

# Louisa May Alcott

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Louisa May Alcott (November 29, 1832-March 6, 1888), best known as the author of *Little Women*, was an advocate of abolition, women's rights, and temperance. Her stories, novels, and poems helped to support the Alcott family, and most have now been republished, widening her reputation beyond that of children's author and bringing fresh critical notice to her work.



Louisa was the second daughter of Bronson Alcott and Abigail May, who met while Abigail was visiting her brother, Samuel J. May, minister of the Unitarian church in Brooklyn, Connecticut. Abigail fell for the tall, handsome young schoolteacher with radical ideas. Her family feared—rightly—that Bronson had little notion of how to support a family, but the young people were not to be deterred. They were married on May 23, 1830, at King's Chapel, Boston, where the May family were members.

The couple moved to Philadelphia, where their first daughter Anna was born. They lived in Germantown when Louisa arrived on November 29, 1832. Before Louisa's second birthday they returned to Boston for the opening of Bronson Alcott's unconventional Temple School, which lasted almost five years. Elizabeth was born in June, 1835, and Abby May five years later. By that time the Alcotts were living, for the first of several times, in Concord, Massachusetts. Under the wing of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alcott recovered from the failure of his Temple School and looked about for new projects.

The girls were mostly educated at home. "I never went to school," Louisa wrote, "except to my father or such governesses as from time to time came into the family. . . . so we had lessons each morning in the study. And very happy hours they were to us, for my father taught in the wise way which unfolds what lies in the child's nature as a flower blooms, rather than crammed it, like a Strasburg goose, with more than it could digest. I never liked arithmetic nor grammar . . . but reading, writing, composition, history, and geography I enjoyed, as well as the stories read to us with a skill peculiarly his own."

When Louisa was ten, the family, now under the influence of Bronson Alcott's English friends Charles Lane and Henry Wright, moved to Harvard, Massachusetts.

On a hillside farm they planned to establish a model community, Fruitlands, making use of no animal products or labor except, as Abigail Alcott observed, for that of women. She and her small daughters struggled to keep household and farm going while the men went about the countryside philosophizing. In a few months quarrels erupted, and winter weather saw the end of the experiment. The only lasting product of Fruitlands was Louisa's reminiscence, "Transcendental Wild Oats."

The family retreated to Concord and for the next three years lived across the road from Emerson in a house they called Hillside, a relatively happy period preserved in the first chapters of *Little Women*. Closeness to the Emerson family was important to Louisa. Her first book, *Flower Fables*, 1854, was written for Ellen Emerson, whose father she idolized.

"In browsing over Mr. Emerson's library," she later wrote, "I found Goethe's 'Correspondence with a Child,' and at once was fired with a desire to be a Bettine, making my father's friend my Goethe. So I wrote letters to him, but never sent them; sat in a tall cherry tree at midnight, singing to the moon til the owls scared me to bed; left wild flowers on the doorstep of my 'Master,' and sung Mignon's song under his window in very bad German."

Years later Alcott told Emerson about her early romance. "He was much amused," she wrote, "and begged for his letters, kindly saying he felt honored to be so worshipped. The letters were burnt long ago, but Emerson remained my 'Master,' while he lived, doing more for me,—as for many another—than he knew, by the simple beauty of his life, the truth and wisdom of his books, the example of a great, good man."

In these years, Louisa "got religion," as she later put it. Running in the Concord woods early one fall morning, she stopped to see the sunshine over the meadows. "A very strange and solemn feeling came over me as I stood there," she wrote in her journal, "with no sound but the rustle of the pines, no one near me, and the sun so glorious, as for me alone. It seemed as if I felt God as I never did before, and I prayed in my heart that I might keep that happy sense of nearness all my life."

In adulthood she wrote: "When feeling most alone, I find refuge in the Almighty Friend. If this is experiencing religion, I have done it; but I think it is only the lesson one must learn as it comes, and I am glad to know it."

Over the next few years she read Plutarch, Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Goethe, Schiller, Bettine Brentano, Mme. de Stael, Emerson, Charlotte Bronte, Carlyle, Margaret Fuller, and George Sand, among others. Such literature fueled

her active imagination with ideas for the thrillers she began writing in her teens, hoping to support what she called "the pathetic family."

Her first story, "The Rival Painters, A Tale of Rome" was written at the Hillside house in 1848 and published four years later in *Olive Branch*. By that time, the Alcotts were back in Boston, where they lived at five different addresses between 1849 and 1852. The two older girls contributed to the meager family income by teaching. Louisa's unhappy few weeks with a Dedham family were recorded in her essay, "How I Went Out to Service." Publisher James T. Fields rejected the piece and advised her: "Stick to your teaching, Miss Alcott. You can't write." Disheartened but determined, she continued to write, gradually learning how to produce what would sell. On her own in Boston she also took in sewing and served occasionally as governess. Living as frugally as possible, she sent home almost all the money she earned..

