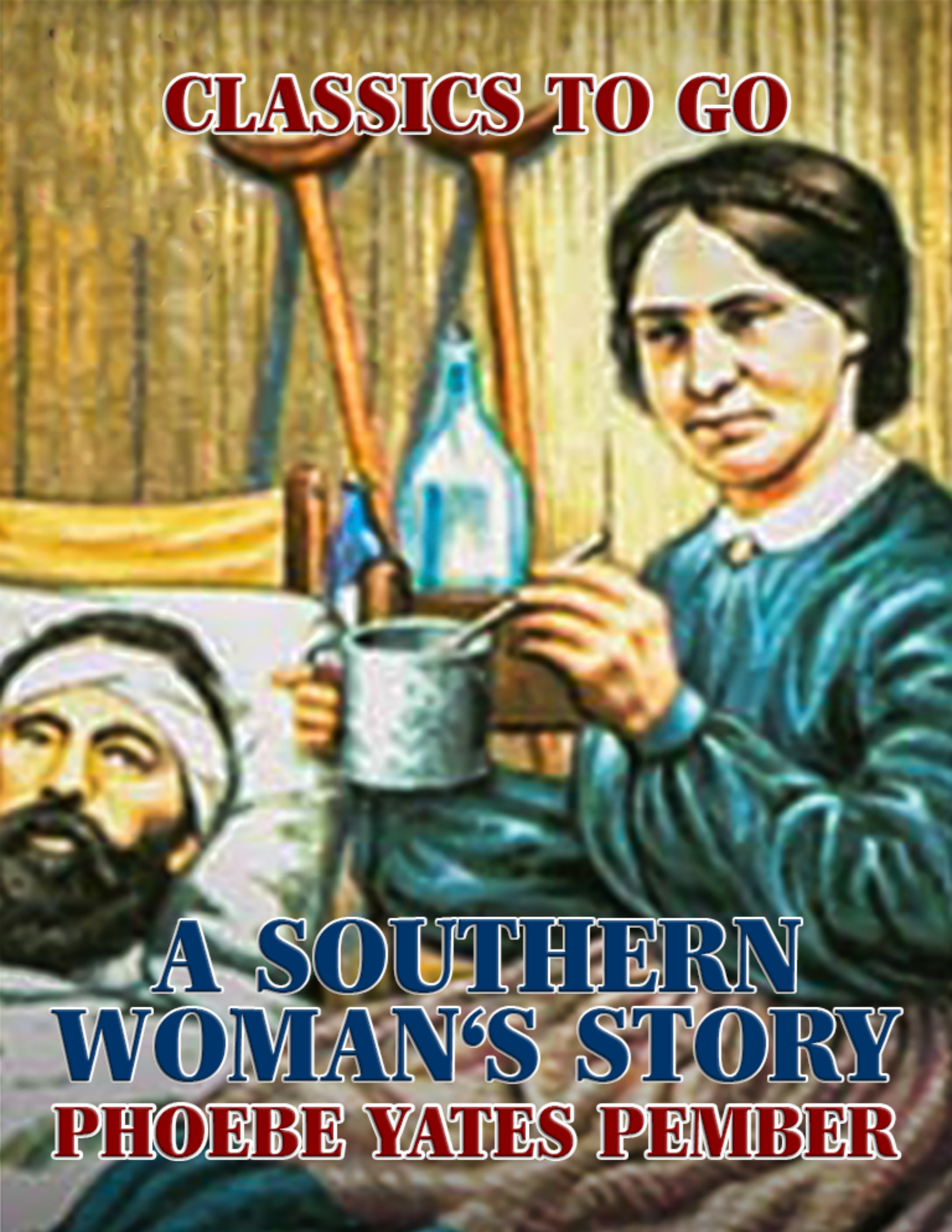
CLASSICS TO GO



A SOUTHERN WOMAN'S STORY

PHOEBE YATES PEMBER

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Introduction.

