

MARY LOUISA WALKER ROBERTS*

By HELEN NOBLE WORST

BLOCKADE-RUNNING during the last days of the Civil War was a serious business, fraught with almost certain disaster; an adventure to make strong men quail and turn back; and which held unmitigated terror for a woman. Yet Mary Louisa Walker Roberts essayed it, and succeeded. Neither love nor lust for gold inspired her—compassion had her by the hand and steeled her heart. Her ship was not loaded with powder and shot; its holds, instead, were filled with bandages and medicines for the wounded soldiers of the Confederacy. It was the last vessel to run the gantlet of the Union fleet and to dock safely in a Southern port.

Mary Louisa Walker, later Roberts, the second daughter of Isaac and Eliza Ann (Brooke) Walker, was born on June 2nd, 1835, in Sadsbury Township, Lancaster county. Her mother was a great-great-great-granddaughter of Thomas Croasdale, who came to America on the ship "Welcome" with William Penn. Her father, later known as "The Historian of Lancaster County," had a most interesting ancestral back-ground. He was the great-great-great-great grandson of Nicholas Newlin, who came to America in 1683, settled in Concord Township, Chester county (now Delaware county), was commissioned, in 1684, one of the Justices of the Courts of Chester county, and in 1685 was called to the Council of the Governor and the Proprietary, William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania. His great-great-great grandfather, Nathaniel Newlin, (son of the above Nicholas Newlin), was the owner and founder of Newlin Township, Chester county, Pa., was a member of the Provincial Assembly in 1698; one of the committee on the Revision of the Laws and Government of Pennsylvania in 1700; a Justice of the County Courts in 1703; one of the Commissioners

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of Property, and one of the Trustees of the General Loan Office of the Province from 1722 to 1729. He was, also, the great-great grandson of each of the following men, all of whom were prominent during the colonial period: Guyon (or Gayen) Miller, of Kennett, Pa., who was a member of the Provincial Assembly in 1714; Jeremiah Starr, of Chester county, a member of the Provincial Assembly in 1740; Nathaniel Newlin, 2nd, (son of Nathaniel Newlin) who was also a member of the Provincial Assembly; Andrew Moore, one of the founders of Sadsbury Friends' Meeting, and who was instrumental in erecting the first meeting house there in 1725; and Lewis Walker, of Valley Forge, whose holding of 1000 acres was purchased direct from William Penn, his friend.

It is worth noting that Lewis Walker erected for his home the first stone residence at Valley Forge, the edifice being used in the Revolutionary times by General George Washington as his headquarters; and that he gave the ground there for a Friends meeting house and cemetery. The meeting house was used for a hospital during the war.

When the Civil War broke out, Miss Walker was on the eve of graduation at Baltimore Female College—in fact, had just finished preparing her dress for the Commencement exercises, when the first Union army came marching through on its way to invade Virginia. Nearly all of her classmates were Southern girls, and she, herself, was imbued with the feeling that States' rights was the paramount issue in the impending strife; therefore, she cast her lot with the Confederacy and at once proceeded to Richmond to volunteer her services. She was assigned for duty as nurse-in-chief of Howard's Grove hospital, at Richmond, serving without pay.

For four terrible years she witnessed all the horrors of war, as only a hospital attendant has seen them, attending day and night to the sick, wounded and dying, with corpses of young men in their teens and old gray-headed men piled in ranks from the floor to the ceiling in the next room, while the booming of the cannon was shaking the building to its foundations.

When supplies were needed, she braved not only the perils of the deep, but the shrieking cannon balls and bursting shells of the

blockaders as she went on her missions to Canada to raise money for the sick and wounded on several occasions.

As the war proceeded, however, and the Union fleets tightened their grip on Southern ports, supplies of all kinds became almost impossible to obtain. Finally, it became imperative that outside aid be smuggled in somehow, and Miss Walker volunteered for the undertaking.

She embarked on a small vessel at Wilmington, North Carolina, which, after a desperate effort, managed to win clear of the Federal warships, but only after being so damaged by shot and storm that it was forced to run for haven to the Bahamas instead of making for Canada, as intended. However, she finally managed to get to Halifax in the late autumn of 1864, and by personal appeals in Quebec and Montreal raised money and medical stores. Assembling her cargo, she had to freight it on sleds over five hundred miles down the frozen St. Lawrence river to get it aboard ship. The hardship was incalculable, but was borne cheerfully, and eventually the cargo was landed in Havana, Cuba.

Here the Confederate consul gave out the discouraging report that the Union blockade had become so tight that even a rowboat could not steal through; but, Miss Walker, nothing daunted, persuaded a very reluctant sea-captain to try it, "just once, to Galveston."

Fourteen hundred miles of turbulent water were safely astern and the approach to the harbor at Galveston was about to be made, when the heavily loaded "mercy ship" hove to to prepare for the final desperate enterprise.

The vessel was given a coat of whitewash. The crew was dressed in white and sent below. The captain and the pilot remained on deck. Then, Miss Walker, also in white, took a prominent position on the vessel's bridge where she could be easily seen. The idea was to simulate a pleasure craft. The ruse worked, and Miss Walker's "ship of mercy" docked safely in the Southern port; but for a time it was "touch and go" as the "yacht" moved in between the blockading men-o'-war so close Miss Walker could almost literally look into the black muzzles of cannon and see the shells in place, any one of which could blow her and her mission to eternity.

After Lee's surrender, Miss Walker was escorted to her father's home near Gap, Pa., by Colonel Kelso Spear, chief of staff to General John B. Gordon, afterwards governor of Georgia and United States senator. Here, she was greeted by many of her old friends. Among these was James P. Wickersham, whom she had assisted in the original organization of the county institute when she was a student and teacher at Millersville. After her return from Richmond, Mr. Wickersham heartily recommended her to the school board of Baltimore where she re-entered the teaching profession.

One of the soldiers carried away from the battlefield to the hospital was one of "Stonewall's men," Col. John Coleman Roberts, who had lost his right arm in the battle of Gaines' Mills, Virginia. His people, although of Kentucky, were originally Virginians. After the war, Col. Roberts went to Baltimore and renewed his acquaintance with Miss Walker, the war-nurse, who had ministered to him when he lay suffering in the hospital. Four years later, June 16th, 1869, they were married at her father's home, by the Rev. Henry R. Smith, rector of St. John's Protestant Episcopal Church, Pequea, and removed to Bremond, Robertson county, Texas. However, before leaving for Texas, they purchased the "Henderson Place," at Gap, which they always used as a summer residence.

Mrs. Roberts died at her home, "Elm Grove," Bremond, Texas, on February 2nd, 1911, and was interred in the private cemetery on her plantation beside her husband and little daughter, Dollie (Mary) Moore Roberts.

Besides the following brothers and sisters, James M. Walker, Isaac L. Walker, Esther Jane Walker Worst (Mrs. I. Diller Worst) and Sarah Frances Walker Hershey (Mrs. Henry Hershey), who survived her at that time, but all of whom have since died, Mrs. Roberts left one son, Edward Walker Roberts, a lawyer, who married Miss Daisy Hill, a granddaughter of Col. T. R. Hill, of Virginia. He is still living, residing with his wife and two children, John Coleman Roberts and Josephine A. Roberts, at "Elm Grove," Bremond, Texas.