

The Nurse in Fiction.

How seldom one takes up a novel now-a-days over which it is a delight to spend the midnight oil! "The Guarded Flame," by Mr. W. B. Maxwell (the son of Miss Braddon), is a work of genius—nothing less—and has but one flaw in its marvellous brilliancy. The author has had the misfortune to come in contact with women acting as nurses of a very repulsive type, and pitilessly he has pilloried them.

It is to be regretted that this marvellous book, which will not only be read, but bought and treasured by thousands, may do an injustice, the great body of trained nurses are likely to suffer for the faults of the few, as its readers of hasty judgment will, we fear, be inevitably prejudiced against nurses as a class.

We have not the slightest doubt that Mr. W. B. Maxwell has met, and may have suffered from the type of nurse he portrays—vulgar, greedy women, there are many such. But the great "philosopher's" nurses are not those we are accustomed to meet, and we hope some day Mr. Maxwell may be present at a gathering of the "Leagues" and thus come in contact with the educated, refined, and kindly class of nurse who form them, whose unselfish work makes them well beloved by the sick in our hospitals, amongst the poorest in the land, and also by their patients in private houses. We will not spoil our Review of this great book by telling its story, suffice it to say that the hero is helpless on a bed of sickness, and trained nurses appear upon the scene.

"The room itself had passed into alien hands; by day and night the nurses guarded it. When the door moved a strange face was seen. Hirelings, with warning finger and a grave reproof, turned Effie from the door, and almost drove her mad by whispered words of doom.

"It was old Mary who came—the grey-haired, faithful old servant, who with loving hands had nursed her loved master till the trained nurses came to snatch him from her care. Now she was the servant of the stern and unloving guardians, who demanded unceasing service, who grumbled if their food was cold, and talked to her of death while they sipped their claret or greedily powdered their oranges with sugar.

"Now, Nurse Susan had gone on duty for the night; Nurse Emily was at her dinner downstairs with poor Effie ministering to her wants or sitting by the fire while Nurse munched or chatted. Effie, desolate and forgotten, used to go to the dining-room when the nurses were there, as if she were driven by an imperative need of human company, if not sympathy.

"First, the quiet life of the happy home had gone. Then there had been the narrowed circle of home about the sick bed, with the home spirit still on guard, seeming to draw all closer. Now the house

had passed into another phase—unbroken silence and unchanging sadness. Yet now again all the household seemed habituated to the new order. The nurses, always busy and methodic, had established themselves as part of the house itself—with hours and meals now fixed, a rearranged, undeviating system of service for all the household staff—the household wheels all running smoothly in the altered grooves.

"In the long hours Effie was in the sick room, when one nurse slept and the other was eating. . . ."

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Then the villain of the piece, a medical man, trembles in his shoes.

"Or those nurses? Suddenly he thought of the two nurses from the training home in London. He had old experience of nurses. They are quick to suspect; they are quick to give words to each passing thought. One of those nurses might have spoken her thought to Effie. She was constantly with them, had sat with them often at their meals; and since she had been allowed to enter the sick-room, they had made her a messenger, a willing assistant, a third nurse to guard the room when they were absent chattering downstairs about the service of the room. One of these women might have spoken to Effie of her betrothed. A joke and a laugh, as she ate her dinner. In imagination he heard it: 'I say, miss, you don't look after that doctor of yours. If he belonged to me, I wouldn't trust him further than I could see him.' Some vulgar joke, words uttered without meaning perhaps, words bubbling to the surface from the springs of vulgar folly, and yet sufficient to set Effie thinking. Perhaps that was what she had really meant when she spoke that day of the 'dreadful things?' The nurse's joke was what had set her thinking.

"As in imagination, he heard the voice and the laugh, he cursed all women who had ever worn a nurse's cap and apron. . . ."

"Thinking there might be something wrong, Mary had followed; and through the open door of the sick-room had seen Miss Effie by the bed, stooping over the bed. The master was sleeping, Mary thought; and certainly the nurse was sound asleep. . . . After the long day, when Nurse Susan came on duty for the night, the mistress of the house would still linger.

"Nurse Susan, flushed after a good dinner, used to come in and out of the room, gradually taking over command, whispering to Mary in the corridor, sending Mary up and down stairs to bring things that the professional nurse had perhaps forgotten."

Sorrowfully we must admit that these women are drawn from the life—they give us all cause for thought. How are we to protect the defenceless sick from such attendants? By more careful selection of probationers for training; by giving our probationers higher professional ideals; by encouraging their self-respect and love of humanity. Surely this would help? Women do not make good machines, everything must be done to keep them human.

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