

## The Neurotic Patient.

I have not selected this class of patient to write about, because it is a specially popular or attractive one, but because I think that at present most nurses have given very little serious thought to its cure. There is, perhaps, no task that tries the temper so much or from which a nurse escapes so readily as the charge of a neurotic patient. Yet unless each one, capable of such charge, is willing, if circumstances allow, to devote some small portion of the years of her nursing life to this branch of work, the cure of the many who *ought* to be cured will not be accomplished.

The cure of neurotic affections depends peculiarly on the capability of the nurse. The doctor is indispensable. His authority is a necessary factor. It is his responsibility to examine into the condition of the various organs, which may be debilitated by the want of nervous power, and to give individual directions for the treatment of every patient. But on the nurse will depend the successful maintenance of a life of gentle, regular discipline; the guidance, teaching, and encouragement of the patient in the school of steady purpose—one object always before her, to become possessed of a healthy mind in a healthy body. Upon the nurse will rest the details of the all-important diet and its submissive acceptance, and it is from her that the patient must receive a constantly renewed inspiration to persevere in the determination to conquer. Of no other kind of invalid is, perhaps, quite such an exercise of will required. Unfortunately, the force of will in these cases is usually peculiarly enfeebled.

The physician should be capable of being something of a "tartar." Not so the nurse. Few women resent a little imperiousness in men if it is combined with kind-heartedness. Charlotte Brönte's heroines are not the only ones who enjoy being brought to submission by the ruling sex! The nurse should be of a strong and resolute character—possessed of that strength which is always combined with gentleness; above all things endowed with judgment and tact, ready to shield the patient's feelings, and to gain her point without unnecessary assumption of authority. Dignity and a power to gain obedience by the indescribable instinct that a weaker nature feels towards a stronger one is what is required. The authority and influence that are almost unconscious to the patient, but that during the daily routine of treatment are leading her to exert her will, to become disciplined in mind, to honestly desire a return to health, are what will be found of most value. Determination on the part of the nurse to be baulked by no difficulties, discouraged by no relapse, and a large stock of patience are essentials.

Every nurse has a very sharp eye for detecting the least trace of "hysteria." Is she equally clever in

discovering symptoms of organic disease that may be lying out of sight, well masked by an evident neurosis? I should like to offer an earnest warning on this point. All nurses, the seniors as well as the juniors, need to remind themselves frequently that an unmistakably neurotic condition may very well be coincident with concealed serious disease. There is a distinct danger, which we should never forget, of entirely overlooking such disease owing to the impossibility of placing full credit in the statements of a highly neurotic patient. *Æsop's* ancient fable of "Wolf! wolf!" has been painfully carried out in real life more than once. It is for all intelligent nurses to see that they never fall into the error.

It must not be imagined that every victim of a neurosis is a weak and foolish person. Far from it. Two of our most talented authoresses are patients under London specialists for neurotic infirmities. The composition of the human physical temperament is a very complex one. Each man or woman is a descendant of many ancestors, and inherits a medley of opposing physical characteristics. In the same individual we may sometimes see on one side strength of purpose and brilliant abilities, on the other, strong neurotic tendencies weakening the character in certain directions, and, in some cases, ruining the disposition as a whole. The contradictory elements to be found in one nature often remind one of the many different sources of a river. They originate in torrents from widely different districts charged with all kinds of mineral and vegetable atoms. All converge and together make up one rushing river, full of power and beauty. Each individual is made up of paradoxes—physical, mental, and moral.

The study of the various forms of nerve disorder that we meet every day is, alas, becoming more and more necessary. In the over-civilised age in which we live nervous degeneration is invading every rank of life. It is by no means confined to the "educated" classes, or even to the denizens of towns. While I was training in massage in a special hospital for paralysis, a bright little boy of eight was admitted to the men's ward in which I was working. He was a labourer's child and lived in the depths of the country among fields and woods. His mother described how for months he had been in the habit of falling down suddenly and becoming perfectly helpless, and how this helplessness had for some time become permanent. The resident medical man applied the usual electrical tests and found that all the boy's muscles were in a normal condition, and that there was no organic disease of the nerves. He then suddenly startled the child by crying out, "Quick, Tommy, jump out of bed, or that rat will bite you!" Peals of laughter were heard from the beds all round. As the men exclaimed afterwards with renewed mirth, "Oh, Nurse, how Tommy did nip out of bed and run to the other side of the ward! And the porters

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