

out of the way in giving up the retail dry goods business which he had just got well under way in Providence, and going to work under ground in the darkness of a mine, if there was any chance of saving his fiancée, the dried-up, mincing milliner I had seen, or thought I'd seen the day before. There was no certainty that he could save her. I told him that, but, as soon as he understood that there was a chance, he was off to make his arrangements. He has gone out into that unknown country, made, I hope, a little less forlorn and friendless to him by some letters I was able to give him to friends in Denver and Colorado Springs.

You could never forget that man if you had seen him—his eyes, his quiet, slow voice, his muscular hands. I saw him. Yet he was no more real than the thousands of others whom I have seen and forgotten,—forgotten because I never saw them, but only their ghostly outline, their generic type, the racial background out of which they emerged.

Let me tell you another of our humiliations. This case of typhoid,—a walking typhoid who has just turned up late, near lunch time, at the Out-patient Department, is obviously too sick to go home. We must keep him in the hospital. "Well, make out his recommendation slip, and count his white corpuscles, ring for John and the wheel-chair, and get his clothes on, and don't forget to record the dimensions of his spleen before you put his record slip away."

While these orders were being given, and while half a dozen assistants were executing them, a visitor to the hospital, not yet blinded and deafened by routine, heard the sick man ask three times for a drink of water. The visitor heard it; the others stood just as near, but none of them heard it. The sounds of his voice struck the tympanum of each man's ear, but to three of them it was an unusual request, and so was simply unheard. By two others it was heard, but disregarded, not because they were cruel-hearted, not at all, but because they were none of them assigned to that duty. It was no one's business in particular, and they all had other jobs, though, to be sure, jobs which could wait. One other assistant who heard the request said to himself, "Oh, he'll be in the ward in half an hour, and get plenty of cooler water; and what possible difference can it make in his recovery anyhow? He'll want water again in a few hours." So no one stirred to get him the water until the visitor could stand it no longer, and so hunted up the tumbler and faucet and brought it himself. Goodness! to see the sick man down that glass and look up with the gleam of momentary relief was

something that visitor will never forget, and wouldn't have missed for a year's life.

It was the foreground—immediate, pressing, wholly transient relief, direct personal service of the simplest kind—all hidden from the minds of the regular assistants because they were looking far off into the distance, shaping the sufferer's future course to the ward and towards recovery, each pointing like a dog at his task, each put in blinders, like a horse, by his concentration on the future and the distant. All concentration means deafness and blindness outside the circle which is lit up by the lamp of attention. The concentrated beam of the searchlight on a battleship is typical of the mind of a busy, well-trained man. Any well-trained physician, as he looks with one eye through a microscope, keeps the other eye open, not closed, as the beginner does, but wide open and perfectly blind, absolutely unaware of the images that fall upon it.

So foregrounds are always invisible to the man whose mind is elsewhere intent upon its duties and its plans.

Sometimes an immediate crying need, like that of the thirsty fever patient, is disregarded, because, as we say, it is so transient—so momentary is the relief that we give. "He'll be thirsty again in half an hour, and water won't cure him anyway." Yes. It is now and here. It does not stretch into the distant future. In other words, it is just what I have called it, a foreground, and we are dreadfully prone to forget that all eternity is made up of half-hours as transient as this, as simple, unimpressive, and insignificant as this. Nothing divine, nothing heroic, about this mean, commonplace present. If the occasion were imposing and resounding, we should rise to it nobly, but we notice nothing very important just here in this dingy laboratory or on that dreary corridor. We are almost indignant if any one tries to open our eyes. How can this piece of cheap, transient drudgery be linked to anything noble or significant?

"Lord, when we saw thee an hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?"

Whatever we think, whatever our creeds say, our acts prove that we count it mere poetic exaggeration or literary figure when Christ said, "Inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of the least of these, ye did it not unto Me." Christ said that every person, every moment, is a representative of the best in life—a fair specimen opportunity. "One of the great illusions is that the present hour is not the critical decisive hour. God gave me insight into to-day."

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)