In this difficult time Louisa discovered Theodore Parker. "Go to hear Parker," she wrote in her journal, "and he does me good. Asks me to come Sunday evenings to his house. I did go there, and met [Wendell] Phillips, [William Lloyd] Garrison, . . . and other great men, and sit in my corner weekly, staring and enjoying myself."

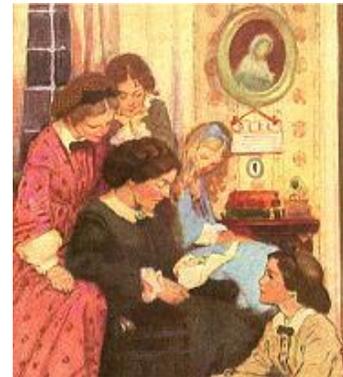
The Parkers offered the young woman practical as well as spiritual support when she needed help in finding a job. Under the name of Mr. Powers, Theodore Parker appears in her autobiographical novel, *Work*, which includes a description of his Music Hall services. In 1881 she wrote a preface to a new edition of the *Prayers of Theodore Parker*.

According to her biographer Ednah Dow Cheney, Alcott also liked to hear Unitarian Cyrus Bartol preach but never joined any church. While visiting New York in 1875 she heard the Revs. Octavius Brooks Frothingham and Henry Whitney Bellows. She enjoyed the company of Unitarian John Turner Sargent and his Radical Club, which she attended in 1867: "Fine time. Bartol inspired; Emerson chairman; Alcott on his legs; strong-minded ladies out in full force; aesthetic tea for refreshment."

With all her hard work, Alcott found time to enjoy Boston theater. A veteran of amateur performances at home and elsewhere, she loved the stage and wrote for it. One of her plays was accepted for presentation, but circumstances prevented its opening. She made friends in the theatrical community and through them received a cherished theater pass. Summering in Walpole, New Hampshire, between 1855 and 1857, she organized the Walpole Amateur Dramatic Company. When she moved back to Concord in the fall of 1857, she lost no time in forming the Concord Dramatic Union. Theatricals involved many Concordians and livened up what she considered a dull town.

Settled in Concord for the next twenty years, Alcott's family finally had a permanent home. Their first year there was marked by Elizabeth's death and Anna's marriage to John Pratt—contrasting events of great significance for her. Bronson Alcott continued to lecture and served as superintendent of schools. Alcott spent as much of her time as possible in Boston, writing, tutoring and sending money home. Her stories written under the pseudonym "A. M. Barnard" found a ready market; "Pauline's Passion and Punishment," 1863, won its author a \$100 prize and appeared in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newsletter*. She was also working on two serious novels, *Moods*, and "Success," later published as *Work*, 1873.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Alcott was eager to do her part. She had long attended antislavery meetings and fairs. "I became an Abolitionist at an early age," she wrote, "but have never been able to decide whether I was made so by seeing the portrait of George Thompson [the British abolitionist] hidden under a bed in our house during the Garrison riot . . . or because I was saved from drowning in the Frog Pond some years later by a colored boy. However that may be, the conversion was genuine; and my greatest pride is in the fact that I lived to know the brave men and women who did so much for the cause, and that I had a very small share in the war which put an end to a great wrong."



Alcott's "small share" was a month's service during the winter of 1862-63 as a nurse at the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown, Virginia. Though she began with characteristic determination, typhoid pneumonia soon forced her home. Her health was permanently damaged by the fever and by the calomel (mercurous chloride) with which she was dosed. After a gradual recovery she was able to write "Hospital Sketches," serialized in the *Boston Commonwealth* and published in book form in August, 1863. The book was extremely popular and stimulated calls for more of her work. In December

she published two more books, and her dramatization of "Scenes from Dickens" opened in Boston as a benefit for the Sanitary Commission. In 1864 *Moods* was published, but she still depended on her thrillers for reliable income.

When the war ended, Alcott spent a year in Europe as the companion of Anna Weld, enjoying scenes familiar to her in books. Her return to Boston marked the beginning of a new phase in her career. She accepted the editorship of a children's magazine, *Merry's Museum*, and became its major contributor. In September, 1867, publisher Thomas Niles asked her to write a book for girls, but it was not

until the following May that she could bring herself to this task, not one of her own choosing. She then went into her usual writer's "vortex" and, in mid-July finished Part 1 of *Little Women* for fall publication. It was an immediate best seller. Readers clamored for a sequel. Part 2 was published the following spring.

From this point on Louisa May Alcott was a victim of her own success. Though she yearned to do more serious fiction, children's books flowed from her pen for the rest of her life because their sales supported her family. "Twenty years ago," she wrote in her journal in June, 1872, "I resolved to make the family independent if I could. At forty that is done. Debts all paid, even the outlawed ones, and we have enough to be comfortable. It has cost me my health, perhaps; but as I still live, there is more for me to do, I suppose."

