Surgeons must be very careful
by middlemarch

Summary

Conflict over a patient's care exposes more fissures than expected. Mary makes an unexpected choice to cope.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

Jed set the cup of boneset tea on the small table beside his armchair. It was already strewn with books, a variety of papers, and his pen, but he made room for the cup close to the edge. He rather wished it would fall to the ground so he would watch it soak into the Turkey carpet, the rich colors becoming dulled and sodden; Mary had insisted he drink the tea and had been as liberal as she could with the honey they had on hand but it was still bitter and appeared largely ineffective. The steam rising from the cup had provided some transient relief and he had cradled it to his chest to let the heat sink in, but he still felt as miserably ill as he had when he’d awoken. He’d been sick for several days with a head that felt stuffed full of conkers, his body heavy, slowed, hot and cold by turns, but it was the illness of a healthy man; he could feel his underlying vitality ready to reassert itself, felt still the strength of his hands and the soundness of his heart, his lungs moving air effortlessly. Mary had noticed just as the symptoms had come on, fetching him an extra cup of coffee to help him through the last surgery, then briskly sending him off to his bed, “You’ll do no good to anyone in this condition, Jed!” called over her shoulder, an admonition and reassurance in one. He’d been nearly asleep on his bed with only his boots off when she had come by with the first cup of boneset, a little dish of broth and a cool, damp cloth to wipe his face. She had got the tea and broth into him and gotten him settled in the bed, vest and braces off, collar loosened. She moved easily about the room, setting things to rights. She pulled the rough woolen blanket across
him and sighed disparagingly at the coarse weave, a small housewifely sound he had not realized he missed. He had felt her go, his eyelids already weighted down, but he did recall her low voice promising to come check on him again and wishing him a good sleep, her palm gentle on his cheek.

For the last three days, she had been, well, coddling him as best she could. He still made his rounds and did his surgeries, but found she had arranged things so there were longer pauses between. She managed to ply him with hot drinks unobtrusively and he found himself sitting at the bedside of some of the boys during rounds when he had only ever stood and walked before. It was a curious sensation to be the object of her nursing again. She was careful to be perfectly correct but she exercised her power as Head Nurse to see to his comfort more obviously. The element of secrecy was still present however; this time, his illness was not to be concealed, but the depth of her concern and source of her care. She allowed only the slightest shade of her affection in her tone of voice, imperceptible to any but him, he supposed, as Hastings criticized only the composition of the tisanes Mary brewed him and Summers looked on approvingly, once remarking, “Nurse Phinney’s a dab hand at nursing, clever too, who would’ve thought a Baroness, eh?” in a familiar tone that made Jed wonder how and when Mary had nursed Summers.

He imagined being ill and being allowed to receive all her care, the extra smiles and touches throughout the day designed to lift his flagging spirits, being led back to bed firmly when he tried to leave it too soon to return to his work. Her cool hands in the night rubbing his aching head or slipping a fever-soaked shirt off his back, the relief of fresh linen against him and her lavender Mary scent all around him, being soothed with her voice in his ear, the hymns of her childhood now his solace too. He thought, even if he had had the letter he wished already, and oh how he wished it had come already! he could not have had what he envisioned. She could not be Head Nurse and his wife—she could not run the hospital and their household both. This additional complexity, a burden to consider when he was well, was too much when his head felt full of boiling molasses and his back ached like an old man’s, the old man he would become, rushing towards his middle aged self. He pushed the thoughts away and let them come back as a sort of comfort when he lay feverish in his bed at night. He heard Mary’s light tread in the hallway then and the sound was a relief, pure in the way it hadn’t been when she had tended him in his withdrawal.

The knock at his door was not her. It was too bold, clearly a pleasantry only, though the door did not open immediately. She had told him to stay in bed, or at least in his chair, a few hours longer this morning when she saw the shadows beneath his eyes. The pallor of his cheeks above his beard was evidence of a long night with little rest. He was fatigued enough he did not question her, how the men would be cared for, what she would say—he only settled back against the pillows and let the enervation take him again, his busy mind slack, not even wishing for the easy pastoral poetry of his boyhood or his last letter from Jules in Paris. He had taken the broth she brought and the tea, and her hand in his a moment; she checked his fever with a caress, then stroked his closed eyelids and told him to sleep again. It was not Mary at his door.

He shrugged on a vest and buttoned it quickly, tied the cravat loosely, and opened the door. The chaplain stood before him, a more welcome sight than many others, until he saw the look in the man’s eyes—discomfort and concern mixed. Given Hopkins’s familiarity with suffering boys, Jed took note of his uneasy affect, the way he shifted on his feet, one hand, fisted, swinging by his side.

“Dr. Foster, I hate to disturb you—I know you have been unwell—but you are needed downstairs, as the executive officer,” Henry said, apologetic but brooking no dissent. Still, it was Jed’s nature to disagree—on good days, he justified it as scientific skepticism and on others, when he was more self-critical, or perhaps more honest, he admitted he took pleasure in defiance for its own sake.
“Where is Dr. Summers? Can he not handle whatever is going on?” Jed replied. It was too early in the day for Summers to be in his cups, even if he sought to take the chill off the dank October morning with a tot of rum in his coffee.

“Dr. Summers has been in surgery all morning. Mr. Diggs is assisting him. Excuse me, Dr. Foster, but it truly is a matter requiring the attention of the executive officer.”

Jed’s head ached. Standing in the doorway, he began to perceive an unpleasant noise, voices raised, rising up the stairs. Two voices—hard to make out with his hearing hampered by the illness—but one a woman’s, sharp and quick, progressing through the secondo passagio to flageolet register. The cooling cup of boneset tea began to regain its appeal. He made one last attempt.

