

THREE YEARS
IN
FIELD HOSPITALS.

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IN
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OF THE
ARMY OF THE POTOMAC.

BY
MRS. H.

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INTRODUCTION.

THIS simple story of hospital scenes, and the unpretending sketches of the few brave soldiers to which they allude, is arranged from the meager notes which were hurriedly written at the time they occurred, when there was not the most remote idea of ever preparing them for publication.

The events of the war are "graven as with an iron pen" upon my memory. To preserve some slight memento of them for friends at home, was the primary object of these notes: to gratify the same persons are they now grouped together.

MRS. H.

UPPER MERION;
Montgomery County, Penna.,
October 1, 1866.

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THREE YEARS IN FIELD HOSPITALS.



CHAPTER I.

Antietam.—Hospitals.—Frederick City.—Virginia.—Breaking up of the Hospitals.—Moving North with the Army.

WHEN the first sounds of war were heard, and there dimly dawned the startling fact that traitors were imperiling the life of the nation, we all remember how thousands rushed to arms at our country's call, eager to proffer aid in this her hour of need. City, village, and country alike gave, as their first offering, their young men, the pride and strength of the land.

The first that our quiet valley knew of the preparation for war, a company was being gathered from about our very doors,—with Col. Hartranft (now major-general—and nobly has he won the double stars, to which his bravery entitles him) as their chosen commander. We saw them as they stood beneath the shade of a spreading tree, with uplifted hand, vowing true allegiance to the best government the world has

ever yet beheld; and as that roll now shows, many upon far-off battle-fields have sealed it with their blood.

They followed where Burnside led; and all along that way, which occupied four years of these eventful times, we trace their course, marked by the battles in which they so bravely bore their part.

As the soldiers went out from among us, there came the yearning wish to lessen somewhat the hardships of their lonely camp life, especially when sick in hospital or wounded. What each family first began to do for *their* relatives and friends, soon became general; and thus by uniting together, "Soldiers' Aid Societies" were formed. With all loyal women of the land, I worked zealously in their behalf; worked, because there was irresistible impulse *to do, to act*. Anything but idleness, when our armies were preparing for the combat, and we knew not who should be the first to fall, who be called *widow*, or who *fatherless*. At length the battle of Antietam came so startlingly near, that it brought before us the horrors and sufferings of war as we had never previously felt it. From our midst six women felt called upon to offer their services, for a few weeks, to nurse the wounded. Though strongly urged to make one of the number, I declined. The idea of seeing and waiting upon wounded men, was one from which I shrank instinctively.

But when my husband returned, soon after, with the sad story that men were actually dying for food, home comforts and home care; lying by the roadside, in barns, sheds, and out-houses; needing everything that we could do for them, I hesitated no longer, but with him went earnestly to work in procuring supplies of food, medicine, and clothing. Through the kindness of friends and neighbors, we were enabled to take with us a valuable supply of articles that were most urgently required. Fortunately they were hurried through without delay, came most opportunely, and were invaluable. The name of Antietam is ever associated in my mind with scenes of horror.

As I passed through the first hospitals of wounded men I ever saw, there flashed the thought—*this* is the work God has given *me* to do in this war. To care for the wounded and sick, as sorrowing wives and mothers at home would so gladly do, were it in their power. From the purest motives of patriotism and benevolence was the vow to do so, faithfully, made. It *seemed* a long time before I felt that I could be of any use—until the choking sobs and blinding tears were stayed; then gradually the stern lesson of calmness, under all circumstances, was learned.

We found the men, who had so bravely fought, still scattered over the hardly-contested field. At this time, 6th of October, 1862, they were all under some kind of

shelter. A sad want of suitable food and medical stores was still felt; and though both were forwarded as rapidly as possible, yet it was insufficient to relieve the distress.

At that early day in the history of the war, we found our noble United States Sanitary Commission here, doing a vast amount of good. From their store-room were sent, in every direction, supplies to relieve the greatest suffering. And to it, strangers as we were to them, we daily came for articles which we found, in our visits to the hospitals, were most urgently needed, and which our own more limited stores could not furnish. They were as freely given to us for distribution, as they had been in like manner intrusted to them by friends at home. The Montgomery County delegation occupied one room in a house adjoining the "German Reformed Church Hospital." In this uncomfortable, little place, crowded with boxes and swarming with hospital flies, the six ladies continued their labors during the day, waiting and working faithfully among the wounded. And so dividing their number that part went daily in the ambulance, which was furnished for their use, to look after and prepare food for those in the country that urgently required it, while the remainder attended to the same kind offices for those who were in town. Of the six who at that time volunteered their services, one remained in the hospital for two years;

two others, from that date until the close of the war, were known as reliable, valuable helpers.

Added to this fatiguing kind of labor, there seemed no limit to the numbers who came looking after their dead and wounded, the "loved and lost." From that little room persons were constantly aided in their search for missing friends, food furnished at a time when it was almost impossible to buy at *any* price, and they directed to lodgings in the town or elsewhere.

Among these was a young wife, whose frantic grief I can never forget. She came hurriedly, as soon as she knew her husband was in the battle, only to find him dead and buried two days before her arrival. Unwilling to believe the fact that strangers told her—how in the early morning they had laid him beside his comrades in the orchard, she still insisted upon seeing him. Accompanying some friends to the spot, she could not wait the slow process of removing the body, but, in her agonizing grief, clutched the earth by handfuls where it lay upon the quiet sleeper's form. And when at length the slight covering was removed, and the blanket thrown from off the face, she needed but one glance to assure her it was all too true. Then, passive and quiet beneath the stern reality of this crushing sorrow, she came back to our room. The preparations for taking the body to Philadelphia were all made for

her, and with his remains she left for her now desolate home.

