

## THE PASSING SHOW

WILLA CATHER

At last the poems of Richard Realf, poet, soldier and workman—some would add the harsher title, adventurer—who spent the six cleanest and happiest years of his disorderly life in Pittsburg—have been collected and edited. Twenty one year's ago Realf's tragic death in San Francisco attracted universal attention. He committed suicide there by drinking laudanum, driven to desperation by domestic troubles and pursued by the malignancy of an almost incredible hatred. His death was called a tragedy; it was, however, merely the end of one, the falling of the curtain on a tragedy which had lasted forty-four years. There are men who are simply cast for the tragic parts in life. Such a role was assigned the man who was once the Byronic genius of the Pittsburg press, and he played it fiercely and well, up to the limit of his heart and brain and strength, played it to the death. Though the man has not yet been dead a quarter of a century, the story of his life is so wild, so horrible, so fantastically grotesque that it reads like a romance evolved by some disordered brain.

Richard Realf was born in Sussex county, Eng'and, in 1834. He was born one of the heirs of poverty and worked at gardening to pay for his schooling. When he was eighteen he published a volume of verses, "Guesses at the Beautiful," which attracted the attention of Eliza Cook, Gerald Massey, Lady Byron and her daughter, and a nephew of Thackeray's, and unfortunately secured him their patronage. The young man became the idol of Brighton, the most fashionable watering place in England, at the height of the season—and for a season only. This untimely adulation affected him as disastrously as it had done Burns years before, and completely disarmed him for the struggle before him. For, as George Eliot remarked, "To be an uncommon young man is to have an uncommon difficulty in getting along."

He was made steward on one of the Byron estates and there became entangled in a disastrous love affair with a Miss Noel, a relative of Byron's, the first of those baleful attachments which eventually wrecked his life. As if prophetic of the end, the first love affair was terrible in its consequences. He contracted large debts, wandered over England indulging in freakish excesses which called his sanity into question, and was at last found barefooted and in rags in the streets of Southampton, singing ballads for the pennies which passersby threw in his hat. So most of his dreams of love—and they exhausted arithmetic—began in the clouds and ended in the streets. The "eternal feminine" which was to thwart him at every turn, wait for him in every path, despoil him of every honor, hold his feet forever in the mire and at last track him to his death, was first born into his life with madness and destitution and shame in its wake. And whenever and wherever it crossed and recrossed his life, it left that same black stain. The influence which has lifted other poets to the stars, for him put out the sun and more than once threatened to extinguish the light of reason itself.

In 1855 Realf landed in New York. In 1858 Richard Realf and literature parted company and he went to Kansas to take part in the anti-slavery struggle there, having been one of that convention which pledged its members to death in the cause of liberty. He was a member of John Brown's band, but left for England before the raid on Harper's

Ferry. On his return he entered a Jesuit college, remained there three months, then wandered over the country lecturing for some months, and then went out in one of those strange disappearances which clouded his life and perplex his biographers. He had periods of total disappearance, absolute lapses, as it were, from the world of the living. During these disappearances nothing whatever could be learned of him. At this time he was seemingly blotted out for almost two years. When he again rose to the surface and cast a shadow amongst living men, he enlisted in the Union army. His military career was brilliant. His name was recorded several times in eulogistic general orders for high personal heroism during the two years of mighty fighting in which the army of the Cumberland bore so large a part. His bearing of the colors to the front at Missionary Ridge has been splendidly described by his biographer, Colonel R. J. Hinton;

"The dark winding line climbed ever up and up, one regiment moving eagerly to the front. The heavy fire from the enemy's rifle pits belched forth, and the blue line, yet unformed, momentarily broke. The flag rose, and then suddenly fell to the ground, for the bearer had been shot. It seemed minutes, but it was not really a second of time, when clearly against the hazy autumn sky a slight, lithe figure, sword in hand, was seen to dash out from the swaying ranks. The flag was raised and swung aloft as the soldier faced the command behind. Cheers were borne to the straining ears of appreciative generals and then the whole line swung swiftly forward to bayonet point under a terrific rifle fire. At the forefront was seen the soldier with pointing blade and waving colors leading the way. A moment more and the rifle pits were reached. A second's clash and the flag was there above the low line of rifle pits. Over the works went the Eighty-eighth Illinois."

In 1845, while Realf was still serving as a soldier, he contracted his first legal marriage with Sophie E. Graves, whom he met in a small western town. When he was ordered south he left her in Indiana, apparently with every intention of returning to her. His letters to her were warm and frequent. But while he was serving in the south a fancy seized him for a society woman who lived in Washington, and when he received his discharge he hastened to that city against the promptings of his own reason, swayed by one of those violent and apparently irresistible caprices which governed and wrecked his life, and led his eager feet through such weary wanderings in despair and night. Of his latter marriage his biographer says:

"The marriages of Richard Realf have been much discussed. I use the plural, though legally there was but one marriage. The second ceremony was bigamous in character and Realf had no knowledge whatever of his being free from the wholesome and honorable relation that he first entered upon. The third relationship entered upon after he had obtained from one state court a divorce from the woman he contracted marriage with at Rochester, N. Y., was, if any validity could attach, of the common law order. His partner in this third union was the mother of children by him, and everywhere in his latter years he spoke of her as "my wife." His efforts, letters, and speech were burdened by his intense desire to take care of her and the children. These were triplets, all girls, and fortunately these have been adopted and well provided for. The son has grown to a manhood worthy and upright.