Soon after the breaking out of the Southern war, the need of hospitals, properly organized and arranged, began to be felt, and buildings adapted for the purpose were secured by government. Richmond, being nearest the scene of action, took the lead in this matter, and the formerly hastily contrived accommodations for the sick were soon replaced by larger, more comfortable and better ventilated buildings.

The expense of keeping up small hospitals had forced itself upon the attention of the surgeon-general, Moore, who on that account gradually incorporated them into half-a-dozen immense establishments, strewn around the suburbs. These were called Camp Jackson, Camp Winder, Chimborazo Hospital, Stuart

Hospital and Howard Grove; and were arranged so that from thirty to forty wards formed a division, and generally five divisions a hospital. Each ward accommodated from thirty to forty patients, according to the immediate need for space. Besides the sick wards, similar buildings were used for official purposes, for in these immense establishments every necessary trade was carried on. There were the carpenter’s, blacksmith’s, apothecary’s and shoemaker’s shops; the ice houses, commissary’s and quartermaster’s departments; and offices for surgeons, stewards, baggage-masters and clerks. Each division was furnished with all these, and each hospital presented to the eye the appearance of a small village.

There was no reason why, with this preparation for the wounded and sick, that they should not have received all the benefit of good nursing and food; but soon rumors began to circulate that there was something wrong in

hospital administration, and Congress, desirous of remedying omissions, passed a law by which matrons were appointed. They had no official recognition, ranking even below stewards from a

military point of view. Their pay was almost nominal from the depreciated nature of the currency. There had been a great deal of desultory visiting and nursing, by the women, previous to this law taking effect, resulting in more harm than benefit to the patients; and now that the field was open, a few, very few ladies, and a great many inefficient and uneducated women, hardly above the laboring classes, applied for and filled the offices.

Women of the South.

The women of the South had been openly and violently rebellious from the moment they thought their States' rights touched. They incited the men to struggle in support of their views, and whether right or wrong, sustained them nobly to the end. They were the first to rebel—the last to succumb. Taking an active part in all that came within their sphere, and often compelled to go beyond this when the field demanded as many soldiers as could be raised; feeling a passion of interest in every man in the gray uniform of the Confederate service; they were doubly anxious to give comfort and assistance to the sick and wounded. In the course of a long and harassing war, with

ports blockaded and harvests burnt, rail tracks constantly torn up, so that supplies of food were cut off, and sold always at exorbitant prices, no appeal was ever made to the women of the South, individually or collectively, that did not meet with a ready response. There was no parade of generosity; no published lists of donations, inspected by public eyes. What was contributed was given unostentatiously, whether a barrel of coffee or the only half bottle of wine in the giver's possession.

Startling Proposition.

About this time one of these large hospitals was to be opened, and the wife of the then acting secretary of war offered me the superintendence—rather a startling proposition to a woman used to all the comforts of luxurious life. Foremost among the Virginia women, she had given her resources of mind and means to the sick, and her graphic and earnest representations of the benefit a good and determined woman’s rule could effect in such a position settled the result in my mind. The natural idea that such a life would be injurious to the delicacy and refinement of a lady—that her nature would become deteriorated and her

sensibilities blunted, was rather appalling. But the first step only costs, and that was soon taken.

First Appearance on any Stage.

A preliminary interview with the surgeon-in-chief gave necessary confidence. He was energetic—capable—skillful. A man with ready oil to pour upon troubled waters. Difficulties melted away beneath the warmth of his ready interest, and mountains sank into mole-hills when his quick comprehension had surmounted and leveled them. However troublesome daily increasing annoyances became, if they could not be removed, his few and ready words sent applicants and grumblers home satisfied to do the best they could. Wisely he decided to have an educated and efficient woman at the head of his hospital, and having succeeded, never allowed himself to forget that fact.

Petticoat Government.

