

**The Wound Dresser**

**By**

**Walt Whitman**

But in silence, in dreams' projections,  
While the world of gain and appearance and mirth goes on,  
So soon what is over forgotten, and waves wash the imprints off the  
sand,  
With hinged knees returning I enter the doors, (while for you up there,  
Whoever you are, follow without noise and be of strong heart.)

I onward go, I stop,  
With hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds,  
I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable,  
One turns to me his appealing eyes--poor boy! I never knew you,  
Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would  
save you.

I am faithful, I do not give out,  
The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,  
These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast a  
fire, a burning flame.)

Thus in silence, in dreams' projections,  
Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals,  
The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,  
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,  
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad,  
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested,  
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

The Wound Dresser.

## PREFACE

As introduction to these letters from Walt Whitman to his mother, I have availed myself of three of Whitman's communications to the press covering the time during which the material which composes this volume was being written. These communications (parts of which, but in no case the whole, were used by Whitman in his "Memoranda of the Secession War") seem to me to form, in spite of certain duplications, which to my mind have the force, not the weakness, of repetition, quite an ideal background to the letters to Mrs. Whitman, since they give a full and free description of the circumstances and surroundings in the midst of which those were composed. Readers who desire a still more extended account of the man himself, his work and environment at that time, may consult with profit the Editor's "Walt Whitman" (pp. 34-44), O'Connor's "Good Gray Poet" (included in that volume, pp. 99-130), "Specimen Days" (pp. 26-63, included in Walt Whitman's "Complete Prose Works"), and above all the section of "Leaves of Grass" called "Drum-Taps." I do not believe that it is in the power of any man now living to make an important addition to the vivid picture of those days and nights in the hospitals drawn by Whitman himself and to be found in his published prose and verse, and, above all, in the living words of the present letters to his mother. These last were written on the spot, as the scenes and incidents, in all their living and sombre colors, passed before his eyes, while his mind and heart were full of the sights and sounds, the episodes and agonies, of those terrible hours. How could any one writing in cold blood, to-day, hope to add words

of any value to those he wrote then?

Perhaps, in conclusion, it may be as well to repeat what was said in the introduction to a former volume,--that these letters make no pretensions as literature. They are, as indeed is all that Whitman has written (as he himself has over and over again said), something quite different from that--something much less to the average cultured and learned man, something much more to the man or woman who comes within range of their attraction. But doubtless the critics will still insist that, if they are not literature, they ought to be, or otherwise should not be printed, failing (as is their wont) to comprehend that there are other qualities and characteristics than the literary, some of them as important and as valuable, which may be more or less adequately conveyed by print.

R. M. B.

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## THE GREAT ARMY OF THE WOUNDED

The military hospitals, convalescent camps, etc., in Washington and its neighborhood, sometimes contain over fifty thousand sick and wounded men. Every form of wound (the mere sight of some of them having been known to make a tolerably hardy visitor faint away), every kind of malady, like a long procession, with typhoid fever and diarrhoea at the head as leaders, are here in steady motion. The soldier's hospital! how many sleepless nights, how many women's tears, how many long and waking hours and days of suspense, from every one of the Middle, Eastern, and Western States, have concentrated here! Our own New York, in the form of hundreds and thousands of her young men, may consider herself here--Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and all the West and Northwest the same--and all the New England States the same.

Upon a few of these hospitals I have been almost daily calling as a missionary, on my own account, for the sustenance and consolation of some of the most needy cases of sick and dying men, for the last two months. One has much to learn to do good in these places. Great tact is required. These are not like other hospitals. By far the greatest proportion (I should say five sixths) of the patients are American young men, intelligent, of independent spirit, tender feelings, used to a hardy and healthy life; largely the farmers are represented by their sons--largely the mechanics and workingmen of the cities. Then they are soldiers. All these points must be borne in mind.

People through our Northern cities have little or no idea of the great and prominent feature which these military hospitals and convalescent camps make in and around Washington. There are not merely two or three or a dozen, but some fifty of them, of different degrees of capacity. Some have a thousand and more patients. The newspapers here find it necessary to print every day a directory of the hospitals--a long list, something like what a directory of the churches would be in New York, Philadelphia, or Boston.