Alcott and her widowed sister Anna Pratt bought the Thoreau house on Concord's Main Street and moved their mother into it only a few days before her death. When Bronson Alcott started his School of Philosophy, his daughters saw to it that lecturers and their audiences were housed and fed. Asked for her definition of philosophy, Alcott replied: "My definition is of a man up in a balloon, with his family and friends pulling the ropes which confine him to earth and trying to haul him down."

Alcott gave her energy to practical reforms, women's rights and temperance. She attended the Women's Congress of 1875 in Syracuse, New York, where she was introduced by Mary Livermore. She contributed to Lucy Stone's *Woman's Journal* while organizing Concord women to vote in the school election. "Was the first woman to register my name as a voter," she wrote. "Drove about and drummed up women to my suffrage meeting. So hard to move people out of the old ruts." And again, "Helped start a temperance society much needed in C[oncord]. I was secretary, and wrote records, letters, and sent pledges, etc."

She continued to produce her stream of children's books and wrote an adult novel, *A Modern Mephistopheles*, published in 1877. Spending considerable time in Boston, she sometimes shared her rooms at the Bellevue Hotel with her sister May and also provided her with art lessons. They went abroad together, and May was able to establish herself as an artist in London. She married Ernest Nieriker and settled with him in Paris but died a few weeks after the birth of a daughter named after Louisa. She left the baby to Alcott. In September, 1880, "Lulu" arrived in Boston and gave Alcott's life a new focus. She delighted to watch the child grow, told her stories and published them as *Lulu's Library*.

As Alcott's health continued to fail, she tried various doctors and "cures." When her father suffered a stroke in 1882, she established a home for him with Anna, her

two sons and little Lulu at 10 Louisburg Square in Boston. She herself moved from place to place in search of health and peace to write, settling at last in a Roxbury nursing home. Although only in her mid-fifties, she realized that death might come at any time and legally adopted Anna's son John Pratt. She willed her copyrights in trust to him, stipulating that the income be shared by Anna, Lulu, John and Anna's other son Fred.

On March 1, 1888, Louisa visited her father for the last time. "I am going up," he said. "Come with me." "Oh, I wish I could," she replied. Bronson Alcott died on March 4, and Louisa May Alcott on March 6. She was buried in Sleepy Hollow cemetery in Concord. Her grave bears a Civil War veteran's marker.

A complete list of Alcott letters is in Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, "A Calendar of Letters of Louisa May Alcott," *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1988). Some letters appear in Ednah D. Cheney, *Louisa May Alcott, Her Life, Letters, and Journals* (1889, repr. 1980) and Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, eds., *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, introduction by Madeleine B. Stern (1987, 1995). The journals are also published: Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine B. Stern, eds., *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott* (1989)

Alcott's thrillers are available in three collections, all edited by Madeleine Stern: *Behind a Mask: Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* (1975), *Plots and Counterplots: More Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* (1976), and *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers* (1995). Among Alcott's works not mentioned in the above article are *The Rose Family and On Picket Duty, and Other Tales* (1863), *Morning Glories and Other Stories* (1868), *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870), *Little Men* (1871), *Eight Cousins* (1875), *Silver Pitchers* (1876), *Rose in Bloom* (1876), *Under the Lilacs* (1878), *Jack and Jill* (1880), *Spinning Wheel Stories* (1884), *Jo's Boys* (1886), *A Garland for Girls* (1887), *Comic Tragedies* (1893), and *A Long Fatal Love Chase* (1995). She also wrote six volumes of *Aunt Jo's Scrap Bag* (1872-82) and three volumes of *Lulu's Library* (1885-89). Her poem, "Sunlight," was published in *Peterson's Magazine* (September 1851) under the name "Flora Fairfield."

Biographies of Alcott include Madeleine B. Stern, *Louisa May Alcott* (1950); Martha Saxton, *Louisa May, A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott* (1977); and Madelon Bedell, *The Alcotts: Biography of a Family* (1980).



# Hospital Sketches

By Louisa May Alcott

## CHAPTER I.

"I WANT something to do."

This remark being addressed to the world in general, no one in particular felt it their duty to reply; so I repeated it to the smaller world about me, received the following suggestions, and settled the matter by answering my own inquiry, as people are apt to do when very much in earnest.

"Write a book," quoth the author of my being.

"Don't know enough, sir. First live, then write."

"Try teaching again," suggested my mother.

"No thank you, ma'am, ten years of that is enough."

"Take a husband like my Darby, and fulfill your mission," said sister Joan, home on a visit.

"Can't afford expensive luxuries, Mrs. Coobiddy."

"Turn actress, and immortalize your name," said sister Vashti, striking an attitude.

"I won't."

"Go nurse the soldiers," said my young brother, Tom, panting for "the tented field."

"I will!"

