

LIFE AMONG FIFTY THOUSAND SOLDIERS

Our Brooklyn people, not only from having so many hundreds of their own kith and kin, and almost everybody some friend or acquaintance, here in the clustering military hospitals of Washington, would doubtless be glad to get some account of these establishments, but also to satisfy that compound of benevolence and generosity which marks Brooklyn, I have sometimes thought, more than any other city in the world. A military hospital here in Washington is a little city by itself, and contains a larger population than most of the well-known country towns down in the Queens and Suffolk county portions of Long Island. I say one of the Government hospitals here is a little city in itself, and there are some fifty of these hospitals in the District of Columbia alone. In them are collected the tens of thousands of sick and wounded soldiers, the legacies of many a bloody battle and of the exposure of two years of camp life. I find these places full of significance. They have taken up my principal time and labor for some months past. Imagine a long, one-story wooden shed, like a short, wide ropewalk, well whitewashed; then cluster ten or a dozen of these together, with several smaller sheds and tents, and you have the soldiers' hospital as generally adopted here. It will contain perhaps six or seven hundred men, or perhaps a thousand, and occasionally more still. There is a regular staff and a sub-staff of big and little officials. Military etiquette is observed, and it is getting to become very stiff. I shall take occasion, before long, to show up some of this ill-fitting nonsense. The harvest is large, the gleaners few. Beginning at

first with casual visits to these establishments to see some of the Brooklyn men, wounded or sick, here, I became by degrees more and more drawn in, until I have now been for many weeks quite a devotee to the business--a regular self-appointed missionary to these thousands and tens of thousands of wounded and sick young men here, left upon Government hands, many of them languishing, many of them dying. I am not connected with any society, but go on my own individual account, and to the work that appears to be called for. Almost every day, and frequently in the evenings, I visit, in this informal way, one after another of the wards of a hospital, and always find cases enough where I can be of service. Cases enough, do I say? Alas! there is, perhaps, not one ward or tent, out of the seven or eight hundred now hereabout filled with sick, in which I am sure I might not profitably devote every hour of my life to the abstract work of consolation and sustenance for its suffering inmates. And indeed, beyond that, a person feels that in some one of these crowded wards he would like to pick out two or three cases and devote himself wholly to them. Meanwhile, however, to do the best that is permitted, I go around, distributing myself and the contents of my pockets and haversack in infinitesimal quantities, with faith that nearly all of it will, somehow or other, fall on good ground. In many cases, where I find a soldier "dead broke" and pretty sick, I give half a tumbler of good jelly. I carry a good-sized jar to a ward, have it opened, get a spoon, and taking the head nurse in tow, I go around and distribute it to the most appropriate cases. To others I give an orange or an apple; to others some spiced fruits; to others a small quantity of pickles. Many want tobacco: I do not encourage any of the boys in its use, but where I find they crave it I supply them.

I always carry some, cut up in small plugs, in my pocket. Then I have commissions: some New York or Connecticut, or other soldier, will be going home on sick leave, or perhaps discharged, and I must fit him out with good new undershirt, drawers, stockings, etc.

But perhaps the greatest welcome is for writing paper, envelopes, etc. I find these always a rare reliance. When I go into a new ward, I always carry two or three quires of paper and a good lot of envelopes, and walk up and down and circulate them around to those who desire them. Then some will want pens, pencils, etc. In some hospitals there is quite a plenty of reading matter; but others, where it is needed, I supply.

By these and like means one comes to be better acquainted with individual cases, and so learns every day peculiar and interesting character, and gets on intimate and soon affectionate terms with noble American young men; and now is where the real good begins to be done, after all. Here, I will egotistically confess, I like to flourish. Even in a medical point of view it is one of the greatest things; and in a surgical point of view, the same. I can testify that friendship has literally cured a fever, and the medicine of daily affection, a bad wound. In these sayings are the final secret of carrying out well the rôle of a hospital missionary for our soldiers, which I tell for those who will understand them.

As I write, I have lying before me a little discarded note-book, filled with memoranda of things wanted by the sick--special cases. I use up one of these little books in a week. See from this sample, for instance, after

walking through a ward or two: Bed 53 wants some liquorice; Bed 6--erysipelas--bring some raspberry vinegar to make a cooling drink, with water; Bed 18 wants a good book--a romance; Bed 25--a manly, friendly young fellow, H. D. B., of the Twenty-seventh Connecticut, an independent young soul--refuses money and eatables, so I will bring him a pipe and tobacco, for I see he much enjoys a smoke; Bed 45--sore throat and cough--wants horehound candy; Bed 11, when I come again, don't forget to write a letter for him; etc. The wants are a long and varied list: some need to be humored and forgotten, others need to be especially remembered and obeyed. One poor German, dying--in the last stage of consumption--wished me to find him, in Washington, a German Lutheran clergyman, and send him to him; I did so. One patient will want nothing but a toothpick, another a comb, and so on. All whims are represented, and all the States. There are many New York State soldiers here; also Pennsylvanians. I find, of course, many from Massachusetts, Connecticut, and all the New England States, and from the Western and Northwestern States. Five sixths of the soldiers are young men.

