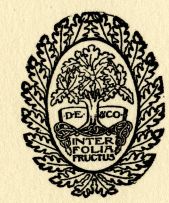


MARY ANN LAMB.

Little-Known Sisters  
OF  
Well-Known Men

BY  
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Author of "A Loyal Little Subject,"  
"A Festival of Light," etc.



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SOPHIA THOREAU

“ He was the elder and a little man  
Of forty inches, bound to show no dread,  
And I the girl that puppy-like now ran  
Now lagged behind my brother's larger tread.

I held him wise, and when he talked to me  
Of snakes and birds, and which God loved the best,  
I thought his knowledge marked the boundary  
Where men grew blind, though angels knew the rest,  
If he said ' Hush,' I tried to hold my breath  
Whenever he said ' Come ' I stepped in faith.”

— GEORGE ELIOT





SOPHIA THOREAU.



## SOPHIA THOREAU

THE town of Concord, Massachusetts, attracts an ever-increasing tide of tourists; for its historic and literary associations are unique in this country. All travelers are eager to cross Concord Bridge, to visit Sleepy Hollow Cemetery and to see the homes of Emerson and Hawthorne; but, to the average visitor, many members of the "Concord group" who made the place famous a half-century ago are now little known. "A. Bronson Alcott and William Ellery Channing are neglected and even Thoreau is becoming only a name." There is danger that, in another generation, the last-mentioned may cease to be even a name, for the Thoreau family is now extinct both in Europe and America. But Henry Thoreau was at one time a well-known man in American literature; he investigated and recorded his observations in the days before nature-study had become a fad as well as a science, and



his work has formed the basis for many later developments. He was indeed America's pioneer naturalist and he won a slow recognition. His well-earned fame did not come in his lifetime and much of his ultimate recognition was due to the devotion and interpretation of a faithful sister.

Sophia was the youngest member of the quartette of sons and daughters who composed the family of John and Cynthia (Dunbar) Thoreau. Her brother John and sister Helen were seven and five years her senior while her brother Henry was only two years older. Sophia and Henry inherited the characteristics of their mother's family and were very much alike in their love of humor, happy dispositions and fondness for nature in all its forms. This last tendency was common to the whole family and it is recorded that: "Both Mr. and Mrs. Thoreau were deeply interested in botany and physical geography. With their children and guests they visited the haunts about Concord, collected specimens of plants, rocks and insects, little realizing that their son was to become America's greatest nature-poet."

Sophia's earliest education was obtained in the excellent dame school kept by Miss Phœbe

Wheeler, where many tiny boys and girls, who afterwards developed into worthy citizens of Concord, were first led along the path of learning. Later, both Sophia and Helen Thoreau attended the Concord Academy where they studied Latin, along with other branches offered in the curriculum.

When she was just entering her teens, Miss Prudence Ward, the granddaughter of a Revolutionary colonel, moved to Concord with her mother and soon became interested in the bright, ambitious little girl who, like her brothers and sisters, was endowed with a distinct and unmistakable personality of her own. It was Miss Ward who encouraged her interest in art and botany and taught her much about these branches.

While Sophia was growing up, she entered into all the frolics and good times of the girls of her age and was intimate with the daughters of the Hoar, Whiting, Brooks and Ripley households, in fact with the young people of most of the old Concord families. She was, in her girlhood, a friend of Ellen Sewall, the young girl who was beloved by both the Thoreau brothers and whom Henry forbore to seek as his wife, out of deference to his elder



brother. This friendship continued through all the variations of the romance and lasted as long as the two women lived. But her chief and dearest associate was her sister, Helen.

After Helen's school-days were over, the two were separated for a time while the elder sister taught in Taunton; but, at length, she thought that she would open a private school in Roxbury and wanted Sophia to share in the venture. John, who had also taught in Taunton, had carried out a similar plan in Concord, where he and Henry had conducted a school together; and the two sisters were enthusiastic over their own undertaking. There is very little known about this school or what branches Sophia taught, but the letters which she wrote at this time show her genuine interest in botany; for she describes walks which she had taken about Roxbury to find early spring flowers which did not grow around Concord.

