

“DEAR KATE”

An account of the tragic aftermath of the death of Major General John Fulton Reynolds, U.S.A., on the First Day of the Battle of Gettysburg.

One of the most poignant and yet scarcely known tragedies of the Civil War was the death of Major General John Fulton Reynolds of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on the first morning of the Battle of Gettysburg, July 1, 1863, and the subsequent disclosure of his secret engagement to be married to a handsome and talented young woman whom he had met five years before.

The sequence of events in the opening phases of the battle has been related many times: the Union cavalry, led by Brigadier General John Buford, had temporarily halted the advance of Confederate troops approaching the crossroads town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on the Cash-town Road from the west. Heth's Division of Confederate General James A. Archer's Brigade had reached a grove called McPherson's Woods, when Major General Reynolds, bringing up the main body of the First Corps of the Union Army, was struck in the back of the head and killed by a Rebel sharpshooter's Minie bullet.¹

This was a fearful loss to the Federal Army. Reynolds, one of the most promising, efficient, and popular professional officers on the Union side, had been offered the command of the entire Army of the Potomac by President Abraham Lincoln on June 2nd, only a month before his death at Gettysburg.² Because he had feared political interference with his command and administration of the Army, Reynolds had declined the post, and it had been given to Major General George Gordon Meade, Reynolds' junior in rank and service. Meade immediately appointed Reynolds to the command of the Federal Left Wing, composed of the First, Third, and Eleventh Corps.³ Thus, John Reynolds, instead of being at Army headquarters back at Taneytown on July 1, 1863, as he might have been, was on the skirmish line at Gettysburg, directing the disposition of front-line troops in the initial stages of the decisive battle of the Civil War.

As General Reynolds fell from his horse, his devoted orderly, Sergeant Charles H. Veil, rushed to his side. He found that the General had been



CATHERINE MARY HEWITT

killed instantly. In loosening the collar of Reynolds' military blouse, an aide discovered around the General's neck a silver chain from which hung a Roman Catholic religious medal and a gold ring in the form of clasped hands. Inside the ring were inscribed the words, "Dear Kate."⁴

The General's aides and Sergeant Veil transported their commander's body to the small stone house of George George on the Emmitsburg Pike, in the southern outskirts of Gettysburg. In collecting the General's effects, they came across several letters sent to him from Torresdale, Pennsylvania, and signed "Kate." It was noticed, also, that the General's West Point ring, always a treasured possession, was missing.⁵

Who was "Dear Kate"? As far as John Reynolds' family and friends had known, the General, at forty-two years of age, was a confirmed bachelor. He was considered to be a "soldiers' soldier," devoted single-mindedly to his profession. Throughout the voluminous correspondence he had carried on with his family, especially with his sisters to whom he was devoted, and beginning with his entrance to West Point in 1837, there had been no hint of a serious interest in any particular young woman. Now, at the time of his death, twenty-four years after he had begun his military career, an unknown "Kate" was introduced into his life as his family knew it.

General Reynolds' body was taken from Gettysburg to Baltimore, and then to Philadelphia, to the home of his sister, Mrs. Katherine Reynolds Landis, at 1829 Spruce Street. The public funeral services were to be held on July 4th⁶ in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

On the morning of July 3rd, when the Battle of Gettysburg was reaching its climax one hundred miles away, a young woman came to the Philadelphia house where General Reynolds' body was lying, to inquire if a "Miss Hewitt" could view the remains. Eleanor Reynolds, hearing the question, went to the door and asked, "Is it Kate?"⁷

It was Kate — and Eleanor and Harriet Reynolds greeted her warmly. Catherine Mary Hewitt — for that was the stranger's name — and the Reynolds family got along splendidly from the start. "She seems to be a very superior person," wrote Jennie Reynolds to her brother Will, a Captain in the United States Navy, "We all regret that he (their brother, General Reynolds) had not told some of us about her, and that we had (not) known her, yet are happy she came and had all the comfort we could offer her."⁸

Up to that time Kate had maintained her composure, but on seeing the General's body she broke down and wept. She explained that she had hesitated to come to Mrs. Landis' home because she knew no one of the family, but felt that she could not resist the wish to see John again. She returned in the evening to ask if she might sit by him; so she and Eleanor shared the night-long vigil.⁹

Eight days after the burial of John Reynolds in his home-town of Lancaster, Kate Hewitt applied for admission to the Saint Joseph Central House of the Sisters of Charity, in Emmitsburg, Maryland.¹⁰ This was part of the plans that John and Kate had made for their future. If all had gone well, they were to have been married after the war and to have gone on a European honeymoon. However, they had foreseen the possibility of tragedy and, in the event of General Reynolds' death, they had agreed that Kate would enter a convent. As Jennie Reynolds put it, "Kate had his consent to enter a religious convent should she lose him, and now she intends to do it as the world has no interest for her now . . .

