

Recently I was staying in a hotel where were also the *médecin-chefs* of five of the hospitals. On my arrival four of them bowed and smiled when I entered the dining-room as if I were an old, old friend returned. The fifth looked quite unhappy. After dinner, when they met me standing over the only radiator in the entrance hall, the fifth made haste to explain that he had received nothing, "*mais rien, rien!*" and his confrères had had such beautiful presents! Poor little man, I found that all his bales had gone astray. He had wondered if I personally had not liked his hospital, or if I had not thought it needy. "But we are the poorest in the town," he said. "You may ask all of the gentlemen here if it is not so." Having assured him that there would presently be something for him too, I left him thoroughly cheered and content. Next day I found his two bales—the first, in fact, which had arrived—black as the coal-dust which lay around them, overlooked in a corner of the freight depôt. I felt as if I had found a lost lamb for the shepherd!

Recently I had the opportunity to be present at the giving of the medals for valour to a group of men just able to be up and about, though still under hospital treatment. The soldiers from the garrisons of the town and those from various hospitals, headed by drum and fife corps, began to march through the town, with banners waving, almost an hour before the ceremony began. Wounded men, hobbled in twos and threes, others rode in autos loaned for the occasion, peasants came in their two-wheeled carts, and all the population of the town was out, including hundreds of small boys—for it was Thursday afternoon, the school holiday. When I arrived at the Champs de Mars, the militia had already surrounded it on three sides, standing in close rank, at attention. We squeezed into the front row on the fourth side. For some time the square itself was empty, save for a drum corps and one or two officers, including the colonel, who was to present the medals.

By and by a bugle sounded, the soldiers presented arms, and there marched into the square in a long, wavering line thirty-eight men, poor crippled creatures, with canes or crutches, pale, hobbling, legless or armless, in faded uniforms of every description. At the end of the line was a man of about fifty in civilian clothes who was to receive his dead son's medal. The little procession would have been comic had it not been so fearfully tragic. They formed in line, facing the crowd. There was a fanfare of trumpets and every one became very still. The colonel unsheathed his sword and, pointing it directly at the first man of the row, read aloud the man's name and recited the act or acts of bravery for which he was being decorated. Then, dropping his sword into the hand of an aide, he pinned upon the man's breast two medals, the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille Militaire. While he was attaching them he talked to the man in a quiet, informal way, and the man's face flushed

and wore an expression of mingled embarrassment and pleasure. The medals once fixed, the colonel put a hand on each shoulder of the soldier and kissed him in a fatherly fashion on either cheek. I can tell you it was touching!

It was pretty to see the way in which the officer went down the line, one by one, bringing a blush to this one's cheeks, and a smile to another's face, and receiving himself always a kiss in return—a timid salute or a hearty smack. The ceremony was long, and more than once I saw a man waver from side to side from weakness or lean heavily on his crutches. Some were so pale that I held my breath. Finally, when one had collapsed upon the shoulder of the next in line and was carried away, orders were given for the others to fall out of the line and to sit just in front upon a couple of benches. The man who was to receive his dead son's medal did not have it pinned upon his coat, but given in a little box. Nor did he receive any kiss. Poor man! as he stood there with bared head in the rain I felt as if he was the most pathetic of them all. And then the ceremony was over and the crowd surged into the square to shake hands with and congratulate their heroes.

Before I close this long letter I must tell you of one hospital in the vicinity that I visited two days ago. If you speak of this, don't say where it is. I wouldn't hurt the nice surgeon or the equally charming *directeur* for all the world. They were so delightfully friendly, and seemed to find my sympathy and understanding so welcome. Somehow I thought them more friendly than ever when I said I was an American. Apropos of a gift I am making through some of the money sent me by our kind American friends, the surgeon wrote me: "*Notre hôpital est probablement un des plus humbles et des plus modestes que vous ayez visités, mais je sais que c'est pour vous une raison de vous y intéresser davantage.*" One of the humblest and the most modest! It was an abandoned factory of the most primitive sort; most of the staircases are open like ladders; the ground-floor is still a sort of lumber and storage place; in some of the wards (if they can be dignified by that name) the windows are high up in the wall, as if to give the workmen who were once there light upon their machinery; ceilings are in places upheld by rough, unpainted posts; the floors are uneven, worn away, and without a vestige of polish or surface; I saw no electricity or lighting anywhere save in the little operating-room; I need not describe the beds to you—you know what they were like from others I have described. The only water is a tap in the lower entry. In one place, to close up an open loft, the *directeur* had begged of a theatre in a neighbouring town a drop-curtain upon which were painted a castle and moat and a wonderful cascade. He was very proud of this piece of ingenuity—and I was proud, not only of his ingenuity, but of his courage everywhere. He said he had been discouraged when he first saw the building, but that he had begged and borrowed, and they had cleaned and painted, and that now

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)