Sometime during this period, both Helen and Sophia became members of the Episcopal church and remained devoted churchwomen all through their lives. Their brother's interest in "transcendentalism" disturbed the sisters somewhat, as may be seen in passages in their

earlier letters, but they were always united on the essentials of religious thought.

The brothers and sisters were often separated for long periods at a time, as their work carried them far afield and the special intimacy at first existed between the two brothers and the two sisters. But Fate decreed that the two youngest were to become all in all to each other. In the spring of 1842, John Thoreau died under singularly pitiful circumstances and, in 1849, when Sophia was just entering her thirtieth year, the sister who had been her closest friend also died. Soon after, the family moved to the house on Main Street, which remained their home for twenty-five years, and here began the closer intimacy between the remaining brother and sister.

The members of his family had always looked upon Henry Thoreau with profound admiration and their faith in him was his inspiration when his fellow-townsmen considered him an oddity and when the general public continued to misunderstand him. Helen had always been particularly proud of her brother and confident of his success, but she died before his genius had met with any wide appreciation. It was left to the younger sister to continue



to sustain him in times of disappointment and to encourage him with her help and companionship, to cheer and ease his last days and, finally, to clearly interpret him to a public which, at length, appreciated him.

“Henry’s letters testify to their common interest in botany and woodcraft and he recorded in his journal, their joint pleasure in watching the evolution of a brilliant moth. During his later life they walked and rowed together and, when strength for exercise failed, Sophia became his companion on long drives and was his faithful scribe.” In his turn, he always manifested a great interest in her affairs, helping her in caring for the fine conservatory near the dining-room where she kept her flowers and working to make the garden and outdoor surroundings of their home attractive.

During the two years in which Thoreau was making his experiment at Walden, his sisters were both living and were greatly interested in his plans. He was not entirely separated from his family during these months but came frequently to his father’s house and the sisters occasionally went to the little cabin which he had built for himself. In later years, Sophia

often walked with her brother along the shores of the little lake which had become endeared to him by familiarity.

An old friend of the Thoreaus, whose acquaintance with the family began about 1851 and continued for twenty-five years, has given a picture of the family life at this period. “The house was a veritable haven of refuge to one who fled thither from the weary tread and turmoil of the city. Recollections crowd upon me: its undisturbed orderliness, the restful sitting-room where the sun lay all day, passing around the corner of the house and shining in again at the west window in the late winter afternoons, making Sophia’s window-plants all-glorious, which some magic in her touch or magnetism of genuine love for the floral family always conjured into wonderfully luxuriant bloom. In memory I walk among her flowerbeds (hardly a garden) enjoying the fragrance of the old-time favorites; I see the graceful laburnum in full blossom, and a few steps further bring me to the little pine grove in the corner of their front yard (long since sacrificed to the opening of a new street), where in an instant I am in perfect seclusion; I see the sun glinting through the moving boughs, mak-



ing a dancing mosaic of light and shade on the floor of pine needles; I hear the gentle, sighing voice of the wind through the soft green branches — a lovely retreat, to which no footsteps but those of memory will evermore wander.”<sup>1</sup>

“I recall the reading aloud of fresh new books, the evening games of chess and backgammon; the bright, often distinguished people who came to the house; the tea-parties and evening visits; the lyceum lectures on cold winter nights, the walks by field and river, sometime to the old battle-ground where, one early June morning, we turned in to the shady inclosure and Sophia pointed out the unnamed graves of the British soldiers who fell in the fight, their resting-place marked by rough gray stones. . . . If Henry happened to be with us, although we were unobservant of what was beneath our feet, his acute eyes, ever active, would detect Indian arrow-heads, or some implement for domestic purposes made of flint or other hard stone. . . . Occasionally Henry would invite us to go with him in his boat. One of these excursions was in late No-

<sup>1</sup>“Reminiscences of Thoreau,” an anonymous article, *The Outlook*, Dec. 2, 1899.

vember, and the weather was of almost unearthly beauty; bees in great multitudes hummed loudly as they lazily floated in the golden slumberous haze only seen in the true Indian summer.