“Surely, Nurse Mary is capable of managing the… dispute? She excels as resolving these minor conflicts as we both know, always so… serene in the face of acrimony, I find.” Oh, Mary, spare him the tedium of mediating another petty argument, the strife a proxy for the helplessness in the face of suffering they all struggled with.

“Dr. Foster, that is Nurse Mary,” Henry replied, putting paid to any further discussion. Jed straightened his cravat and took a deep breath; the lion’s den awaited.

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Mary was incandescent. Jed looked immediately, instinctively, for her in any room he entered but he felt sure that anyone would notice her first upon encountering the strange tableau before them. Above her dark grey dress and blood-stained pinafore, her pale face shone. Jed did not agree with the patronizing perspective that anger rendered a lovely woman more beautiful, as if the power of a woman’s rage could be managed and diminished by its transformation into mere appearance. He did not find Mary any more beautiful in her ferocity but she was utterly compelling. He spared a moment to wonder if her Phinney heritage was part Irish, for in her fury, she reminded him of the legend of the banshee and her keening wail of death. He glanced around the room and noted that Mary had transfixed others—the men in their beds and the nuns beside them, the chaplain behind him, Anne Hastings, curiously placed to Mary’s right side, her face unreadable at the moment, and Hale, stiff in his rumpled uniform, the focus of Mary’s wrath. The volume of their exchange was muted for him, but the intensity and fierceness were not.

Hopkins moved a step closer to him and murmured, “It was like this almost from the start—I came to get you after a few minutes. I didn’t think it was good for the men, but I’d hoped they would have stopped by now. I think you see why you were needed?” Jed nodded, listening more now to the actual words and not only the emotional tenor of the argument.

“But why? You still haven’t given any explanation! I came to you right away and you said you would help--” Mary said, her cheeks flushed. Jed saw she was trembling, the half-light of the cloudy day catching just a little on the curls captured in her chignon. She had hurried then with her toilette this morning, forgoing the elaborate braided coiffure she generally wore in favor of bundling her dark curls in a black silk snood.

“So you did and I made my decision. That leg was crushed, couldn’t be saved and the pelvis shattered too—no hope for it,” Hale replied, louder than his usual but making an effort seem calm.

“His name is Charlie! Charlie Gibbons! He is eighteen years old and he comes from Perth Amboy, New Jersey. He has a Norfolk spaniel called Penny. He never left his home before this War and now you’ve seen to it-- he’ll never go home! Never! How could you? All I asked was for you to help, to take on a few more surgeries today so Je- Dr. Foster could rest a few hours and you’ve killed him, you’ve killed him!” Mary cried, the reckless, passionate Mary who had thrown herself
onto an attempted murderer the first day she arrived at Mansion House.

“I did nothing of the kind! A Rebel shot him in the leg, a Rebel’s horse trampled him. A Rebel will be the one responsible for his death, not me! You asked me to see a patient and I did—I decided it was a pointless surgery he’d never survive. How dare you question me?” Hale escalated, bristling at Mary’s attack.

“I asked you to treat a patient—to give that boy a chance. Je- Dr. Foster would have at least tried to save him—you didn’t even try! What will I write to his mother? What kind of man are you?” Mary responded. She seemed unaware of anyone now except Hale, whose face had turned a peculiar heliotrope. Jed saw Anne Hastings’s eyes flicking back and forth between the two, assessing… something, conniving he presumed, how to turn the situation to her own advantage.

“Madam, I am a surgeon and an officer in the United States Army! You have no place questioning my medical decisions—an untrained nurse, thrust upon us by that dragon Dix, inexperienced, barely competent, not fit to be Head Nurse! In your own words, you’re barely even the Baroness we were told to expect, just the widow of a German immigrant, another man you couldn’t keep alive. You belong at home where a woman should be, you shouldn’t even be out of mourning yet! We shouldn’t have any women nurses, well, the nuns are acceptable, they know their place, but the hospital is a man’s world and doctors shouldn’t be interrogated by ignorant, ill-educated women who don’t know their place!” Hale exclaimed. In the split-second before he spoke, Jed saw Anne Hastings’s eyes narrow. Hale had lumped her in with Mary as useless and extraneous and now Anne was torn between her personal enmity towards Mary and her own sense of self-importance. Jed also had to admit that Hastings was a far more competent clinician and diagnostician than Hale and did not deserve, as Mary did not, to be so demeaned.

“Enough! Dr. Hale, Nurse Phinney—come with me at once to Dr. Summers’s office. This is no place for such a discussion! Nurse Hastings, please see to the men. Chaplain, if you would assist Nurse Hastings?” Jed spoke firmly, attempting a stern, impartial air with the expertise of a twenty year old playing at Lear. Frankly, a white beard wouldn’t go amiss at this moment for Jed himself, he thought. He had let the argument go on too long, but his illness had slowed his responses; Mary had seemed to make a wise choice by keeping him from operating this morning, but now he knew she rued it, rued her choice with every fiber of her being. His illness was to blame, and, he accepted, his shocked fascination at the vehemence of the exchange. Mary had argued so boldly, as a man would argue, but with a woman’s sensibility. No one had been prepared for it, though Jed thought Anne Hastings had a look of recognition in her eyes, another woman who had been told, too many times, to take her rightful, lesser place. He gestured for Mary and Hale to follow him, though he wished to walk beside Mary; he knew he would have to tread carefully now, must act as the executive officer first, much as he longed to act as Hale’s challenger and Mary’s champion.

