

Superstitious Nursing.

BY LINA MOLLETT.

" . . . The whole of this matter is still enveloped in great uncertainty." (SIR WILLIAM HAMILTON: Lectures on Metaphysics.)

I SUPPOSE in viewing psychological matters we inhabitants of the earth all resemble more or less that young man born with cataract in both eyes, whom CHESELDEN quotes in the "Philosophical Transactions of 1728." The patient, we are there told, discerned all things, including day and night, "as through a glass of broken jelly." All reality was revelation to this man, when sight was given him. Our case is similar, with one great difference. This man's introduction to the material world confused and bewildered him. When "the fever called living" is over for us on earth, the blurred confusion of delirious vision will cease, and we shall rest content to find things as they are.

In the meantime, I think the safest course for us women (especially those devoted to the care of the sick in body or mind), is to fix our minds on the simplest and purest forms of spiritual revelation, and to satisfy our instinctive longing for the unseen with the tenets of a creed that is based on unselfishness.

Few doubt that human belief in the unseen is heaven born. Like other created instincts its health depends on perfect balance. Like activity, thirst or hunger, this highest faculty of our mind may be our doom. Who could work out this statement better than those whose very life-work consists in fighting the fearful consequences of exaggeration, or indulgence in what were at first innocent-enough "tastes"? Who can tell more truly than a Nurse, how inevitably "the third and fourth generation" are felled by the revengeful Nemesis some self-indulgent ancestor evoked? Who knows better than they, how many the crooked bye-roads and tangled labyrinths that lead aside from the straight upward path to Truth and Light into the dungeons of Madness and Despair? While admitting that a distinct definition of faith or of superstition is among the things "too high for me" to presume upon analysing. I think I may venture to affirm that faith, well-balanced, and part of a generally healthy-minded being shows itself in quiet courage. Superstition is restless and fearful.

Nurses influence, for the time being, the spiritual life of their charges in a manner they themselves scarcely seem at times to realize. The constant companionship of one who is absolutely necessary to his comfort will, in a greater or less degree, act on the weakened will of a patient in a manner that may appear incredible, even ludicrous to the same patient in days of health.

I remember an awful nurse, who considered it her duty to "prepare" her patients for possible fires of wrath. This woman nearly drove a little girl of my acquaintance from a slight feverish attack into brain fever. Setting aside this peculiarity, the Nurse in question was a kind-hearted, conscientious woman, too blunt herself to realize the effect of a vivid sketch of gridirons, fiends and eternal flames on a sensitive mind and nervous and imaginative organization, and quite shocked at the frenzy she evoked. The little girl grew to womanhood without becoming the inmate of a lunatic asylum. All through her youth, however, a dream re-occurred from time to time, rehearsing in hideous detail the story of the Nurse, and always leaving her exhausted and terrified, overwhelmed with religious scruples, and completely unstrung.

A friend of mine who met with a mountaineering accident in Switzerland, gave me an account of the manner in which her Nurse was wont to comfort her when she was in great pain, by telling her that she would pray to the souls in purgatory to take her sufferings in addition to their own as an extra penance.

"I remember," says my friend, "meanly and hopefully agreeing to this arrangement. I am not a Romanist, nor in health at all inclined to superstition, but at that time I realized with my first severe illness what the moral influence of a Nurse is, and the immense power she exercises over her weak and fevered charge. As she spoke, I pictured the souls in purgatory without questioning their existence, and a faint fluttering of English justice whispered, 'Shame!' I silenced it with languid selfishness: 'A little more or less does not matter to them!' I was pleased to see my Nurse leave the sick room for the adjacent chapel to impose my comparatively puny ailment upon the heavy-burdened souls."

"You feel better," said my Nurse on her return. "Ah, I knew my prayers would avail!"

"Yes, I am better," murmured my friend. She tells me she felt no regret for the good-natured victims, and no gratitude. In health, I must add, my friend would not harm a fly, and is a beggar's easy prey.

"My experience," continued my friend on her eventual recovery, "opened my eyes to the value of a good many death-bed conversions, for with returning strength, I ceased to mirage the pictures my kindly Nurse was wont to place before me. At one time she might have converted me to Mahomet, Buddha, or Confucius."

The Duke of Norfolk's intention to take his afflicted son to Lourdes on a pilgrimage, has re-aroused the interest of the general public in faith cures. Many have lately been the arguments, theological, sceptical, scientific, on this subject. On

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