“There was about the household a perennial spring of vivacious life that made its members interesting and attractive even to the young and immature. Its members possessed large stores of anecdote and historical information relative to old Boston and neighboring towns that were always entertaining and instructive. A ready and copious vocabulary was characteristic of every member of the family, and life went on with them so evenly and calmly that talking seemed to be the principal business of the days.”

So this beautiful home life continued happily for ten years, until their father died in the winter of 1859. A glimpse of the sister's character is given in one of her brother's letters, written soon after this event, in which he says: “My mother and sister thank you heartily for your sympathy. The latter in particular agrees with you in thinking that it is communion with still living and healthy nature alone which can restore to sane and cheerful views.”



“The conspicuous Spartan fortitude in the family character which the mother had taught both by precept and example” was shown by Henry Thoreau in the year of his father’s death, when he delivered an encomium on John Brown in Concord at the time of the Harper’s Ferry episode. It took unusual courage to take the stand which Thoreau made at this time, for, although the citizens of Concord were for the most part united on the subject of the Civil War, they had not then taken a definite stand on the subject of slavery and even the abolitionists were against John Brown.

Mrs. Thoreau entered with all the zeal of her nature into the anti-slavery agitation and soon made her house a rendezvous for abolitionists. Her daughter shared her enthusiasm and it was through their mutual interest in the anti-slavery cause that she first came into intimacy with the family of Deacon Wheeler. Sophia’s special friend, Martha Bartlett, daughter of the village physician and niece of the famous Mrs. Ripley, shared her enthusiasm for chess-playing and the two spent many evenings in the enjoyment of their favorite game. “Henry invariably came down from his study for a while in the evening for conver-

sation; the sound of the piano was sure to draw him. Sophia would play the oldtime music, notably Scotch melodies, which so well suited her flexible voice, and those quaint ballads of a past generation, whose airs were often so plaintive and with so much of heart-break in the words. . . . Often Henry would suddenly cease singing and catch up his flute, and, musical as was his voice, yet it was a delight never to be forgotten to listen to the silvery tones that breathed from the instrument.

“Sophia had an artistic temperament and skill. She had an admirably balanced nature, and plenty of sentiment of a healthy kind; there was no waste or superfluity in any direction, and this equilibrium was her defense, and sustained her under the clouds of sorrow and sickness which overshadowed so much of her life. Henry and Sophia were in perfect accord and her thorough knowledge of botany formed a special bond of sympathy between them. Henry placed great reliance — as did all who knew her — on his sister’s rare judgment and ability in practical matters, and he was himself a shrewd, practical man in affairs of everyday life.”

In December, 1860, only a little more than



a year after his father's death, Henry Thoreau showed the first symptoms of that disease which gained a hold upon him until he finally succumbed to it in May, 1862, seventeen months later. But these months, shadowed as they must have been by the approach of death, were, nevertheless, happy ones for the devoted sister; and in them the intimacy of years grew stronger. During all the seventeen months, according to her own testimony, not a murmur escaped him, he seemed to be never affected by his illness and she never saw such an example of the power of spirit over matter.

The parlor of the house was given over to the invalid: but it never seemed like a sick-room, for it was continually filled with flowers, pictures and books, and Thoreau's cheerful presence dominated it; and his cheerfulness was so contagious that mother, sister and guests were all influenced by it. He continued to busy himself all through his sickness and, during the last months of his life, edited many papers for the press. Among his sister's most precious memories in after years were the thoughts of these hours when she sat in the little parlor and assisted him by copying for him and reading aloud from his manuscript.

In April, 1862, she wrote: "My dear brother has survived the winter and we should be most thankful if he might linger to welcome the green grass and the flowers once more. . . . Since autumn he has been gradually failing and is now the embodiment of weakness, still he enjoys seeing his friends, and every bright hour he devotes to his manuscript which he is preparing for publication. For many weeks, he has spoken only in a faint whisper. Henry accepts this dispensation with such childlike trust and is so happy that I feel as if he were being translated, rather than dying in the ordinary way of most mortals." Their wish was gratified; for the invalid lived a month longer and saw the spring flowers he loved so well before "something beautiful happened," and he was translated.

