled corpses together to form grisly breastworks against the unrelenting threat of enemy fire.³⁰ At some point, Suhre must have been evacuated to the east side of the Rappahannock. As previously stated, he gave up his place in the first convoys heading to Georgetown so that more grievously injured men might receive treatment sooner. Nothing more is known of him until Alcott and the hospital matron, Hannah Ropes, took up the narrative in Georgetown.

²⁶Bates, *Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 4:264.

²⁷E. M. Schrock, "To Sarah Suhre [*sic*]," 25 December 1862, Shure [*sic*] Letters, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pa.

²⁸Ropes, *Civil War Nurse*, p. 117.

²⁹Bates, *Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 7:264.

³⁰Couch, "Sumner's 'Grand Right Division,'" p. 116.

The Aftermath

At the hospital, Suhre soon attracted the attention of both Alcott and Ropes. Alcott confided their shared sentiments to her journal: “Mrs. Ropes and myself love him & feel indignant that such a man should be so early lost” (*J*, p. 113). She wrote in *Hospital Sketches* that John “seemed to cling to life, as if it were rich in duties and delights, and he had learned the secret of content” (*HS*, p. 87). Ropes’s description might have been taken from the same page. She observed, “There was in the man such a calm consciousness of life, such repose on its secure strength. There he lay, his broad chest heaving with obstinate breath, but the face as composed in its manly beauty, as though he were taking natural rest in sleep.”³¹ Both women gauged the gravity of Suhre’s condition before he did.

Suhre’s prognosis and his ignorance of its severity are confirmed in the second and last letter in his file at the Army War College, written on Christmas Day to his anxious mother. Though identified by George Rable as the handiwork of a nurse, it was not from a nurse at all. Working from a typed transcript at the Army War College, which does not list the author’s name, Rable drew a reasonable inference. However, the original letter survives in the collections of the Historical and Genealogical Society of Somerset County, Pennsylvania, and I reproduce it here with permission. The signature, though torn, is distinguishable: it belongs to E[dward] M[organ] Schrock, the captain who had served as the original commanding officer of Suhre’s Company D.

Washington Dec 25 1862

Mrs. Sarah Suhre

Your Son is at the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown. His name was not on the list and it was only after a lengthy search that I found him. He was in the fight at Fredericksburg where so many brave men lost their lives for their Country’s liberty. He fought bravely as long as he had ammunition to fire at the enemy.

³¹Ropes, *Civil War Nurse*, p. 117.

He received 2 wounds the one ball is lodged in his breast And one passed through his Lungs. I think he cannot live to get well again. It would have been very pleasant to have staid with him during his last hours of suffering on this earth but I can do no more than visit the wounded. He thinks he is getting well but does not know his condition — I gave him some money and left him with a heavy heart expecting never to see the young man again in this world. If you write direct to Georgetown D.C. Union Hotel Hospital

I am truly yours
E. M. Schrock³²

John Suhre lived but one day after the letter to his mother was written. On 27 December, Hannah Ropes, the hospital matron, recorded the soldier's last moments in her journal. Around 6 P.M. on the 26th, struggling to utter each labored word, Suhre "reached his hand into Miss Alcott's lap and firmly grasped her wrist." To Ropes, he haltingly said, "Thank you, madam, I think I must be marching on." Two hours later, he took his final breath. Ropes called Alcott to the dead man's bedside, bestowed a kiss on his mortal remains, and said, simply, "Good by."³³ The litany of errors that would so long obscure the life and death of John F. Suhre was not Alcott's doing alone. Ropes's journal names him "Lewie" (an aural variant of Alcott's Sulie), not Suhre. According to Bates's *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers*, Private John Shure [*sic*] died of his wounds on December 29 [*sic*]. He was buried at the Military Asylum Cemetery (now known as the United States Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemetery) in Washington, D.C.³⁴

Of the approximately two hundred sixty Union infantry regiments under Burnside's command at Fredericksburg, only eight suffered more casualties than the 133rd. It was by far the most intense engagement in the history of the regiment, which suffered a modest loss at Chancellorsville in May 1863, shortly

³²I am deeply grateful to Jacob Miller and the Historical and Genealogical Society of Somerset County for sharing the original manuscript of this letter with me and for allowing me to reprint it here.

³³Ropes, *Civil War Nurse*, pp. 117–18.

³⁴Bates, *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 4:272.

before the regiment's enlistment period expired. On 19 May, the unit returned to Harrisburg and was mustered out of service *en masse* a week later.³⁵

Just why Louisa May Alcott found it appropriate to fictionalize the details of John Suhre's life in *Hospital Sketches*—his place of origin, his age, the names of his relatives—may be long debated. By placing John's origins in Virginia instead of his native Pennsylvania, Alcott may have been indulging in a bit of Unionist propaganda. There were, indeed, soldiers from Virginia who had chosen loyalty to the Union above fealty to their state. Perhaps Alcott hoped that Suhre's example would prompt others to follow suit. Then, too, it appears that the Suhre family had a number of ties to Bethany College, to which Suhre refers in his 6 October letter. Though the college lies in modern-day

³⁵The "Mike" to whom Suhre reports having sent a dollar in his 6 October letter and an individual appearing in an annotation at the bottom of Schrock's letter that reports Suhre's wounding are almost certainly one and the same. The annotation records that Suhre's half-brother was M. C. Lowry. In a list of Civil War soldiers from Somerset County who were killed in battle, the November 1961 issue of the *Laurel Messenger* cites a Michael C. Lowry (<http://www.pagenweb.org/~someset/history/cwhonor.htm>; accessed 2 December 2014).

