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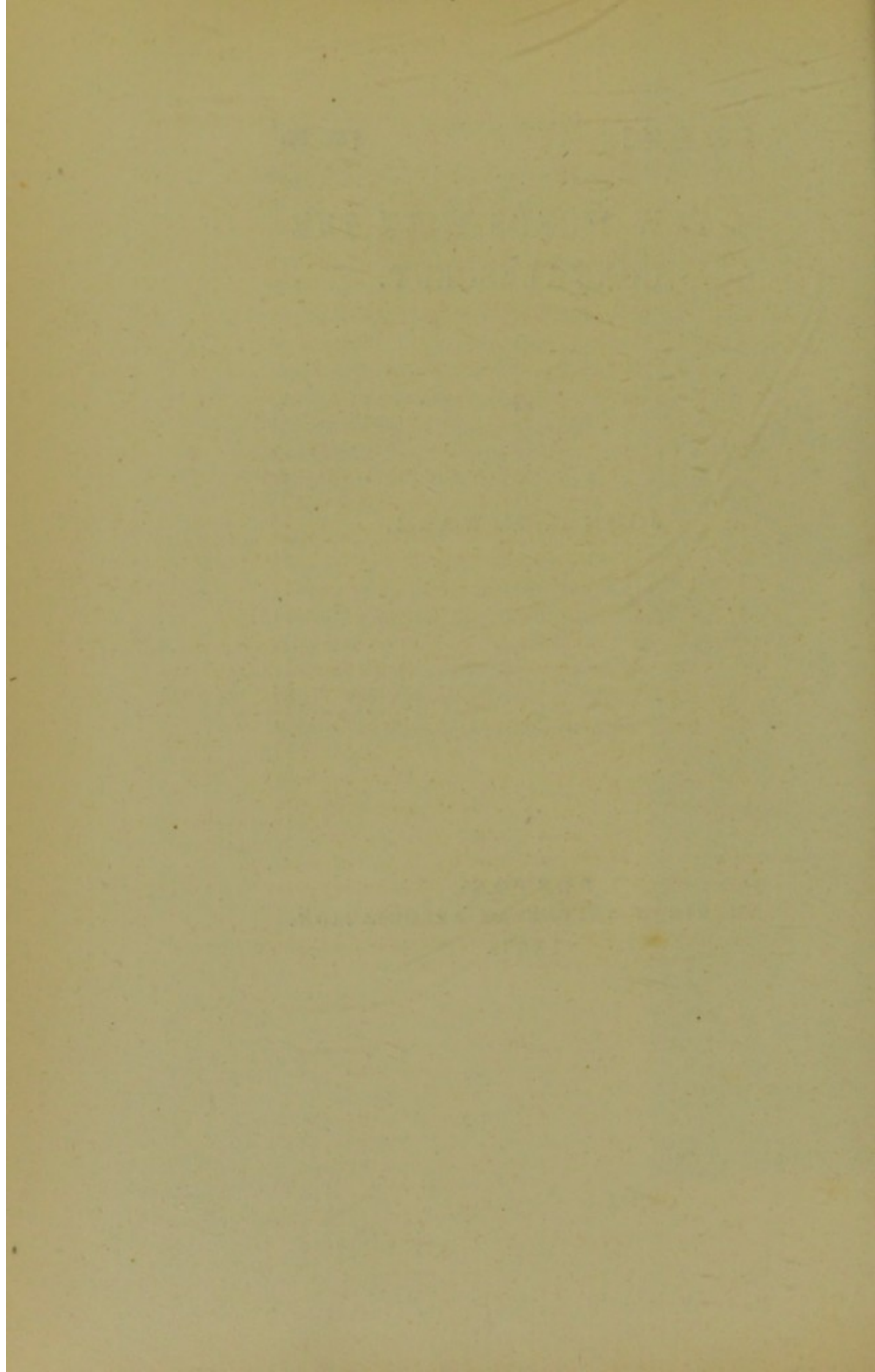
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A FEW WORDS WITH THE
CONVALESCENT.

BY

JOHN F. W. WARE.

BOSTON:
AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION.
1864.



A FEW WORDS WITH THE CONVALESCENT.