The Government (which really tries, I think, to do the best and quickest it can for these sad necessities) is gradually settling down to adopt the plan of placing the hospitals in clusters of one-story wooden barracks, with their accompanying tents and sheds for cooking and all needed purposes. Taking all things into consideration, no doubt these are best adapted to the purpose; better than using churches and large public buildings like the Patent office. These sheds now adopted are long, one-story edifices, sometimes ranged along in a row, with their heads to the street, and numbered either alphabetically, Wards A or B, C, D, and so on; or Wards 1, 2, 3, etc. The middle one will be marked by a flagstaff, and is the office of the establishment, with rooms for the ward surgeons, etc. One of these sheds, or wards, will contain sixty cots; sometimes, on an emergency, they move them close together, and crowd in more. Some of the barracks are larger, with, of course, more inmates. Frequently there are tents, more comfortable here than one might think, whatever they may be down in the army.



Each ward has a ward-master, and generally a nurse for every ten or twelve men. A ward surgeon has, generally, two wards--although this varies. Some of the wards have a woman nurse; the Armory-square wards have some very good ones. The one in Ward E is one of the best.

A few weeks ago the vast area of the second story of that noblest of Washington buildings, the Patent office, was crowded close with rows of sick, badly wounded, and dying soldiers. They were placed in three very large apartments. I went there several times. It was a strange, solemn, and, with all its features of suffering and death, a sort of fascinating sight. I went sometimes at night to soothe and relieve particular cases; some, I found, needed a little cheering up and friendly consolation at that time, for they went to sleep better afterwards. Two of the immense apartments are filled with high and ponderous glass cases crowded with models in miniature of every kind of utensil, machine, or invention it ever entered into the mind of man to conceive, and with curiosities and foreign presents. Between these cases were lateral openings, perhaps eight feet wide, and quite deep, and in these were placed many of the sick; besides a great long double row of them up and down through the middle of the hall. Many of them were very bad cases, wounds and amputations. Then there was a gallery running above the hall, in which there were beds also. It was, indeed, a curious scene at night when lit up. The glass cases, the beds, the sick, the gallery above and the marble pavement under foot; the suffering, and the fortitude to bear it in the various degrees; occasionally, from some, the groan that could not be

repressed; sometimes a poor fellow dying, with emaciated face and glassy eyes, the nurse by his side, the doctor also there, but no friend, no relative--such were the sights but lately in the Patent office. The wounded have since been removed from there, and it is now vacant again.

Of course there are among these thousands of prostrated soldiers in hospital here all sorts of individual cases. On recurring to my note-book, I am puzzled which cases to select to illustrate the average of these young men and their experiences. I may here say, too, in general terms, that I could not wish for more candor and manliness, among all their sufferings, than I find among them.

Take this case in Ward 6, Campbell hospital: a young man from Plymouth county, Massachusetts; a farmer's son, aged about twenty or twenty-one; a soldierly, American young fellow, but with sensitive and tender feelings. Most of December and January last he lay very low, and for quite a while I never expected he would recover. He had become prostrated with an obstinate diarrhoea: his stomach would hardly keep the least thing down; he was vomiting half the time. But that was hardly the worst of it. Let me tell his story--it is but one of thousands.

He had been some time sick with his regiment in the field, in front, but did his duty as long as he could; was in the battle of Fredericksburg; soon after was put in the regimental hospital. He kept getting worse--could not eat anything they had there; the doctor told him nothing could be done for him there. The poor fellow had fever also; received

(perhaps it could not be helped) little or no attention; lay on the ground, getting worse. Toward the latter part of December, very much enfeebled, he was sent up from the front, from Falmouth station, in an open platform car (such as hogs are transported upon North), and dumped with a crowd of others on the boat at Aquia creek, falling down like a rag where they deposited him, too weak and sick to sit up or help himself at all. No one spoke to him or assisted him; he had nothing to eat or drink; was used (amid the great crowds of sick) either with perfect indifference, or, as in two or three instances, with heartless brutality.

On the boat, when night came and when the air grew chilly, he tried a long time to undo the blankets he had in his knapsack, but was too feeble. He asked one of the employees, who was moving around deck, for a moment's assistance to get the blankets. The man asked him back if he could not get them himself. He answered, no, he had been trying for more than half an hour, and found himself too weak. The man rejoined, he might then go without them, and walked off. So H. lay chilled and damp on deck all night, without anything under or over him, while two good blankets were within reach. It caused him a great injury--nearly cost him his life.