They made their way to Summers’s office. Jed found himself in Summers’s chair behind the hulking, mahogany desk, Mary and Hale standing before him as not so long ago, he and Hale had stood before Summers. From this vantage point, Jed could see the number of liquor bottles Summers had tucked in drawers and under papers. It was a wonder the man could see straight enough to operate, though he was probably half-pickled already and less affected by the spirits. He certainly retained the dexterity to play his violin, a reassuring thought when Jed considered the number of surgeries Summers had performed in the past few days.

Hale was before him, chest thrust out, having regained every iota of pomposity Mary had knocked from him with her inquisition. Beside Mary, there was something unfinished appearing about Hale, as if he had been drawn with too blunt a pencil. His pugnacious jaw and squared shoulders couldn’t offset the dullness his eyes so often held. Jed could have appreciated Hale as a reliable workman in the field of medicine if he didn’t so often present himself as a shining light, a skilled and
innovative practitioner. It was the juvenile self-aggrandizement that Jed found so dishonest. Mary stood very still and very straight. In her dark grey dress with its little black lace collar and cuffs, she had the look of a Quakeress, but he saw in her eyes turmoil, not the calm surety of principles defended. She did not appear defiant, nor apprehensive of being chastised—her aspect was withdrawn and bleak. He sensed whatever would be said in the office was nothing to her thoughts, the manifestations of rage and guilt and powerlessness that consumed her.

“Dr. Foster, I am prepared to accept Nurse Mary’s apology so we can put this regrettable incident behind us,” Hale began, “Her tender heart does her credit, surely, but she must see she cannot question a physician, nor cast aspersions on my character, that was not at all acceptable, and from a woman—” Hale’s voice and increasingly expansive gestures suggested he was prepared to go on at some length on these themes but Jed interrupted.

“Christ, Hale! Her apology? After you spoke to her in such a way? I have you here as the executive officer, and will handle this… encounter as such, but you behaved in as ungentlemanly a manner as I can recall, short of asking a woman for her favors in broad daylight!” Jed exclaimed.

“Foster! How dare you! I have never—not a gentleman? I suppose you are prepared to school me in that realm?” Hale blustered in return.

“It would be only one of many areas you need education in! Not least of which is your surgical skill, but I am more concerned about your inability to work with other staff. You are not some emperor or pasha, you owe this hospital’s head nurse respect if not explanations for your decisions,” Jed stated firmly. He was working diligently to rein in his impulse to verbally thrash Hale although it would have been easier had he put on his uniform, the blue wool and gold buttons tangible reminders of his role.

“Nurse Mary, I am sure you can understand we cannot have another incident like today’s. It is critical that this hospital function efficiently and that we instill in the men we treat the utmost confidence in their physicians. It is not a nurse’s place to question a physician’s decision for his patient,” Jed said, striving for a neutral tone.

“But Charlie Gibbons was not his patient! He was just ‘a crushed leg, a shattered pelvis, a waste!’ He was my patient—I sat with him and talked with him, he is a strong boy with so much to live for—none of that mattered to Dr. Hale, as it hardly ever matters to any of you! We nurses, we are the ones who comfort these boys, and bring them water and sing to them, and write their letters home, and we are the ones with them when they die! That is our place, my place—how can I not question when I ask for just a chance, just a chance to save this boy and am told he will get it, and then find out, nothing has happened, nothing will happen—and it is too late for Charlie now, he has blood poisoning, he’ll never even know he didn’t have a chance! And why? A whim?” Mary took a deep breath, “I have seen you operate, Dr. Foster, on boys injured just as badly, or worse, than poor Charlie Gibbons—you would have given him a chance, even Dr. Summers would, so why would not Dr. Hale? There is no reason, no principle—”

“None you know of, because you are not the physician!” Hale burst out. “You don’t know enough to know the principles of medicine, let alone to question how we make our choices about how we treat the men.”

“What principles do you follow then? What textbook could I read, what lecture could I attend that would allow me to understand? I have Latin, German, French— You have said I am untrained, but what training am I allowed? You force me to a corner, then tell me to be content with my prison! I will never be able to give Charlie Gibbons’s mother an answer that would not break her heart, but why can you not tell me how you decide to take away a boy’s chance at life so I may pray on it,
while I sit at his bedside and hold his hand, and try to help him have an easy death?” Mary’s voice broke then, the word ‘death’ rasped out, tears threatening to crowd it out. Yes, Jed thought, Mary would want, at the very least, to know the why of it.

“Why, just give him the morphine and have an end to it! All this feminine sentimentality and melodrama—he was a soldier and he was killed by the enemy. Many men have died so and many more will follow. Even now, this conversation prevents me from saving even more injured men, my real responsibility as an Union officer and a physician.” Hale declared, revealing what Jed had suspected—the man lacked both intellect and compassion. God help the Union soldiers who fell to his care! He wished Mary had come to him this morning to ask him to operate, not because he thought he could have saved the grievously injured Charlie Gibbons—although, maybe, maybe if Mary thought he could!—but because she would not bear this additional burden. And he would not have to know so clearly how limited Byron Hale was as a colleague and fellow officer, leaden knowledge he could now not avoid.

“Dr. Hale, Nurse Mary, we must bring an end to this,” Jed tried, hoping a resolution would appear, even deus ex machina, to extricate them all from this morass of Hale’s superior inanity and Mary’s painful acuity.

“I am not a Union officer or a physician—just a widowed Yankee nurse. I do not need to be dismissed by either of you. I will be on the wards should you need me, though that seems exceedingly unlikely,” Mary finished, moving swiftly to the door before Jed could catch her eye once more. Hale still stood before him, even more oafish without Mary’s graceful presence beside him.

