HOSPITAL SKETCHES (1863; REPRINTED IN HOSPITAL SKETCHES AND CAMP AND FIRESIDE STORIES, 1869)
The “Hospital Sketches” by Louisa M. Alcott, which have appeared in the Commonwealth, are productions of uncommon merit. They would grace the pages of the Atlantic or any other magazine. Fluent and sparkling in style, with touches of quiet humor and lively wit, relieving what would otherwise be a topic too sombre and sad, they are graphic in description, and exhibit the healthful sentiments and sympathies of the cheerful heroism that should minister to the sick and suffering. The contrast between the comic incidents, and the tragic experience of a single night, given in No. 2 of the series, is portrayed with singular power and effectiveness. “The Death of John” is a noble and touching picture.

This little book scarcely needs an introduction to our readers, who have already laughed and [wept over those portions?] of it which have been printed in our columns. It now appears in a neat volume, and will find as many readers, we trust, in its new form as in its old. Besides the two additional chapters, we notice that Miss Alcott has added a page here and there, where the fitness of things or the correction of some misunderstanding required it. She dedicates the book to that faithful friend and loyal lady – herself a nurse, Miss Hannah Stevenson of this city.

If this number of our paper had proved to be the last, as we feared, from our Publisher’s account it must be, we were reconciled to the passing away of the Commonwealth, by this among other things, that we have introduced to the great public a book so full of wit, sense and sympathy, as this of Miss Alcott’s.

This little book is well written, and gives the interesting experiences of a New England woman who went to the war in the honorable capacity of nurse. She relates with much effect the peculiar scenes through which she passed, and as her book is intended to help the children who are made orphans by the war, it is to be hoped that this publication may have a large sale.

A very entertaining little book. It contains a great deal of pathos, humor and incident.

These Sketches, by Miss Alcott, are deservedly and “respectfully dedicated to
her friend, Miss Hannah Stevenson,” of Boston — a noble and good woman. They are overflowing with genius, wit, humor, pathos, and womanly compassion and tenderness. All who read them will greatly relish them.


They are received with universal favor.


Graphically drawn.*** Exceedingly well written — and the graver portions of thrilling interest. There is a quiet vein of humor, too, running all through them, so that the reader is alternately moved to laughter and tears.


Most of these Sketches were first printed in the Boston Commonwealth, where they won praise from literary men and women of the first ability. The publisher, having agreed to pay the author the usual copyright and resolved to devote at least five cents for every copy sold to the support of orphans made fatherless or homeless by
the war, will not permit any journal to publish any part of the contents. The writer, who is understood to describe scenes of which she was an eye-witness, is the gifted daughter of the Transcendental Philosopher, A. Bronson Alcott.

_The Independent_ 15.771 (10 September 1863): 2:5.

These Sketches first appeared in _The Commonwealth_. Their wealth of curious humor, graphic picturings of hospital life, strong good sense, and thorough good-heartedness, took such entire possession of their readers, that here they are in a little book. Buy it; it is wonderfully enjoyable, and moreover, a fair copyright is promised to be devoted to the support of orphans of the war.


The somber realities, with which the author of this volume was brought into intimate contact in the discharge of her professional duties as a volunteer nurse in the military hospitals at Washington, were unable to place a check on her exuberant and irrepressible humor. She records her experience in the midst of the saddest scenes which the human eye can witness in a tone of gay, almost rollicking vivacity, which shows wonderful “pluck,” with but slight admixture of feminine weakness. It is not often that a writer ventures to portray the comic aspects of hospital life. But in the present case, the ludicrous features of the occasion are always uppermost, and furnish plenty of materials to a merry fancy and a frolicsome pen.

Here is a description of the jolly nurse’s introduction to Washington:

It was dark when we arrived; and, but for the presence of another friendly gentleman, I should have yielded myself a helpless prey to the first overpowering hackman, who insisted that I wanted to go just where I didn’t. [Remainder of 3 quoted paragraphs omitted.]

Her initiation into the duties of the hospital is set forth in a similar mirthful vein.

The first thing I met was a regiment of the vilest odors that ever assaulted the human nose, and took it by storm. [Remainder of 8 quoted paragraphs omitted.]

But not all her “happy-go-lucky” resolution could save the laughing Miss Periwinkle from a taste of hospital experience, by no means jolly to itself, but of which as usual she sees nothing but the funny side.

