

The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal

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April 22, 1920

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Address.*

HELEN HOMANS.

BY FREDERIC A. WASHBURN,

Late Colonel, M. C., U. S. Army, and Chief Surgeon, Base Section No. 3, American Expeditionary Forces.

WE have assembled today to pay tribute to the memory of Helen Homans. She gave her life for France in the World War just as truly as though she had been killed upon the field of battle.

The blood that is within the veins of a man or woman, the family heritage, traditions, and teaching are what determine the conduct of an individual when the time comes for great decisions.

An examination of the antecedents and background of Helen Homans' life furnishes the clue to her actions. Her family has been noted for its connection with medical work and for its patriotic response to the call of the nation in the time of peril. With the exception of a few years at the beginning of the nineteenth century, an interval between the death of one ancestor and the maturity of his son, there has been a John

Homans practicing medicine in this vicinity since 1775. Helen Homans' great grandfather, Dr. John Homans, was a surgeon in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. From this descent her eldest brother Robert is a member of the Society of the Cincinnati. Her grandfather, Dr. John Homans, was a practicing physician. Her father, again the same name, Dr. John Homans, is well remembered by most of us in this room.

He was graduated as house pupil of this hospital in 1861, joined the regular navy upon graduation, served with it for one year, and resigned to accept a commission in the Medical Corps of the United States Army. He was on duty with the army until the close of the Civil War, from 1862 to 1865. His service was conspicuous and distinguished, well illustrated by the fact that he was medical director upon General Sheridan's staff during the Shenandoah campaign of 1864. None but an able man of initiative and courage would have been chosen for such a position. Uncle John, as we house officers called him, served this hospital from 1876 to 1899 actively, and as consulting surgeon until his death in 1903. We remember him affectionately for his humor, quick appreciation, impatience with pretence, and underlying warm-heartedness. His chief claim for distinction here,

* Delivered December 11, 1919, at the Massachusetts General Hospital, upon the occasion of the unveiling of a tablet to Miss Helen Homans.

and that a great one, is that he forced the hospital to permit abdominal surgery to be done within its walls against the opposition of a too conservative board of directors and staff.

Miss Helen Homans' cousin, another Dr. John Homans, was a house officer of this hospital. One of her brothers, again a surgeon, and a graduate of the Massachusetts General Hospital, is the present representative of the name. Three of her brothers were commissioned officers of the United States Army, serving with the American Expeditionary Forces.

HELEN HOMANS

herself was connected with the Massachusetts General Hospital upon the Board of Visiting Ladies, from 1912 to 1917. She was a volunteer in the Social Service Department, working especially with tuberculosis patients during this same period, the latter part of the time working here in the short intervals between the periods of her service in France.

I have gone into some detail of the ancestry of Helen Homans and her previous hospital work to show how naturally she would come to connect herself with medical activities in a military emergency.

She had lived in France for a number of months at one time and grown to love the country. When the brutal attack was made by Germany and all civilization was imperiled, when her beloved France was writhing under the tortures, the agony and death of her children, Helen Homans suffered with her, and longed for the chance to help. The opportunity came when the first Harvard Unit went abroad; and she went with it. She performed the work of a nurse at l'Hôpital de L'Alliance, No. 41, bis Yvetot Seine Tuferience from May to September, 1915, and again from February to December, 1916. Then for a short period she was in another French hospital. From January to September, 1917, she served in l'Hôpital Auxiliaire 109 at Pont Audemes, Eure; and from September, 1917, to February, 1918, she was with l'Hôpital d'Evacuation, No. 18, as a member of the Ambulance Automobile Chirurgicale Nos. 21 and 22, Vasseny, Aisne. Her last position was with l'Hôpital de l'Armée 65 at Pontoise, Seine et Oise, where she served from July to November, and where she died of pneumonia following influenza in the terrible epidemic of that fall.

When taken sick she was in charge of a ward of French wounded. The hospital had been under bombardment and the service was hard and hazardous.

Her services were appreciated by the French authorities, and she was awarded the Croix de Guerre with Palm, in a citation signed by the great French General, Petain, himself. Translated it reads as follows:

MISS HELEN HOMANS

"With the armies since the twenty-ninth of February, 1916, she has been noted for her absolute devotion to duty, particularly in the Evacuation Hospitals at Courlandon and Vasseny in the bombarded zone and in an Auxiliary Hospital of the Army where she has contracted in caring for the sick wounded soldiers a contagious disease which places her life in danger."

