

PUBLIC HEALTH IN THE MIDDLE AGES.

By EUPHEMIA TORRY.

In her new book, "Malta of the Knights" (Heinemann), Miss Schermerhorn has much to say about the daily life of the Knights Hospitallers, or Knights of the Order of St. John in Jerusalem from the time of their arrival in Malta (1530) to their surrender to Napoleon in 1798. She has searched the records of many noble families for accounts of the expenses of entry into the Order, for descriptions of the new-comer's outfit, of his duties, his heroism in battle, his boredom and his diversions during long periods of enforced idleness. She has sketched for us the lives of the more famous Grand-Masters, their diplomacy, their riches and their splendour of living. She does not omit the scandals and the wranglings, but through it all, she tells us, the Knights remembered their duty at the Hospital. This was the one of their vows they were the least likely to forget for the tradition of the Hospital was a holy and venerated one.

One of the most famous Grand-Masters, Verdalle (1581-1595), got into serious trouble for neglecting the hospital. A memorial was sent to Rome complaining that he was not mindful of his obligations to the sacred infirmary. The drugs were poor in quality and often gave out altogether because he had accepted bids for the pharmacy; instead of chicken they served goats flesh which "killed the sick people." The rule regarding separate wards for incurables was neglected and clinics were no longer held each week. Worst of all the Grand-Master did not fulfil his own obligation of attending to the sick in person once a week.

The dangers of infection seem to have been understood earlier than might be supposed. In 1591 a famine had devastated southern Europe and we learn that it was so bad in Malta that when some galleys arrived with food from Alexandria "no one waited for the cargo to be disinfected before it was distributed to the perishing people, although there was disease on board." (Several medical specialists in Malta, after studying the record of these outbreaks of disease are disposed to think them similar to modern influenza.) Only after the epidemic had got beyond control was there an attempt made to burn the remains of the infected cargo. Eventually "Pietro Paresi, an expert on contagious diseases, was brought from Trapani. He ordered a strict quarantine of all the families in their homes, disinfection of all the washing places, and, by an excess of precaution, the streets which were strewn with rags and refuse, were swept and the rubbish burned, while nine hundred suspects were shut up in a hastily constructed Lazaretto." With these measures the epidemic ceased.

It seems that, a hundred years later, the English had little respect for the rules of health which had long been in force in Malta. When the customary "clean bill of health" was asked before a ship of Charles II's navy was given the freedom of the port, her captain replied that he had "none but what is in my gun's mouth," a reply showing as much ignorance as rudeness.

The same Grand-Master, Verdalle, who so neglected the hospital, was responsible for bringing Ursulines to Malta. "This was not an innovation," says the author, "there had always been a place for women in the traditions of the Order of Chivalry. The Convent of the Blessed Gerard at Jerusalem had maintained a hospital for women as well as for men, and an affiliated Order of Nuns, wearing the eight-pointed cross, took the vows of Obedience to the Master of the Hospital, as he was first called, and nursed sick pilgrims and the wounded. . . ."

After the fall of Jerusalem the women left that city and were attached to some of the European Priors, but there

were none at Malta until the days of Verdalle, who built them a convent and endowed it richly. A hundred years later, under Grand-Master Carafa (1680-1690), we learn that "the ladies grew tired of watching the Knights go forth in their galleys, while the sisters did nothing to save the Faith except to make lovely wreaths of silk flowers for the novices to wear at their reception; and they raised a mild feminist revolt. They requested the privilege of supplementing their Faith with works, of reviving the ancient traditions of the first Sisters of the Order and participating in the Nursing activities of the Knights." They were rebuked and told "God has led you from desire to the contemplation of virtue and piety. Remember how Lot's wife was turned to salt because she looked back." The nuns resigned themselves to remain cloistered and thus were undisturbed by the changes which drove the Knights from Malta, so that now "it is only among the Ursulines . . . that one may still see in Malta the Habit of the Hospitallers and get a glimpse of that mysterious great white linen cross gleaming from dusky mantles in the dim light of a Vesper service."

But though the Knights were so jealous of their traditional privileges, we may note, not without amusement, that some of the less spectacular work was done by women. For instance, scurvy patients were not allowed in the Hospital but were treated outside by a skilled and "aged" woman. Furthermore, the sick poor of Malta were cared for by "elderly" women, under the supervision of Knights. It was the duty of the women to make daily rounds, carry supplies to the sick and see that the physicians appointed to visit them attended to their duties and that the patients received the proper food and medicines.

The Hospital itself, says Miss Schermerhorn, would bear comparison with the great hospitals of Pisa, Florence and Rome with the balance often in favour of Malta. There were "Separate wards for surgical and medical cases, fever and dysentery patients isolated . . . the luxury of single beds at a time when in most hospitals the sick lay two or three to a bed. . . . A school of Anatomy and Surgery in connection with the Hospital, with courses of study in infectious diseases and public anatomical clinics where even the bodies of Knights and Grand Crosses who died in the Hospital were brought for dissection . . . a botanical garden . . . and an excellent surgical and medical library."

Their medical activities were only the undercurrent of the activities of the Order in Malta. More energy was devoted (and more space is given in this book) to more militant interests. But when the work of the Order as the "Water Police of the Mediterranean" was no longer needed and the island was taken from them, the Hospitallers settled in Rome and, from there they now direct "a charitable and religious service more in accord with modern ideals than the capturing and plundering of Moslem galleys. . . . Thus the circle is complete, and the Hospitallers have returned to their original purpose."

THE PROBLEMS PRESENTED BY MENTAL DEFICIENCY.

The Council of the British Medical Association have appointed a committee "to report on the various medical problems presented by mental deficiency, more especially with regard to methods which have been suggested to reduce its incidence and to the facilities for medical education in this subject."

Dr. R. Langdon-Down states that figures show that mental deficiency has been about doubled in one generation and expresses the opinion that sterilisation is the only practical and effective means of dealing with the question, birth control not being applicable to people of low intelligence.

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