

THE LONDON HOSPITAL YESTERDAY AND TO-DAY.

In September, 1879, I had completed a year's training as a Paying Pupil at the old Royal Infirmary, Manchester, a splendid old hospital, long since superseded by one much more modern and extensive. I purposely write "splendid," because of the spirit of humanity and fine discipline maintained in its wards, and of the generosity with which I was treated and taught by wise old Sisters and the great physicians and surgeons on its nursing and medical staffs. I remember and revere their personalities to this day.

Who knowing him well can forget the charm of Dr. Mathias, of Cheadle Convalescent Hospital, attached to the M.R.I.? When he invited me to take the matron's duty for a month I agreed with pleasure. A few days later I received quite unexpectedly the following letter dated September 6th, 1879:

London Hospital,
Whitechapel Road, E.

Dear Madam,

Your friend, Miss Leslie, has been with me and I have appointed her as "Sister" to the male accident wards. I have now a vacancy in the female medical wards for a "Sister," and from the account I receive of you from Miss Minks (the Matron under whom I trained at the Children's Hospital, Nottingham) I should like you to take them if you feel that the responsibility will not be too much for you. I enclose rules, will you write by return of post and give me full particulars about yourself, age, etc., and also when you could enter on fresh duties? I fear I could not wait until the 24th as the Sister leaves on that day, and it is positively necessary that her successor should be with her for four days at least to take up the inventory of linen, etc., so that there may be no misunderstanding afterwards.

Yours truly,
ANNIE M. SWIFT.

This letter filled me with great joy. To work as Sister in the East End of London in those days of acute poverty and degradation was just the environment in which I longed to expend all my energies, and, released from duty at Cheadle, I wrote to the Matron of the London Hospital giving her the particulars she required.

Dated September 10th, 1879, I received the following letter from her:

London Hospital,
Whitechapel Road, E.

Dear Miss Manson,

I fear you have not received my letter addressed to the Hospital, Cheadle, saying that I was quite disposed to give you a trial as "Sister" in our female medical wards, 52 beds, salary £36, all found but washing, towards which 1s. per week only is allowed. The difficulty I see is this, that if you decide on coming here you will be obliged to give up taking the duty of the Matron at Cheadle. For this I am very sorry, but it is imperative on me to release the present Sister as soon as possible, as she is in very bad health, added to which I am most anxious to take rest myself, fearing that if I do not I shall break down, and, of course, I wish to settle this ward before I go. Will you let me have a line as soon as possible, telling me your decision, indeed I shall be glad of a telegram to say if you will take the appointment or not? If you decide on coming fix the earliest day possible, even this week would suit me.

Yours very truly,
ANNIE M. SWIFT.

A few days later I bid good-bye to all my kind friends at the M.R.I., many members of the senior staff, the Superintendent, Matron and Sisters assembling on the steps to wave me farewell to pastures new.

On the afternoon of that day I drove along the Whitechapel Road, sunny and spacious and quite a surprise, to the London Hospital. At the gate I was made welcome by "William," than whom there never was a greater model of courtesy. He had all instructions: "new Sister Charlotte? to be handed to Sister Rowsell (a precious registered packet!) Such were his directions. And there on the steps was Sister Rowsell, Cassandra Beachcroft, sprightly, straight as a dart, a devoted friend from start to finish. After tea she conducted me to the Matron's house, where I was presented to Miss Annie M. Swift—a tall, more than middle-aged lady—who had so trustfully given me my chance. I felt warmly disposed towards her, but she cast a severe eye over me, then she said:

"I will show you how to put on your cap," which she affixed with care (it remains unchanged in shape these fifty years, goffers—tails all complete). I peeped in the glass and thought it becoming, and then she startled me by remarking:

"If I had seen you I should never have engaged you."

"That would have been a pity," I replied, "you have no idea how delighted I am to be here."

Then all her grimness faded away. She bid me be seated, we had half an hour's heart to heart chat, and until her retirement, a year later, I received nothing but motherly kindness from her; indeed, she showed me great favour.

I was then taken across to Charlotte Ward (now Paulin), spacious and airy, with the Governor's garden on one side and the fine open space on the other. Sister had two nice little rooms, bed and sitting rooms, she resided on the premises, and was in fact never off duty. How could it be otherwise? Fifty-two beds always full of serious cases, the staff consisting of four ward nurses on day duty and two on night, with one scrubber to do rough cleaning. And everything was scrubbed in those days, floors, 52 lockers, tables, lobby, sculleries, lavatories, bathroom, Sister's rooms and cupboards.

And if there was a speck—well, there was "a high wind in Jamaica."

The Ward Nurses had received no theoretical training, but during a short probation had become marvellously skilled practical nurses. Women of strong individuality. Not a bit like peas in a pod. Once appointed to a ward they retained it for years if their conduct was good.

I studied the situation for a week and then realised there were four potentates in power, and one peripatetic inkpot floating around and that was me. So I invited them to be present around the lobby table, and addressed them thus—"For the future Nurses there is only room for one Sister on this Floor, and that is me. I am sure we can work together in perfect harmony, and our rule of life will be devotion to patients, order and discipline, loyalty to physicians, and thanks be to God.

I shall hold you in sympathy and affectionate regard—and you will look upon me as a true friend, not as a superior officer only.

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