“My dear girl, we shall have you sick in your body unless you keep yourself warm and quiet for a few days.” [Remainder of 8 quoted paragraphs omitted.]

The lively lady, we are glad to assure our readers, was not at all disconcerted by the “dismals” of her first experiment, but hopes to try her hand once more, and among the hospitals of the colored regiments.
These sketches are the best record we have yet seen of hospital experience, for while the author sees and pictures the ludicrous side of every scene, she also shows, with genuine feeling, all a woman’s sympathy for suffering, and all a woman’s tact in relieving it. There are some passages in this little volume which will move the heart to tears as irresistibly as the humor of others will move the voice to laughter.

We hope all our readers will purchase a copy.

In organizing our army hospitals in such a manner as to draw into them some of the most cultivated, refined and humane of women for nurses we have prepared the way for a new variety of literature which will still further open our sympathies for the sick and wounded soldiers. Of this fresh and deeply interesting kind of reading these “Hospital Sketches” are not only remarkable but memorable. Though the author’s service was brief, because of breaking down under the labor, she so felt and has so described what she saw and did, that a good influence has taken strength if not life from her touch. It is true that her characters are all heroes, and were ready to her hand; yet they were in such disguise as few penetrate, and she has not only reached their hearts but taken all restraint from their deepest and tenderest emotions.
It is thus that we have her picture of the Virginia blacksmith – for it is beyond the creative power of genius.


Miss Alcott’s “Hospital Sketches,” which, on their original appearance in the Commonwealth newspaper, were so warmly applauded by the press, have been published in a little volume, and are for sale at all the bookstores. The wit, the humor, the power of brief and vivid description which the volume evinces, will give it a wide popularity.


To buy the little volume of Hospital Sketches by Louisa M. Alcott will prove both a duty and a pleasure; the book is instructive, provoking and amusing, and the purchaser’s money not only defrays the cost of publication but helps the homeless orphans of the war, and is a substantial token of respect to a faithful army nurse, who gained in a Washington hospital a wealth of kindly experience, with the loss of health and her hair. The greater part of this narrative has already appeared in the columns of the Commonwealth; what is new to the public must be copied by no unscrupulous editor; it would be like robbing a charity box in the vestry of a church. Neither is it needful to speak of its direct, animated style, its cheery common sense, its wholesome bits of censure and satire, and its eye filling touches of pathos, for of all these things Miss Alcott can discourse much more effectively than we. We leave her to tell her own story to a public that knows her well and is waiting to know her better.


Roberts Brothers publish, this week, the long-promised reprint of the admired Hospital Sketches of Louisa Alcott, which were so popular when first published in the spring of 1863. They ran through the newspapers like wildfire, for we were in the midst of the war, and few such experiences had then been made public, so that everybody was interested in them. They were related, too, in such a lively and pathetic manner, just as they were written for the family circle in Concord, out of which the daughter and sister had gone to duty as a nurse at Washington, in the winter of 1862–3, – that they went to the heart of all readers, except a few who blamed them for levity. To this criticism she makes allusion in the preface to the present volume, and gives the reason of the tone which was complained of; quite a sufficient and
proper one, too. Very little change has been made in the work itself, or in the additional sketches which are here published along with it. The latter are nearly three times as much in bulk as the “Hospital Sketches,” which fill but 96 pages, while the eight “Camp and Fireside Stories” stretch to 283 pages. More than half of them relate to the war, and have more or less of Miss Alcott’s army experience woven into them; they have all been printed before, either in the Atlantic or the Commonwealth, for which, at one time, Miss Alcott was a regular contributor. Of the three “fireside stories,” one was written for the Atlantic (“The Modern Cinderella”), another, we believe, for the Saturday Evening Gazette (“Mrs Podgers’s Teapot”), and the other, which is quite as good as either – “The King of Clubs and the Queen of Hearts” – was printed in the “Monitor,” a short-lived literary paper, published in Concord in 1862. It is founded on events with which the Concord folks were familiar, and relates to that remote period when Dr Lewis first introduced his “light gymnastics” to the people of New England. Concord was one of the first villages to welcome the new system [system], and nearly all its people engaged in it, at least for a short time, among them Miss Alcott herself.