Given at Great Headquarters by the General, Commander-in-Chief, Petain.

What greater honor!

Well earned—we her friends know it to be.

She laid down her life for the France that she loved and "greater love hath no man than this."

Helen Homans would not wish the claim made for her that the free gift of her all to the cause was an exceptional act amongst the women of the warring countries. Anyone who was privileged to see the work and the sacrifice of the women of England, France and America, appreciates that such devotion was the usual thing.

The physicians and nurses connected with this hospital responded in large numbers to their country's call. Five physicians and seven nurses made the last sacrifice for the great cause.

I like to think that the training and the standards of this hospital were an inspiration to its children, and that the thought of it helped them to run straight even when death itself was the goal. Can we, who have been spared, allow an institution which has produced such offspring to fail to progress and develop, and then fall behind? That is what is happening and will continue unless there is a united effort immediately to provide her with the sinews of war.

The Board of Visiting Ladies have given this tablet to Helen Homans' memory. The work of Boston women at this hospital has for many years been conspicuous. They have given freely of their time, strength, and money. They have helped us to keep the human side of our work

prominent, and their ideals have always been high for what this hospital should be. It is therefore fitting that a tablet should be erected in this room to one of their number.

I take this opportunity to pay my tribute to the wonderful courtesy, kindness, and hospitality shown the Americans by both English and French. In England the houses of the people were thrown open to our convalescent soldiers. Several thousands of our men upon leaving the hospitals went into British homes and stayed for a week or ten days before rejoining their organizations. This was allowed with some hesitation, but there were surprisingly few instances where difficulties ensued. Thousands of our men became better acquainted with their British brothers, and they in turn learned to know the Yankees.

In those trying days of October, 1918, when we in England were receiving into our hospitals the American wounded from Flanders, and at the same time transport after transport arrived from America with many cases of influenza and pneumonia, the Chief Surgeon had a conference with General Sir John Goodwin, Director General, R. A. M. C., as to the disposition of our sick and wounded when our own hospital capacity should be exceeded. General Goodwin's reply was, "While there is a bed in England it shall be at the disposal of the Americans." This was when the British casualties were coming into England at the rate of 3,000 to 4,000 daily, and ours at the rate of 300 to 400 daily. Our hospital capacity in England at that time was 15,000 beds, limited to that number, because we were not allowed additional medical personnel which was needed more desperately in France at the moment.

Our hospitals in England were visited by the King and Queen, and Princess Mary, and many distinguished citizens and high officers of the army and navy. Dances, theatrical performances, prize fights, and many other forms of amusement were arranged for our soldiers on leave in England, and there seemed no limit to what the British tried to do for us.

Americans living in England did much. Lady Harcourt ran a small hospital for us in Lancaster Gate, London. Mrs. Spender Clay conducted an Officers' Convalescent Home at Ford Manor, Lynnfield. Sir William and Lady Osler kept open house for American Medical

Officers at Oxford. Those who partook of their delightful hospitality will never forget it. Sir William made American and British physicians know each other as they never would have done without him.

In France there was the same spirit. It is harder for a Frenchman than for an Englishman to take an American into his home, but it was done in thousands of instances. In Bordeaux many of us made firm friendships and delightful acquaintances. The appreciation of the French for what America was doing was great. This was more openly shown by the humble peasants. It was touching and embarrassing to those of us who thought we should be doing more, and that our help should have come much sooner.

I remember that upon the anniversary of the sailing of Rochambeau from Bordeaux, on his way to Newport, the school at Talence closed early and the children brought a basket of flowers decorated with French and American colors to the American Hospital in their midst.

We who have lived among them know the sincere and earnest desire of the British and French peoples to live in harmony and union with us, and with us to bear the burdens of this distressed world, and solve its mighty problems. When we think of this, and contemplate the sacrifice of the noblest and best youth of these nations, one is tempted to offer a prayer that the gift may have its complete reward; that having frustrated the foul designs of Germany, we may succeed in forming a Union of Nations which will endure and make war more and more difficult. Politics and obstinacy delay the making of a peace and the establishment of some form of a League of Nations. Can we look upon our dead and tolerate that such motives should stand between the civilized world and the consummation of its victory?

Helen Homans' life was one of service. The gift of this life to France was cheerfully and gladly made.

May this tablet commemorate these qualities of hers and be an inspiration to the coming generations of young men and women who shall use this library.