

## DEACONESSSES : ANCIENT AND MODERN.

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Many are the personalities who, throughout the centuries, have taken part in the making of nursing history, men and women who have so developed the powers of their will as to have been capable of the sacrifices that are always the price of achievement whether the motive which inspires these sacrifices may be altruistic or otherwise. "Let us now praise famous men" is a phrase which we sometimes hear quoted, and to praise famous nurses and venerate their memory and inspiration is, in a sense, the duty of the nursing profession if the example of its pioneers is to be kept alive for the future. It was not possible, in ancient Christian times, for nurses to bring to their labours the same scientifically trained *intellect* that is expected from those of the present, but there was no lack, in most of those old-time nurses, of a quality still more important, namely *intelligence*. It went far, this quality, united as it was with a fine enthusiasm and a great love of humanity. Viewing those early efforts to succour the sick at the beginning of our era we can indeed look into the past and "praise famous nurses."

Dimly indeed, out in the mists of antiquity, stand those figures whom we seek to consider, the patrician Deaconesses of ancient Rome. We are sometimes told that the women's diaconate of the fourth and indeed earlier centuries did not survive in its original importance for long. We need not argue this point here beyond reminding ourselves of the fact that, whether or not it be very widely recognised, there is always going on evolution and a continuous metamorphosis; from this aspect, apart from what history has to tell us of the deaconess movement in old Rome, we have one great fact to testify to its importance in history—those great abbesses who ruled over large monasteries, often composed of double foundations (one for monks and another for nuns), those scholarly and gifted abbesses were actually the spiritual descendants of the women who composed the diaconate of the early Roman Church. Still another fact is important in regard to the deaconesses—they were the first to bring women out from a position of inferiority in the West.

The Deaconess movement of the Protestant Church in the last century admittedly owes its inception to the impulse and example of those high-born ladies. Pastor Fliedner has said so quite clearly, and it is with the Kaiserswerth deaconesses that we are chiefly concerned when, from a nursing point of view, we consider the deaconess movement as it developed in later times. Nevertheless we cannot regard the two movements as to any great extent analagous. The one has in it the colouring of the ancient church with an almost oriental eloquence running through it when it comes to praise from the Church Fathers for the work and accomplishments of the deaconesses. In the modern movement there is the simple colouring given by the protestant faith. The Deaconesses of the ancient church, the great forerunners of such as St. Hilda of Whitby, who taught Cædmon, the first of the great English poets, Radegunde, the Thuringian Princess (later an abbess), absorbing her learning despite the strictures put upon her studies by her husband, the Frankish King Clothaire; Hildegard of the Rhine, so scholarly and so full of an almost scientific knowledge of disease and its cure that she came to be held suspect of getting her knowledge by forbidden and occult means, and Hroswitha, the philosophic nun of Gandersheim, with her wonderful writings reminiscent of Plato but warmed and enlightened by Christianity—the great deaconesses prepared the way for such and did more perhaps than we generally recognise towards the development of women's activities throughout the centuries. It may of course be held by some that the abbesses were not deaconesses but at least

they were undoubtedly a growth from the old diaconate and, besides others, we find two historians of the early middle ages, Thomassin and Abelard, referring to the abbesses as deaconesses. The deaconesses of the ancient church were women married under the free marriage law of Rome and were possessed of great inherited wealth, over which, in marriage, they retained complete control. Their admission to the diaconate was undoubtedly a matter of high ceremonial and important religious significance. They were ordained deaconesses by the imposition of hands and the bishop himself conferred upon them the diaconal stole and ring. They were actually regarded as holding clerical rank judging from records of the Council of Nicæa. Far otherwise was it with the modern deaconesses at Kaiserswerth. Here was no pontifical recognition but, in the obscurity of a village threatened with financial ruin and decay, was sown the seed of a movement which, in its own way, was to inaugurate a world-wide development. Neither wealth nor scholarship was in the possession of the simple young women, daughters of small farmers and indeed of peasants, who came to join the community at Kaiserswerth, but, just as the diaconate of Rome blossomed into the many great monasteries organised and controlled by women, so may we see the blossoming of the impulse from Kaiserswerth, as it flowed into and helped form the inspiration of Florence Nightingale, to spread itself abroad far and wide for the healing of mankind. Therefore let us "praise famous nurses" and, when we view the developments of modern times, give a thought to the "queenly Olympia" of imperial Rome and to the simple pastor's wife, Friedrika Fliedner. Friedrika's name is not blazoned in the pages of church history or saints' calendar. Rather indeed is it to be found among "the short and simple annals of the poor." The wealthy patrician of imperial Rome and the obscure pastor's wife each proved herself capable of high sacrifice and initiative of which to-day the whole world reaps the fruit. And so it becomes us to "praise famous nurses" and, as Schiller puts it, to seek "to pay to posterity the debt we owe and cannot repay to a bygone generation for the many precious benefits it has bequeathed to us" by developing, and preserving in the memory of the profession, the work of those who went before.

The first of the ancient Deaconesses was, of course, Phœbe, Deaconess of the Church of Cencrea. "She hath been a succourer of many and of myself also," says St. Paul. Tradition also makes her the messenger to whom he entrusted his epistle to the Romans. The Greek word *diakonia* is to be taken in the sense of minister or servant in its highest sense; *doulos* was the word the Greeks used to designate a servant or slave in a household. Clement of Alexandria, who lived in the second and third centuries, refers to women of high service in the Church although he does not actually call them deaconesses. Origen, a few decades later, makes reference to them. In the times of Basil and St. Chrysostom they were regarded as very important in Christian activities and the great Church Councils of Nicæa (A.D. 325) and Chalcedon (A.D. 451) drew up statutes relating to their work.

St. Olympia, St. Marcella and St. Paula are usually regarded as the three most important figures in the early diaconate, but there were others scarcely less so, such as Pentadia, the widow of a Roman Consul, who suffered much for her loyalty to Chrysostom, and Fabiola, who built the first hospital in Rome. Olympia was at the head of a foundation of 40 deaconesses in Constantinople. She actually worked under the ministry of three bishops there. She owed her education to the Bishop Gregory Nazianzen, she was ordained a Deaconess by Bishop Nectarius, who succeeded him, but best of all is she known as one of a group of deaconesses of whom St. John Chrysostom, another Bishop of Constantinople, wrote eulogistically; she kept in constant communication with him during his banishment

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