

THE MONTHLY NURSE; HER ORIGIN, RISE, AND PROGRESS.*

By MARIAN HUMFREY, M.R.B.N.A.

AT the request of our Executive Committee I have come up to London this evening to read a paper before you, and hasten to take this opportunity of expressing the pleasure it affords me to meet for the first time our Metropolitan Members.

If anything were wanting to convince us how much the art of Nursing has advanced in professional and popular estimation, our meeting to night would quite suffice; for I venture to assert that only a short decade ago the homely subject of my paper would not have claimed your attention, far less your time. Now I look upon this fact, as an outcome, though it may be a by-path, of our Association, which has brought together Nurses from all parts of the Kingdom, and awakened an interest in all kinds of Nursing.

I must claim your kind indulgence to-night for one of the most despised members of the Nursing profession, by the greater number of whom the poor "Monthly" is scarcely considered a Nurse at all, and certainly she has no place whatever in the Hospital Nursing hierarchy. The reason of this is not far to find: her sphere of duty is the home; her constant familiar, birth—not death. Her work is scattered about in all directions, unseen, unknown, and up to comparatively recent times uncared for. I purpose to divide my subject into three portions, and I shall dwell as briefly as possible upon each. We will first inquire into the origin of our Nurse, trace her rise and mark her progress; it is upon this last, as being of the most practical importance, I trust to elicit your valued opinions to-night.

I must premise that my remarks will apply exclusively to our native land and our English Nurse, a familiar figure for generations past; and in this instance, as in so many others, from the siege of Troy for instance to Emin Pasha and his butterflies, we must *cherchez la femme*, in our case *sage*, for I think it is pretty generally conceded that from very early days amongst us the two functions of Midwife and Nurse were combined in one individual, and possibly the infant of melancholy Jacques, "muling and puking in his Nurse's arms," was brought into the world under her auspices. It will be one of the objects

* A Paper read before the British Nurses' Association.

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of my paper to point out how these two functions came to be disassociated, and how, step by step as it were, the gradual decadence of the former led to the rise of the latter, and I must ask my hearers to kindly bear this fact in mind, as it will be the keynote of much that I shall say to you further on.

In considering the part that women of past generations played in child-birth ministrations, we have every reason to believe that they were ruled by tradition only,

"For Knowledge to their eyes her ample page,
Rich with the spoils of time, did ne'er unroll;"

there was no light to guide them on their way. What they did they did as it were by rule of thumb, and what they knew they knew from word of mouth; but for all this we may fairly assume they knew pretty well all that was known in those days, and did all that could be done, and Dame Nature supplied all other deficiencies, but as far as I know we have no record of their work. To digress and anticipate for a few moments, it has occurred to me that I have heard of a record—I believe perfectly authentic—of a Midwife's work on a tombstone—not her patient's; her own—and the legend set forth that she did successfully perform the Cæsarean section. The first attempt to throw a light upon their way, as far as I am aware, and one that might have led to an earlier dissociation of the functions, was made in the latter part of the seventeenth century by a foreign lady—I believe a Frenchwoman—who practised Midwifery in England in the reign of Charles II., and who was in fact the Court Midwife of the period (there are Court Midwives now in Russia, I have heard). It was the intention of this enlightened lady to have established a sort of school, or college, for the better instruction of women in Midwifery, but unfortunately these generous designs were frustrated by the decease of Madame Cellier before their fulfilment, and hence we may infer the women went on in the old grooves.

The next step upon what we will call the path of disseverance also took place at the latter part of the seventeenth century—one fraught with momentous issues in the future, though having but a limited effect at the time. I allude to the introduction of mechanical aids for delivery. Somewhere about the year 1650, a Dutchman, Roonhuysen by name, devised a primitive kind of contrivance called a vectis. It consisted of a flat piece of iron bent into a slight curve at both

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