(Kate) had given him first to God, then to his country, and then to herself. She said, "To him I stand third." 11

The whole chain of events had been a terrible shock to the Reynolds family. Jennie wrote, "I need not tell you what a thunder clap it was to us all." 12 The loss of their beloved brother, the revelation of his secret engagement to a strange young woman who was a Catholic — and they were Protestants 13 — and finally, the entrance of their once-intended sister-in-law into a religious order were enough to throw an ordinary family off balance. But the Reynolds family was not an ordinary one; they rallied magnificently and took Kate to their hearts.

The Saint Joseph Central House of the Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg was located only ten miles from the spot where General Reynolds had been killed. Here the Sisters of Charity had maintained their convent and school since the founding of the establishment by Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton in 1809. 14 General Reynolds and the troops of his First Corps had marched past the convent grounds on their way to Gettysburg only a few hours before the General was killed on the first day of the Battle. Tradition has it that the Sisters and some of the students knelt by the road and prayed for the spiritual and physical safety of the soldiers as they passed. Later, the Sisters went to Gettysburg to aid in nursing the thousands of wounded and dying soldiers who were collected there. 16

After she had entered the convent, Kate Hewitt took the religious name of "Sister Hildegardis" which the Reynolds sisters had helped her select. Eleanor and Harriet Reynolds visited Kate regularly and during the visits they learned something of her background.

Kate had been born on April 1, 1839, to Richard and Germina Green Hewitt, in Oswego, Tioga County, New York. 17 According to a letter from Eleanor to Will Reynolds, "Katie . . . is an orphan, has a (half) brother who is so prejudiced against her religion that she cannot be much with him . . . He is a Baptist." 18

Kate went to California in 1856 as a governess in the family of a G. R. Woodward, who had two daughters and a son. It must have been in California that she met John Reynolds, who at that time was on duty in San Francisco. 19

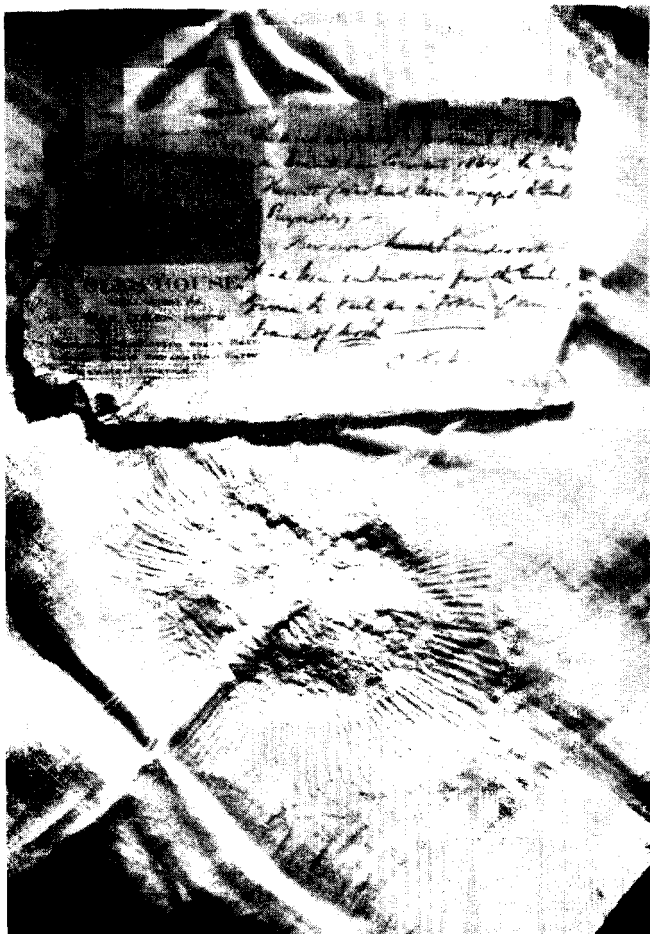
When Kate returned to the East, she entered the Academy of the Sacred Heart, Eden Hall, Torresdale, Pennsylvania, on November 10, 1860. Here she became a convert to the Catholic faith, and on March 18, 1861, she was baptized. She received her First Communion on March 19, and was confirmed on July 5, 1861. 20 She left Eden Hall later that month and apparently went to Huntingdon, New York, for this was the home address she gave upon entering Saint Joseph Convent in 1863. 21