“Well, that put paid to her meddling! Though you should have been more clear, Foster, we can’t have these nurses second-guessing everything we do. She’s a pretty thing and no mistake, but so easily muddled by her finer feelings, as they all are. Even Annie, that is, Nurse Hastings falls prey to it, loses sight of the goal so easily,” Hale smiled, as if he and Jed shared the opinion.

“Hale, you are a hack and a braggart and I would run you out of this hospital myself if I could, but you are a Union officer and a surgeon and I have no choice. Nothing I said today reflects my personal opinion of you, only my responsibility, in this small way, to preserve the Union, even as it is manifest within this hospital. Mary Phinney is worth twelve of you! Her mind, her wit and passion—Christ, to think we are saddled with you and she is bridled so! You’ve done the Army and the men no favors with your remarks about the nurses—let us thank God in his heaven if they do as we all should, and simply ignore the endless stream of idiocy that pours from your mouth. There must be men left you cannot butcher too badly—get the hell out and see what you can salvage from this debacle.” Jed finished, wishing only that Hale would leave as quickly as Mary had, but resigned to the man’s flustered, clumsy exit, before the door closed. He thought to rest, just a few minutes, but he knew he needed to return to the wards, walk the halls and establish to the sick men that the natural order had righted itself, even as within himself, he remembered the look in Mary’s dark eyes and he doubted.

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The rest of the morning and the afternoon seemed relatively uneventful, a blessing. Jed noticed that either as a result of the copious boneset tea or his own innate vigor, his energy returned as the day wore on. He saw Mary little though an orderly brought him a tray with hot coffee, bread and cheese “as Nurse Mary told me to, she said you’d never eat your luncheon today without this, and you oughtn’t operate without it” and felt the strength of her affection running through him with the heat and charge of the black coffee. He glimpsed her across a room as the afternoon drew on, between the second surgery and the third; Emma passed beside her and he saw the small gesture
between them, Emma’s hand on Mary’s shoulder as she sat at a bedside. He was pleased to see the comfort offered and accepted as Mary turned her face up to Emma’s, though she did not fall into her usual smile. The chaplain also seemed to be more present, his step heavier, his voice deeper, the drop from baritone to bass, working to balance the men’s needs and the nurses’ efforts to meet them with his own even temper.

Evening had fallen with the rapidity that October brought when he noticed the woman in the hallway. She sat on the wooden bench near the staircase that rose into gloom with the sun down and the moon making little progress in her ascent. Her fine features gave a first impression of being a gentlewoman fallen on hard times but when he looked more closely, he saw she was likely one of the prostitutes Mary treated at her clinic. This one was younger, her hair a dark auburn beneath the worn green bonnet tied under her little, pointed chin. He saw she had taken care with her dress, but the bodice and skirt were not matched and ribbons attempted to conceal fraying hems and seams. She had a complexion envied by any Southern woman, the creamy white of fresh milk, and the rouge on her cheeks and lips only emphasized her pallor yet remained just this side of garish. He felt a pang of sadness at the sight of her décolletage, aware that she would much rather be buttoned to the neck, unsullied and unavailable. He was about to ask why she was sitting alone on the bench when she spoke.

“Dr. Foster?”

“Yes. Can I help you?” He kept his voice gentle, cognizant that she probably was roughly treated by men daily.

“I don’t like to talk in the hallway, might we go somewhere?” she said, her tone pleasantly husky but her question raising his suspicions.

“Now, then, I’m not interest--” he began, the thrum of his earlier headache beginning again behind his eyes.

“Oh no, no, I only want to speak in private, just a moment. Then I must go, I’m wanted elsewhere but Nurse Mary,” she trailed off, looking about as if Mary herself might arrive with the invocation of her name, a savior for both of them.

“I can try to find her for you,” he offered, hoping she would agree.

“No, it’s about her, that is, that’s why I wanted to speak to you, only not in a hallway, where anyone might pass. Do you think we might go to her clinic? Where she sees the girls? It won’t be long, promise,” she added, making him revise her age. She couldn’t be more than twenty, perhaps younger under the paint and strain.

“Well, yes, I suppose. For a few minutes. What are you called?” he responded. To go off in a private room with a prostitute for conversation was one thing— something he would have accepted his mother’s genuine horror at— at least, he could know her name.

“You can call me Araminta. Some of the men, they like to call me Minty,” she said, reflexively fluttering her eyelashes, but despondently, as if she were saying her lines upon the stage.

“What does Nurse Mary call you? I suspect Minty is not your Christian name and Nurse Mary would be sure to winkle the truth out of you,” he said, slightly wry in hopes of being wholly reassuring.

“It’s Sarah, Dr. Foster, but mostly she calls me Sally, like they do, that is, like they did at home.” Jed nodded.
“Well, then, Miss Sally, let’s find Nurse Mary’s hidey-hole so you can talk more comfortably.” Jed was not entirely dismayed to be conducting a lengthier conversation with a prostitute out of the sight of the staff. It had already been a day full of incident.

He had not spent much time in Mary’s clinic. It was a small room, not much more than an alcove, but it had a door and space for a few chairs, a table, a cupboard for supplies and a few shelves. There was a window double hung with curtains to ensure the women’s privacy. Jed saw Mary had collected a few trinkets upon the shelf, a china figurine, a little lidded glass dish, a squat brass clock. There was a black wool shawl draped over the back of the chair; he recalled she had started to wear it in the mornings when there was still a chill from the autumn dawn. He sat in a chair and gestured for Sally to do the same; it was surprisingly uncomfortable, the curve of the wood slats cutting into his lower back. Sally had had more experience with the chairs and perched on the edge of the seat. Her feet peeped out below her hem, boots in need of blacking.

