AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER
OF WILLIAM GILMORE SIMMS
BY HERBERT SMITH

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In the Philhower Collection of the Rutgers University Library is a letter of William Gilmore Simms which is the only known letter bearing directly upon one of the least known areas of his post-war career—his brief Masonic affiliation. Simms apparently became a Freemason late in the year 1865, probably introduced to the society by the husband of one of his wife’s cousins, Christopher McKinney Rivers. His immediate reasons for joining are, of course, unknown and unknowable, but his activities in regard to the society suggest that he saw membership in it as a possible help to his straitened circumstances in the wrecked post-war South.

Indeed, Simms’s affiliation with Freemasonry was a marriage of convenience from the very beginning. His first trip to the North after the war was financed by the South Carolina lodge. In November, 1865, he journeyed to New York, ostensibly “to interest the Masonic fraternity in behalf of their destitute brethren in [South Carolina].” But, though the trip was paid for by Masonic contributions, Simms did not hide the fact that he had “business there of my own.” Without the Masonic commission Simms would not have been able to finance a trip North for some time.

Except for the new evidence of the letter in the Philhower Collection, the evidence of Simms’s Masonic affiliation would virtually come to an end at this point. There are few further references to the fraternity, and all of them seem to suggest rather a diminishing than an increasing interest in things Masonic. But the Philhower Collection letter, previously unpublished, proves that Simms used

2 Simms Letters, IV, 525.
3 Simms Letters, IV, 522, 524.
his Masonic connections in the North for at least one publication.4

Sixty years old, with over fifty volumes of fiction and verse behind
him, Simms wrote very little after the Civil War. A few short stories
published in periodicals were the limit of his output during these
last years of his life. But in his impoverished situation, he had
nothing to live by except his pen and his reputation—and the possi-
bility of reprinting some of those many works his reputation was
built upon. This letter illustrates how, through his Masonic con-
nections, he managed at least one reprinting to the tune of two hun-
dred dollars, no small matter for a man financially ruined through
the fortunes of war.

78 Dean Street, Brooklyn5
15th Aug1, 1866

My dear Mr. Ellis:

Have you received the photographs I sent you from Yonkers, & do they
satisfy you. The head and face are those of an ourson6 of the antique, and
all that have ever been made of me are villainously like—yet unlike. My
eyes being very sensitive to any light or strain upon them,—in consequence
of my being sun-struck when young—at once contract themselves & all the
muscles about them, the moment the machine is brought to bear upon them.
The engraver should be instructed to do some “Eye-opening” while working
on the picture. Verily I am always shocked to see what a grisly bear I present
to the world, with every picture made by the instrument. You might get a
more amicable, &, I think, quite as natural & true a portrait, by adopting
that which accompanies my poems, in Newfields’ Edition. So again, you
will find an excellent profile likeness, published in Griswold’s International
Magazine. These were made some 20 years ago, & are thought to be very
good presentments of the subject at that date. As respects my appearance,
I am free to say, I am quite indifferent (which I ought not to be) but it is
your policy to exhibit your bears, or lions, under the most favorable aspects.—
When will you commence your “Sunny Side Series.”7 I think you do wisely

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4 The letter is valuable also in suggesting very strongly that Simms’s letter No. 1183
(Simms Letters, IV, 586-87), in the Simms Collection of the New York Public Library,
is wrongly described in Simms Letters as addressed to Fletcher Harper. The editors
assumed that references in the letter to “the Brethren” suggest the Harper brothers; in
the light of the Philhower letter it seems far more likely that the NYPL fragment is
also directed to Mr. Ellis and the Masonic “brethren” Simms encountered in Trenton.
5 The address of William Hawkins Ferris, Simms’ publisher in New York.
6 Illegible in the MS., but probably “ourson,” French for “bear-cub,” since the image
is picked up later in the letter.
7 Simms’s volume in the series was entitled The Ghost of My Husband: A Tale of the
in choosing that title. I shall be glad to see you beginning and shall rejoice to learn that you succeed. This will depend wholly upon the degree of dash, novelty, and general ability which you employ. It will be in my power, I modestly think, to prepare as soon as the Summer is over,—and I think of doing it—a series of novellettes, [sic] which shall be unique and fresh—distinguished by passion [illegible] and, perhaps, fun & frolic. You may think it strange, but my penchant for humor, fun & gaiety, is always more active when my sadness is most pressing; so that, if you find my letters lively, you may conclude that I am at my saddest. But this is sorry egotism.

I think, my dear Mr. Ellis, that you and Mr. Chapman are both perfectly aware of the importance, to me, of realizing, from my poor brain all the pecuniary results possible, and that you will take care to let me have my quid,—in part, at least—before I depart for the South. Will you be so good as to say in what manner this shall be done? You were to pay me $100 by the 20th Augt. and the remaining $100 by the 20th Sept. How, & on whom, shall I draw? Advise me, if you please, of all necessary particulars.

I shall be pleased, if possible, to visit Trenton, and as it is not unlikely that I shall return South by the land route, I may have a chance to look in upon you & our brethren of the Mystic tre when you least expect it. Present me gratefully to yr. medico (Dr. C.), our medical brother. I may need a potion at his hands. Commend me to him expressly, to the fraternity generally, and hold me as ever

very truly yours,

W. Gilmore Simms.

P.S. Brady, by the way, has taken several portraits (photographs) of me for a large quarto work of the publisher, Johnson. He has also made some cartes de visite—all frightful—more so than those I sent you, since they were taken when I wore all my fearful wilderness of beard. But it may be well to look in at Brady’s & see them.

W.G.S.