SICK FRIENDS AND DEAR FRIENDS:—

I have a long time wanted a quiet talk with you, for I cannot help thinking much and often of those quiet, brave, and patient men I have so many times seen in the hospitals, — suffering not only from disease and wounds, but from the absence of home and all its endearments and comfort, — things which the best-regulated hospitals, the most faithful attendants, the most skilful surgeons, and all the marvellous forethought and liberality of government, the Sanitary Commission, and other less and nameless charities, cannot supply. I have thought you needed some special home word of comfort and cheer. I have waited for some one else to speak it. I cannot wait longer.

If sickness be hard to bear, very much harder is this condition of yours, — the neutral ground between sickness and health, the long, dreary interval which stretches so uncertainly and with hope

often deferred between the subsiding of disease and the going out to life again. There is a power in active disease which soon convinces a man that it is useless for him to struggle, that his best wisdom is quietly to submit, and let disease have its way. He is held down to his bed ; his doctor, his nurse have him under subjection. He cannot rebel. He must obey. Besides, the sick man soon becomes reconciled to his bed. It is the only relief to his languor or his pain. He comes to say of it what Sancho once said of sleep : Blessings on the man who invented a bed.

But convalescence is a different thing. Active disease has passed away, and the hope of health has taken its place. The doctor has ceased his medicines, the bed is no longer our one place of abode. We are beginning to move about. Other people lose much of their interest and sympathy, for danger is over. Their thought is no longer detained by our condition. They turn to something else. We are left to ourselves, to our own resources. At the time we want and should prize attentions we are deprived of them. Weakened in mind, as body, we become easily depressed. We chafe at the lagging hours. We constantly put ourselves back by our efforts to get forward. We become peevish, discontented, unreasonable, despondent, uncomfortable to ourselves, uncomfortable to those about us. Our peculiar natural infirmities come out

with exaggerated power, and show now the tyrants they really are. We do not get much charity. Our best friends find it hard to get along with us, and our convalescence drags its slow, unhappy length along, the body weak and weary, the mind not yet adjusted to its balance, the heart sick with its hopes deferred, the whole man a discomfort to himself, and a puzzle or a plague to those about him. He must be a very rare character who can pass through the tedium of convalescence with honor and self-respect.

If all this be true of ordinary convalescence, — convalescence at home, surrounded by all its cares and loves and protections, — how much more true must it be in the army hospital, where each man is only one of a crowd, where each is separated from the sympathy and consideration of home, where whims and weaknesses and ill-temper can have little attention and less forbearance, where all the discomfort of his position is aggravated by absence, and that sickly yearning for home, itself worse than disease.

Now do not think that this state of yours is not recognized by friends at home. It is not one they can reach or do anything directly for, but if there be anything in sympathy, anything in appreciation of service, anything in pity for suffering, anything in good-will and prayer, you have them all. They are not things tangible to the sense, it is true, as the

delicacies are which find their way to your sickly appetite sometimes, or the tender look, word, act you long for; but they are the tribute, the genuine, generous tribute, of warm hearts, — all that the circumstances will allow us to give and you to receive. Men who judge of everything by their senses may call all this nothing. But it is not so. The unseen forces are the most vital and effective. They are the powers behind the act. These sentiments keep you before our thought; they keep us not only alive to the demands, but the sufferings of the hour. They cannot remove every pain or delay, prevent all mistake or abuse, give you what home only can; but there is not a hospital ward in the land where their influence is not felt, nor a wounded soldier on the field that they do not reach. What is this blessed, all-embracing charity of the Sanitary Commission, — not omnipotent, indeed, but almost omnipresent, — what are lesser associated and private charities, but the expression of feelings which pervade the homes and the hearts of the land? What are they but the combining together and bringing to your relief of those unseen things which men are apt to scoff at and consider as merely *feelings* and *words*, but thus, by their fruit, become tangible and blessed *things*.

Throw off, then, the despondency which is so apt to settle upon the convalescent because he thinks himself out of the pale of sympathy. It is not so.