The day after my decision was made found me at “headquarters,” the only two-story building on hospital ground, then occupied by the chief surgeon and his clerks. He had not yet made his appearance that morning, and while awaiting him, many of his corps, who had expected in horror the advent of female supervision,

walked in and out, evidently inspecting me. There was at that time a general ignorance on all sides, except among the hospital officials, of the decided objection on the part of the latter to the carrying out of a law which they prognosticated would entail “petticoat government;” but there was no mistaking the stage-whisper which reached my ears from the open door of the office that morning, as the little contract surgeon passed out and informed a friend he met, in a tone of ill-concealed disgust, that “*one of them had come*.”

Dull, but necessary Details.

To those not acquainted with hospital arrangements, some explanations are necessary. To each hospital is assigned a surgeon-in-chief. To each *division* of the hospital, a surgeon in charge. To each *ward* of the division, an assistant surgeon. But when the press of business is great, contract doctors are also put in charge of wards. The surgeon-in-chief makes an inspection each day, calling a board of inferior surgeons to make their report to him. The surgeon in charge is always on the ground, goes through the wards daily, consulting with his assistants and reforming abuses, making

his report daily to the surgeon-in-chief. The assistant surgeon has only his one or two wards to attend, passing through them twice each day and prescribing. In cases of danger he calls in the surgeon in charge for advice or assistance. The contract surgeons performed the same duties as assistant surgeons, but ranked below them, as they were not commissioned officers and received less pay. Each ward had its corps of nurses, unfortunately not practised or expert in their duties, as they had been sick or wounded men, convalescing and placed in that position,—however ignorant they might be,—till strong enough for field duty. This arrangement bore very hard upon all interested, and harder upon the sick, as it entailed constant supervision and endless teaching; but the demand for men in the field was too imperative to allow those who were fit for their duties there to be detained for nursing purposes, however skillful they may have become.

Besides these mentioned, the hospital contained an endless horde of stewards and their clerks; surgeons' clerks; commissaries and their clerks; quartermasters and clerks; apothecaries

and clerks; baggage-masters; forage-masters; wagon-masters; cooks; bakers; carpenters; shoemakers; ward-inspectors; ambulance-drivers; and many more; forgotten hangers-on, to whom the soldiers gave the name of “hospital rats” in common with would-be invalids who resisted being cured from a disinclination to field service. They were so called, it is to be supposed, from the difficulty of getting rid of either species. Still, many of them were physically unfit for the field.

Initiation.

Among these conflicting elements, all belittled at a time of general enthusiasm by long absence from the ennobling influences of military service, and all striving with rare exceptions to gain the small benefits and rare comforts so scarce in the Confederacy, I was introduced that day by the surgeon in charge. He was a cultivated, gentlemanly man, kind-hearted when he remembered to be so, and very much afraid of any responsibility resting upon his shoulders. No preparations had been made by him for his female department. He escorted me into a long, low, whitewashed building, open from end to end, called for two benches, and then, with entire

composure, as if surrounding circumstances were most favorable, commenced an æsthetic conversation on *belles lettres*, female influence, and the first, last and only novel published during the war. (It was a translation of *Joseph the Second*, printed on gray and bound in marbled wall-paper.) A neat compliment offered at leave-taking rounded off the interview, with a parting promise from him to send me the carpenter to make partitions and shelves for office, parlor, laundry, pantry and kitchen. The steward was then summoned for consultation, and my representative reign began.

"*Great Oaks from little Acorns grow.*"

A stove was unearthed; very small, very rusty, and fit only for a family of six. There were then about six hundred men upon the matron's diet list, the illest ones to be supplied with food from my kitchen, and the convalescents from the steward's, called, in contra-distinction from mine, "the big kitchen." Just then my mind could hardly grope through the

darkness that clouded it, as to what were my special duties, but one mental spectrum always presented itself—*chicken soup*.

Partnership with Jim.