My imperfect notes of this date are filled with names of terribly wounded men, who are scattered over the entire extent of the field, recalling most vividly scenes that can *never* be forgotten. Those were fortunate who were in barns, where they were sure of a little hay or straw upon which to rest their shattered limbs, while many of the others lingered a few days, with no bed nor pillow other than a knapsack or piece of clothing. And then—the weary marches over, *their* last fight ended, they closed their eyes, and sank to rest. Upon one end of the piazza, at Locust Spring, lay Lieut. Williams, of Connecticut. For three weeks he lingered in intense suffering, and then passed from earth. That same piazza had been thickly strewn with the dying, and the wounded, ever since the battle. In the house were several officers, all seriously wounded. The barns were crowded with the sufferers; among them Lieut. Maine, of the 8th Connecticut—nursed by his wife, patient and gentle, while life lasted. In one of the tents was a zouave; a shell had torn his chin and fractured the shoulder; both legs broken; the fingers of one hand partly gone,—yet he is cheerful, and thinks he got off well. Near him lay a young boy, from Union, Centre County, Penna., wounded in the chest badly, but, as his surgeon said, not fatally. His

thoughts, sleeping and waking, were of home. He was constantly repeating, "Oh, take me to my mother." And when I told him that I would do all I could for him, that I knew many persons in Centre County, he brightened up and quickly said: "Then you *will* take me to my mother." Of his wound he never seemed to think, but at each visit we saw that he was fast passing beyond our care; and in a few days, repeating, while life lasted, the same words, he "fell asleep," and so went to his "long home." In a miserable little log-house near the Potomac, thirty men lay upon the floor, ill with fever; some had a little straw, but no pillows were to be found; at that time it was unavoidable, but their food was hardly fit for well men; medicines very scarce;—this house the counterpart of many others, both as to occupants, food, etc.

On the same road were several places filled with wounded rebels; in their hurried flight, they had been left by thousands, and now had to be provided for. The Episcopal church in the town had also been taken for their use. The rest of the churches, and half the houses in the place, were crowded with our wounded troops.

Going into the hospital one evening, I found, lying upon a stretcher near the door, Wm. P. C., of the 12th New York State Vols., "the only son of his mother, and she was a widow." To my question, if I could do anything for him, he replied: "Not now; he was waiting

for the surgeon to attend to him." A few hours later, when taken from the operating table, I found him perfectly calm and quiet; after making him as comfortable as could be done for the night, promised to care for him on the morrow. When I first wrote to his mother, it was only to tell her he was wounded. The following day was a decided change for the worse, and he thought he could not live. Even then, it was not upon his own sufferings and death that his mind dwelt, but upon his absent mother and sisters. He would constantly exclaim, "This will kill my mother; oh, break it gently to her." After messages to them, would ask that some portion of Scripture be read to him, and the prayers which he named repeated with him. Thus occupied, the hours fled too rapidly, as we felt that each moment was precious to him who was upon the brink of that unknown river, whose crossing must be *alone*. By his lonely bedside, I wept bitter tears for the home so darkened, the light of a mother's life departed, and the sorrowing sisters of whom he spake. Conscious almost to the moment of his departure, he calmly and trustfully passed "into the spirit land." Upon the evening of the same day, 13th of October, 1862, with my husband and a lady friend, we accompanied the detachment of his own regiment which carried his body to the grave. In the Lutheran church-yard, with the solemn burial-service of the Episcopal Church,

Mr. Holstein committed his remains to the grave. "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, and dust to dust." Soon after came the most touching letter of thanks from his sister. I thought *then*, as I *still* think, that those kindly words amply repaid me for the little I had done for him, or all I *could* do, for other soldiers, in the future. A few months afterward we stood again beside his open grave; this time, at the request of his sister, that we should once more look upon the body we had placed there, and know that it was *indeed* her brother. Painful as it was, her request was complied with to the letter; the body, disinfected, was prepared for reinterment. With my husband as its escort, the homeward journey was taken; at length reached Utica, N. Y., in safety; then, his last request complied with, carried by loving hands to its final resting-place. Again came words of thanks, dearer far to me than any earthly treasure.

While the army rested in the vicinity of Sharpsburg, in addition to the wounded, scores of fever-patients came pouring in; some new regiments went down by hundreds. About this time the wounded were gathered up from the numerous scattering hospitals, and sent to "Smoketown" or "Frederick City." As the short supply of medicine, food, and clothing continued, we left, when the party of six went home. Going directly to Philadelphia, came to the house of a relative as

the wedding-party of a dear friend was about proceeding to the church; with the family, we stood around the chancel, as our beloved Bishop Potter pronounced the words which made the twain one; and then, as the guests returned to the house, for a few moments mingled with the crowd. But think of the *contrast!* Only yesterday walking among, and waiting upon the mangled, brave defenders of our country's flag; men who were in want of suitable food, lying upon the hard ground; needing beds, pillows, clothing, covering,—*is it* any wonder that I turned away, sick at heart, coldly calculating how many lives of noble men might have been saved with the lavish abundance of the wedding festivities which I saw? Of the wedding, I knew nothing more; but quietly withdrew to an upper room. From thence sent notes, imploring help for the wounded, to friends throughout the city: so prompt and abundant was the response, that in forty-eight hours we were on our way back to Antietam, with boxes of medical stores, valued at one thousand dollars. Delicacies, clothing, etc., all selected to meet the wants as we represented. We were again most warmly welcomed by our friends, the surgeons, under whose direction our labors had heretofore been carried on. The supplies, as they said, were in many instances a perfect "God-send," as we had articles which it was impossible to obtain there. This time, our location was a better