...In a few days a townswoman heard of my desire, approved of it, and brought about an interview with one of the sisterhood which I wished to join, who was at home on a furlough, and able and willing to satisfy all inquiries. A morning chat with Miss General S.—we hear no end of Mrs. Generals, why not a Miss?—produced three results: I felt that I could do the work, was offered a place, and accepted it, promising not to desert, but stand ready to march on Washington at an hour's notice.

A few days were necessary for the letter containing my request and recommendation to reach headquarters, and another, containing my commission, to return; therefore no time was to be lost; and heartily thanking my pair of friends, I tore home through the December slush as if the rebels were after me, and like many another recruit, burst in upon my family with the announcement—

"I've enlisted!"

An impressive silence followed. Tom, the irrepressible, broke it with a slap on the shoulder and the graceful compliment—

"Old Trib, you're a trump!"

...As boys going to sea immediately become nautical in speech, walk as if they already had their "sea legs" on, and shiver their timbers on all possible occasions, so I turned military at once, called my dinner my rations, saluted all new comers, and ordered a dress parade that very afternoon. Having reviewed every rag I possessed, I detailed some for picket duty while airing over the fence; some to the sanitary influences of the wash-tub; others to mount guard in the trunk; while the weak and wounded went to the Work-basket Hospital, to be made ready for active service again. To this squad I devoted myself for a week; but all was done, and I had time to get powerfully impatient before the letter came. It did arrive however, and brought a disappointment along with its good will and friendliness, for it told me that the place in the Armory Hospital that I supposed I was to take, was already filled, and a much less desirable one at Hurly-burly House was offered instead.

"That's just your luck, Trib. I'll tote your trunk up garret for you again; for of course you won't go," Tom remarked, with the disdainful pity which small boys affect when they get into their teens. I was wavering in my secret soul, but that settled the matter, and I crushed him on the spot with martial brevity—

"It is now one; I shall march at six."

I have a confused recollection of spending the afternoon in pervading the house like an executive whirlwind, with my family swarming after me, all working, talking, prophesying and lamenting, while I packed my "go-abroady" possessions, tumbled the rest into two big boxes, danced on the lids till they shut, and gave them in charge, with the direction,—

"If I never come back, make a bonfire of them."

Then I choked down a cup of tea, generously salted instead of sugared, by some agitated relative, shouldered my knapsack—it was only a traveling bag, but do let me preserve the unities—hugged my family three times all round without a vestige

of unmanly emotion, till a certain dear old lady broke down upon my neck, with a despairing sort of wail—

"Oh, my dear, my dear, how can I let you go?"

"I'll stay if you say so, mother."

"But I don't; go, and the Lord will take care of you."

Much of the Roman matron's courage had gone into the Yankee matron's composition, and, in spite of her tears, she would have sent ten sons to the war, had she possessed them, as freely as she sent one daughter, smiling and flapping on the door-step till I vanished, though the eyes that followed me were very dim, and the handkerchief she waved was very wet....

### CHAPTER III.

"THEY'VE come! they've come! hurry up, ladies—you're wanted."

"Who have come? the rebels?"

This sudden summons in the gray dawn was somewhat startling to a three days' nurse like myself, and, as the thundering knock came at our door, I sprang up in my bed, prepared

"To gird my woman's form,  
And on the ramparts die,"

if necessary; but my room-mate took it more coolly, and, as she began a rapid toilet, answered my bewildered question,—

"Bless you, no child; it's the wounded from Fredericksburg; forty ambulances are at the door, and we shall have our hands full in fifteen minutes."

"What shall we have to do?"

"Wash, dress, feed, warm and nurse them for the next three months, I dare say. Eighty beds are ready, and we were getting impatient for the men to come. Now you will begin to see hospital life in earnest, for you won't probably find time to sit down all day, and may think yourself fortunate if you get to bed by midnight. Come to me in the ball-room when you are ready; the worst cases are always carried there, and I shall need your help."

So saying, the energetic little woman twirled her hair into a button at the back of her head, in a "cleared for action" sort of style, and vanished, wrestling her way into a feminine kind of pea-jacket as she went.

I am free to confess that I had a realizing sense of the fact that my hospital bed was not a bed of roses just then, or the prospect before me one of unmingled rapture. ...when I peeped into the dusky street lined with what I at first had innocently called market carts, now unloading their sad freight at our door, I recalled sundry reminiscences I had heard from nurses of longer standing, my ardor experienced a sudden chill, and I indulged in a most unpatriotic wish that I was safe at home again, with a quiet day before me, and no necessity for being hustled up, as if I were a hen and had only to hop off my roost, give my plumage a peck, and be ready for action. A second bang at the door sent this recreant desire to the right about, as a little woolly head popped in, and Joey, (a six years' old contraband,) announced—

"Miss Blank is jes' wild fer ye, and says fly round right away. They's comin' in, I tell yer, heaps on 'em—one was took out dead, and I see him,—hi! warn't he a goner!"

With which cheerful intelligence the imp scuttled away, singing like a blackbird, and I followed, feeling that Richard was *not* himself again, and wouldn't be for a long time to come.