Having vaguely heard of requisitions, I then

and there made my first, in very unofficial style. A polite request sent through “Jim” (a small black boy) to the steward for a pair of chickens. They came instantly ready dressed for cooking. Jim picked up some shavings, kindled up the stove, begged, borrowed or stole (either act being lawful to his mind), a large iron pot from the big kitchen. For the first time I cut up with averted eyes a raw bird, and the Rubicon was passed.

My readers must not suppose that this picture applies generally to all our hospitals, or that means and appliances so early in the war for food and comfort, were so meagre. This state of affairs was only the result of accident and some misunderstanding. The surgeon of my hospital naturally thought I had informed myself of the power vested in me by virtue of my position, and, having some experience, would use the rights given me by the law passed in Congress, to arrange my own department; and I, on reading the bill, could only understand that the office was one that dovetailed the duties of housekeeper and cook, nothing more.

A First Venture.

In the meantime the soup was boiling, and was undeniably a success, from the perfume it exhaled. Nature may not have intended me for a Florence Nightingale, but a kitchen proved my worth. Frying-pans, griddles, stew-pans and coffee-pots soon became my household gods. The niches must have been prepared years previously, invisible to the naked eye but still there.

Gaining courage from familiarity with my position, a venture across the lane brought me to the nearest ward (they were all separate buildings, it must be remembered, covering a half mile of ground in a circle, one story high, with long, low windows opening back in a groove against the inside wall), and, under the first I peeped in, lay the shadow of a man extended on his bed, pale and attennuated.

What woman’s heart would not melt and make itself a home where so much needed?

His wants were inquired into, and, like all the humbler class of men, who think that unless they have been living on hog and hominy they are starved, he complained of not having eaten anything “for three mortal weeks.”

“*A Rose by any other name,” &c.*

Love unto Death.

Scenes of pathos occurred daily—scenes that wrung the heart and forced the dew of pity from the eyes; but feeling that enervated the mind and relaxed the body was a sentimental luxury that was not to be indulged in. There was too much work to be done, too much active exertion required, to allow the mental or physical powers to succumb. They were severely

taxed each day. Perhaps they balanced, and so kept each other from sinking. There was, indeed, but little leisure to sentimentalize, the necessity for action being ever present.

After the battle of Fredericksburg, while giving small doses of brandy to a dying man, a low, pleasant voice, said "Madam." It came from a youth not over eighteen years of age, seeming very ill, but so placid, with that earnest, far-away gaze, so common to the eyes of those who are looking their last on this world. Does God in his mercy give a glimpse of coming peace, past understanding, that we see reflected in the dying eyes into which we look with such strong yearning to fathom what they see? He shook his head in negative to all offers of food or drink or suggestions of softer pillows and lighter covering.

"I want Perry," was his only wish.

On inquiry I found that Perry was the friend and companion who marched by his side in the field and slept next to him in camp, but of whose whereabouts I was ignorant. Armed with a requisition from our surgeon, I sought him among the sick and wounded at all the

other hospitals. I found him at Camp Jackson, put him in my ambulance, and on arrival at my own hospital found my

patient had dropped asleep. A bed was brought and placed at his side, and Perry, only slightly wounded, laid upon it. Just then the sick boy awoke wearily, turned over, and the half-unconscious eye fixed itself. He must have been dreaming of the meeting, for he still distrusted the reality. Illness had spiritualized the youthful face; the transparent forehead, the delicate brow so clearly defined, belonged more to heaven than earth. As he recognized his comrade the wan and expressionless lips curved into the happiest smile—the angel of death had brought the light of summer skies to that pale face. “Perry,” he cried, “Perry,” and not another word, but with one last effort he threw himself into his friend’s arms, the radiant eyes closed, but the smile still remained—he was dead.

The Silver Cord loosened.

There was but little sensibility exhibited by soldiers for the fate of their comrades in field or hospital. The results of war are here to-day and gone to-morrow. I stood still, spell-bound

by that youthful death-bed, when my painful revery was broken upon by a drawling voice from a neighboring bed, which had been calling me by such peculiar names or titles that I had been oblivious to whom they were addressed.