Never were men so surrounded and embraced by the holiest sympathy as you; never did charity so beautifully exemplify the sweetness and the breadth of her spirit; never did the wealth and good-will of a people so overflow as to-day it does toward you, as it will till this "cruel war is over," and you are again in the old homes, filling your old places there, and felt again as neighbors and citizens, — soldiers no more. You are heroes to us, as well as those who lie on the field of honor. You are soldiers and men, and all suffering of the hospital, as of the field, is heroic. It is true, and shame that it should be true, that there are some who are so wholly led away by the sound of things that they do not recognize your service or feel for your need. It is true that some are dazzled more by rank than by merit; that the accident of a wound is more to them than the fact of a disease; that a dainty officer on crutches, or with an empty sleeve, will carry their applause, while the sick private may want the merest decencies of charity. Shame that it should be so; yet there are such men and women, and only now, in a New England town, the whole neighborhood turned out to welcome a wounded officer, while a poor, sick soldier, of the same town, returning by the same train, was permitted to crawl away by himself to his home, and die there two days after. Myself, I once met on a crowded steamboat a gaudily dressed

Zouave, in uniform that had never seen the smoke of battle, upon costly crutches, with a ball through the fleshy part of his leg, the observed of all observers, the recipient of flattering attentions from all around him, while a poor, dying private, the most pitiable of sights, told me that in all that crowd he had been indebted to the help of a woman to get his valise on board! Yes, such things are. Believe me, they are not common. They are the exception. The real men and women of the land, those whom you would value, are not deceived by the fiction of rank or show. They do not gauge and dole their charities that way. The real interest, the true love, the reliable judgment of home, centres upon her braves wherever they are, whatever their condition, their rank, their suffering. Cheer up, then, and do nothing to forfeit the goodwill and the earnest sympathy of home.

The general spirit of cheerfulness pervading our hospitals has been a frequent matter of comment and surprise. I have found it the same everywhere. But the very men who were cheerful in bed, or in the earlier stages of recovery, become despondent as the long, dull weeks roll on with their wearing monotony, while they make no substantial gain. I do not wonder at it. It is hard when one is at home, and has everything done for him, to keep up the tone of the spirit. It is hard to feel the active world in which you have had a

part, in which you have taken part, passing on, absorbed in its pursuits, while you are laid by as a useless thing, your place filled, yourself forgotten. But this is inevitable, and it is not manly to yield to any despondency. That is a feeling which must be guarded against. It is a terrible, an insidious foe. It strikes at your manhood. It saps your courage and your self-respect. It lets you down, it degrades you in your own eyes. It tempts, it leads you into forbidden things. You become morose and peevish, unreasonable and complaining. Our homes are flooded with reports that have come from men in this condition, doing a gross injustice to the kindly efforts of those about them, making the home unhappy, and casting suspicion on the purest charities, and threatening to stop the source of supply.

One of the worst forms this spirit of despondency assumes, and one you must guard specially against, is the loss of self-respect. It is all over with a man when it comes to that. It is no use for him to hope or to contend. In losing that he loses all. He is like the man who loses his grasp at the brink of a precipice. His fall is inevitable and fatal. God gave us as an instinct, a saving power, this self-respect, and we should all guard it as his gift and our hope of salvation. I know how it is with you. You left home with high hope. You were going to do something for your country, but here you are. You can't get home, you can't go

back to the field, you can't get well. Very discouraging it is, indeed. The people about you don't realize how discouraging it is. Government can't stop to think about it, surgeons and nurses have no time for you. They only see diseases in the flesh,—disease in the spirit is not within their province. Strangers do not think much about you. Their sympathy is with the sick. The chaplain does something, and kind, thoughtful people do what they can by sending you books and other means of occupation. But these are after all only pebbles against the swell and sweep of the deep, dark current, which the gloomy, lengthening days only make deeper and darker. Every true man and woman feels how hard it is for you, and thanks God that they have not such a discipline. But, hard as it is, don't give up your manhood. Hold on to your self-respect. Do not stoop to anything as a present relief which will afterward make you ashamed. Do not desert any principle, do not yield to or form any bad habit, but summon all your courage,—courage which has stood you in such good stead in many a trial hour before,—and resolve to bear patiently till the brighter hour comes.

Some of the saddest things I have seen in hospitals have been the signs that weary convalescence was telling on the men in this way, and they were losing heart. I have seen men out on leave, stag-

gering toward the hospital again,—sick men, wounded men, crippled men. It was a sad, sad sight. It said that they were losing self-respect. For is there anything that takes that pearl of price from a man quicker? That which makes a drunkard's case so hopeless is that you have no self-respect to work on. It is clean gone. I have seen many sad sights in my day, but I think no sadder than a man, in a uniform which showed him to be an American soldier, *drunk*. I cannot help a certain respect for that uniform wherever I meet it, and the more I respect it the more am I grieved when I see it disgraced.