This volume illustrates excellently well the characteristics of Miss Alcott’s talent as a novelist. Her subjects are always portions of her own experience; her characters always the people she has known, under slight disguises, or strangely metamorphosed, as may happen, but easily to be recognized by those who have the key to them. In this she resembles many other writers; but there is a peculiar blending of this realism with extreme idealization in most of her stories. She succeeds best – indeed, she only succeeds at all – in her real pictures. Her descriptions are as faithful, and as varied in their fidelity, as life itself, so long as she restricts herself to what she has actually seen and known; beyond this, all is shadowy and a matter of luck. She may come near the fact she aims at, or she may not, when she trusts to her imagination; but when she cleaves to real experiences, she is sure of her effect; and her success is always greater in proportion to the depth of the experience she has to portray. For this reason we have always thought “Hospital Sketches” her best piece of work; it is by no means faultless, but it fastens itself upon the mind and heart of the reader with a force that makes one rank the author high among American writers. She has never had patience to form a concise and simple style, and writes as the spirit moves her. Sometimes in admirable sentences – sometimes in a very rambling and slipshod way – but always with spirit, good sense, and good feeling, – and rising sometimes into genuine humor and pathos, such as few writers ever reach.

Now that she has won a deserved fame, and can choose her own time and manner of writing more than she has done heretofore, we shall expect her to prune and condense somewhat; to publish only what satisfies herself, and thus secure a permanent hold on her readers, who are now so fascinated by all that comes from her pen that they do not criticize it very closely. A brilliant and useful career is before her, and we trust she will have health, spirits and courage enough for all its requirements.

New-York Tribune

A fascinating volume, full of pathos and beauty, and with some touches of dark
tragedy, is the collection of fugitive pieces, by Miss Louisa M. Alcott, just published by Roberts Brothers. It includes a new edition of her famous Hospital Sketches, with eight Camp and Fireside Stories, drawn in a great measure from experiences of the war and Slavery. Miss Alcott is an excellent story-teller, and her book is destined to be popular.

**Boston Daily Evening Transcript 42.12,068 (14 August 1869): 2:1.**

Hospital Sketches, communicated originally in letters to the Springfield Republican, we believe, were among the first efforts of Miss Alcott’s pen that won the attention of the public. Fresh, lively, descriptive, with incidents full of pathos, they were not alone prized for their vivacity of style and touching narratives; they also had influence in keeping in vigor a glowing patriotism, and fostered tender sympathy with those who endured the dangers and hardships of the fight for freedom. Roberts Brothers have, as many will be glad to know, put these “Sketches,” with several short stories, into a volume; thus reaching thousands of new and old readers. In a brief preface the author explains why she indulged in what seemed to some an occasional tone of levity, and also why she said no more of her religious experiences or religious matters when serving as nurse. This explanation, on the one part, is creditable to her common sense and knowledge of human nature; and on the other to her humility and reverent shrinking sensitiveness as to sacred things, which it would be well for such as question her piety to imitate.

**Hartford Daily Courant 33.194 (16 August 1869): 2:3.**

The Hospital Sketches of Miss Louisa M. Alcott were very favorably received when they were first published; and they deserved to be. They owed their popularity to no factitious accompaniments, they were not exaggerated, but very real sketches, full of bright humor and occasional wit, a wide-awake appreciation of the situation, and a sub-tone of pathos, which would now and then surprise the reader by coming to the surface and demanding its tribute. They were, besides, capitaliy written, in a style lively and clear.

Her publishers have just reprinted those Sketches in a very neat volume, together with eight other tales of fireside and camp, making a book of 379 pages. These stories lack the absorbing motive of the sketches, but they are very readable, and show the same lively humor and quick ability to seize telling points and make striking situations. The art of constructing short stories is one of the most difficult in the world, and very few have been successful in it. Miss Alcott has a skillful hand in this department. Her publishers have made up a very entertaining volume, which will be welcome.

**The Liberal Christian 24.36 (21 August 1869): 3:2.**

Those who remember Miss Alcott’s pleasant Hospital Sketches will be glad to see
them put together in a very pretty volume with eight of her entertaining, sprightly, short stories. Among the latter are “My Contraband,” “Love and Loyalty,” “A Modern Cinderella,” “A Hospital Christmas,” and “An Hour.” The volume is very unlike her “Little Women,” but can scarcely fail of being quite as popular as that work.

Springfield Daily Union (21 August 1869): 4:5.