Catherine Cassidy and Richard Realf were married at the Church of the Trinity, Rochester, early in October, 1867. Realf himself never denied his

folly in this matter, though he never acknowledged, except to his sister, some ten years later, the illegality of the act. It is not supposable that he believed himself to have then had another and living wife. In some exceedingly pathetic letters he afterwards wrote when jealousy made his second companion a raging terror to him, that his Rochester marriage was contracted during a prolonged debauch, and to myself and Colonel Samuel F. Tappen, his two oldest Kansas friends, he declared that he so acted in a fit of mental aberration."

The six years he spent in Pittsburg as writer and editor on the Commercial, were the least tempestuous and most useful of his life. There he became a convert to Francis Murphy's temperance movement, for a time overcame the liquor habit and lectured as co worker with the reformer. His wife appeared on the scene and he obtained a divorce. He went to England and on his return was completely unmanned to find that the decree of divorce had been annulled by a higher court. That moment was the one which prefigured the end, the "fatal third act" of the grim tragedy he played. Scandal engulfed him, he lost his position and became a vagrant again, took up the old course of dark ways and blind wanderings under a starless heaven. He drifted from place to place, from strait to strait, from disgrace to disgrace, always pursued by an implacable fury—a hate which never slept. His flight was only stopped by the Pacific ocean. In San Francisco he hid himself deep. He was working industriously and hoping to bring his third wife to him when his Pittsburg pursuer came. He returned to his lodgings one night to find her destroying his manuscripts and effects. He asked no questions then. The time had come, the supreme moment. It was time for the curtain. The finest steel has its yielding point. He spent his last money for laudanum and got a room in a hotel. He wrote letters to his friends explaining his act, saying:

"On no account is the person calling herself my wife to be permitted to approach my remains. I should quiver with horror even in my death at her touch.

"I have had heavy burdens to bear, such as have set stronger men than I reeling into hell. I have tried to bear them like a man, but can endure no more."

He wrote, moreover, one of the most remarkable poems in the language, the last lines blurred by the poison which had numbed his hand but not chilled his brain. He was buried with a circlet of yellow hair on his arm, a love-token from his first love, Miss Noel. The first madness and the last; there was very little difference between them save of time and circumstance. In the first folly was the essence of the last. But the verses, which were the bloody sweat of all this anguish, they will live as long as American letters.

Genius is the one thing indestructible.

The following is a part of his last poem, the swan song which he wrote alone, penniless and dying on that last fateful night in San Francisco. A man's lips never uttered a braver death cry. A man's soul never went out in greater agony:

"But say that he succeeded. If he missed World's honors, 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 unto singing—and a 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 bright 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 broke his heart in trying to be brave. Nor did he wait till Freedom had become The popular shibboleth of courtier's lips; He smote for her when God himself seemed dumb And all His arching skies were in eclipse. He was a-weary, but he fought his fight. And stood for simple manhood; and was joyed To see the august broadening of the light And new earths heaving heavenward from the void. He loved his fellows and their love was sweet— Plant daisies at his head and at his feet."

George Moore, in his critique on Paul Verlaine, says that a great poem is the most indestructible thing in the world; that if a great poem were cast in the sands of the Sahara desert or dropped upon one of the remote islands of the sea it would be recovered and accorded its place among the world's priceless possessions. The theory accords well with the fact that these scattered poems, written for obscure journals published in out-of-the-way places, sired by a wandering vagrant, now a soldier, now a tramp, now a reformer, now a debauche, who spent half his life fleeing from the consequences of his own mistakes, have been at last ferreted out, collected, published and accorded the place of distinction which is their due. Of all the storm and stress of this man's life, of all his innumerable follies and unspeakable anguish, of all his dreams which were born on the mountain tops only to die in the gutter, of all his tenderness and pity and courage, these three-score poems are what remains. In the language of Mr. Henry James, "How much of life it takes to make a little art!"

Every expression of the human soul through the medium of art is valuable either as art, or a documentary evidence upon life itself, as psychological data. It is impossible to judge the verses of Richard Realf merely as poetry. They were born in the stormy atmosphere of overwrought emotions and to the emotions rather than to critical discrimination do they appeal. Simple human anguish is outside the province of criticism. Of a death scene enacted on the stage, deliberately planned, no matter how intensely played or how complete the abandon of the actor, one may say that it is well done or ill done. But before death itself, criticism is dumb. There are two sonnets by Realf, among his best, which are wonderfully revelatory of the two sides of his character, the imperious frenzy of his personal needs and desires to which he sacrificed everything, and which drove him from folly to folly, and the beautiful tenderness, the true poet soul that lived and suffered amid all these tempests until the end, and made him beloved by all men, and by all women, save one.

### PASSION.

I clench my arms about your neck until  
The knuckles of my hand grow white  
with pain,  
And my swollen muscles quiver with the  
strain,  
And all the pulses of my life stand still.  
I say I clench so. Ah! you cannot tear  
Yourself away from my mortal grip  
Of forlorn tenderness and salt despair.

And child-like sorrowing after fellowship,  
And wolf-like hunger of the famishing  
heart;  
For not until my sundering fibers crack,  
And my torn limbs from their wrenched  
sockets start,  
O darling, darling! will I yield me back  
To that lone hell whence, shuddering  
through and through,  
With one wild tiger leap I sprang to you.

### SILENCE TILL.

But do not heed my trembling; do not shrink  
Because my face is haggard and my eyes  
Blaze hot with thirstiness as they would