

The Revolution in French Hospitals.

By Miss LAVINIA L. DOCK.

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One gets an interesting glimpse of the way the nursing nuns were trained at the beginning of the seventeenth century, in the life of Mère Geneviève Bougier, who entered the Hôtel Dieu at the age of twenty-two, and did so much to improve the service that she was called the "Reformer of the House." She found the custom existing in the nursing service of each old Sister taking charge of a group of young probationers or novices, whom she trained up in her own way, and with whom she lived in a rather detached and individualistic fashion. Mère Bougier did not approve of this plan, which we can easily imagine would have produced the same results as if all our head nurses to-day were to personally take entire charge of their assistants without any regard to the unity of the hospital; and she introduced a common rule of life for the whole household. Her aim was to secure novices of good ability and energy, and she could not bear to hear a nurse excuse herself from work by reason of prayers or fatigue from prayers. She used to say that the care of the sick should be their whole austerity, and that a day well spent was one well filled with work.

During an epidemic of the plague she was removed from her position as mistress of novices in the Hôtel Dieu to manage the hospital where the victims of the pest were received, and the improvements which she made in this service included a water-tank and an arrangement for drying clothes, as well as an altar. Though the details are meagre, there seems no reason for doubting that she was an earlier Florence Nightingale. Returned to the Hôtel Dieu, in charge of the drug-supply, she made up "prescriptions that they had never had before," and, finally, had charge of the lying-in department before being made prioress. She died in 1665.

In spite of the distinguished ability of such women as this, the general average of nursing work remained low, and the benumbing effect of masculine control and interference in affairs belonging peculiarly to women was then, as now, to blame for most of the lack of progress. And then, as now, there were always certain men who understood this and who pointed out the mistakes in masculine management. A French encyclopædia published in 1764, in an article on nursing says, in speaking of military hospitals:—

"Why should we not substitute women nurses for men in the military hospitals? Not hospital Sisters, but women of the people? They could be taught to give excellent service, and the men could be returned to the land, to business, &c. More than this, a new line of employment would be opened for numbers of women among those now

vainly seeking employment. This most important and most neglected point merits the serious attention of Government."

The same article describes the nursing profession as follows:—

"This occupation is as important for human beings as its functions are low and repugnant. All persons are not adapted to it, and the heads of hospitals ought to be difficult to please in choosing applicants, as the life of patients may depend upon their character and actions. Nurses should be patient, mild, compassionate; they should console the sick, foresee their needs, and relieve their tedium. The domestic duties of nurses are: to light the ward fires and keep them burning; to carry and distribute food, broths, and drink; to accompany the surgeons and doctors on their rounds, and to remove all dressings, &c., afterwards; to sweep the halls and keep everything clean; to wash the wards and the persons of the sick, their belongings, &c.; to empty all vessels, fetch and exchange the linen of patients; to prevent noise, quarrelling, and everything which may cause trouble; to warn the chiefs of everything that is wrong; to carry the dead and to prepare them for burial; to light the lamps in the evening; to visit the sick during the night, and, finally, to watch them continually, giving them every aid which their state requires, and treating them with kindness and consideration."

This programme, coupled with the remark about the choice of applicants, shows that, even with Sisters in charge of the wards, the actual nursing duties were assigned to those servant-nurses, who had to combine so much hard manual labour with their nursing that it followed inevitably only a rough class of persons could be induced to assume such positions.

There seems no room whatever for doubt that the deplorable state of the nursing in the hospitals of Paris (leaving others out of the question) during the last two centuries was the inevitable and logical result of men's mismanagement of women's work and their unmodified control of the women workers. On the one hand, the clergy interfered continually with the nursing work of the Sisters, forbidding to them all manner of necessary practical details, thus reducing their efficiency and bringing about the identical deterioration against which St. Vincent de Paul had warned them. On the other hand, the lay authorities, offering a grade of pay and a manner of housing and treatment which could only attract the poorest grade of workers, kept these workers in a wretched condition, and could make no improvement because they did not know what to improve. Yet in spite of this two-fold repression, an occasional instance of rare capacity and devotion to duty was found among the lay nurses, as in the case of Mademoiselle Bottard, who, having entered one of the great city hospitals in 1841, at the age

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