

"Am I Called to be a Nurse?"

By Miss M. LOANE,

Superintendent of District Nurses, Portsmouth.

Every nurse has seen brief careers in hospital wards, and has watched them with eyes contemptuous, impatient, amused, or compassionate, according to the development of her sympathetic insight; but I think that the briefest and most inglorious I ever saw or heard of was run in a large provincial infirmary. A probationer, after all the usual long-spun-out preliminaries, arrived on the scene one night in time for supper and bed. At seven the next morning she went into the wards; at nine, with boxes packed, she was driving to the railway station. What had happened? Had she, by an untoward chance, witnessed some nerve-shaking spectacle? Had she been ordered to perform some office for poor humanity that could only have been accepted by the training of a nurse, the piety of a saint, or by strong unselfish love? Had the bashful young house surgeon raised his eyes for once and discovered some fatal flaw in her constitution? The tale was a simpler one, though, from some points of view, sadder. The probationer had been asked to help make a bed, and had flatly refused on the ground that she came there to learn nursing, not to do a housemaid's work. Asked by the Matron to define what she meant by nursing, she said, "Giving the patients medicine, sitting with them, and reading to them." (Feeding them, I imagine, was cook's work!) The Matron succinctly explained that the entire system of nursing could not be reorganised to please her, and that, if she could not reconcile herself to the THING THAT IS, the train timed to leave at 9.15 would be a convenient one by which to return to her most obedient parents.

Now a career like this, or a less conspicuous one ending in the third or fourth week, is not only an annoyance to all concerned, and a serious waste of time and money, but often has indirect results of a disastrous kind upon much more promising and valuable lives. Gentle Amy Plodder, who would make a faithful and in every way excellent rank-and-file nurse, thinks that she would like to enter a hospital, but her mother argues, "My dear, you had much better stay at home, and get on with your music, and give lessons. Then you know where you are. Just think of Kitty Caprice and Gertie Grummaler and Fanny Pert—you know they all took a better place at school than you did, and not one of them lasted out the first month, and all the money gone for nothing." And Amy, just because she is kind and conscientious, and does not think that her duty to the nearest tramp or beggar woman is greater than her duty to her affectionate and well-meaning mother, and because she is too modest to have more than a dim idea of the moral gap that

lies between her and these foredoomed failures, and because she has still less conception how much her active kindness of disposition has done towards developing her intellect in the years since she left school, sets to work at "her music" (it certainly is not anyone else's!) and perseveringly tries to earn money by it; tries "art" with the same result, then "secretarial duties" with a trifle more success. Finally, when her constitution is undermined by irregular and insufficient meals, she marries some steady young fellow with an income rather under than over £200 a year; the babies are sickly; her health fails, and nothing but the innate goodness of the pair of them prevents the marriage from being a tragic failure. If she had spent those years under the modern conditions of nursing—moderate hours, good plain food, no unnecessary exposure to weather—she would have been doing far more useful work, and would have entered on matrimony with a store of practical knowledge, her health intact, and a profession to fall back upon if the necessity should ever arise. Or Monica Masters, with her inborn gift of leadership and extraordinary powers of rapid organisation, has the same desire, but her mother protests, "You know as well as I do that you will always have a good income; but even if you were bound to earn your living, I should wish you to try some less difficult way. Surely you can do good work at home without running the risk of ruining your health and appearance. Why, Florence Fragile was only six weeks in that hospital, and she has never looked the same since; although, as they only kept two servants even when there were nine of them in family, she must have been pretty well accustomed to work, and you have never done anything for yourself in your life." So Monica remains at home, trying to be content with a life which at twenty-eight is not much less subordinate and irresponsible than it was at eighteen, or even at eight; and some day when in the course of Nature her mother's loving restraint is removed, left "independent" and without a particle of practical experience, she flings herself headlong into a scheme for recasting human nature in a day and a night, or else enforced submission has endured too long even for such an abortive and spasmodic attempt, her powers have atrophied and all the gracious possibilities of her youth have withered. And this mischief has been done because the "failures" who influenced their own and other lives, so far from having asked themselves seriously "Am I called to be a nurse?" have not even asked themselves "Do I know what nursing means?" Let the would-be probationer go no further until she can give herself a detailed and realistic answer to this question. In order to acquire a practical idea of the work she should carefully read one or two books on general nursing, and then visit any friends she may have working in hospitals and get them to talk to

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