The first thing I met was a regiment of the vilest odors that ever assaulted the human nose, and took it by storm. Cologne, with its seven and seventy evil savors, was a posy-bed to it; and the worst of this affliction was, everyone had assured me that it was a chronic weakness of all hospitals, and I must bear it. I did, armed with lavender water, with which I so besprinkled myself and premises, that, like my friend Sairy, I was soon known among my patients as "the nurse with the bottle." Having been run over by three excited surgeons, bumped against by migratory coal-hods, water-pails, and small boys, nearly scalded by an avalanche of newly-filled tea-pots, and hopelessly entangled in a knot of colored sisters coming to wash, I progressed by slow stages up stairs and down, till the main hall was reached, and I paused to take breath and a survey. There they were! "our brave boys," as the papers justly call them, for cowards could hardly have been so riddled with shot and shell, so torn and shattered, nor have borne suffering for which we have no name, with an uncomplaining fortitude, which made one glad to cherish each as a brother. In they came, some on stretchers, some in men's arms, some feebly staggering along propped on rude crutches, and one lay stark and still with covered face, as a comrade gave his name to be recorded before they carried him away to the dead house. All was hurry and confusion; the hall was full of these wrecks of humanity, for the most exhausted could not reach a bed till duly ticketed and registered; the walls were lined with rows of such as could sit, the floor covered with the more disabled, the steps and doorways filled with helpers and lookers on; the sound of many feet and voices made that usually quiet hour as noisy as noon; and, in the midst of it all, the matron's motherly face brought more

comfort to many a poor soul, than the cordial draughts she administered, or the cheery words that welcomed all, making of the hospital a home.

The sight of several stretchers, each with its legless, armless, or desperately wounded occupant, entering my ward, admonished me that I was there to work, not to wonder or weep; so I corked up my feelings, and returned to the path of duty, which was rather "a hard road to travel" just then. ....Presently, Miss Blank tore me from my refuge behind piles of one-sleeved shirts, odd socks, bandages and lint; put basin, sponge, towels, and a block of brown soap into my hands, with these appalling directions:

"Come, my dear, begin to wash as fast as you can. Tell them to take off socks, coats and shirts, scrub them well, put on clean shirts, and the attendants will finish them off, and lay them in bed."

If she had requested me to shave them all, or dance a hornpipe on the stove funnel, I should have been less staggered; but to scrub some dozen lords of creation at a moment's notice, was really—really—. However, there was no time for nonsense, and, having resolved when I came to do everything I was bid, I drowned my scruples in my wash-bowl, clutched my soap manfully, and, assuming a business-like air, made a dab at the first dirty specimen I saw, bent on performing my task *vi et armis* if necessary. I chanced to light on a withered **old Irishman**, wounded in the head, which caused that portion of his frame to be tastefully laid out like a garden, the bandages being the walks, his hair the shrubbery. He was so overpowered by the honor of having a lady wash him, as he expressed it, that he did nothing but roll up his eyes, and bless me, in an irresistible style which was too much for my sense of the ludicrous; so we laughed together, and when I knelt down to take off his shoes, he "flopped" also, and wouldn't hear of my touching "them dirty craters. May your bed above be aisy darlin', for the day's work ye ar doon! —Whoosh! there ye are, and bedad, it's hard tellin' which is the dirtiest, the fut or the shoe." It was; and if he hadn't been to the fore, I should have gone on pulling, under the impression that the "fut" was a boot, for trousers, socks, shoes and legs were a mass of mud. This comical tableau produced a general grin, at which propitious beginning I took heart and scrubbed away like any tidy parent on a Saturday night. Some of them took the performance like sleepy children, leaning their tired heads against me as I worked, others looked grimly scandalized, and several of the roughest colored like bashful girls. One wore a soiled little bag about his neck, and, as I moved it, to bathe his wounded breast, I said,

"Your talisman didn't save you, did it?"

"Well, I reckon it did, marm, for that shot would a gone a couple a inches deeper but for my old mammy's camphor bag," answered the cheerful philosopher.

Another, with a gun-shot wound through the cheek, asked for a looking-glass, and when I brought one, regarded his swollen face with a dolorous expression, as he muttered—

"I vow to gosh, that's too bad! I warn't a bad looking chap before, and now I'm done for; won't there be a thunderin' scar? and what on earth will Josephine Skinner say?"

He looked up at me with his one eye so appealingly, that I controlled my risibles, and assured him that if Josephine was a girl of sense, she would admire the honorable scar, as a lasting proof that he had faced the enemy, for all women thought a wound the best decoration a brave soldier could wear. I hope Miss Skinner verified the good opinion I so rashly expressed of her, but I shall never know.