Those who have been charmed with the previous volumes of this talented writer, entitled “Little Women,” will be glad to welcome another volume from her pen, and if, as the critics assure us, this shall prove as attractive a volume as the preceding it will serve to enhance the reputation of the fair authoress. These hospital sketches were first published in the Commonwealth in 1863, when the writer was a hospital nurse in Washington and at once attracted attention from the piquancy of her style and the life like coloring she threw over the scenes she described. To these has been added a number of stories, descriptive of scenes in the camp and at the fireside, written at different times since. One of the sketches taken at random will give a correct idea of the style of the author.

A few minutes later, as I came in again with fresh rollers, I saw John sitting erect, with no one to support him, while the surgeon dressed his back. [Remainder of 7 quoted paragraphs omitted.]

American Literary Gazette 13.9 (1 September 1869): 255.

The Hospital Sketches appeared some time ago, and the favor with which they were received has caused the authoress to issue another edition, attached to which is a collection of short tales of an attractive character. Miss Alcott tells us that she “makes no pretensions to literary merit,” and then proceeds to give us some of the most delightfully written tales it has ever been our good fortune to read. They are simple, but to this they owe their great charm, while the graceful elasticity of their style might serve as a model for more pretentious writers. The book is neatly printed, and the illustrations well drawn and engraved.

Zion’s Herald 46.35 (2 September 1869): 413.3.

Roberts Brothers have added two pretty books, to their youths’ library, both by bright women, both full of bright touches... “Hospital Sketches” is the best flower the war has yet blossomed. It is the beginning of Miss Alcott’s strength, and has never been surpassed by her. Some of the scenes are exquisitely touching. Scenes from real life, they are full of immortal life. It will be a book that will be more popular with our grandchildren than with us, for it paints one expression of the war in most vivid lines and colors. Let the Sunday-schools remember both these books.
One of the most readable books of the season, is Roberts Brothers’ edition of Miss Louisa M. Alcott’s Hospital Sketches and Camp and Fireside Stories. Very many of our readers well remember the freshness and sparkle of some of these sketches, published in 1863, and very widely copied by the newspaper press, giving glimpses of Nurse Periwinkle’s experience in one of the large hospitals during the war. With a large heart fully enlisted in the work, Miss Alcott’s letters, originally, we believe, written for the home circle, with their sad and varied experiences, yet everywhere revealing glimpses of sunshine which the heroism and courage of those scenes displayed, and lightening the picture with such rays of gladsome cheerfulness as are to be found even in the midst of so much suffering, touched and thrilled many thousand hearts all over our land.

These sketches, together with a number of stories, into which, as usual, Miss Alcott weaves somewhat of her personal experience, are fresh and interesting, charming, as do all of her works, by their lively, chatty style, while her power of description, pleasantness of thought and earnest imagination, are sure to attract and please; Miss Alcott has already established her fame as an author, and these sketches, if not as finished as some more elaborate productions, are full of tenderness and pathos, fully making up for any fault otherwise.

These “Hospital Sketches” were originally written as letters from Washington when Miss Alcott was engaged as nurse in one of the army hospitals there in the winter of 1862–3. They were printed at that time in the Boston Commonwealth, and were received with warm commendation by the public. Miss Alcott possesses the rare gift of presenting a cheerful view to even the saddest of scenes, and so these “Sketches” excite smiles as well as tears. Some have objected to these descriptions of hospital life as having a “tone of levity.” To such she says in her preface “that the wish to make the best of everything and send home cheerful reports even from that saddest of scenes, an army hospital, probably produced the impression of levity upon those who have never known the sharp contrasts of the tragic and comic in such a life. [Additional quoted sentence omitted.]

The touching story of the brave John’s struggle and triumph cannot soon be forgotten by those who read it. The lesson, too, which Miss Alcott teaches of our Christian duties to the colored people is most timely and valuable. We quote the following scene:

But more interesting than officers, ladies, mules or pigs, were my colored brothers and sisters, because so unlike the respectable members of society I’d known in moral Boston. [Remainder of 6 quoted paragraphs omitted.]

The “Camp and Fireside Stories,” eight in number, make up the rest of the volume.
They were originally published as magazine contributions and were received with much favor. Their collection in one volume, with the “Sketches,” will afford much additional pleasure to the numerous readers of *Little Women*, into whose hands the book will be sure to go.

*Arthur’s Home Magazine*
34.4 (October 1869): 238.

Hospital Sketches first appeared in book form a few years since, and met with decided success. In the present edition there is added to the original work a number of “Camp and Fireside Stories” of more than ordinary interest. Any volume from the pen of Miss Alcott, the author of *Little Women*, needs no recommendation of ours to insure its success.