In her eagerness to learn every possible detail of her fiance's death, Kate asked the Reynolds sisters to bring the General's orderly, Sergeant Charles H. Veil, to visit her at the convent in Emmitsburg.

Sergeant Veil later wrote his memories of the occasion, stating: "While we were in Gettysburg the sisters (of General Reynolds) informed me of what was or has not been generally known, and that was that the General was engaged to be married to a Miss Hewitt, of New York City, and that she was then in the Emmitsburg convent, some ten or twelve miles from Gettysburg, and that she had expressed a desire to see me and they

wanted to know if I would go with them to call on her. I, of course, was glad to do so; and next day we drove over and, through the influence of the ladies, I was allowed to enter the convent and see the young lady. Miss Hewitt was a very beautiful lady, highly educated, and, when she lost her sweetheart she decided to give up the world and enter a convent, and for some reason desired to enter the one at Emmitsburg. She made a good deal of me. I had to tell her all about the General, his last moments, and so forth, and she wanted very particularly to know if he had left any last message. When we came to leave, she said, 'Mr. Veil, I have a little token here I had for the General, some of my own work, and I want to give it to you as a token of remembrance of both of us,' and taking from the folds of her dress a small package, she handed it to me. I thanked her for it and left. After we had left the convent I told the sisters of what had taken place, and on opening the little package which was nicely done up and tied with a ribbon, found a very beautiful embroidered handkerchief — the Coat-of-Arms of the United States, very beautifully done — and I have the handkerchief and token to this day."²²

One of the many delightful sidelights on the relationship between the Reynolds sisters and Kate was contained in a letter from Eleanor to Sergeant Veil in August, 1865, when she wrote: "Miss Hewitt sends you her



Embroidered
handkerchief
presented
to
Sergeant
Veil
by
Miss
Hewitt.



View of Emmitsburg, Maryland, July 1863. St. Joseph College, Mount St. Mary's College, St. Joseph's Church in Emmitsburg. View shows Gen. Meade pursuing Gen. Lee.

kindest regards and says she is much pleased at your selection of active duty — your late commander having always taken the active part.

"She is very well and is much happier looking than when you saw her. Her position is a settled one and she feels at home in her duties . . . on Saturday she was permitted to go alone with us to the mountains where we spent the morning. It is a very great pleasure to see so much of her . . ." ²³

Later, in October, 1865, Eleanor reported to Sergeant Veil that Miss Hewitt, "now Sister Hildegardis," had been quite ill but was well again.²⁴ Three months later she wrote, "Miss Hewitt had gone to Albany (New York) and is teaching in a large school there that the 'Sisters of Charity' have recently opened. She passed through Philadelphia in the night but stopped in Baltimore for a few hours. Mrs. Gildersleeve (Jennie Reynolds) had the pleasure of seeing her there."²⁵

For the next two years Eleanor Reynolds continued to keep in touch with Kate Hewitt and to write to Sergeant Veil about her visits to "Sister Hildegardis." On May 6, 1866, she wrote: "Miss Hewitt is very well now and is stationed at Albany, teaching in one of their schools . . . She has not been well during the winter . . . I hope to go and see her in a few weeks. Her letters are few and short, but she always asks for you and desires to be kindly remembered."²⁶

Later that year, on August 9, Eleanor wrote: "Miss Hewitt was well when I heard from her last . . . we expect to visit her in Albany in the fall."²⁷ And then on January 15, 1867, Eleanor wrote that Kate was well and that they had spent a week with her at Albany in October and had "cheered her somewhat."²⁸ She said that they tried to make Kate a yearly visit. Kate, for her part, apparently considered the Reynolds to be her only family and the feeling must have been mutual, for Eleanor wrote: "I do not know which of us enjoy (the visits) more."²⁹