Twenty years previous, after the first and greatest sorrow of his life had come to him with the sudden death of his brother, John, Thoreau had written: "What right have I to grieve who have not ceased to wonder? We feel at first as if some opportunities of kindness and sympathy were lost but learn afterwards that any pure grief is ample recompense for all. That is, if we are faithful; for a great



grief is but sympathy with the soul that disposes events, and is as natural as the resin on Arabian trees. Only Nature has a right to grieve perpetually, for she only is innocent. Soon the ice will melt and the blackbirds sing along the river which he frequented, as pleasantly as ever. The same everlasting serenity will appear in this face of God, and we will not be sorrowful, if he is not."

The above lines have often been quoted as an illustration of the beautiful faith and optimism of Henry Thoreau, but the words which show that his sister shared this trait of character are less well-known. They are found in nearly every letter to old friends written after her brother's death. I quote at random.

"Profound joy mingles with my grief. I feel as if something beautiful had happened, not death." And again: "No shadow of gloom attaches to anything in my mind connected with my precious brother. Henry's whole life impresses me as a grand miracle. I always thought him the most upright man I ever knew and now it is a pleasure to praise him."

But the threads of life had to be taken up again and new problems met Sophia Thoreau.

The chief source of the family income had been, for years, the manufacture and preparation of plumbago for electrotyping and, originally, pencil-making. The family had first moved to the house on Main Street where they made their home for so many years, in order that the work of pencil-making might be carried on in the little shop attached to the house. All the children had some knowledge of their father's trade and it is quite probable that, at some time, Sophia learned its mysteries. After his father's death, Henry Thoreau had carried on the business for the benefit of his mother and sister and, when he died, Sophia conducted it for a time. The actual manufacture of pencils was no longer carried on but the grinding and preparation of plumbago was still done in a mill a few miles away and Miss Thoreau became the head of this business. It was rare for a woman, in those days, to be actively interested in business matters and her path was not an easy one. That she was successful, in spite of illness and care, is an illustration of her ability.

A few months after her son's death, Mrs. Thoreau met with a painful accident from which she never fully recovered although she



lived for several years. In the midst of that trying winter, Sophia wrote to their friend, Mr. Ricketson, "Mother and myself live almost wholly in the past. Henry is ever in our thoughts. I feel continually sustained and cheered by the influence of his childlike faith." Later she wrote: "I often think how much Henry is spared when I realize the terrible state of our country, — it would have darkened his sky — he was most sensitive."

Once her splendid courage wavered a little and she wrote pathetically, "I have passed the round of a year with no earthly friend to lean upon — and often overwhelmed with care, I so miss the counsels of my precious brother, who was never cast down and who in every emergency could make the light shine, that I confess my heart is at times heavy."

In the first two years following her brother's death she was far from strong; but, after a little rest and change away from Concord, she wrote to Mr. Ricketson that she was able to walk five and six miles with ease. She used to love to revisit the old haunts where she and her brother had spent happy hours, and especially Walden. Once she writes of going to his little house, which had been moved to the northern

part of the town, and of eating her dinner under its roof, with only the mice for company.

But, as the years went on, she found less and less consolation in this manner, for Walden became popular with the public and the attractions of a picnic resort were built on its shores. Writing of one of her last visits to the pond, in 1867, she said: "Associations have rendered the spot so entirely sacred to me, that the music and dancing, swinging and tilting seemed like profanity almost. An overwhelming sense of my great loss saddened me, and I felt that only the waters sympathized in my bereavement, for there seemed in all that throng no heart nor eye to appreciate the purity and beauty of nature. The lover of Walden has indeed departed. I recalled my last day spent there with Henry —

" 'Sweet September Day, so calm, so cool, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky.'

While I sat sketching, Henry gathered grapes from a vine, dropping its fruit into the clear waters which gently laved its roots.

"With the lapse of time my sense of loneliness increases and I often fail to realize that



each day shortens my separation from those who have gone before."

