

In a Surrey Workhouse.

Sometimes I wonder if we nurses sympathise sufficiently with Poor Law officers, apart from those in charge of the sick. Are we not still a little intolerant of "Bumble" and all his ways; indeed, have we quite realised that "Bumble" is now as obsolete as our own prototype, the immortal "Sairy"? and that the poor-house is one of the most intensely interesting spheres of work?

I asked myself all these questions one day as I drove home through eight miles of leafy Surrey lanes with a friend who is a Poor Law guardian, and who had let me loose in charge of the Matron in a Surrey workhouse during a two hours' Board meeting.

One hundred and eighteen years ago, some wise and good men must have cared vastly for their parish poor, and, indeed, I must take it that someone amongst them also loved the "lay of the land," and had the artistic temperament, for only a lover of the beautiful could have selected the site on Hambledon Common, in the odorous pine country above Godalming, on which to build a workhouse. And such a house! Pass in under the front gateway and find yourself in a garden, just now carpeted with masses of gorgeous blooms; walk up the centre pathway, and face what looks like the home of all the refinements—a gracious Georgian manor house, faced with bricks of mellowed rose and purple lustre, and brightened with many-paned windows filled with flowers. A tablet over the doorway informs you that "This house was erected by the united parishes of Bramley, Chiddingfold, Dunsfold, and Hambledon for the better relief and employment of the poor. Anno Domini 1786."

In the blazing sunlight bees hum, butterflies flit airily, the flowers emit a hundred exquisite perfumes—magnolia, lavender, verbena, rose—an enchanted place; and yet all the passions, grey grief and black despair, have passed along this shining pathway, and found shelter, and even lordly Death himself, awaiting them under the eaves.

Once inside, one finds oneself in an environment of wholesome, practical usefulness. Here in the sunny corridor, so cool and green, all the window-sills are filled with plants and flowers. At the far end one catches a glimpse of the Board room, where the relief and employment of the poor receive humane consideration. I wait awhile in the Matron's parlour, a low, tasteful room, and when, a little later, she comes in, I find her the very antithesis of the lady with the silver spoons. I talk on Poor Law topics, the training difficulty, the care of the children, nursing responsibility, and many other points, and I find my hostess thoroughly well-informed and warmly sympathetic on one and all. A gentle briskness of temperament makes her an ideal worker in this most important field of

social reform. Realise, she argues, that the born tramp is a deficient, and of the genus nomad, and deal with him as such. Away with the pauper taint where the children are concerned; let them start fair. Why "guy" them in dress, &c.? And nursing, now a highly-skilled profession, must be in the hands of the efficiently trained.

A little higher up the hill a beautifully-situated infirmary has been built at Hambledon, separated from the Union, over which the Matron has general supervision only, and where a Superintendent Nurse is directly responsible to the medical officer for the actual nursing care of the sick. The system works here without friction.

Then Mrs. Howard, the Matron, took me over the establishment. First I crossed the courtyard at the back, and found myself in a sunny room overlooking the women's garden. Here were several old ladies, each in charge of pretty babes, rocking their cradles, and ready for chat. Mrs. A. had been mother in her time of sixteen children, Mrs. B. of eight, and both had tendered the maternal palm to a Mrs. C., a late inmate, "now in a better land," who had added twenty to the population. The pretty old things were at once proud of and apologetic for their wonderful fecundity, and when I told them that they were women after the heart of the great Napoleon, and the strenuous President of the United States, it appeared to amuse them mightily.

Here the Matron brought to notice a charming babe (and babes are born with or without charm), a beautiful blue-eyed boy, a year old, and the hero of a history intensely sad. Some months ago two callous wretches—baby farmers of a fiendish type—were brought to justice, one of their hapless charges having been literally starved to death; the second, the little Garth Seymour, was brought to the Hambledon Union, a mere bundle of skin and bone, with two great sad eyes, which had already seen most unholy things. Here, a few months' fostering love and care had wrought miracles; what with right feeding and pine-scented air the eerie starveling had become unrecognisable; he was plump and bonnie, and unmistakably a well-bred child. The Matron says all his little ways are extraordinarily refined, his temper of the sweetest, his intelligence clear as a bell. Garth Seymour! What a name for a romance! Surely the future has something good in store for the little man, rescued from the cruellest of deaths as he has been. The Matron would welcome a beautiful rich fairy princess if she would drive over the heather in her coach-and-six and demonstrate that the little Garth is her long lost heir, spirited away by the Murder Fiend; or, failing this, some more substantial person might adopt him and give him a fair start in life. Why not?

Everyone seemed wholesomely busy in the Hambledon Union. Passing upstairs, and through corridors half covered with drying lavender, we found,

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)