

2022

When Nurse Jackson Met Dr. Walker

Karizma Chhabra

Follow this and additional works at: https://touro scholar.touro.edu/quill_and_scope



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chhabra, K. (2022). When Nurse Jackson Met Dr. Walker. *Quill & Scope*, 14 (1). Retrieved from

This Poetry and Creative Writing is brought to you for free and open access by the Students at Touro Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quill & Scope by an authorized editor of Touro Scholar. . For more information, please contact touro.scholar@touro.edu.

WHEN NURSE JACKSON MET DR. WALKER

BY KARIZMA CHHABRA

In September of 1940, well before it would enter World War II, the United States issued a peacetime military draft. While the majority of those recruited were drafted, there were many who volunteered to serve. Among those enlisting were physicians and nurses. At this time, segregation and discrimination were not only present in the armed forces, but also in the Armed Forces Nurse Corps, which was managed by the American Red Cross. Despite this, many African American nurses tried to volunteer for the war effort. One such nurse was Della Hayden Raney Jackson, who would go on to become the first African American nurse commissioned by the US Army.

Della solemnly stepped out of the Nurse Manager's office, shutting the door behind her. The US Army Nurse Corps had denied her application.

Everyone had left for the evening as she came out to the front room. Seeing a bench, she sat down in the waiting area, dejected. As she lifted her eyes from the floor to the wall before her, she noticed a portrait of a woman. Glancing at the engraving at the bottom of the portrait she read, "Dr. Mary Edwards Walker."

"I bet they gave you hell too," she mumbled, before closing her eyes and resting her head against the unyielding wall behind her.

"They don't pay you to sleep around here, do they?" a woman's voice announced, her voice breaking Della out of her sleep.

"Oh, I...um...must have dozed off. I don't know how. I'm sorry Miss..." Della trailed off, looking apologetically at the elderly white woman before her.

"It's Doctor, actually. Dr. Mary Edwards Walker," the woman replied with a grin.

"Oh, Dr. Walker I apologize—" she began to say but Dr. Walker brushed her hand dismissively.

"Never mind that." Placing her cane against the bench, she took a seat beside Della before asking, "So what's got you so troubled my dear?"

Della stared back in surprise, looking at the woman with raised eyebrows.

Dr. Walker gave a knowing smile. "Call it years of experience," she said as she spread her arms out in front of her. Della hesitated for a few moments more, unsure of how Dr. Walker would respond. She decided to trust her instinct and tell the truth. "They're looking for nurses to help the war front. Well, in case we get pulled into the war, anyway. I volunteered, but they told me no."

"Did they give you a reason?"

Della gave a wry smile as she pulled out the rejection letter. She offered it to Dr. Walker.

Scanning the document, Dr. Walker cleared her throat. Lowering the letter, she looked at Della. "No regulations in place for the appointment of black nurses, huh?" She did not say it with any malice, just matter of fact. "Well I guess being a woman isn't the problem anymore."

"No, just being a colored woman is."

Dr. Walker's eyes softened. "Then the people in charge are still as blinded as ever. Tell me dear, where did you train?"

"Durham, North Carolina over at Lincoln Hospital, Dr. Walker."

"And why do you want to enlist in the army? I bet they need nurses out here in civilian hospitals, isn't that right?"

"I know there are, Dr. Walker. And I could just apply to work in a civilian hospital." Della paused, thinking. "But I can't explain it, I've given my life to the cause of helping people. Just like the men giving their lives for this country. Caring for these men, well, it feels like my duty. It would be an honor...It feels like the right thing to do," she ended with a shrug.

"You've got the reason then. So now what, Nurse Jackson?"

"Well...they won't let me in. Doesn't seem like there's much else to do."

"Well, the boys never let me in either... that never stopped me." Dr. Walker grabbed her cane and used it to lift herself off the bench. "Come on, then." She turned to Della expectantly.

"Where are we going?" Della said, getting up from the bench.

"To the battlefield. Nothing like seeing it for yourself." Dr. Walker began walking out of the waiting room, towards the door that led outside of the US Army Nurse Corps headquarters. Della hesitated, but followed a moment after. As Dr. Walker pulled open the door, Della gasped in surprise. Gone were the streetlights and small shops, replaced by a large open field with several white tents.

"Dr. Walker...where are we?" Della said as she took a few steps out onto the field. It was then that she noticed that the dress she had on had been replaced by bloomers and a coat. Looking to Dr. Walker, she saw that she was wearing the same. "And what are we wearing?"

With an impish grin, she responded "Bloomers, dear. The job gets pretty demanding when they're pouring in. Better for mobility." She winked. "And I wanted you to see what it's like helping wounded soldiers."

"Are we...are we in Europe fighting with the Allies? But how...?"

"Not Europe, dear. Forgive me, but your era of medicine just doesn't make sense to me. Much easier to show you mine. We're on American soil. Union soil to be exact. I believe you know this as the Civil War?" With that she marched forward, with a stride full of purpose, as Della struggled to keep up. Questions were brewing in her mind, but all she could focus on was matching the doctor's large, quick strides.