“So, Miss Sally, what shall we talk about?” he asked, slightly bemused.

“Dr. Foster, I’m worried about Nurse Mary. She has not been quite herself these past few days, and today—I’ve never seen her this way,” she paused.

“Excuse me, Miss Sally, but how well can you really know Nurse Mary? You have seen her at the clinic a few times, I suppose, and perhaps she would greet you in the street, that would be like her…” He imagined Mary, scrupulously fair, nodding her head as she passed the prostitutes clustered at the street corner, a spoiled bouquet of feminine charms.

“Nurse Mary, she and I are friends,” Sally replied.

“But you are a whore!” Jed blurted out. Yes, Mary cared for them, but she was a gentlewoman, a Baroness, and they were… fallen, this was not like Paris with its elegant courtesans and sophisticated salons—these were camp followers, some fresh, others crude and drab after years of work.

“Yes, Dr. Foster. I know what I am. And so does Nurse Mary, but that is not all I am to her. She is still willing to be my friend even though-- despite what I am,” Sally said evenly.

“Miss Sally, I must apologize for offending you,” Jed said. There were no rules he knew for this scenario, but he decided to follow the spirit of etiquette if not the law.

“How can I be offended by the truth? I am a whore but Nurse Mary is still my friend. I think, from the way she has spoken about you, that you are her friend as well. And I can see for myself that you are honest underneath your officer’s fol-de-rol. Men spend so much time lying—to themselves, to their women—trying to find some magic that will make the truth more palatable but they don’t see, the lies are the hardest to swallow, the lies and all the ways they avoid the truth, when that is all that is wanted,” Sally said. Jed thought of Mary and Eliza, his mother, and how his father had brought Ezra and him up, “Don’t trouble your mother, she’d needn’t hear about this,” so many times, so many moments when he looked away, the marginalization of candor to a children’s story.

“I beg your pardon, but why would Nurse Mary be your friend? She is a Baroness, the Head Nurse of this hospital. Why would she be friends with a--” he broke off, uncomfortable.

“A whore? I know she prefers to call us “prostitutes,” but really, a whore is what the men call me, and my parents, and my pastor—it is what I call myself. Why is she my friend? I imagine she would talk a great deal about the reason, but I think, I think she is lonely and she found I would talk to her when she talked to me. She was not always a Baroness and a Head Nurse and I was not always a whore and sometimes we are able to be those other people to each other and find
something to laugh about,” Sally replied.

“I think many people must underestimate you, Sally,” Jed said.

“Ah, well, Dr. Foster, I’m not sure that’s so. I’ve been as great a fool as they come and I’ve made every mistake there is, some more than once. But Nurse Mary doesn’t care. She’s happy to see me, foolish or not. Except, she hasn’t been happy the past few days, she’s been tired, maybe a little sad. Today was different though—she seemed angry first, and then, she cried, just a little, and she said she was going to get something for me, but then she never came back. I have to leave, but I don’t want her to come looking for me and not find me, not when she seems so unhappy. Something is wrong—I don’t know what, she’d never say, not to me. But the way she has spoken about you, I think maybe you are best friend she has here, so, when I saw you, I thought maybe she would tell you,” Sally ended. She stood then and he wondered about her life, where she would go next. Did she live in a brothel? Was there a man waiting for her? A madam? She smoothed her hands across her skirt and he thought he made out the delicate curve of a pregnant belly, but he couldn’t be sure and it wasn’t his place to ask.

“Thank you, Miss Sally. I hope I am as good a friend to Nurse Mary as you are. I will try to find her tonight and see that she is well. And if there is a time when you need something, and you cannot find Nurse Mary, let an orderly know you are waiting for me and I will try to help. I think that while you may be a whore, you are not only that-- truly, you are Sally,” he said, without a smile but trying to shape his expression to show how he appreciated her. She did smile in return, a small one at odds with her rouged mouth, and walked out, her hips starting to swing as she left the room and walked down the hall.

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Jed didn’t linger long in Mary’s clinic after Sally left but he did wait a few minutes to allow Sally to walk out unaccompanied and unquestioned. He straightened his vest and stood, pleased that his illness appeared improved, head cleared. His residual aches might have been attributed to the torturous chairs Mary had in her little office. He walked throughout the wards, looking for Mary but did not find her. He thought of how Sally had said Mary went to fetch something and wondered whether he might find her in her room. As he paused, absently gazing out a window, the sky empty with the new moon, Anne Hastings approached.

“Dr. Foster! Wool-gathering, I suppose?” Anne seemed incapable of beginning a conversation without a snide remark, delivered with a plummy accent Jed suspected she nurtured to impress the “colonials.” Jed had taken both his Grand Tour and spent additional time in France to study medicine, so his blasé response to her Continental airs was not forced.

“Perhaps, Nurse Hastings, perhaps. May I ask you a question?” As much as he was loath to do so, Anne would likely be able to direct him to Mary much more efficiently than his wanderings about Mansion House. With a clear destination, he would be able to be more discreet.

“Well, of course you may! You are the executive officer and a physician, I a simple nurse,” she replied. As he had suspected, Mary had not been the only one offended by Hale’s sneering comments. He thought Byron Hale should sleep lightly tonight.

“I wondered if you had seen Nurse Mary. There were some issues I wanted to address with her but I can’t seem to find her,” he said, hoping Anne would refrain from innuendo for once.