According to United States Army Archives, Michael Conrad Lowry, of the 39th Regiment of the Tenth Pennsylvania Reserves, Company A, was mustered into service on 20 June 1861. Wounded at Gaines Mill the following June, he was then captured and paroled within about a month and was admitted to Chesapeake General Hospital at Fortress Monroe on 27 July 1862. He returned to the Tenth Reserves in November, in time to take part in and die at the battle of Fredericksburg on the same day that Suhre was mortally wounded (<files.usgwarchives.net/pa/someset/military/cwr/l/lowry-michael-c.txt>; accessed 2 December 2014). Lowry's regiment was attached to General George Meade's division, which was heavily engaged on the Union's left flank at Fredericksburg, far removed from Suhre's 133rd. Lowry was doubtless shot a few hours before Suhre. Whether Suhre learned of Lowry's passing is unknown.

Two men alluded to in Suhre's letter survived the war, and both took up careers in journalism. "Emanuel" is almost certainly Emanuel Lowry, Suhre's half-brother. Born in Somerset County in 1837, he pursued "a classical course in Bethany College" in Bethany, West Virginia, a stint that accounts for Suhre's reference to Bethany (http://www.archive.org/stream/alottofcityin10000gibs/alottofcityin10000gibs_djvu.txt ["*A Lott of City in 100 Years*": *A Centennial History of Gibson City, Illinois*]; accessed 2 December 2014). When Suhre wrote home, Lowry was newly wed, having married Phoebe Colborn in Somerset County the previous month. In 1875, he moved to Gibson City, Illinois, and purchased the *Gibson Courier*, of which he became the publisher. Suhre's younger brother George, also educated at Bethany College, had been born in Milford, Pennsylvania, in May 1848. He founded the *Salisbury Independent* in 1872 and was the associate editor of another area periodical, the *Meyersdale Commercial (History of Bedford, Somerset, and Fulton Counties, Pennsylvania* [Chicago: Waterman, Watkins & Co., 1884], pp. 437–39).

West Virginia, in December 1862 West Virginia had yet to declare itself separate from Virginia. Alcott may have remembered Suhre referring to Bethany, and the misconception that he lived in Virginia may have stuck in her mind. As for Suhre's age, in the fictionalized *Hospital Sketches*, John tells Trib that he has recently turned thirty. In her journal, however, Alcott simply hazards a guess. Given her strong affinity with Suhre, she may have wanted to imagine him nearer her own age, or, indeed, she may simply have estimated imperfectly. Then again, many a young man has donned a few extra years to impress a slightly older woman. Alcott's "Prince of Patients" may have innocently inflated his age, prompting Alcott's own miscalculation.

Louisa May Alcott's military career outlasted Suhre's by less than a month, and it nearly ended just as tragically. Despite her naturally robust constitution, the relentless work, poor diet, and exposure to disease that Alcott encountered at the hospital rapidly wore down her resistance. Along with the hospital matron, Alcott contracted typhoid pneumonia. On 20 January 1863, Ropes died of the disease. Alcott, too, was near death. Before she succumbed, Ropes sent a telegram to the Alcotts in Concord, urging them to come and rescue their daughter at once. Alcott's father Bronson arrived on the sixteenth. Fearing that she was too weak to survive the journey home, the hospital's doctors forbade removing her; Ropes's death changed their minds. After another day's delay, occasioned by bad weather, Bronson left Georgetown with Louisa on the twenty-first. By the time they reached Concord, Louisa had fallen into delirium. She did not emerge from that state for three weeks. To make matters worse, in a well-intentioned but disastrous attempt to cure her disease, the doctors in Georgetown had dosed her heavily with mercurous chloride, a compound better known as calomel. The treatment poisoned her, and she continued to battle its lingering effects for the rest of her life.³⁶

Nevertheless, the experience that made a ruin of her body also wrought a series of beneficial transformations. Months later, when she had recovered enough to ride and walk around

³⁶See my *Eden's Outcasts*, pp. 280–90.

Concord, Alcott thought she had been spiritually reborn. She found the New England springtime “beautiful and new” and felt herself restored in like fashion (*J*, p. 118). Her brush with death had taught her to value life as never before. Her suffering and sacrifice had also redeemed her in the eyes of her father, who had long been inclined to regard her as selfish and wayward. After he had seen her give up nearly all she was and had for the causes of union and abolition, his criticisms of her ceased, and their relationship became one of deep mutual respect. In his eighties, Bronson Alcott wrote a series of sonnets, one for each member of his family. His sonnet for Louisa mentioned only secondarily her international success as a writer; it honored above all her military service. In the poem’s last line, Bronson wrote, “I press thee to my heart, as Duty’s faithful child.”³⁷

From Alcott’s weeks of nursing also came *Hospital Sketches*, her greatest professional success to that date. The book did more than secure her literary reputation; it showed her that she no longer needed to search her imagination alone to find the stuff of stories: her own life was rich enough.

When John Suhre died, Alcott refused to believe that such a naturally noble man could have died in vain. However futile the struggle at Fredericksburg had been, Alcott clung to the belief that Suhre’s sacrifice had meaning. She told her journal, “Though he might never distinguish himself before the world, his influence & example cannot be without effect, for real goodness is never wasted” (*J*, p. 113). John Suhre, a man of “common . . . education and condition,” by Alcott’s own account (*J*, p. 113), could hardly have anticipated that the legacy of his goodness would be in any sense literary. Nevertheless, by extraordinary chance, he offered an example of courage and an enduring inspiration to the woman who wrote *Little Women* and who shaped the course of American writing and the concept of American childhood more profoundly than all but a handful of her countrymen and women. His efforts were not lost. And now, neither is he.

³⁷A. Bronson Alcott, *Sonnets and Canzonets* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1882), p. 73.

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