As her life went on, her cares steadily increased; for her mother, who lived for ten years after her son's death, never entirely recovered from her accident and later succumbed to the family scourge, consumption. Her household at one time was increased by two aged aunts; but, in their last years, they made their home in Maine and she and her mother remained in Concord. "Mrs. Thoreau kept her hopefulness and courage under the constant disability of feebleness of body, yet complaints she never uttered, and her stately though frail figure sitting year after year in her straight-backed chair was a picture of patience and brave endurance. Ever ready to be interested in passing events, expressing keen opinions or offering valuable suggestions, her hold on life was firm, and it was almost a surprise when she at last yielded to the inevitable and submitted to lie several days in bed before the end came. To a friend who visited her at this period Mrs. Thoreau recited Cato's soliloquy with perfect composure and contentment. Well might a gifted woman exclaim, 'She looks like a queen,'

when death at last had claimed the resolute spirit, and she lay silently receiving her guests for the last time."

During her mother's lifetime, Miss Thoreau occasionally went away from home for short visits, but she was never able to prolong her absence. Miss Jane Hosmer of Concord remembers with pleasure her companionship with Miss Thoreau on one of her short holidays. They went to Springfield to visit in the family of Mr. Sanborn and then visited the White Mountains, going to the very top of Mt. Washington. During this pleasant journey, Miss Thoreau kept a diary and recorded the events of each day in a book which her brother Henry had begun as a commonplace book. This interesting manuscript is now in the possession of a gentleman in St. Louis.

She was at all times most heartily welcomed in the household of Mr. Daniel Ricketson, an old friend of her brother and herself. Mr. Ricketson's daughter remembers her well and thus writes of her: "She had a rare appreciation of all that was beautiful either in nature or in mankind. A most devoted daughter and sister, it was her pleasure to give up all that nature had endowed her



with to minister to them and heroically held her part until her mother passed on, when she became a great sufferer and closed her beautiful life, in which she had found so much to enjoy in spite of disappointments and great losses. My recollection of her is of a fine, gentle, sweet nature, but she possessed great firmness of character and was always on the side of justice. In looking back into the past, I recall no woman of my acquaintance more noble than Miss Sophia Thoreau."

After her mother died, it seemed as if her work was nearly finished, for she had cared for the last of her loved ones and had expended her best energies in editing her brother's manuscripts. Only two of Thoreau's books were published during his lifetime, and it was her cooperation with his literary friends which caused his work to finally be truly interpreted. She decided that it would be best for her to leave Concord for Bangor, Maine, where her few surviving relatives were living, because she realized that as time went on she would need constant care which would be given her in the home of her cousin.

Her friends in Bangor were always kind to her but the household where she lived was not

dominated by the cheery optimism which had always pervaded her own home. With her naturally cheerful spirit, she endeavored to make the best of the situation and her action on coming to the home was indicative of her entire life there. "When she went into the house her room like all the others was intensely dark that the carpet might not fade. She threw open the blinds and said, "Cousin, I must have sunshine. I have always had it, and when the carpet fades, I will buy another." So it happened that as invalidism grew upon her she was surrounded, just as her brother had been, with pictures, books and flowers. But she must have spent many lonely hours, for she missed the intellectual sympathy which she had so long enjoyed in Concord.

That her spirit was unbroken is shown in one of the last letters she was able to write before her death. "You will be glad to know that notwithstanding my invalid condition I have been able to get much satisfaction out of life. Memories of the past afford me true consolation. I feel as if I had been singled out for peculiar blessings. No sad hours as yet have befallen me — they may come. Thus far, through Divine blessing, my soul is per-



mitted to dwell in an atmosphere of cheerfulness and I am now conscious of the Infinite tenderness which overshadows all God's children." To the end, "In all things she found sunshine."

So at length came that October day when she joined her loved ones, and friendly faces gathered around the little plot of ground in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery where the family, whose whole life had been a part of Concord, found its last home. Her own words about her dearly-loved brother seem best to describe her brave and loyal soul, for *she* also possessed "a spirit so attuned to the harmonies of Nature that the colors of the sky, the fragrance of the flowers and the music of the birds ministered unceasingly to *her* pleasure" and she too was "the happiest of mortals."

ELIZA W. S. PARKMAN

"A ministering angel shall my sister be."

— SHAKESPEARE.