

CHOOSING HER PROFESSION.*

BY MISS M. CHADWICK.

(Member of the British Psychological and International Psycho-Analytical Societies.)

Let us investigate some of the causes which lead to the selection of the nursing profession. What do we find? Choice really lies quite outside the control of our conscious volition. We may, it is true, give the most excellent reasons for adopting one course of action rather than another, but actually we are obeying laws of repetition and carrying out day-dreams of our childhood. We will leave the day-dream as the root of vocational selection upon one side for the time being, and begin with the factor of *Identification*, because it is one of the essentials in the growth of ideals and the building-up of character.

In the last lecture we saw that education implies learning to give up our own way to adopt that of another, not only because of love, on account of fear, or to avoid punishment, but also owing to this principle of identification, which is closely connected with love.

"Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," the proverb tells us, and we know that even tiny children will attempt to copy those of whom they are particularly fond, and express the hope to grow up like so-and-so. Putting oneself thus into the place of another is called *Identification*, and it proves for many an important factor in the choice of her profession. Perhaps, as a child, the girl knew and loved someone who was a hospital nurse, or confused the nurse with her old nanny on account of the name or a similarity in dress, or again, the model may have been her own mother, and her wish to look after and tend sick persons as though they were her children; when this wish has been paramount we shall find the nurse with a preference for patients who are ill in bed and quite helpless; when they are convalescent, her interest wanes, because they are no longer so dependent upon her. The girl who needs to exercise her maternal instincts, and at the same time use her administrative or managing capacity, often finds full scope for her talents in the career of a nurse. Still it is not only feminine identifications, *to grow up like mother*, which contribute to the making of a nurse; the reason may also be *to resemble father*, for we find a large percentage of doctor's daughters becoming nurses, usually particularly gifted ones, when the financial resources of the family do not permit them to study for a medical degree, or when the girl's inclinations attempt to combine father and mother identifications.

It is very seldom a girl chooses the nursing profession without showing signs of an interest in such things in her childhood. We read of Florence Nightingale, as a young girl, setting the broken leg of a shepherd's collie, and I know another nurse, who related how her favourite childish game was "hospitals," when doll's arms and legs were set with matches, and those injured beyond hope amputated. A younger sister would be put to bed in the doll's cradle, supposed to be suffering from the most serious ailment the little girl knew, and nursed with such solemnity and realism that the baby howled with self-pity until some adult came and put an end to the game. Medicines, salves, ointments and plasters were concocted and given to long-suffering relatives as aids to the complexion or toilet perfumes. Once a "Doctor Game" was instituted with some little friends who had similar tastes, but parents intervened thinking it morbid.

To the child the Doctor is a very awe-inspiring person, as was and is the Medicine Man among primitive savages. These are the main reasons for venerating him.

- (1) He may visit sick people when others are excluded.
- (2) He is never sick or ailing himself.

* The second of a Course of Six Lectures delivered at 6, Guilford Place, Russell Square, W.C.1.

(3) He knows everything, and is supposed to bring the baby in his black bag, so presumably he knows where it comes from. This information makes him especially enviable.

(4) He may also be regarded as the avenger of wrongdoing, to be called in to punish us should we persist in doing that which has been forbidden, or fail to carry out parental instructions.

All these ideas present the Doctor in an enviable light, making him appear thoroughly worth while as an ideal, and by identifying ourselves with him, we hope to gain the same wonderful power. All children who have come in contact with doctors and nurses in some way, and few have not nowadays, remark that the nurse is an important person second only to the doctor, therefore, if one cannot identify with him, the next best thing is to become his understudy, the nurse.

The ambition of many little girls whose early lot was to receive a large share of this particular form of attention, is to be an important person, to manage others and to order them about. To reverse the situation is a favourite game or phantasy. To put the adult into the place of the helpless infant, who must be kept in bed, washed and dressed, fed and otherwise attended to, is a frequent ambition of many little girls with capable, energetic mothers. Or, again, to have father dependent upon her and grateful for her ministrations may appeal even more strongly to another, who shows a preference for male patients. So do our childhood's wishes gain their gratification by means of our career, if we have chosen rightly, and it will for this reason prove satisfactory both to our selves as well as those whom we tend. In no other calling may wishes such as these receive so much direct gratification, unless it be that of the wife or mother; yet many women, either from force of circumstance, deliberate choice or because of other reasons connected with their infantile life, attend to other people's babies, husbands, sons and daughters instead of having their own.

Much can be learnt about these infantile wishes by discovering a nurse's favourite duties, and it is possible to ascertain from them, the roots from which they have sprung. To play at being father or mother or some other dearly loved and admired person is not always the only motive in operation, other preoccupations of childhood may gain gratification from the duties of a nurse, which cannot find an outlet in the ordinary daily life of the present day. In order to understand how this may be, we must again turn our attention to infancy and its strivings, from which arise so many adult character traits and predispositions; and I suppose our nursing experience will enable us to realise these childish impulses more easily than lay folk, because we have had so much more opportunity for observing them.

The child's training means the alteration of its own wishes to conform with those of the trainer. Let us see in what directions these wishes most need redirection. It is quite clear that there are two primary themes, the appetite and the excretory functions, the desired end in both cases being to establish regular habits. In these two ways children will be found to differ very considerably, some being readily educable, while others, even a few days' old, maintain a stubborn resistance against what they feel to be unwarranted interference. We must remember, however, that for the first nine months no external demands disturbed their peace. Nourishment was automatic, what excretory function existed was also carried out involuntarily. Later on the child endeavours to assert its independence still more actively over both these functions, during weaning, and when more rigid restrictions are enforced in the interests of cleanliness. Concerning the latter, interesting manifestations may be observed nowhere so well as in hospital, where children whose training has been almost non-existent are to be found, and whose impulses have enjoyed practically unrestrained gratification. The grown-up person often shows

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)