

## The Nurse and the Dying.

O eloquent, just, and mighty Death! whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; whom none hath dared, thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only hath cast out of the world and despised. Thou hast drawne together all the farre stretched greatnesse, all the pride, crueltie, and ambition of man, and covered it all over with these two narrow words, *Hic jacet!*

SIR WALTER RALEIGH.

It is dying rather than death consummated that engages the nurse's attention that, if she be imaginative or young, haunts her off-duty dreams. The struggle, the unwillingness with which the spirit parts from its raiment—the body—haunts her day by day, at every turn; no one, no doctor, no soldier, is brought so intimately, so continually in contact with that inevitable conflict. No philosophy, no religion, no affection can do more than mitigate the natural horror with which we witness the gradual slowing of the machinery of the body, by which that body, as we know it, lives.

Death itself is not terrible; the peace that follows on the struggle is a relief to all. You say (we have all said it), "I am thankful she can lie down at last; she did so long to lie down again"; or, "Oh, it is a good thing to see him out of that awful agony!" or, "She has conquered that terrible vomiting at last"; or, "It is a comfort not to hear her struggling for every breath." It is so seldom that Death is merciful enough to come softly; he generally precedes his advent by his heralds, pain, distress, and terror, and storms the forts of our courage and self-reliance before he himself appears. Few can withstand his couriers. None himself.

And we are the hourly spectators of the unequal fight, for the fight against death and his forerunners is the pitiful reason for our nursing existence.

It is a wonderfully merciful arrangement that allows us, as a whole, to face this ever-recurring problem with so much practical calmness, as it is one of our greatest privileges to be entitled to mitigate to some extent the rigour of that conflict. We may not save, but we can help, and she is a poor nurse who will not give freely of her strength, her ability, and her charity to help helpless struggling humanity through the last hopeless conflict.

We are differently constituted, but I must own myself to a great admiration for those who face dying with courtesy and firmness—who are decorous even in their death. The records of those heroes of history who met their fate with supreme composure has always had an attraction for me. I must be pardoned

for admiring even that slight "swagger" which, in face of such overwhelming odds, is excusable. The martyrs of all ages and creeds, who have died singing; the nobles of France in the Red Revolution, showing the mob how gentlefolk should die are merely types of a certain nobility of character in face of an inevitable disaster, common to high courage in all mankind. There is many a poor man or woman, dying in seemly decency in a hospital bed, stifling the natural terror and distress, who shows it in as great a degree, without an audience, as he who parts with his life on the world's scaffold. Nor can it be easy, for pain unmans us—destroys our nervous force and withers the sap of our endurance, and he who can in the last extremity so behave as to do credit to our humanity is very worthy of praise. For not all are buoyed by the vision of the glorious palaces of immortality or of fuller knowledge athwart the stream; for some, as the poem says:—

"I heard them calling in the streets  
That the ship I serve upon,  
The great ship, Immortality,  
Was gone down like the sun."

And it is the privilege of the nurse not to judge and not to condemn, but to soften and smooth that passage as far as may be humanly possible.

The tenderness and pity with which we view and, as far as we may, aid in this last combat is a higher thing than our nursing knowledge and skill. It has its origin in that common humanity, which is the root of all that is best and highest in our profession, without which it has, indeed, no sap or real life; nor do I ever think highly, or even well, of a nurse, however clever, who is chary of kindness and consideration towards those who will never again thank her in this world.

It is common to the men and women of this world to part with reluctance from custom and usage, from the little things that are, indeed, our life and our love, so it behoves the nurse to deal gently towards the fancies and whims of the dying. They reach back often to secrets of which she hath not the key; they are linked to memories in which she hath no part; they recall chords of music made by other hands; they are often the last sign of pride and self-respect, for there are some who do not willingly, even when dying, yield themselves into another's hands.

I am inclined to think that in the respect, the kindness, and the consideration a nurse shows towards the dying, lies the last great test of her human fitness for her calling. A respect, a kindness, a consideration no use may blunt, no custom stale, for it responds to the

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