“I believe she is in her room. I told her I would manage here, it’s finally quiet now,” she paused and her voice changed, a change Jed could never had anticipated, “It has been a hard day, one of the worst since Antietam I think… first Byron, the fool, and then the rest—I told her I could
manage but I think perhaps, you should look in on her. She didn’t look… well,” Anne finished. Some extraordinary alteration had occurred; Anne was speaking of Mary as if they were comrades, or at least, not mortal enemies. Could she finally have taken Mary’s true measure? There was nothing about her to suggest she meant him to catch Mary out in some compromising situation, only the faintest hint of how a proper colleague might behave, or a nurse in alliance with her own chief. Jed was too used to fiascos to seek out any additional information; he would go to Mary now. He did not notice Anne as he strode away, making a small nod to herself as another task was addressed, before she went to check the next boy.

Jed climbed the stairs, refusing to allow himself to take them two at a time. Anne would not have concealed a true emergency. She had simply said Mary was not well and Sally had said how tired she was; perhaps she had caught his illness and simply needed rest and an endless supply of boneset tea. He would double the honey before he gave it to her. Her room was on the third floor, but at the other end of the long hallway from his own. The other doors were closed and no one seemed to be about, a relief. He knocked and softly called out, “Mary, it’s Jedediah. May I come in?”

“Yes.” The response was muffled but clear enough. He opened the door and walked in. Then he stopped, completely taken aback. The room was smaller, held a narrow white bed, desk, a walnut wardrobe. A lamp was lit on the desk, casting shadows in the corners. Mary sat on the floor beside her bed, her grey skirts spread around her; she had unbuttoned her collar and her hair spilled down her back, snood discarded, held from her face by two dark combs. Her right hand was curled around a tumbler and a bottle of bourbon sat at her right side. The smell of the spirits—perhaps some had spilled?—hung in the air of the close room. She was clearly, incontrovertibly drunk.

Jed admitted that he had imagined Mary intoxicated, no more than tipsy—they would be in Paris and she would wear a silk gown the color of a black cherry’s luscious flesh, a rich woman’s evening gown with flounces and the froth of lace, a cut crystal wine glass filled with burgundy in her hand. She would be warm and laughing in his arms, the summer taste of the alcohol on her mouth when he kissed her. There was no hint of that fantasy in the Mary who sat before him in her grey dress, her pale face, her hair nearly black in the lamplight. She had a small trunk opened next to her; a cream-colored hand-knit blanket spilled over one side and he saw letters scattered on the bare floor. He knelt down before her and she looked up at him. She was flushed from the bourbon but the look in her eyes was—broken.

“Oh, Mary, Mary, what is it?” he asked, reaching a hand towards her. She felt his touch and shrugged it off, swallowed another mouthful of the bourbon without a gasp at its burn.

“He died today, Charlie Gibbons died right after noon, I held his hand but he didn’t know, then they kept dying, they just kept dying,” she said, her voice shot through with misery. “Who, Mary? What do you mean?” He wondered how long she had been drunk, why this boy’s death had been the one to push her to the edge of the abyss.

“Charlie died, then William Grant, and Joseph Harvey, his wife just had a new baby, and Thomas Grady, they all died as I held their hands or stroked their heads. I was holding Thomas up, had him in my arms to help him breathe and he died, all of them, so many—Alec, my mother, Gustav, they’re all dead… ‘Thou'lt come no more,/Never, never, never, never, never!’” Her voice had grown louder with her recitation, then dropped, the grief an anchor, drowning her. He took her hand in his and waited. There was more.

“It is my anniversary today, we were married four years this October and I should still be in mourning for him, all black, veiled, but I threw it off when she asked, I threw him off but I cannot
let go— Why did I bring these things, these letters from my dead men, the swaddle for the baby we never made, oh! if we had had that baby, should I never have come here? Why? Sally will have the blanket at least, for her baby, at least there is that—” Again, she paused and started raising her hand as if she would drink again, but he stopped her, grasping her hand gently but preventing her from another swallow.

“Molly, my Molly, enough, love, it is enough—” he began but she interrupted him.

“I am not your Molly, I never will be, never, no matter how much I want it!—I am a drunk and a coward and a thief, I’ve stolen this liquor from the stores, this is medicine for dying boys and I took it to try to make it go away, but I have stolen it the way I have tried to steal you from your wife, a thief and a cheat. I want so much, want you so much and I will never, never get to keep you— you’re hers, and Gustav was taken, and even Alec, all that time ago, only those few afternoons—it was only the one kiss! and then the fever, all taken and God knows, God knows why, but I am lost, I sin and I don’t repent, I keep sinning and I do not know anymore if there is even a God to judge me, left to me— There is no way back and no way forward and you are looking at me now with those dark eyes of yours, all I want, oh my love, I’ll never get to keep you, thou’lt come no more, no more—” and he could hardly bear it, her grief and longing overwhelming, the alcohol inflammatory.

“Oh, Molly, oh love, no, you are not taking—” he tried again, yearning to hold her in his arms, her head against his breast but expecting she would pull away, an experience he could not tolerate.

“Taken? I’ll never have what I want, never get keep it… I should take the little I can, then, let you take me, be your whore like Sally, I’d rather be your whore than nothing, if I can never be your wife, if that is all I can get,” she cried.

“Molly, no! You’re never a whore-- I would never,” he started and then stopped, knowing within himself he did not mean never, that part of him longed for what she offered-- to tumble her onto that pristine nun’s bed and lift her skirts, his mouth on hers, her breasts bared to him; to feel her around him, her hands in his hair, holding him to her, her thighs warm and smooth, hooked over his hips, his legs braced between, her belly soft against his bearded cheek. Molly everywhere, within, without, her breath in his lungs, her heartbeat pacing his, his eager cock seeking, seeking until he spent and still she would hold him, hers entire.

