

THE CATALYTIC PERSONALITY.

"'Alice in Wonderland' is dead," I read in the headlines of my evening paper on November 16th. The announcement had been made of the death of Mrs. Alice P. Hargreaves, the original "Alice" of the book. She was a quiet, retiring old lady, of considerable strength of personality, and had all her life retained that joyous youthfulness which endeared her to the great writer, Lewis Carroll. Seventy years ago she was his intimate friend. For her, and, indeed, at her express command, he created his humorous masterpiece, "Alice in Wonderland." We can be certain that had it not been for her intelligent appreciation and the direct inspiration she gave to the writer, we should never have seen the book. The shy, intellectual man, whose hesitation in speech prevented him from becoming a parson, was pestered by the little girl into writing down the wonderful story that he had related, bit by bit, in the open meadows on summer afternoons. It was for Alice that he wrote it, as a present, never dreaming of publication. Yet that original copy was sold by auction six years ago for more than fifteen thousand pounds. The ten-year-old child could have had no idea that she was making literary history, nor was it possible for her to have foretold the immense joy that, together, they would give the world. That book has been translated into many languages and is enjoyed not only by children but by adults. To Lewis Carroll we owe a debt of gratitude for his ridiculous phantasy, and to Mrs. Hargreaves also we owe our praise. She has left us, but "Alice in Wonderland" is immortal.

There are some people, like the late Mrs. Hargreaves, who have the power of awakening the latent possibilities in the lives of others. It is not seldom, through such influence, that great gifts have been discovered; but often the one who inspires them must be content with a lowly place in the scheme of things. He may find himself unrecognised and unthanked, while the one he has inspired receives all the praise—though that was not the case with "Alice."

People who so inspire others may be likened to those peculiarly interesting chemical elements known to us as "catalytic agents." They are substances which remain unchanged themselves in chemical combination, but, by virtue of their presence, set up reactions in other substances which without the "catalytic agent" could not take place. A very small quantity of such agents is required to produce very great results. We may compare this natural phenomenon with the little Alice, only ten years old, who spurred on the stammering, retiring genius, Lewis Carroll, to produce one of the greatest humorous works ever written. Even this young child had become a "catalytic" personality.

Nurses are, perhaps, the only professional class which has constant opportunities for mixing intimately with old and young, rich and poor in every social class and nation. Their work, happily, is essentially international, non-political and undenominational. Who, then, could have such opportunities for personal contact and service as the nurse? She, of all workers, sees individuals stripped of pretence and subterfuge. She knows her patients as they really are—or should do so—recognises their virtues, weaknesses, courage or despair, witnesses their crises, physical and moral, comforts them in sorrow or rejoices in their good fortune. Who can be such a "catalysing agent" as a finely trained nurse of stable character and a good understanding? The influence, conscious and unconscious, of one personality upon another is a matter being widely studied; and the findings of psychologists are gradually becoming applicable to our everyday duties.

It is impossible for one person to have contact with

another, even for a short period, without some sort of exchange taking place for good or ill. It should be the conscious duty of us all so to fit ourselves for work in a world sorely filled with unhappiness that we may be diffusers of real joy and not merely superficially cheerful people. We can never foretell with what fine mind or spirit we may meet. Recently an experienced mental specialist said, "I always enjoy taking on a new patient, for I feel that genius may be lurking around the corner waiting to be discovered."

Such gifts as genius and spiritual beauty are not confined to place, or class, or time, but may arise in our midst unexpectedly when we are least prepared to meet them. They are always above and beyond most of us in our own imagining, but in reality they may be very near. Few of us may have dealt with genius, but most of us have met outstandingly fine people. It is impossible for us to judge how many people we may know who have, latent in themselves, fine characteristics which await development. Perhaps the one thing needed is health, or friendship, or personal security in someone who has faith in that individual. We can only speculate on these things.

All nurses begin their careers with ideals, usually with the hope of serving others, but there are times when we are tired or irritated so that we forget these early aspirations. There are times, also, when our senses are blunted by the witnessing of constant suffering, of poverty, or sordidness. There are times when we allow our personal affairs and disappointments to obscure our vision. Let us not give way to these many hindrances which will necessarily fall to our lot. Let us rather maintain, in so far as we are able, a quiet mind, sensitive to the needs of those whom we serve in our profession, not cramping ourselves or narrowing our own spheres unnecessarily. For if we close our minds and become stultified we may be allowing opportunities of service to slip past us which will never come our way again. Let us rather be, like little Alice, eager to appreciate, to understand, and above all, to encourage the better efforts of our fellow men.

"WATCHING THE BRAIN THINKING."

Great interest has been aroused by the discovery of Professor E. D. Adrian at Cambridge, reported in the *Morning Post*, that it is possible to "watch the brain thinking."

Professor Adrian and his colleague, Mr. Brian Matthews, of King's College, can already obtain electrical records which show whether a person's brain is lying idle or engaged in concentrated thought.

With more delicate apparatus, it has been suggested by Sir Gowland Hopkins, the President of the Royal Society, it should be possible to obtain information which should be of direct assistance to brain specialists.

"It is a thrilling advance which is fraught with tremendous possibilities," Sir Grafton Elliot-Smith commented to a representative of our contemporary. "It promises to throw a flood of light on a subject on which we have hitherto been guessing, very largely in the dark—the question of the part played by different areas of the brain in different types of activity."

A further point of interest is that Professor Adrian's work has only been possible by radio-technique. His work involves the amplification of very small electric changes until they are large enough to be recorded by ordinary instruments. This is exactly analogous to the amplification of the current in a wireless aerial until it is strong enough to operate a loud-speaker.

It is also of interest to notice that the type of recorder employed by Professor Adrian, known as the "cathode-ray oscillograph," is the same instrument which is now rapidly transforming the outlook for practical television.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)