

## **HOSPITAL SKETCHES EXCERPT**

The first thing I met was a regiment of the vilest odors that ever assaulted the human nose, and took it by storm. . . . The worst of this affliction was [that] 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 coalhods [buckets used to pour coal onto a fire], water pails, and small boys; nearly scalded by an avalanche of newly filled teapots, and hopelessly entangled in a knot of colored sisters coming to wash, I progressed by slow stages upstairs and down, till the main hall was reached, and I paused to take a 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 [strength; courage], 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 [“doses of medicine or liquor used to stimulate the heart”] 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. The house had been a hotel before hospitals were needed, and many of the doors still bore their old names; some not so inappropriate as might be imagined, for my ward was in truth a *ballroom*, if gunshot wounds could christen it. Forty beds were prepared, many already tenanted by tired men who fell down anywhere, and drowsed till the smell of food roused them. Round the great stove was gathered the dreariest group I ever saw—ragged, gaunt and pale, mud to the knees, with bloody bandages untouched since put on days before; many bundled up in blankets, coats being lost or useless; and all wearing that disheartened look which proclaimed defeat, more plainly than any telegram of the Burnside blunder. [Union General Ambrose Everett Burnside’s failed attack at the Battle of Fredericksburg. Burnside was relieved of his command following this crushing defeat.] I pitied them so much, I dared not

speak to them, though, remembering all they had been through since the rout at Fredericksburg, I yearned to serve the dreariest of them all. 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 horn-pipe 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 [doubts or misgivings about what is right and what is wrong] in my washbowl, clutched my soap manfully, and, assuming a businesslike air, made a dab at the first dirty specimen I saw, bent on performing my task *vi et armis* [Latin phrase meaning “by force and arms”] 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 . . .

—Louisa May Alcott

Source: Alcott, L. M. (2008). From Hospital Sketches. In Beers, K., & Odell, L., Holt Elements of Literature, Fifth Course: Essentials of American Literature—Oklahoma Teacher’s Edition (pp. 379–380). Holt Rinehart Winston. (Original work published 1863.)