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A Children's Hospital in War Time

By J.M.Barrie

What should I write about, O Princess Elizabeth in this, your Gift Book? About hospitals I think as, behold, you have now a Hospital of your own. Or perhaps I should write about children, and in compliment to you, about poor children, as yours is a hospital for these, and the compliment lies in this, that since your earliest days poor children have been the people about whom you have most wondered. Yes, and so practical was your curiosity that, in the far past when you were only four, you drew for me a picture of what you thought a Hospital for such children should be like. It was a triumphant rural edifice, though at the time I could not discover that it had any back to it. Now I see that you meant this to be its chiefest glory. You were signifying that your Hospital was to extend indefinitely in that direction among trees and buttercups until all the ailing ones were roped in.

There is a competition these days in children's hospitals between you and a still younger Princess, for you have now a Hospital apiece, hers being in Edinburgh, and it comes to my mind that I might tell now in print, as once before in talk, of a third, an odd little hospital that was mine. This hospital was in France during the war. It was on the river Marne, not far from Verdun, and had some peculiarities that made it different from other war hospitals. It began because I have a lamentable weakness for children and old ladies, and it was largely staffed (as you would now say) in a pretty chateau by kind voluntary nurses. (I shall tell you what a voluntary is some other day, but you are one.) I regret to say that it had often to be run in ways that would be promptly shown the door in your Hospital. Nevertheless I beg to decline to disparage my hospital.

It started with eight beds, which you may consider made it no more than a nursery, but in a few months there were nearly a hundred, although I dare say the inmates of your Hospital would not have called them all beds. The procedure, you see, was to begin constructing another bed, woodwork and all, when another stretcher was coming up the avenue. Bedrooms for extra nurses were knocked up with the same rapidity by the male staff, for outside help could not be obtained. If you had an hour off you immediately became a carpenter or a glazier or a plumber. It was a hospital for French children wounded by bombs or guns, and many of them had lost a leg or an arm. The oldest patient, I suppose, was not ten years of age, and others were little more than babes. On the evening of the day the hospital opened the first eight were all asleep in one room, which afterwards became Ward No.1. At the time the chateau was damp, and that night part of the ceiling fell down. There was a hastening of grown-ups to the room, who wondered at hearing no screaming, for it had sounded like the falling of a bomb. The children had indeed thought it was a bomb, but they were used to bombs, and when their elders opened the door they found these eight little Roman Catholics by their bedsides praying so neatly.

When the hospital was at its fullest a Zeppelin fell into the grounds, brought down by the guns at Bar-le-duc. I think it was one of the first airships brought down in the war. It had been coming and going occasionally dropping bombs, and I feel sure the airmen had no idea that there were these small people below. The children were put to bed at an unusually early hour, while it was still light, the blinds pulled down, and they were told it was night-time and to go to sleep. Next morning when they woke they knew, though an attempt was made to conceal it from them, that the Zeppelin was lying in the grounds of the hospital with some fragments of men who had once been as brave as ours. They were very frightened children at first, but the staff had the happy thought of giving the equivalence of threepence in French coins to each, whereupon they skipped and sang, and with the awful sarcasm of early years they called their threepences 'The tears of William.'

Being now people of means they gave financial gifts to forty old ladies who had mostly been living in holes in the ground with some planks over them for a roof, ladies whom we were afterwards to supply with forty beds in another chateau. I was not there, but must it not have been great fun to see the children tipping the old ladies?

These little patients were not sad all the time. They invented games in which to have a limb missing was a help rather than a hindrance: indeed if I was there they expected me to invent the games and to play in them also. I taught them cricket with rules never conceived by the M.C.C. in which the bat was a crutch and the ball was made out of lint purloined from the medical stores. I hope you won't draw back from me with a shudder when I say that I fear I was the purloiner. They developed regrettable artifices to bring me down to join them in these pastimes in the early morning. Thus they learned a few Scots words from a nurse who I am sure never picked them up at Glamis, words like 'dagont' and 'Tam Shanter,' which they thought was the friendly Scottish for 'potatoes.' Me they called 'Monsieur Auld Reekie,' and armed with such words they gathered beneath my window at dawn and suddenly shouted them in chorus in a tempting way of luring me from sleep. Sometimes their parents journeyed to the chateau to take them in their arms and weep over the parts of them that were not there, but the convalescents wriggled away from all such fondling in order to get back to their games. And upstairs at windows were other patients looking out wistfully and cunningly 'holding their breath' so that the nurse with the thermometer should be deceived into thinking their temperatures were normal and so let them down to play. How gay that little hospital is to look back upon now, but it was not always gay. In that way and in some others I dare say it was rather like yours. If we cannot always be gay we can always make pretend.