As they approached the first white tent, their pace slowed. Della began to register the painful groans of the man lying on the cot nearest to them. His right forearm had a deep gash extending from the wrist to his elbow. Dr. Walker immediately rushed up to him, surveying him for any other injuries. Confirming there were no others, she urged Della forward.

"Nurse Jackson, I'm going to need dressing and bandages. I need them to be clean, you understand. Not a smidge of dirt or a hint of blood on them. And I'm going to need my instruments. My bag is just back there. Bring them in the case they're in, be careful not to touch the instruments. We're going to do everything we can to make this clean."

As Della rushed back with the supplies, she noticed that Dr. Walker had rinsed out the wound and was applying antiseptic. "The dressing and tools, Dr. Walker."

Opening the box, Dr. Walker put on clean gloves before removing her suturing tools. Urging Della to come closer, she started closing the wound. "When I went to medical school up in Syracuse, and even when I was treating the Union army, we didn't know about Pasteur's germ theory just yet. Wounds weren't cleaned properly, bandages may have been dirty, and instruments...you were lucky if they got a quick rinse in water! So it's no surprise that soldiers ended up with infected limbs. And when that happened, it was straight to amputation. Can you imagine that?"

Della shook her head. Noticing the patient's anguished face, she stepped to his other side, holding onto his hand to comfort him. "That's terrible. Those poor soldiers."

"It is. I never liked the idea. Made me wonder if we could do something to stop the limbs from getting infected to begin with. When I took a long, hard look at the work we were doing for these wounds, it hit me. None of it was clean, not the wound, not the bandages, not the tools, and not our hands when we were running from patient to patient. So I started boiling my surgical instruments and made sure to use clean bandages and dressings. I did what I could to clean the wounds and my hands, and it seemed to work."

"Dr. Walker, that's wonderful. Did your colleagues start doing that too?"

PHOTO BY LARA MATTEI DAVILA



PHOTO BY LARA MATTEI DAVILA

“No, quite the opposite.” She shook her head slowly. “I could see the difference it made to those I cared for, but they couldn’t. It’s not easy, convincing someone to change their methods without any proof of the why. They thought I was just lucky, and that my methods were ridiculous. They didn’t believe for a second that I was saving my patients from amputations.” She paused as she surveyed her handiwork on the patient’s arm. “Could you help me with the dressing, Nurse Jackson? Be sure to put on some gloves.”

Della nodded and returned to Dr. Walker’s side. Dr. Walker moved back, allowing Della to put on the dressing. As she wrapped the patient’s arm in gauze, she asked, “So how did you deal with it? Your colleagues making fun of your methods.”

“I believed in what I was doing. Just because they couldn’t see the difference my methods made, doesn’t mean I had to stop.” She paused, before placing a hand on Della’s shoulder. “And neither should you.” When Della looked confused she added, “Don’t stop trying to volunteer. They need good nurses like you out there.”

“But they’ll never let me join. Nurses like me, well, they just don’t want us.”

“They didn’t want doctors like me either dear. I was the only woman in my class at Syracuse Medical College. When I wanted to work for the military as a commissioned surgeon, the military didn’t want me because I was a woman. Didn’t matter that I had the same training as any of the other physicians they hired. But I knew I wanted to help, so I found a way. I worked as a civilian surgeon for the Union Army. I kept trying to earn an Army commission, and they kept on dismissing my requests. I made some good friends in the Army and even went up to the Medical Board to plead my case. I heard no at every turn, but that never kept me from trying. They called my position all sorts of different names instead of giving me the title I deserved, but I was serving my country and looking after our soldiers. No one could ever take that away from me. So you see dear, it doesn’t matter what they want. These men out here,” Dr. Walker pointed to all the white tents, “they need you.”

Placing the last bit of bandage on the soldier’s dressing,



"THE FABRIC THAT BINDS US" - ISIDORA MONTEPARO

Della smiled back up at Dr. Walker. "His dressing is done, Dr. Walker."

Turning to the patient, Dr. Walker exclaimed, "Well your arm looks much better, soldier. Take a look!" She helped lift his arm so he could see.

"Thank you, Dr. Walker." He smiled at her before turning to Della. "Thank you, Nurse Jackson."

"Do take care of yourself young man," replied Dr. Walker. She motioned for Della to follow. "Nurse Jackson and I should get going now." With a bow, she turned back in the direction they had come from. As they reached the door, Dr. Walker stopped in her tracks, turning towards Della. "So now what, Nurse Jackson?"

Della looked back towards the tents. "Now...I try again. And I think I know how." She turned back to look at Dr. Walker. "If I can get endorsed by the American Red Cross...I might have a chance. I'll write to their director of nursing...I think it's Miss Mary Beard," she said with renewed hope.

"That's the spirit, Nurse Jackson! After you." She gestured towards the door.

With a nod, Della moved towards the door and turned the knob. As the door swung open, a bright white light quickly took over Della's field of vision. As colors reemerged once more, her eyes focused on the walls of the US Army Nurse Corps headquarters. She felt the wall behind her head. As she took in her surroundings, her eyes settled on the portrait of Dr. Mary Edwards Walker.