

The Nurse in Fiction.

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Some day I imagine a fine novelist will introduce to his public the best type of modern nurse—the nurse as many of us know her, and not the types which apparently those who write unfortunately meet during illness. We should enjoy having such a character put forward in justice to the profession at large, but perhaps the devoted, untiring woman, whose life is one long self denial, who often works sixteen, or even more, hours a day for seven days a week, and for whom “anything” is good enough, would appear dull and colourless in fiction. Anyway, a sketch of the best type of nurse remains to be given to the world in black and white—a chance for some sympathetic writer. Lady Henry Somerset, in her novel “Under the Arch of Life,” has much to say of doctors and nurses, from whom, apparently, she has suffered “many things,” and the “purring” platitudes of the eminent specialists are no doubt annoying to courageous people when really ill. But we must not forget the absolute horror which many people endowed with wealth and social position have of those pitiless powers, malignant disease and Death—to whom the distinctions of this world are unconsidered trifles. How far the medical attendant is justified in withholding grim truths from delicately organised patients is a question too far-reaching for the moment.

We have had set out in fiction many nursing types of late years—fiends, frivols, and fools—it remains for Lady Henry Somerset to show up the genus “snob.”

“Katherine,” a spoilt darling of fortune, exquisite, lovely, and extraordinarily superficial has nevertheless an inquiring mind. She is attacked by malignant disease—the doctors talk in ambiguous terms—so, when isolated at the seaside with a nurse, she unconsciously extracts the character of the Nurse Snob in attempting to extract information as to her own physical condition.

To quote:—

“By degrees the invigorating air brought to Katherine some fresh strength, and with it came a greater interest in her surroundings. At first the presence of the nurse was a comfort, and it was a rest to leave herself in her hands; but when she had thoroughly established an invalid routine, the thralldom began to be unspeakably irksome. She had, however, no other companionship, and she became the only human interest.

“During the tedious process of daily electric massage Katherine would listen to her talk with a mixture of weariness and amusement, and would question her about her life and her hospital experience. Then

she would try and extract her opinion as to her own progress towards health; but here she came on a professional bedrock.

“‘Am I better, nurse?’ she would say after the daily weighing. ‘Have I gained anything?’

“‘We can never tell our patients; we are never allowed to give particulars,’ said the nurse, mysteriously.

“‘But you can tell me what you think,’ said Katherine, peevishly. ‘It’s absolutely ridiculous.’

“‘You musn’t think at all, my lady,’ she would answer. ‘You have been a very good patient up to now; you must ask Dr. Graham next time he comes.’

“‘What did Dr. Graham tell you was the matter with me,’ queried Katherine.

“‘He told me just what he told you.’

“‘Oh, that is nonsense,’ she replied impatiently. ‘That does not account for the symptoms you are watching. He said it was only weakness and that I should grow stronger.’

“‘That was just what he told me,’ said the nurse diplomatically.

“Katherine looked suspicious and said no more; but the nurse, although reticent about Katherine’s ailments, was certainly not reserved about her own experiences. The ‘cases’ she had attended were minutely described; the triumphs she had achieved over disease, the recoveries which were the direct result of her care, were all told in detail. Her ‘gentlemen patients’ appeared to be the most interesting charges.

“‘I have never had any trouble with them,’ she said, as she kneaded Katherine. ‘They are lovely to me,’ and a little reminiscent smile played round her mouth. ‘Sir William, for whom I have nursed a lot, said, “You’re the very nurse for gentlemen; I would trust the most difficult case to your care and tact.”’

“‘Aren’t they impatient and troublesome sometimes?’ Katherine questioned.

“‘Oh, dear no, not after the first. I have sometimes a good bit of bother with the wives. They want to be fussing in and out, and I won’t have it. After operation cases I keep them out altogether?’

“‘Don’t the husbands ask for them?’

“‘Not after a bit,’ said the little nurse.

“She was young and rather good-looking, and Katherine pictured the wives, frenzied with anxiety and jealousy, haunting the ante-chambers guarded by this relentless little siren.

“‘You see we get a good deal behind the scenes. Gentlemen have often thanked me for allowing no one to come to them. Very often the wife worries them and they can’t tell her so. We see rather amusing things sometimes.’

“‘Rather squalid, I should think,’ said Katherine.

“‘Oh! not now,’ said the nurse. ‘I’ve given up all district work since I finished my training. I never nurse anyone but people of good family.’

“‘That would not prevent it,’ said Katherine; but she did not trouble to explain to her that she felt there was just as much squalor among rich people as poor, and that it is not only outward dirt which makes things squalid.

“At other times she would ask her minutely

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