Jed felt he was drunk as well, drunk as he hadn’t been for years, the time before the needle, a timeless pre-history he could no longer parse. He was drunk with love, ready to throw everything away to have her, to keep her, to stop the pain in her voice. And yet he knew he could not-- to do so would be the surest way to lose her, his love who was so dear and good and true, who was breaking her heart over him, after she broke it so many times before, mending it herself so she might offer it again. What she wanted with all her heart, he did as well—his Molly, his wife, his task to help her bear her suffering, to give her every joy.

“Jedediah, I don’t understand. Why? Why do I want you so much? How can I want you so and all those boys died today but what I want is to be in your arms? Why is that what beats in my heart—what kind of woman am I, to forget my mourning, to forget all those blue-eyed boys and Thomas with the blood black on his lips, gasping, how can I covet you so, your hands on me, your eyes, your soul? I think this is why God has left me, I am punished, exiled-- but why should all these boys suffer for it? I don’t know what to do, oh, dear God, Jedediah, I love you so, I don’t know what to do.” Mary stopped then and began to cry, the tears running down her face. He did what he must, took her into his arms and held her to him, his hand stroking through the long dark hair he had dreamt of, but not this way, not held back with her black vulcanite mourning combs. He felt her trembling against him while she wept and none of it, her dark curls loose, her bared throat, her
full breasts pressed against his ribs, none of it tempted him to her sweet body—he only wished to
love her and soothe her great, great hurt. He smelled the bourbon through the scent of her hair; he
guessed she’d eaten nothing with it but had tried to drink her way beyond to some place where she
could be empty of it all. He remembered the search for that place and how the needle had taken
him once, twice, and then never would again. He must find a way to comfort her now and some
way to make things right for her, for them. An idea, Sally’s words, danced at the edge of his
thoughts but he would look there later, when Mary was calm.

She began to settle down after a great shiver ran through her; he felt the sleep the bourbon brought
stealing over her. He needed to put her to bed but he would have to ready her. She would get no rest
in her corset, tangled in her petticoats, gartered and laced. Her boots he took off easily and set them
aside near the bourbon bottle. He jostled her lightly, hoping to wake her enough so she might
remove her stays herself, but she only sat up a little straighter, pulled back from him slightly so he
might unbutton the bodice and fold it back, then unhook the corset, and remove both pieces,
leaving her in the linen chemise that barely concealed her breasts, the delicate curve of her ribs to
her slender waist. He could not repress the thrill he felt as he picked her up, her head nesting in the
crook of his neck, her body pliant, before he put her down on the bed. He knew he would carry this
within him, this premature intimacy, but thought she was familiar with it as well from the care
she’d given him during his withdrawal. He supposed she would remember in fragments, as he did,
the shattering of the experience tempering its power. She would not have to remember all the ways
she had been naked to him without the sanction of marriage, though he would, would remember
and ache and desire its return.

He drew the blankets over her, choosing not to fuss with her many skirts and petticoats, but he took
the combs from her hair and set them on the table beside her bed. He saw she had the little painting
of the daffodil he’d had Emma make propped up next to the framed picture of her dead husband.
His curiosity flared—he felt the urge to look through the drawer beneath, to read the letters she’d
brought in the chest, touch the lovingly knit blanket she’d made for the baby she’d never borne—
but he would not look, not now and not without her.

The tears had dried on her face and her eyelids were swollen and pink. She looked at him, drowsy
in her bed, quieter now, the storm of bourbon and words and cries leaving her not tranquil, but
becalmed upon her ocean. He saw the trust and love in her eyes as she turned on her side, turned
her cheek further into his palm cupping her face, as he lingered after removing the combs.

“Molly, you should rest now, my sweet love,” he said, unsure of what else to say that he knew to
be true. She just looked upon him and how he wished he could lie down with her and lull her with
his breast pressed to her back, their heartbeats echoing through their flesh, each other’s moon
pulling the tide of sleep.

Jed leaned down again to whisper to her, the honest words of his soul he’d recognized in another’s
more eloquent voice, “If ever any beauty I did see,/ Which I desired, and got, ’twas but a dream of
thee./ And now good-morrow to our waking souls,/ Which watch not one another out of fear;/ For
love, all love of other sights controls,/ And makes one little room an everywhere.” She closed her
eyes then and sighed, the slow soft breath of sleep overtaking, and he thought he could not feel any
longing more intense than this moment, until the moment before they made their marriage-bed,
when joyful union could beckon and be answered, the only delay Mary’s generous laughter. He
moved the blanket back within the trunk and collected the letters as well before closing it; he took
the bourbon bottle in hand and turned down the lamp, then left the room, the door shut softly
behind him.

* * * * * * * * *
It was later than he hoped but the task lay clear before him, the blank paper illuminated by the lamp. His cravat was flung across his bed, his vest draped over the back of the chair. Eliza’s two letters were before him. He had read them again, as if he had not already memorized the words. The first was shorter, an acknowledgement of his letter’s receipt, and then Eliza’s deferral of a decision or even of a discussion, until her mother regained her health. The second letter was longer; he had responded to her, wishing her mother well, but reiterating his argument about the end of their marriage and the need to formalize the estrangement. Jed had been obscurely proud when he finished drafting it, its logic cogent and succinct, all the pleasantries exchanged with the formality of a minuet; he could not have imagined he could be so gratified by the creation of a document intent on destruction, anathema to polite society.

He had not, however, achieved his goal. Eliza’s second letter had been more discursive, inclusive of platitudes and even a few incurious questions about his work, but she had not addressed the critical point: would she divorce him? She had written of being overwhelmed, of never imagining receiving such a letter, and had deflected every argument he had raised regarding the appropriateness of ending their marriage. She cited other couples who had long lived apart or estranged, but kept their vows. As frustrated as he was with what she wrote, Jed had to admit that she wrote without enmity or rage. She simply did not see any compelling reason they should formally end their marriage and incur the disapprobation of society; he was relieved that she did not appear unduly troubled by the possibility of any supernatural ill-favor.