The next scrubbee was a nice looking lad, with a curly brown mane, and a budding trace of gingerbread over the lip, which he called his beard, and defended stoutly, when the barber jocosely suggested its immolation. He lay on a bed, with one leg gone, and the right arm so shattered that it must evidently follow: yet the **little Sergeant** was as merry as if his afflictions were not worth lamenting over; and when a drop or two of salt water mingled with my suds at the sight of this strong young body, so marred and maimed, the boy looked up, with a brave smile, though there was a little quiver of the lips, as he said,

"Now don't you fret yourself about me, miss; I'm first rate here, for it's nuts to lie still on this bed, after knocking about in those confounded ambulances, that shake what there is left of a fellow to jelly. I never was in one of these places before, and think this cleaning up a jolly thing for us, though I'm afraid it isn't for you ladies."

"Is this your first battle, Sergeant?"

"No, miss; I've been in six scrimmages, and never got a scratch till this last one; but it's done the business pretty thoroughly for me, I should say. Lord! what a scramble there'll be for arms and legs, when we old boys come out of our graves, on the Judgment Day: wonder if we shall get our own again? If we do, my leg will have to tramp from Fredericksburg, my arm from here, I suppose, and meet my body, wherever it may be."

The fancy seemed to tickle him mightily, for he laughed blithely, and so did I; which, no doubt, caused the new nurse to be regarded as a light-minded sinner by the Chaplain, who roamed vaguely about, informing the men that they were all worms, corrupt of heart, with perishable bodies, and souls only to be saved by a diligent perusal of certain tracts, and other equally cheering bits of spiritual consolation, when spirituous ditto would have been preferred.

"I say, Mrs.!" called a voice behind me; and, turning, I saw a rough Michigander, with an arm blown off at the shoulder, and two or three bullets still in him—as he afterwards mentioned, as carelessly as if gentlemen were in the habit of carrying such trifles about with them. I went to him, and, while administering a dose of soap and water, he whispered, irefully:

"That red-headed devil, over yonder, is a reb, damn him! You'll agree to that, I'll bet? He's got shet of a foot, or he'd a cut like the rest of the lot. Don't you wash him, nor feed him, but jest let him holler till he's tired. It's a blasted shame to fetch them fellers in here, along side of us; and so I'll tell the chap that bosses this concern; cuss me if I don't."

I regret to say that I did not deliver a moral sermon upon the duty of forgiving our enemies, and the sin of profanity, then and there; but, being a red-hot Abolitionist, stared fixedly at the tall rebel, who was a copperhead, in every sense of the word, and privately resolved to put soap in his eyes, rub his nose the wrong way, and excoriate his cuticle generally, if I had the washing of him.

My amiable intentions, however, were frustrated; for, when I approached, with as Christian an expression as my principles would allow, and asked the question—"Shall I try to make you more comfortable, sir?" all I got for my pains was a gruff—

"No; I'll do it myself."

"Here's your Southern chivalry, with a witness," thought I, dumping the basin down before him, thereby quenching a strong desire to give him a summary baptism, in return for his ungraciousness; for my angry passions rose, at this rebuff, in a way that would have scandalized good Dr. Watts. He was a disappointment in all respects, (the rebel, not the blessed Doctor,) for he was neither fiendish, romantic, pathetic, or anything interesting; but a long, fat man, with a head like a burning bush, and a perfectly expressionless face: so I could dislike him without the slightest drawback, and ignored his existence from that day forth. One redeeming trait he certainly did possess, as the floor speedily testified; for his ablutions were so vigorously performed, that his bed soon stood like an isolated island, in a sea of soap-suds, and he resembled a dripping merman, suffering from the loss of a fin. If cleanliness is a near neighbor to godliness, then was the big rebel the godliest man in my ward that day.

Having done up our human wash, and laid it out to dry, the second syllable of our version of the word war-fare was enacted with much success. Great trays of bread, meat, soup and coffee appeared; and both nurses and attendants turned waiters, serving bountiful rations to all who could eat. I can call my pinafore to testify to my good will in the work, for in ten minutes it was reduced to a perambulating bill of fare, presenting samples of all the refreshments going or gone. It was a lively

scene; the long room lined with rows of beds, each filled by an occupant, whom water, shears, and clean raiment, had transformed from a dismal ragamuffin into a recumbent hero, with a cropped head.

All having eaten, drank, and rested, the surgeons began their rounds; and I took my first lesson in the art of dressing wounds. It wasn't a festive scene, by any means; for Dr P., whose Aid I constituted myself, fell to work with a vigor which soon convinced me that I was a weaker vessel, though nothing would have induced me to confess it then.

...The amputations were reserved till the morrow, and the merciful magic of ether was not thought necessary that day, so the poor souls had to bear their pains as best they might. It is all very well to talk of the patience of woman; and far be it from me to pluck that feather from her cap, for, heaven knows, she isn't allowed to wear many; but the patient endurance of these men, under trials of the flesh, was truly wonderful. Their fortitude seemed contagious, and scarcely a cry escaped them, though I often longed to groan for them, when pride kept their white lips shut, while great drops stood upon their foreheads, and the bed shook with the irrepressible tremor of their tortured bodies.

