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# DEATH AND REMEMBRANCE

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ARMORY SQUARE HOSPITAL  
WASHINGTON, D. C.  
MAY 28, 1865

**M**oonlight glimmered on the distant capitol dome and cast long shadows from the gothic towers and battlements of the Smithsonian Institute. To the west, the partially completed shaft of the Washington Monument appeared like a giant white chimney protruding from the dark landscape. Between these edifices were fields filled with temporary streets and wooden buildings. Bathed in the dim light was a city transforming itself from a military bastion consumed by the business of war to a city intent on governing the once-again United States.

Within a span of six weeks, Washington had celebrated the cessation of hostilities, suffered the assassination of a president, and witnessed a grand review of the victorious Army of the Potomac. The surrender of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Court House effectively ended the War of the Rebellion. While the carnage had ceased, thousands of soldiers from both sides languished in military hospitals situated not far from where the great battles were fought.

A large, middle-aged man with a full beard and kind face, wearing a wide-brimmed hat pushed back on his head walked along the deserted street with a purposeful stride. Better known for his poems and writings, Walt Whitman

## DAVID H. JONES

was now seeking to provide solace and comfort to the maimed and the dying within the forlorn wards of Armory Square Hospital. It was to be his small part in the distinguishing event of his time, a cruel war that almost irreversibly fragmented the United States of America. Neglecting his primary vocation, Whitman held a part-time job as a clerk in the Army Paymaster's Office and used his meager wages to buy candy and writing paper for soldiers whom he visited in Washington-area hospitals.

Arriving at his destination, Whitman mounted the steps of the hospital administration building, pulled open the heavy door, and entered the reception room. Near the entrance was a large table, behind which sat a U.S. Army hospital steward busily recording entries in medical ledgers that detailed the pain and suffering of those in his charge. The hospital steward looked up and greeted him with a friendly smile. Whitman shared the horror of this place and his contribution of time and heart made life more tolerable for the patients and the hospital staff that cared for them.

“Good evening, Mr. Whitman. It's always good to see you.”

“Good evening, Simpson. I've missed seeing you for several weeks. Have you been on a leave of absence?”

Edwin Simpson smiled. “Yes, sir. Thank God I was able to get a furlough and be away from this place for a short while. I was visiting with my family in Philadelphia, and I enjoyed every blessed moment of it.”

“It's always grand to return to home and hearth,” Whitman replied.

Simpson leaned back in his chair. “You know, Mr. Whitman, I have to be here. I'm a soldier, and it's my duty. Why do you do it? Why do you give so much of yourself to these poor fellows?”

Whitman stared at the hospital steward for a moment, lost in his own thoughts, then re-focused and spoke softly. “It began when my brother George was wounded at Fredericksburg in December of 1862. I immediately traveled to the field hospital where he was being treated and found, to my great relief, that his wound was only superficial. As I looked around me, I was horrified. Seeing the amputation, agony, and suffering of those men who had the misfortune of being wounded in battle led me to help convey them from the front to hospitals

## TWO BROTHERS

around Washington.” The flickering candlelight made the solemnity of Whitman’s expression even more pronounced. He searched within himself for a more complete answer. “Since that time, I’ve been compelled to do this work as so many men are facing a painful, lonely death. Perhaps, in my own way, I too am a soldier in this war.”

Simpson was an astute observer who stayed in the background and made it his business to know what everyone was thinking and saying about others. He knew that a few female nurses were unsettled by Whitman’s almost motherly affection for the wounded men, but he chose not to comment on the minority view. “Mr. Whitman, I can tell you that most of the hospital medical staff considers you to be a godsend. We greatly appreciate the kindness and consideration that you give to these poor men. The truth of the matter is that we’re consumed with administering to broken bodies. We hardly have time to spend tending to their loneliness and sorrow.” He leaned forward and quickly flipped through several pages of his ledger before finding what he was seeking. “There’s a young fellow in Ward D, bed seventeen, who will surely benefit from your kindness tonight. He had a leg amputated above the knee at a field hospital, but serious complications have set in and his condition is steadily worsening. He probably won’t last but another week or two.”

Entering the ward, Whitman waved a silent greeting to the ward master sitting at his desk. He also gave a cordial “good evening” to Helen Wright, one of his favorite nurses. He knew her to be among the most competent and compassionate at Armory Square, a hospital that treated only the most severely injured soldiers. Its location near the steamboat landing at the foot of Seventh Street, S.W., and the tracks of the Washington and Alexandria Railroad meant that arriving soldiers too ill to travel far would be assigned to this military hospital. He passed nurse Amanda Akin without an exchange of greetings. Whitman knew that she could barely tolerate him and he found it easy to ignore her vexation. He continued walking down the center of the long, high-ceilinged pavilion, counting the narrow iron-framed beds lining each side.

Standing beside bed seventeen, Whitman looked down at the patient, his vision aided by both lustrous moonlight flooding through the large windows and