

How I Became Matron of St. Bartholomew's Hospital.

A TELEPATHIC TALE.

BY ETHEL GORDON FENWICK.

In the Life of the late Sir Sydney Waterlow, Mr. George Smalley has referred to my appointment as Matron to St. Bartholomew's Hospital in 1881, an account which I desire to supplement as accurately as possible.

In the autumn of the year 1879 I was appointed Sister of the Charlotte Ward in the London Hospital, upon the recommendation of the Matron, Miss Swift. To look forward, thirty years appear interminable, to look back, they seem to have vanished in a night. There have apparently been significant changes in our hospital world during these three decades—changes on the surface—but of elemental changes there have been none—and there never will be. Human nature, as it was in the beginning—as it is—so it ever will be. That is the reason why we never grow old—or wise—as to the young we appear to do. Thirty years ago I arrived at the London in a growler—today I should whisk there in a taxi. What's the odds? *I should arrive.*

I am in the humour to write philosophic memoirs, but space forbids; instead I will record a page of personal history. Things hummed and were of absorbing interest to us obsolete folks, who laughed, and wept, and worked, oh! so hard in the great East End Hospital in past days. Take it from me—modern nurses—that the explorers had a glorious experience—the women of the sixties and seventies who grappled with almost unsurmountable difficulties in the hospital world, had the best of it. Metaphorically we fought with beasts at Ephesus, and the victory was to the strong. We unfurled our standards and planted them in high places. Yet these were the happy-go-lucky days before nurses were trained—when we just “picked up”—when our demand for knowledge was insistent, when we loved learning, when we went off duty with reluctance, and a stretch of 24 hours on emergency duty found us fresh and keen in the morning. Not so bad for us!

My charge in “Charlotte” was 53 beds, which were usually occupied by acute cases, with a staff of four nurses on day duty, and two on at night. This was no sinecure for a Sister. On duty at 7 a.m., going ahead all day at full speed until 5 o'clock dinner. Breakfast, lunch, tea, often standing feasts on the Floor, off duty from 6 to 8, if possible, and then three hours' strenuous work until 11 p.m. After which blessed bed.—Not

yet awhile. Now came the only quiet hour for study. There were few nursing books in those days. But there were medical journals, students' manuals on anatomy, physiology, and therapeutics, Hoblyn's dictionary, and the works of Plato and John Stewart Mill. We devoured them. I made it a rule never, if possible, to go to rest in ignorance. Words of unknown meaning in clinical lectures, new symptoms and diseases, new treatments, drugs, and diets must all be cleared up overnight, notes made for the instruction of nurses, and an insatiable mental avidity appeased.

One night in the winter of 1880-81, seated at my bedroom table, I was thus absorbed. The door was open, as I wished to speak with Night Sister as she passed by. Presently she stood smiling on the mat.

“I've got a bit of news for you, Sister Charlotte,” she said. “A nice little post is vacant, which will just suit you no doubt.”

I put down my pen.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Oh! only Bart's,” she replied airily, and turned as if to go her rounds.

Then she returned.

“Think of it,” she continued, “the accumulated prejudices of eight hundred years! Doctors and old Sisters on one side, the Matron and modernity on the other. Prejudice has just won the day, and the Matron has resigned.”

“Shouldn't I just love to tilt at prejudice,” I exclaimed. “Oh! for the chance!” and I closed the dry-a-dust dictionary and sent it spinning.

“I thought that would appeal to you,” laughed Miss Seavill, and with a spice of malice she whispered derisively, “Good night, Matron of Bart's,” and was gone.

I turned to my books, but the spell was broken. My attention wandered. I read the same sentence over a dozen times without grasping its meaning. Suddenly a voice said peremptorily, “Go in for Bart's.”

I sprang up and went into the Lobby, expecting to find Miss Seavill. No one was there. I re-entered my room and closed the door. Again the order was conveyed to my inner consciousness.

No doubt I was over-tired. I stood at the open window and breathed keen air. A perfect starlit night, all peace below in the Governor's garden. The far-off muffled roar of traffic in the Whitechapel Road was soothing.

Then I went to bed. But there I found no rest.

Again and again the insistent direction was given—

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