...It was long past noon before these repairs were even partially made; and, having got the bodies of my boys into something like order, the next task was to minister to their minds, by writing letters to the anxious souls at home; answering questions, reading papers, taking possession of money and valuables; for the eighth commandment was reduced to a very fragmentary condition, both by the blacks and whites, who ornamented our hospital with their presence. Pocket books, purses, miniatures, and watches, were sealed up, labelled, and handed over to the matron, till such times as the owners thereof were ready to depart homeward or campward again. The letters dictated to me, and revised by me, that afternoon, would have made an excellent chapter for some future history of the war; for, like that which Thackeray's "Ensign Spooner" wrote his mother just before Waterloo, they were "full of affection, pluck, and bad spelling;" nearly all giving lively accounts of the battle, and ending with a somewhat sudden plunge from patriotism to provender, desiring "Marm," "Mary Ann," or "Aunt Peters," to send along some pies, pickles, sweet stuff, and apples, "to yourn in haste," Joe, Sam, or Ned, as the case might be.

My **little Sergeant** insisted on trying to scribble something with his left hand, and patiently accomplished some half dozen lines of hieroglyphics, which he gave me to fold and direct, with a boyish blush, that rendered a glimpse of "My Dearest Jane," unnecessary, to assure me that the heroic lad had been more successful in the service of Commander-in-Chief Cupid than that of Gen. Mars; and a charming little romance blossomed instanter in Nurse Periwinkle's romantic fancy, though no

further confidences were made that day, for Sergeant fell asleep, and, judging from his tranquil face, visited his absent sweetheart in the pleasant land of dreams.

At five o'clock a great bell rang, and the attendants flew, not to arms, but to their trays, to bring up supper, when a second uproar announced that it was ready. The new comers woke at the sound; and I presently discovered that it took a very bad wound to incapacitate the defenders of the faith for the consumption of their rations; the amount that some of them sequestered was amazing; but when I suggested the probability of a famine hereafter, to the matron, that motherly lady cried out: "Bless their hearts, why shouldn't they eat? It's their only amusement; so fill every one, and, if there's not enough ready to-night, I'll lend my share to the Lord by giving it to the boys." And, whipping up her coffee-pot and plate of toast, she gladdened the eyes and stomachs of two or three dissatisfied heroes, by serving them with a liberal hand; and I haven't the slightest doubt that, having cast her bread upon the waters, it came back buttered, as another large-hearted old lady was wont to say.

Then came the doctor's evening visit; the administration of medicines; washing feverish faces; smoothing tumbled beds; wetting wounds; singing lullabies; and preparations for the night. By twelve, the last labor of love was done; the last "good night" spoken; and, if any needed a reward for that day's work, they surely received it, in the silent eloquence of those long lines of faces, showing pale and peaceful in the shaded rooms, as we quitted them, followed by grateful glances that lighted us to bed, where rest, the sweetest, made our pillows soft, while Night and Nature took our places, filling that great house of pain with the healing miracles of Sleep, and his diviner brother, Death...

## CHAPTER VI.

...The presence, however brief, of relations and friends by the bedside of the dead or dying, is always a trial to the bystanders. They are not near enough to know how best to comfort, yet too near to turn their backs upon the sorrow that finds its only solace in listening to recitals of last words, breathed into nurse's ears, or receiving the tender legacies of love and longing bequeathed through them.

To me, the saddest sight I saw in that sad place, was the spectacle of a grey-haired father, sitting hour after hour by his son, dying from the poison of his wound. The old father, hale and hearty; the young son, past all help, though one could scarcely believe it; for the subtle fever, burning his strength away, flushed his cheeks with color, filled his eyes with lustre, and lent a mournful mockery of health to face and figure, making the poor lad comelier in death than in life. His bed was not in my ward; but I was often in and out, and for a day or two, the pair were much together, saying little, but looking much. The old man tried to busy himself with book or pen, that his presence might not be a burden; and once when he sat

writing, to the anxious mother at home, doubtless, I saw the son's eyes fix upon his face, with a look of mingled resignation and regret, as if endeavoring to teach himself to say cheerfully the long good bye. And again, when the son slept, the father watched him as he had himself been watched; and though no feature of his grave countenance changed, the rough hand, smoothing the lock of hair upon the pillow, the bowed attitude of the grey head, were more pathetic than the loudest lamentations. The son died; and the father took home the pale relic of the life he gave, offering a little money to the nurse, as the only visible return it was in his power to make her; for though very grateful, he was poor. Of course, she did not take it, but found a richer compensation in the old man's earnest declaration:

"My boy couldn't have been better cared for if he'd been at home; and God will reward you for it, though I can't."

My own experiences of this sort began when my first man died. He had scarcely been removed, when his wife came in. Her eye went straight to the well-known bed; it was empty; and feeling, yet not believing the hard truth, she cried out, with a look I never shall forget:

"Why, where's Emanuel?"

