

PURITY.

By MISS MOLLETT

(*Matron of the Chelsea Infirmary*).

My strength is as the strength of ten,
Because my heart is pure.

A MOST untrue statement, common enough thirty years ago, was revived again the other day, namely—that no pure and modest woman can become a sick nurse in a hospital, without sacrificing her natural purity of mind; that no woman can undertake what is (next to motherhood) the most sacred right and duty of women, the care and tending of the sick and poor, without losing the essential characteristic of her womanhood, without blunting the fineness of her natural sense of purity.

Such a view can only have arisen from a hazy memory of nurses of the past—women who entered on their career of nursing without any natural or acquired modesty or refinement, and who, meeting with no guidance nor check from those above them, did not certainly learn to mend loose and callous manners and habits in a hospital ward, nor improve in modesty and refinement, but whose coarseness was a result of natural tendencies unchecked, and was not dependent on the nature of their work.

Nursing is a profession that, far from lowering a woman's character, raises it, frees it from much dross and affectation, and tests its sincerity. No quality in a nurse must be more entirely above suspicion than her purity. As the least blemish spoils the rose, as the smallest flaw or crack lessens by so much the value of the costly vase, so the slightest doubt as to a nurse's purity lessens to an immense extent the value of her influence on those around her. There are some women, it is true, whose minds by some terrible innate flaw turn naturally to the more degraded side of humanity; they greet a coarse jest with ready laughter, they linger with ghoulish pleasure over highly-spiced scandal, they revel with unnatural delight in vicious details. It is unnecessary to discuss such women. A thoroughly bad woman in the position of nurse is happily rare, and too terrible a being to contemplate; for the want of perfect chastity is her moral decay and death, the very nature of womanhood demands absolute freedom from the very breath of impurity.

A good, true woman's innate sense of purity, which has its roots in the very fibres of her being, is never blunted by contact with vice or disease. She performs all her duties—whatever their nature—so decently and orderly, that there is never the faintest notion of there being any impropriety in her doing them; she carries into all her work that serene calmness and careful consideration for the feelings of others, which are the natural outcome of a pure and healthy mind; an immodest word or a coarse jest

are impossible in her presence; and her influence for good is felt like a living pulse throughout her ward.

It has been said "there is one great and dangerous peculiarity of nursing, especially of hospital nursing, namely, that it is the only case, queens not excepted, where a woman is really in charge of men;" but that "great peculiarity" ceases to be "dangerous" if a high-minded woman unite the boundless tact, courage, and patience necessary to restrain male patients to a perfect and stainless purity in every thought, word, and deed. Not, indeed, after the manner of those who are almost as far above the touch of human sympathy as they are above mere human failings—who, clear, cold, and pure as crystal, can claim as perfect an immunity from all impurity as from all feeling; but retaining all her womanly sympathy, her compassion and warm feelings intact, though restrained and chastened by discipline.

The proverb "Touch pitch and you will be defiled" requires to be carefully applied. It seems to refer more directly to those people whom curiosity and not business lead to meddle therewith; for it is wonderful how clean those who use pitch in the daily routine of their work manage to keep themselves, in comparison with those who have no such excuse for handling it. We deprecate those who unnecessarily meddle with dirt; but we certainly do not despise men and women whose useful duty it is to clean our houses and streets, still less those more heroic souls whose daily labour is the effort to lessen moral and bodily disease and impurity, and whose stainless lives and pure minds testify to their freedom from all contamination.

A sick nurse is thrown by her duty into daily contact with phases of life that are jealously guarded even from her knowledge when at home, yet the mere fact of their forming a part of her daily work deprives them, to a pure mind, of all morbid interest, and she learns to regard them with a calm self-possession and quiet sense of having no personal connection with their existence, which is infinitely superior to the hysterical modesty of ignorance.

But this essential quality of perfect purity of mind and morals in a nurse should undoubtedly include the further grace of purity of body, for cleanliness, decency, and purity are practically inseparable.

Is anything more calculated to demoralise a ward than a dirty slattern of a nurse, whose cuffs are never clean, whose apron is always crumpled and stained, whose hands look as if they never made the proper acquaintance of soap and water, whose beds are never spotless, and whose window ledges are never properly dusted? A naturally clean-minded woman is clean in her person, her nursing, and in all her work, for she cannot respect herself if she is careless about the purity of her person and her surroundings.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)