I know that another thing troubles you. You feel that you are privates, and the manner of your officers and of some foolish persons, and the needed discipline of service, leads you to think that a private, especially a sick private, is of no account, a useless encumbrance every one would be glad to have well out of the way. I want to assure you of one thing. It is the private soldier for whom these immense hospitals all through the land have been constructed,—for whom the Sanitary Commission, with a wisdom the world never dreamed of before, is toiling, for whom a charity that never slacks is giving, for whom the busy hands and hearts of the women and children of the land are daily and hourly not only working, but saving. Your officers do not always enough consider what we never forget,—that

the private in this war is a man from the home, always their equal, often their superior. If they abuse their authority, as they sometimes do; if they are cruel in their neglect, and make you trouble by their ignorance; be sure the home knows it and remembers it, and when their brief authority is over, and they are on the simple level and equality of manhood again, all this will return with fearful usury upon them. Try to bear all to-day. You have trials and privations, hardship, and sometimes injustice. But keep a good heart. The man who bears up, works his way through things that break the man who gives up.

It is hard to be laid aside, to feel that the neglect of company officers deprives you of your pay, and your families of their support, that the strange delay in the department deprives you of your furlough or discharge. It is hard even to suspect that you are considered of no moment, now that you can no longer serve. All this we at home know and realize. But it will never do for you to lose your just pride, your brave heart, — never do to give up. You are soldiers. You bear the scar of service. The disease, the wound, the disability, is a badge of honor. Every true heart recognizes it. You have borne up under the trials and disasters of the field. With indomitable will you have overcome the difficulties before and about you. You have not quailed under the call of duty. Why quail now? Why

lose heart? Why not be as brave, as persistent? The end is as desirable as the victory upon the field. The end is to keep your manhood, your integrity, to keep from slipping into the power of low things. Camp and field have made you heroes. The hospital must not make you recreant and coward.

You see by what I say that I have no idea that the uncomfortable things attending convalescence must be tamely submitted to. I cannot agree with a wise friend of mine, who says "that one of the chief duties of a sick-room is to forget duties, lay aside responsibilities, and so rest the will. We are not under law in sleep, nor are we in sickness." I think we are under law in sickness. The sick-room, the hospital ward, has its duties. Not the gravely sick, it is true, can be held to much duty, to none of the old duty of active life, but the period of convalescence — the most trying period of sickness — has its duties, and they should not be evaded. You must summon yourselves to the discharge of them. It is no excuse that they are hard. No good soldier urges that in health, when any duty or any superior commands. He obeys. The hardness is a stimulant. So much the better soldier is he if he succeed; so much the greater honor. No good soldier should hesitate now. The duty of obedience is as great. The thing at stake is as vital. His own comfort, character, self-respect, are concerned.

Let him lose these, let him be poltroon, let him yield, go back from the hospital to the field or the home a poor, pitiless, abject, spiritless man, and all the honor he may have got on the battle-field is of little avail.

Patient waiting is perhaps the hardest thing a man ever does. It is many times the only thing he can do. It is the only thing many of you can do. What good will it do for you to fret, to rebel, to kick the pricks? An inexorable necessity compels you to wait. It will not let you act. You are bound hand and foot. There is no help for it,—nothing you can do. Your wisdom is to wait quietly.

Suffering friends! in all your suffering remember the oversight, the watchful care of the good Father. He doeth all things well. Not a sparrow falls without him. Fear not, despair not. Through this way may you enter your glory. The glory that comes of man fades, but the glory of God is perennial. Though men desert and decry you, though they withdraw sympathy and charity, though the love of home grow cold, and you become forgotten, outcast and alien, yet will not He cast you off, while you accept his burden and bear his yoke. But home and all honorable men will never do that. They still cherish and hope and pray for you. Disappoint them not. Keep fast by your integrity. Maintain your manliness. Bear as patiently as you have

done nobly, submit as obediently to God's will as of old to your general's command, and it must end well with you. You may never come to health of body here, but you must come to health of soul, which shall make all right in the hereafter!

