

The Profession of Nursing.*

BY MISS M. MOLLETT.

It is not difficult to insist upon the fact that the profession of Nursing is of very great antiquity, notwithstanding that its modern development is a thing of yesterday; for from the earliest times people have been tended in illness, and the nursing of the sick by those to whom relationship or friendship made it a duty, has been supplemented by the help of those who for charity or money nursed strangers.

It is scarcely necessary for me to remind you that in the early Christian ages Nursing was essentially a Christian profession. Deacons and deaconesses were Nurses—men and women filled with religious enthusiasm, who waited on the suffering from religious and charitable motives; and that throughout centuries, even until the present day, the nursing of the sick has been an essential feature in the duties of Roman Catholic sisterhoods and brotherhoods. The care of lepers, of plague-stricken folk, of fever-ridden towns, has ever been undertaken by them, and has furnished a useful and self-denying life to thousands, the very memory of whose good deeds has perished with their names. Many of the religious military orders of the middle ages, such as the Templars and the Knights of St. John, were for a short time in reality—in name for long—protectors and Nurses of the sick and abandoned. The care of the sick was undertaken by these bodies under the strong influence of religious enthusiasm, in obedience to a creed which enjoins strenuously the practice of self-denial and good deeds, amongst which the care of the sick and poor ranks high.

Nursing has still for the true Christian a sanctity upon which it is not necessary here to touch; but what must it have had for those whose natures, less complex than ours, were entirely filled with one great all-pervading enthusiasm, which found in the nursing of the poor and sick a legitimate outlet for its energy? Thus undoubtedly during the earlier Christian era and the Middle Ages, the best nursing was done from religious motives, and was regarded as a species of almsgiving and self-sacrifice; and there is no reason to suppose that sick nursing in the Middle Ages was in any way beneath the standard of the medical and surgical science of those times. But it was when that religious enthusiasm failed that the defects of the system became apparent. Enthusiasts no longer nursed from charitable motives, and as the nursing of the sick for hire was re-

garded with much disdain, it gradually became a purely mechanical drudge, whose connection with the sciences of medicine and surgery was not acknowledged, because not understood; it became a calling, whose members ranked very low in the social scale, and who were often viewed, justly or unjustly, with much of that disgust which found expression in Dickens' famous sketch. Yet for centuries the Hospitals in Protestant countries have, at all events, been nursed by paid assistants—by professional sick Nurses. The grotesque, the unfeeling side of their character, their faults, have all been unflinchingly depicted, yet I am certain that a very much more kindly and appreciative opinion of them would prevail if we really knew more of their lives and their work.

To judge by what was expected from them in Hospitals, they must have been simply crushed by overwork. There were, of course, no Ward-maids, and no scrubbers; the Nurses did all the rough and heavy labour. They can have had very little time to attend to their patients, they were recruited from the lowest classes, and no effort was made to train them for their work. Very slight provision was made in most Hospitals for their comfort; there were ample excuses for them if they neglected their patients. Sanitary arrangements were very defective; sanitary science little understood. We know that all Hospitals were scourged by Hospital fever, gangrene, and erysipelas, and that it was accepted philosophically as a thing not to be remedied or avoided, and we can only suppose that inefficient and insufficient nursing was equally accepted as a thing not to be remedied—to be regretted indeed, but not to be altered. Still, amongst the Nurses of great Hospitals were many, as we know, who nursed their wards loyally and faithfully, according to their lights; and the length of the time they served their Hospitals, as well as the pensions they received, are a proof that their work was appreciated by their generation.

In the first flush of the excitement of the revolution of opinion as to the training and status of a Nurse—of the possibilities of the future for nursing—it became the fashion to despise and condemn our predecessors wholesale—a fashion which, I am happy to say, is dying out, as we begin to appreciate their good qualities, and the many traits of their kindness and obedience, which we gather from a few meagre memories and reminiscences. But when we have allowed the excellence of some individuals, we have said all that can be said in favour of pre-Crimean nursing, for it was reserved for modern days to appreciate the immense value of systematic and organised nursing—*i.e.*, of attention to the sick, that shall not depend only on isolated individual effort and enthusiasm, but be trained,

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