

Washington Post, Mar 7, 1897
A ROMANCE OF THE WAR

Through there are innumerable instances of the swords of dead soldiers being returned to their family's years after hostilities had ceased, yet the incident which has just occurred in this city reads more like fiction than fact. And though there is no positive evidence that there was a love affair in the matter, the facts look very much like the case was one in which Cupid and Mars bore equal parts in the fray.

There has just come to town to spend the winter with her daughter, of this place, a lady whose home is in Prince William County, Va., and who is the source of information for the events herein given. The lady's home was at the beginning of the war in the very center of hostilities and on the path of the marching armies of both North and South. Scarcely a day passes that troops were not seen passing down the pike, and the air was rarely free from the tramp of trotting cavalry of the blast of the trumpeter's bugle.

The farm on which the lady lived was within hearing of the contending armies, and the very first battle of Manassas was fought but a few miles away – so near that the family, perched on a hill, could see the advancing lines of blue and gray as they dashed forward with loud hurrahs, or catch site, through the bellows of smoke, of the maddened horses plunging over the bloody ground as comrades whirled up to take part in the battle. All day long, from early dawn the shadows crept over the field, the dying kept up, and when the sun sank the hot summer day was red with the crimson streams that trickled amongst the grass. The night fell but as a curtain with which to stifle the groans from the dying men strewing the ground.

The Virginia lady walked over some of the field after the firing had ceased and among the hundreds of wounded she noticed one in particular. He was a handsome Union soldier, who had evidently died but a short while before. He was lying amid the heaps of slain, and was especially marked by the lady for the reason that she had seen the same man the evening before while he was visiting at a neighbor's home and had been struck by his fine bearing and handsome look. His blue uniform was crimson with blood and his body was lying prone on the sod one of hundreds which had ceased to breathe or were groaning away the few moments which were left to them of earth.

As there was nothing to do for this poor fellow the lady passed on with a sigh of regret. The next day a gentleman, one of the Ball Family, of Virginia came to the house and exhibited a bundle of letters, which he said he had gotten from the body of the very Union soldier the lady had noticed. There were a great many missives in the package which had been found stuffed safely in his belt, and the lady took them, intending to keep them with an idea of someday returning them to the writer.

The letters, while not of a remarkably loving nature, were written by a woman to the man, and showed that they were great friends at least. She hotly deplored the war and expressed great anger with the rebels who made it a necessity that the gentleman should be brought into danger, and she would frequently say that she wished it was over and hoped that he would come out of it all safely.

From the address on the envelopes it was seen that the name of the gentleman was Uselma Duncan, and that he was a member of the crack regiment, the Seventy-first New York. The letters were from a girl in Burlington, N. J., and thought the name of the lady is known to be the writer of this; it will be withheld out of courtesy.

Those letters were taken charge of by the lady, who, for thirty-five years, kept them constantly in her trunk. When she came to town a few days ago she mentioned the fact to another

lady in her daughter's house, and it was decided that an attempt would be made to find out the owner. So an advertisement was inserted in a New York paper, giving full particulars of the letters and the story of their being found.

In a short while there came a call on the lady, who found her visitors were a gentleman and wife, who said they had come in response to the advertisement, which they had seen in the New York paper. The wife of the gentleman stated that she was the sister of the writer of the letters and would bring the writer, who was away on a visit, to the city within days. She said that the lady who wrote the letters had never married, and still lived here in town.

The package of notes was given to the gentleman and wife, and they left the house, but are expected back daily with her sister, whose story will be told to the Virginia lady. The sister of the writer denied that there was any love affair involved, or that the dead soldier was anything more than a friend, but from the fact that the woman in this case has never married, and that she wrote letters that were treasured so dearly by the soldier it seems to prove that there must have been some sort of an understanding of a mutual attachment.

The body of the soldier was not buried in the huge trenches, so common in war, nor was his bones ever disinterred by the government to be brought to rest at Burlington. His remains were placed in the old cemetery at Sudley Church, not far from the spot on which he breathed his last sigh. Here they are still today.

What the sequel will be is not yet known, nor are the details of the history of the heroine within the knowledge of the lady whose possession the letters have been for so long a time. But she is daily expected to claim her property and then the rest of the romance may be given to the public. To have written the letters, the writer must have been at least fifteen, at the very youngest age at which she may be placed, so that she must now be somewhat past fifty. Her home is here in Washington, where it is probable that she is at work in one of the department. But everything regarding her at present is but a surmise, and it will not be known till she appears on the scene and tells what the real facts about the matter are.

The soldier was probably well known in New York, and this publication may be the first that some of his friends hear of his tragic death and its attending romantic circumstances. His regiment was one of the finest in service, and widely known throughout the country. The details of this incident were given to the writer of this by the lady in whose possession the letters have been since they were taken from the belt of poor Uselma Duncan's body on the bloody battlefield.