I had never seen her before, did not know her relationship to the man whom I had only nursed for a day, and was about to tell her he was gone, when McGee, the tender-hearted Irishman before mentioned, brushed by me with a cheerful—"It's shifted to a better bed he is, Mrs. Connel. Come out, dear, till I show ye;" and, taking her gently by the arm, he led her to the matron, who broke the heavy tidings to the wife, and comforted the widow.

Another day, running up to my room for a breath of fresh air and a five minutes rest after a disagreeable task, I found a stout young woman sitting on my bed, wearing the miserable look which I had learned to know by that time. Seeing her, reminded me that I had heard of some one's dying in the night, and his sister's arriving in the morning. This must be she, I thought. I pitied her with all my heart. What could I say or do? Words always seem impertinent at such times; I did not know the man; the woman was neither interesting in herself nor graceful in her grief; yet, having known a sister's sorrow myself, I could have not leave her alone with her trouble in that strange place, without a word. So, feeling heart-sick, home-sick, and not knowing what else to do, I just put my arms about her, and began to cry in a very helpless but hearty way; for, as I seldom indulge in this moist luxury, I like to enjoy it with all my might, when I do.

It so happened I could not have done a better thing; for, though not a word was spoken, each felt the other's sympathy; and, in the silence, our handkerchiefs were more eloquent than words. She soon sobbed herself quiet; and leaving her on my

bed, I went back to work, feeling much refreshed by the shower, though I'd forgotten to rest, and had washed my face instead of my hands. I mention this successful experience as a receipt proved and approved, for the use of any nurse who may find herself called upon to minister to these wounds of the heart. They will find it more efficacious than cups of tea, smelling-bottles, psalms, or sermons; for a friendly touch and a companionable cry, unite the consolations of all the rest for womankind; and, if genuine, will be found a sovereign cure for the first sharp pang so many suffer in these heavy times.

I am gratified to find that my **little Sergeant** has found favor in several quarters, and gladly respond to sundry calls for news of him, though my personal knowledge ended five months ago. ...I placed the Sergeant on my list of worthy boys; and many jovial chats have I enjoyed with the merry-hearted lad, who had a fancy for fun....

The Sergeant also originated, I believe, the fashion of calling his neighbors by their afflictions instead of their names; and I was rather taken aback by hearing them bandy remarks of this sort, with perfect good humor and much enjoyment of the new game.

"Hallo, old Fits is off again!" "How are you, Rheumatiz?" "Will you trade apples, Ribs?" "I say, Miss P. may I give Typus a drink of this?" "Look here, No Toes, lend us a stamp, there's a good feller," etc. He himself was christened "Baby B.," because he tended his arm on a little pillow, and called it his infant.

Since I left, I have heard, from a reliable source, that my Sergeant has gone home; therefore, ... I now imagine "dearest Jane" filling my place, tending the wounds I tended, brushing the curly jungle I brushed, loving the excellent little youth I loved, and eventually walking altarward, with the Sergeant stumping gallantly at her side. If she doesn't do all this, and no end more, I'll never forgive her; and sincerely pray to the guardian saint of lovers, that "Baby B." may prosper in his wooing, and his name be long in the land.

One of the lively episodes of hospital life, is the frequent marching away of such as are well enough to rejoin their regiments, or betake themselves to some convalescent camp. The ward master comes to the door of each room that is to be thinned, reads off a list of names, bids their owners look sharp and be ready when called for; and, as he vanishes, the rooms fall into an indescribable state of topsy-turvyness, as the boys begin to black their boots, brighten spurs, if they have them, overhaul knapsacks, make presents; are fitted out with needfuls, and—well, why not?—kissed sometimes, as they say, good by; for in all human probability we shall never meet again, and a woman's heart yearns over anything that has clung to her for help and comfort. I never liked these breakings-up of my little household: though my short stay showed me but three. I was immensely gratified by the hand

shakes I got, for their somewhat painful cordiality assured me that I had not tried in vain.

...Then they fell into line in front of the house, looking rather wan and feeble, some of them, but trying to step out smartly and march in good order, though half the knapsacks were carried by the guard, and several leaned on sticks instead of shouldering guns. All looked up and smiled, or waved their hands and touched their caps, as they passed under our windows down the long street, and so away, some to their homes in this world, and some to that in the next; and, for the rest of the day, I felt like Rachel mourning for her children, when I saw the empty beds and missed the familiar faces.

...To such as wish to know where these scenes took place, I must respectfully decline to answer; for Hurly-burly House has ceased to exist as a hospital; so let it rest, with all its sins upon its head,—perhaps I should say chimney top...

The next hospital I enter will, I hope, be one for the colored regiments, as they seem to be proving their right to the admiration and kind offices of their white relations, who owe them so large a debt, a little part of which I shall be so proud to pay.

Yours,  
With a firm faith  
In the good time coming,  
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