There is one more reference to Kate Hewitt — and a final one — in the correspondence between Eleanor Reynolds and Sergeant Charles Veil. On August 11, 1868 — five years and a month since Kate Hewitt had kept her pact with her lost fiance by entering the convent at Emmitsburg — Eleanor wrote: "Miss Hewitt is still at Albany — I hope we shall visit her in October. She is not strong and has a cough that is almost constant. She says she is happier as a 'sister' than she would be 'in the world.'" ³⁰

But the October visit to Albany never took place, for on September

3, 1868, Kate left the Community of the Sisters of Charity. "She had made no vows," according to the archivist at Saint Joseph Convent in Emmitsburg, "and was free to leave if she found the life was too much for her." The notation of her leaving closes the record of Catherine Mary Hewitt's association with the Sisters of Charity.³¹

What happened then? Did Kate go back to "the world" and marry, and thus change her name? Or did the constant cough that Eleanor mentioned lead to her early death?

Extensive inquiries have supplied no answers. All that is known is that when Eleanor Reynolds wrote to Sergeant Veil on February 3, 1870, she made no mention of her brother's (and his commander's) fiancée, the "Dear Kate" of General Reynolds' ring.³²

NOTES

1. Abner Doubleday, *Chancellorsville and Gettysburg* (New York, 1882), p. 131.
2. Edward J. Nichols, *Toward Gettysburg* (University Park, Pa., 1958), p. 220, quoting Eleanor Reynolds to J. F. Landis, Col., U. S. Army (Ret.), August 20, 1913: "As we approached the house (we) saw lights in the parlor, and found your Uncle John reading there. He told us he had been with the President that day, and that Mr. Lincoln had offered him the command of the Army of the Potomac, which he told the President he would accept, if he was not interfered with from Washington. This the President would not promise him, therefore your Uncle declined the offer. I am positive as to the date being June 2nd . . ."
3. Warren W. Hassler, Jr., *The First Day's Battle of Gettysburg*, "Civil War History," Quarterly published by the State University of Iowa, Vol. VI, No. III, p. 260.
4. Edward J. Nichols, *op. cit.*, pp. 211-212.
5. Jennie Reynolds Gildersleeve to William Reynolds, July 5, 1863.
6. Edward J. Nichols, *op. cit.*, p. 211.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 212.
8. Jennie Reynolds Gildersleeve to William Reynolds, *op. cit.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Sister Josephine, Archivist, Saint Joseph Central House, Emmitsburg, Maryland, to John Veil Miller, M.D., Dillsburg, Pennsylvania, April 12, 1957.
11. Jennie Reynolds Gildersleeve to William Reynolds, *op. cit.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. It can be assumed that the General had never referred to Kate in his correspondence with his family, because Eleanor would have known about it and there would have been no "thunder clap" of surprise.
14. Edward J. Nichols, *op. cit.*, p. 4. The Reynolds family were descended from Irish Protestant and French Huguenot stock.
15. Today (1961), the establishment includes the Mother House of the Sisters of Charity and Saint Joseph College, an accredited four-year liberal arts college for women.
16. A stained-glass window in Saint Brigit's Church, Lexington, Massachusetts, commemorates the services of the Sisters of Charity in the Civil War, showing the Sisters ministering to both Union and Confederate soldiers.
17. Mother Julia Hurley, Librarian, Convent of the Sacred Heart, Eden Hall, Torresdale, Pennsylvania, to Mary R. Maloney, March 8, 1960.
18. Eleanor Reynolds to William Reynolds, Captain, U.S.N., "Reynolds Papers."
19. Edward J. Nichols, *op. cit.*, p. 60 ff.
20. Mother Julia Hurley to Mary R. Maloney, *op. cit.*
21. Sister Josephine to John Veil Miller, M.D., *op. cit.*
22. *Memoirs of Charles H. Veil*, copy in possession of John Veil Miller, M.D., Dillsburg, Pennsylvania.

23. Eleanor Reynolds to Charles H. Veil, August 7, 1865.
24. Eleanor Reynolds to Charles H. Veil, October 9, 1865.
25. **Ibid.**, January 16, 1866.
26. **Ibid.**, May 6, 1866.
27. **Ibid.**, August 9, 1866.
28. **Ibid.**, January 15, 1867.
29. **Ibid.**
30. Eleanor Reynolds to Charles H. Veil, August 11, 1868.
31. Sister Josephine to John Veil Miller, M.D., **op. cit.**
32. John Veil Miller, M.D., to Mary R. Maloney, February 15, 1960.

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