Hospital Sketches originally appeared in the columns of the Boston *Commonwealth*, over the signature of Tribulation Periwinkle, and are “simply a brief record of one person’s experience,” as an army hospital nurse. They are written in a pleasant, gossipy, natural style; the incidents, a judicious admixture of the “grave and gay,” the humorous and the pathetic, being alike removed from the extremes of levity and gloom.

*Camp and Fireside Stories*, though more pretentious in style and elaborate in plot, are not, in our opinion, of equal merit.

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*The Ladies’ Repository*

Miss Alcott, as thousands of her readers know, handles a sprightly pen. These sketches originally appeared over the signature of “Nurse Periwinkle,” written from Washington in the leisure moments of a very busy life in hospital service, and published in the *Commonwealth* in 1863. To these sketches are now added eight stories, making a very readable book.


*Hospital Sketches*, by Miss Alcott (Roberts Brothers), is a worthy companion volume of “Little Women.” These stories and sketches were originally published – with one or two exceptions – during the war – the “Hospital Sketches” in the *Boston Commonwealth*, the “Camp and Fireside Stories” in other journals. They deserve not only the reputation they then enjoyed, but this permanent preservation in book form. No more graphic pictures of those aspects of camp life which Miss Alcott depicts were evoked by the war.
Hospital Sketches and Camp and Fireside Stories are written by Miss Louisa M. Alcott, in the same fresh and natural style that characterized her “Little Women.” Those of her readers whose memories are stored with incidents of the late war of which they can boast “magna pars fui” can vouch for the truthfulness of these descriptions, from actual experience. Others can only heartily like the spirit of the book, which reads like the sternest sort of reality, and as heartily commend it to our readers.

Miss Alcott performed a brief tour of hospital duty during the late war. Her career as nurse was terminated by an attack of dangerous illness. But she made good use of her time, and her sketches of hospital life, if briefer than could be wished, make up in quality what they lack in quantity. They are, indeed, the most graphic and natural pictures of life in the great army hospitals that have yet appeared. Free from all affected sentimentalism, they blend in a strange and piquant manner the grave and gay, the lively and severe.

We need not say Miss Alcott stands confessedly at the head of all writers who have portrayed young life as known in New England, and the great humanities which come from intelligence and love of country. These books [also Little Women and An Old-Fashioned Girl] are models of their kind, and without rival in their specialties. Their unbounded popularity warrant their acceptance by old and young alike.

Hospital Sketches, by Louisa Alcott (Roberts Bros.), is the first and best of Miss Alcott’s books. Written in and of the war, full of pathos, wit, and fire, it has now, and will retain the first place among the memorabilia of these times.

It is a book which is thoroughly enjoyable, and with which little fault need be found.
It is not a pretentious work, and the author has only aimed at telling the story of her experience as an army hospital nurse, in an easy, natural style; but the incidents which she has given us are so varied, — sometimes amusingly humorous and sometimes tenderly pathetic, — and her narrative is so simple and straightforward and truthful, that the reader's attention is chained, and he finds it impossible to resist the charm of the pleasant, kindly, keen-sighted Nurse Perriwinkle.

**San Francisco Bulletin.**

Such is the title of a volume by Miss Louisa M. Alcott, author of ‘Little Women,’ one of the most charming productions of the day. Miss Alcott is a New England woman of the best type, — gifted, refined, progressive in her opinions, heroic, self-sacrificing. She devoted her time and means to the service of her country in the darkest days of the Rebellion, visiting the camp and the hospital, devoting herself to the care of the sick and the dying, braving danger and privation in the sacred cause of humanity. The results of her experience are embodied in these ‘Sketches,’ which are graphic in narrative, rich in incident, and dramatic in style. Miss Alcott has a keen sense of the ludicrous, and, while she does not trifle with her subject, seeks to amuse as well as instruct her reader. She has the sunniest of tempers, and sees a humorous side even to the sad life of the hospital.

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**Checklist of Additional Reviews and Notices**


*Boston Daily Advertiser* 114.35 (11 August 1869): [1]:2.


*Eclectic Magazine* n.s. 10.4 (October 1869): 505.

*Putnam’s Magazine* 4.23 (November 1869): 642.

*The Spectator* (11 June 1870). Notices *Camp and Fireside Stories*. 