

Nursing Ethics.

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE THE MATRONS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE WANT OF ETHICS IN THE MODERN NURSE?*

By MISS MARY BURR,

Hon. Secretary of the League of St. John's House Nurses.

A few weeks ago a friend, writing to me after a rather sharp illness, wrote of her nurse, "She did nothing but make up the fire. I had to remind her of my medicine and milk, and she sat all night with the light shining full into my face; you know I don't think much of nurses."

This lady has had a very large and varied experience of nurses, coming in close contact with many during a bad epidemic, and whilst realising that many are real nurses, yet, as a class, she says nurses are selfish, wasteful, and unsympathetic.

This is not as it should be, and it behoves us to look around to find out if possible the cause.

It cannot be that all the selfish, careless and unsympathetic women choose a profession which needs above all others just the contrary characteristics.

Where, then, is the cause?

We are told that upon the "Head" of a house depends the tone, and the same must surely be said of an institution. In reports in articles, etc., etc., we read: "Thanks to the Matron or the Head Master an excellent tone pervades, etc., etc."

In many articles during the past years I have read such sentiments.

If then the "Head" is congratulated upon a good tone, surely when a bad tone prevails the "Head" must also be responsible. Therefore it is but logical to attach the blame of the want of ethics in the modern nurse upon the "Head"—i.e. the Matron.

We all know the meaning of the word Matron—Mother. She is by name the mother of the family, be that family one of six or six hundred members, and being the mother she is responsible for the tone of the family under her care.

Let us take as an example of a probationer, an average girl brought up to take life easily, fond of golf, hockey, tennis, and willing to do a good turn if she thinks it is needed, neither full of virtues nor yet with any particular vice, and with a full consciousness of her own importance.

For some reason or other she decides to become a nurse. She likes the uniform, it suits her, or she has a friend a nurse, or she knows that probably sooner or later she may have to earn her own living, and she thinks she would prefer that way rather than any other.

She enters a hospital without the remotest idea of what the life is like; if she is quite unsuitable her time there is very short, if, on the other hand, there are possibilities in her she is retained. She passes three, sometimes four years, beneath that roof with only very short vacations, she comes in hourly contact with all sorts and conditions of men and women, with sickness and suffering in all its varied forms. Will those years have no influence upon her character? Assuredly yes! We are told they will bring out what is best in her; of course they will if she feels that there is a high moral tone in the atmosphere in which she lives and moves.

But there is also a possibility of the worst in a woman's nature being matured by her surroundings.

Let us presume that the girl has entered a hospital where the Matron is a self-seeker, one who will endeavour to please those above her at the expense of those under her, one who, having gained her position not by merit but by influence, knows that by influence only can she retain it. Who, having great authority, uses it tyrannically, and looks upon herself as a little uncrowned queen, and upon her nurses, not as loyal and loving subjects, but as slaves to be ordered here or there as her fancy dictates, and from whose commands there is no appeal. Who, whilst calling herself a lady, has by no means the manners of one.

Can we expect the influence of such a woman to be a good one in an institution? Certainly not!

I can quite hear in my mind the instant comment that such a woman as I have described could not retain her position, but I draw my picture from life, so I know it is true. There are certain hospitals where discontent is rife among the staff, and it is only the miserable cowardice of the nurses that enables this thing to be. The fear of losing their certificates, this is the threat always hovering over their heads, and so fear permits this tyranny.

Can we expect courtesy from the members of the staff where the Matron when wished "Good morning" by a new pro (an older one knows better), replies "Speak when you are spoken to," and sweeps on?

Is it reasonable to expect a high sense of justice, when flagrant injustice reigns supreme? When Matron's favourites or relations pass out first; where a nurse in fault is not allowed to place her case before the committee, but where only the Matron's version is taken; or where a nurse is failed at her examination because Matron considers her air conceited?

Can we expect thoughtfulness among nurses when the Matron, where other people's feelings and convenience are in question, is the most in-

* Read before the St. John's House Debating Society.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)