

THE SERMON IN THE HOSPITAL

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The Sermon in the Hospital by Harriet Eleanor Hamilton King

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HARRIET ELEANOR HAMILTON KING

**THE SERMON IN
THE HOSPITAL**

THE
SERMON IN THE HOSPITAL

BY
HARRIET ELEANOR HAMILTON KING

(From 'The Disciples')

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THE
SERMON IN THE HOSPITAL.

(From UGO BASSI, Part III. 'The Disciples.')

Now I heard

Fra Ugo Bassi preach. For though in Rome
He held no public ministry this year,
On Sundays in the hospital he took
His turn in preaching, at the service held
Where five long chambers, lined with suffering folk,
Converged, and in the midst an altar stood,
By which on feast-days stood the priest, and spoke.
And I remember how, one day in March,
When all the air was thrilling with the spring,
And even the sick people in their beds
Felt, though they could not see it, he stood there ;
Looking down all the lines of weary life,
Still for a little under the sweet voice,
And spoke this sermon to them, tenderly,
As it was written down by one who heard :

“I am the True Vine,” said our Lord, “and Ye,
“My Brethren, are the Branches ;” and that Vine,
Then first uplifted in its place, and hung
With its first purple grapes, since then has grown,
Until its green leaves gladden half the world,
And from its countless clusters rivers flow
For healing of the nations, and its boughs
Innumerable stretch through all the earth,
Ever increasing, ever each entwined
With each, all living from the Central Heart.
And you and I, my brethren, live and grow,
Branches of that immortal human Stem.

Let us consider now this life of the Vine,
Whereof we are partakers : we shall see
Its way is not of pleasure nor of ease.
It groweth not like the wild trailing weeds
Whither it willeth, flowering here and there ;
Or lifting up proud blossoms to the sun,
Kissed by the butterflies, and glad for life,
And glorious in their beautiful array ;
Or running into lovely labyrinths
Of many forms and many fantasies,
Rejoicing in its own luxuriant life.

The Flower of the Vine is but a little thing,
The least part of its life ;—you scarce could tell

It ever had a flower ; the fruit begins
Almost before the flower has had its day.
And as it grows, it is not free to heaven,
But tied to a stake ; and if its arms stretch out,
It is but crosswise, also forced and bound ;
And so it draws out of the hard hill-side,
Fixed in its own place, its own food of life ;
And quickens with it, breaking forth in bud,
Joyous and green, and exquisite of form,
Wreathed lightly into tendril, leaf, and bloom.
Yea, the grace of the green vine makes all the land
Lovely in spring-time ; and it still grows on
Faster, in lavishness of its own life ;
Till the fair shoots begin to wind and wave
In the blue air, and feel how sweet it is.
But so they leave it not ; the husbandman
Comes early, with the pruning-hooks and shears,
And strips it bare of all its innocent pride,
And wandering garlands, and cuts deep and sure,
Unsparring for its tenderness and joy.
And in its loss and pain it wasteth not ;
But yields itself with unabated life,
More perfect under the despoiling hand.
The bleeding limbs are hardened into wood ;
The thinned-out bunches ripen into fruit
More full and precious, to the purple prime.

And still, the more it grows, the straitlier bound
Are all its branches ; and as rounds the fruit,
And the heart's crimson comes to show in it,
And it advances to its hour,—its leaves
Begin to droop and wither in the sun ;
But still the life-blood flows, and does not fail,
All into fruitfulness, all into form.

Then comes the vintage, for the days are ripe.
And surely now in its perfected bloom,
It may rejoice a little in its crown,
Though it bend low beneath the weight of it,
Wrought out of the long striving of its heart.
But ah ! the hands are ready to tear down
The treasures of the grapes ; the feet are there
To tread them in the winepress, gathered in ;
Until the blood-red rivers of the wine
Run over, and the land is full of joy.
But the vine standeth stripped and desolate,
Having given all ; and now its own dark time
Is come, and no man payeth back to it
The comfort and the glory of its gift ;
But rather, now most merciless, all pain
And loss are piled together, as its days
Decline, and the spring sap has ceased to flow
Now is it cut back to the very stem ;

Despoiled, disfigured, left a leafless stock,
Alone through all the dark days that shall come.
And all the winter-time the wine gives joy
To those who else were dismal in the cold ;
But the vine standeth out amid the frost ;
And after all, hath only this grace left,
That it endures in long, lone stedfastness
The winter through :—and next year blooms again ;
Not bitter for the torment undergone,
Not barren for the fulness yielded up ;
As fair and fruitful towards the sacrifice,
As if no touch had ever come to it,
But the soft airs of heaven and dews of earth ;—
And so fulfils itself in love once more.

And now, what more shall I say? Do I need here
To draw the lesson of this life ; or say
More than these few words, following up the text :—
The Vine from every living limb bleeds wine ;
Is it the poorer for that spirit shed ?
The drunkard and the wanton drink thereof ;
Are they the richer for that gift's excess ?
Measure thy life by loss instead of gain ;
Not by the wine drunk, but the wine poured forth ;
For love's strength standeth in love's sacrifice ;
And whoso suffers most hath most to give.