Arrived at Washington, he was brought ashore and again left on the wharf, or above it, amid the great crowds, as before, without any nourishment--not a drink for his parched mouth; no kind hand had offered to cover his face from the forenoon sun. Conveyed at last some two miles by the ambulance to the hospital, and assigned a bed (Bed 49, Ward 6, Campbell hospital, January and February, 1863), he fell down exhausted

upon the bed. But the ward-master (he has since been changed) came to him with a growling order to get up: the rules, he said, permitted no man to lie down in that way with his own clothes on; he must sit up--must first go to the bath-room, be washed, and have his clothes completely changed. (A very good rule, properly applied.) He was taken to the bath-room and scrubbed well with cold water. The attendants, callous for a while, were soon alarmed, for suddenly the half-frozen and lifeless body fell limp in their hands, and they hurried it back to the cot, plainly insensible, perhaps dying.

Poor boy! the long train of exhaustion, deprivation, rudeness, no food, no friendly word or deed, but all kinds of upstart airs and impudent, unfeeling speeches and deeds, from all kinds of small officials (and some big ones), cutting like razors into that sensitive heart, had at last done the job. He now lay, at times out of his head but quite silent, asking nothing of any one, for some days, with death getting a closer and a surer grip upon him; he cared not, or rather he welcomed death. His heart was broken. He felt the struggle to keep up any longer to be useless. God, the world, humanity--all had abandoned him. It would feel so good to shut his eyes forever on the cruel things around him and toward him.

As luck would have it, at this time I found him. I was passing down Ward No. 6 one day about dusk (4th January, I think), and noticed his glassy eyes, with a look of despair and hopelessness, sunk low in his thin, pallid-brown young face. One learns to divine quickly in the hospital, and as I stopped by him and spoke some commonplace remark (to which he made no

reply), I saw as I looked that it was a case for ministering to the affection first, and other nourishment and medicines afterward. I sat down by him without any fuss; talked a little; soon saw that it did him good; led him to talk a little himself; got him somewhat interested; wrote a letter for him to his folks in Massachusetts (to L. H. Campbell, Plymouth county); soothed him down as I saw he was getting a little too much agitated, and tears in his eyes; gave him some small gifts, and told him I should come again soon. (He has told me since that this little visit, at that hour, just saved him; a day more, and it would have been perhaps too late.)

Of course I did not forget him, for he was a young fellow to interest any one. He remained very sick--vomiting much every day, frequent diarrhoea, and also something like bronchitis, the doctor said. For a while I visited him almost every day, cheered him up, took him some little gifts, and gave him small sums of money (he relished a drink of new milk, when it was brought through the ward for sale). For a couple of weeks his condition was uncertain--sometimes I thought there was no chance for him at all; but of late he is doing better--is up and dressed, and goes around more and more (February 21) every day. He will not die, but will recover.

The other evening, passing through the ward, he called me--he wanted to say a few words, particular. I sat down by his side on the cot in the dimness of the long ward, with the wounded soldiers there in their beds, ranging up and down. H. told me I had saved his life. He was in the deepest earnest about it. It was one of those things that repay a

soldiers' hospital missionary a thousandfold--one of the hours he never forgets.

A benevolent person, with the right qualities and tact, cannot, perhaps, make a better investment of himself, at present, anywhere upon the varied surface of the whole of this big world, than in these military hospitals, among such thousands of most interesting young men. The army is very young--and so much more American than I supposed. Reader, how can I describe to you the mute appealing look that rolls and moves from many a manly eye, from many a sick cot, following you as you walk slowly down one of these wards? To see these, and to be incapable of responding to them, except in a few cases (so very few compared to the whole of the suffering men), is enough to make one's heart crack. I go through in some cases, cheering up the men, distributing now and then little sums of money--and, regularly, letter-paper and envelopes, oranges, tobacco, jellies, etc., etc.

Many things invite comment, and some of them sharp criticism, in these hospitals. The Government, as I said, is anxious and liberal in its practice toward its sick; but the work has to be left, in its personal application to the men, to hundreds of officials of one grade or another about the hospitals, who are sometimes entirely lacking in the right qualities. There are tyrants and shysters in all positions, and especially those dressed in subordinate authority. Some of the ward doctors are careless, rude, capricious, needlessly strict. One I found who prohibited the men from all enlivening amusements; I found him sending men to the

guard-house for the most trifling offence. In general, perhaps, the officials--especially the new ones, with their straps or badges--put on too many airs. Of all places in the world, the hospitals of American young men and soldiers, wounded in the volunteer service of their country, ought to be exempt from mere conventional military airs and etiquette of shoulder-straps. But they are not exempt.

W. W.

From the New York Times, February 26, 1863.