Jed thought about the past weeks and months. His affection for Mary was now so deep-rooted he doubted he could ever excise it from his heart; he would love her and long for her all the days of his life, even if she were never able to be more to him than his dearest friend. He thought it was much the same for her, but she was not tied to another. He could not prevent her from finding some other happiness with a man free to love her if there was no chance for her to become his wife. He could not and he would not. But even the idea of Mary marrying another man, sleeping in his bed, bearing his children—evoked a sense of wrongness in his marrow. It was as if the sun had gone black or the seas a desert. He knew he would return to the needle and she would not be able to call him back; it would not be enough for him to live well for her, but distantly, if he knew her love had turned from him. He was aware he had put nothing of this in his letters to Eliza, both from a sense of propriety but also respect, not wishing to dishonor her, to demean the civil, placid marriage they had had with the prospect of the passionate connection Mary promised. He thought now of the day and what it had meant to speak truthfully, of Sally’s words and Mary’s heartbroken cries.

He wrote,

“Dear Wife, I have received your latest letter and am gratified to learn of your mother’s recovery. I have carefully read and re-read your words and feel I must explain myself better. I have been less than honest with you, and whatever faults our marriage has had, let us agree we have both valued candor in the other. I am asking you to divorce me, not merely because we are estranged, but because I have fallen deeply in love with another woman and wish to marry her. I imagine these are painful words to read but you deserve to know the truth of my request, the reason I continue to ask, despite your remonstrations— the reason I am writing to you again, tonight, when the whole hospital is asleep, to ask you to consider again.

Eliza, I beg you to reconsider. When I married you, I knew you to be a beautiful and courteous woman, gracious, an asset to me and my household. I had thought our marriage would grow, that a love would be engendered between us that would sustain us both. It has not. I have found the woman who answers my soul and I wish with all my heart to wed her— with the fondness I bear you, I would wish the same for you. But we will not find such intimacy and succor with each other and I think we are both aware of this— your remove to California was tolerable because a continent already yawned between our two hearts. I will grant any wish of yours within my ability to
facilitate the divorce. Eliza, I know you to be a kind and honorable woman—please release both of us from this marriage and let us find our true but separate measures of happiness. With sincere regard, your husband, Jedediah Thurmond Foster."

He signed it, not with a flourish, but slowly, intently. He hoped with all his heart this would be enough to convince Eliza, that she might divorce him and he might come to Mary free, even with the stain of the failed marriage upon him. She had accepted his love with the call of the needle still lively within him; he felt she would not shy away from the divorce, her love and her principles more to her than any glances or whispers of polite society. He could say nothing yet to her—after today, he did not think she could bear to know they both waited upon Eliza’s favor.

In the morning, he would have to find an orderly and send Mary coffee and toast for her aching head; she would never retreat to her bed short of an epidemic and would be sure to be making her usual rounds, weakened by the bourbon, the tears, the war she was fighting within herself, her love pitted against her honor. Whatever détente she had reached before had collapsed. Until Eliza released him, he would need to observe the limits that bound him, but he would be her truest companion, so they might emerge from this dark valley unscathed. If he were free, when he was free-- then perhaps he might learn about lost Alec, who had taught her French and trigonometry, the origin of the brass clock and every sundry detail that he wished— conversations over a coffee pot or as she brushed her hair out before bed, the chestnut waves like the silken night itself settling round her shoulders, her cheek brighter than the waxing moon.

End Notes

Once upon a time, I wanted to make calm, contained Nurse Mary Phinney very, very mad. I also wanted to make sure Jed Foster found her pretty drunk. I decided those ideas went together like peanut butter and jelly and voila! this story was born. It seemed only fair to give Jed a hard time as well, so he got a head cold. More seriously, I wanted to play with the roles within the hospital and how the characters might be working against each other in some ways and with each other in others. There is clear documentation about the resistance to the development of the nursing profession and there continues to be tension between doctors and nurses about who “owns” the patient in modern hospitals. I am continuing my story arc of Jed and Mary’s romance though I think my attempt at a letter is not quite up to the standard established by emmadelosnardos. As always, the title is a gift from Emily Dickinson (and really, can you believe it? I couldn’t have made up a better title if I had tried). She has a little competition poetically in this story from two lightweights—William Shakespeare and John Donne. What can you say—I like my Mary and Jed well-read! Now, the notes—

The Good-Morrow

BY JOHN DONNE
I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then?
But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers’ den?
’Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love, all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
Where can we find two better hemispheres,
Without sharp north, without declining west?
Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.

Boneset (Eupatorium perfoliatum) is a common perennial that is native to the eastern United States and Canada, with a range from Nova Scotia to Florida. Other names for boneset are feverwort, sweat plant, and thoroughwort. The Native American name for boneset translates into ague-weed (ague is the name for malarial fever). The common name, boneset, comes from breakbone fever, an influenza-like illness causing severe bone pain that was treated with Eupatorium perfoliatum.

KING LEAR, Act 5, Scene 3
And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!

The whistle register (also called the flageolet or flute register or whistle tone) is the highest register of the human voice, lying above the modal register and falsetto register. This register has a specific physiological production that is different from the other registers, and is so called because the timbre of the notes that are produced from this register is similar to that of a whistle. In some sopranos, the modal register vocal production may extend into what is usually thought of as the whistle register.[1] With proper vocal training, it is possible for women within all voice types to develop this part of the voice.

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