Among other cases of young men from our own city of Brooklyn I have encountered and have had much to do with in hospital here, is John Lowery, wounded, and arm amputated, at Fredericksburg. I saw this young fellow down there last December, immediately after the battle, lying on a blanket on the ground, the stump of his arm bandaged, but he not a bit disheartened. He was soon afterward sent up from the front by way of Aquia creek, and has for the past three months been in the Campbell hospital here, in Ward 6, on the gain slowly but steadily. He thinks a great deal

of his physician here, Dr. Frank Hinkle, and as some fifty other soldiers in the ward do the same, and bear testimony in their hearty gratitude, and medical and surgical imprisonment, to the quality of Dr. H., I think he deserves honorable mention in this letter to the people of our city--especially as another Brooklyn soldier in Ward 6, Amos H. Vliet, expresses the same feeling of obligation to the doctor for his faithfulness and kindness. Vliet and Lowery both belong to that old war regiment whose flag has flaunted through more than a score of hot-contested battles, the Fifty-first New York, Colonel Potter; and it is to be remembered that no small portion of the fame of this old veteran regiment may be claimed near home, for many of her officers and men are from Brooklyn. The friends of these two young soldiers will have a chance to talk to them soon in Brooklyn. I have seen a good deal of Jack Lowery, and I find him, and heard of him on the field, as a brave, soldierly fellow. Amos Vliet, too, made a first-rate soldier. He has had frozen feet pretty bad, but now better. Occasionally I meet some of the Brooklyn Fourteenth. In Ward E of Armory hospital I found a member of Company C of that regiment, Isaac Snyder; he is now acting as nurse there, and makes a very good one. Charles Dean, of Co. H of the same regiment, is in Ward A of Armory, acting as ward-master. I also got very well acquainted with a young man of the Brooklyn Fourteenth who lay sick some time in Ward F; he has lately got his discharge and gone home. I have met with others in the H-street and Patent-office hospitals. Colonel Fowler, of the Fourteenth, is in charge, I believe, of the convalescent camp at Alexandria. Lieutenant-Colonel Debevoise is in Brooklyn, in poor health, I am sorry to say. Thus the Brooklyn invalids are scattered around.

Off in the mud, a mile east of the Capitol, I found the other day, in Emory hospital there, in Ward C, three Brooklyn soldiers--Allen V. King, Michael Lally, and Patrick Hennessy; none of them, however, are very sick.

At a rough guess, I should say I have met from one hundred and fifty to two hundred young and middle-aged men whom I specifically found to be Brooklyn persons. Many of them I recognized as having seen their faces before, and very many of them knew me. Some said they had known me from boyhood. Some would call to me as I passed down a ward, and tell me they had seen me in Brooklyn. I have had this happen at night, and have been entreated to stop and sit down and take the hand of a sick and restless boy, and talk to him and comfort him awhile, for old Brooklyn's sake.

Some pompous and every way improper persons, of course, get in power in hospitals, and have full swing over the helpless soldiers. There is great state kept at Judiciary-square hospital, for instance. An individual who probably has been waiter somewhere for years past has got into the high and mighty position of sergeant-of-arms at this hospital; he is called "Red Stripe" (from his artillery trimmings) by the patients, of whom he is at the same time the tyrant and the laughing-stock. Going in to call on some sick New York soldiers here the other afternoon, I was stopped and treated to a specimen of the airs of this powerful officer. Surely the Government would do better to send such able-bodied loafers down into service in front, where they could earn their rations, than keep them here in the idle and shallow sinecures of military guard over a collection of

sick soldiers to give insolence to their visitors and friends. I found a shallow old person also here named Dr. Hall, who told me he had been eighteen years in the service. I must give this Judiciary establishment the credit, from my visits to it, of saying that while in all the other hospitals I met with general cordiality and deference among the doctors, ward officers, nurses, etc., I have found more impudence and more dandy doctorism and more needless airs at this Judiciary, than in all the twoscore other establishments in and around Washington. But the corps of management at the Judiciary has a bad name anyhow, and I only specify it here to put on record the general opinion, and in hopes it may help in calling the attention of the Government to a remedy. For this hospital is half filled with New York soldiers, many noble fellows, and many sad and interesting cases. Of course there are exceptions of good officials here, and some of the women nurses are excellent, but the Empire State has no reason to be over-satisfied with this hospital.

But I should say, in conclusion, that the earnest and continued desire of the Government, and much devoted labor, are given to make the military hospitals here as good as they can be, considering all things. I find no expense spared, and great anxiety manifested in the highest quarters, to do well by the national sick. I meet with first-class surgeons in charge of many of the hospitals, and often the ward surgeons, medical cadets, and head nurses, are fully faithful and competent. Dr. Bliss, head of Armory-square, and Dr. Baxter, head of Campbell, seem to me to try to do their best, and to be excellent in their posts. Dr. Bowen, one of the ward surgeons of Armory, I have known to fight as hard for many a poor fellow's

life under his charge as a lioness would fight for her young. I mention such cases because I think they deserve it, on public grounds.

I thought I would include in my letter a few cases of soldiers, especially interesting, out of my note-book, but I find that my story has already been spun out to sufficient length. I shall continue here in Washington for the present, and may-be for the summer, to work as a missionary, after my own style, among these hospitals, for I find it in some respects curiously fascinating, with all its sadness. Nor do I find it ended by my doing some good to the sick and dying soldiers. They do me good in return, more than I do them.

W. W.

From the Brooklyn Eagle, March 19, 1863.