

DEACONESSSES : ANCIENT AND MODERN.

By MISS ISABEL MACDONALD, S.R.N., F.B.C.N.

(Continued from page 235.)

FRIEDERIKE FLIEDNER (1800-1842).

It is somewhat appropriate that we consider the modern deaconess movement at the present time, for this month there is taking place at Kaiserswerth the celebration of the centenary of its first Motherhouse. There was opposition enough to the establishment of the hospital; the world is ever ready to stone the prophets, and both the clergy and the medical profession opposed the scheme of the Fliedners. Difficulties relating to finance proved almost insuperable, and, indeed, but for the very able organisation and strong faith that lay behind the scheme, it would have been foredoomed to failure. In all those difficulties Dr. Fliedner turned to his wife, and her faith was strong enough to cause him to persevere. To quote his own words: "We looked about quietly for a house we could use as a hospital. At last, one day, the largest house in Kaiserswerth was to be sold. My wife had been confined only three days before but it was she who persuaded me to buy the house. We had no money. We bought it in faith on April 20th, 1836. In October, the hospital was ready. Its first patient arrived on October 16th of that year, and on the 20th of the same month the first deaconess came. Fliedner had the money required for the purchase of the house by Christmas.

This was the first effort towards the establishment of a recognised nursing institution in the great modern diocese of the 19th century, although Fliedner and his wife had been active in promoting many other schemes for the welfare of the poor and the unfortunate. Especially were they interested in improving the position of those discharged from the prisons and the development of this part of their work reads like a fairy tale from the day when little Mina, an escaped child prisoner, appealed to them for help and was given a home in the small garden house, the favourite nursery of the Fliedner children. "The little sprout from which the Institute of Love grew"—so Pastor Fliedner described the garden house many years after. There were many besides Mina who were saved from "falling into shame," as he expressed it, and, long after a house had been taken near the parsonage for the work among prisoners, the little garden house was affectionately and reverently spoken of as the seedling of the whole organisation which spread itself across the globe. Often in memory Pastor Fliedner used to picture his wife, as she crossed between the garden house and the parsonage with a happy smile on her face and a child toddling at her feet, to take work to the little delinquent in the summer house or to give her food and counsel.

The general deaconess movement was not, except in connection with the Mildmay Mission, destined to have any very close connection with nursing in England, and as it is of the Deaconesses, rather than of any special movement, that we would write, we prefer to confine our considerations to those two great representative figures—Friederike and Karoline Fliedner; they represent the impulse that caused the Kaiserswerth organisation to maintain its healthy growth long after they themselves had, each in her turn, surrendered its guidance.

In a study of Friederike Fliedner, we would direct the thoughts of our readers first to the beautiful valleys of the Rhine, especially to that which lies between Bonn and Bingen; in the neighbourhood is the Lahn valley, so picturesque with its old monasteries and castles, its woods and rugged precipices and the silver thread of the Lahn winding about through the green meadows. Near, in the neighbourhood of old Braunfels, was born Friederike Münster on January 25th, 1800. Her father, first a school-

master and later Steward to the House of Altenberg, had for his home a house that had once been a convent and which looked across the lovely valley of the Lahn. Few children have had the good fortune to be born in such lovely and inspiring surroundings as was the first deaconess of the Institute of Kaiserswerth. Just 600 years before there had come a pilgrim to these parts—none other than the Landgravin of Thuringia, the holy Elizabeth of Hungary who exercised such a profound influence upon the religion and culture of Europe. The Saint had travelled from Marburg barefoot in fulfilment of a vow, and in her arms she carried a little child—her daughter Gertrude—that she might consecrate her, at the Monastery of Braunfels, to the life of a religious. Years passed on, and the baby, who had come to Braunfels in her mother's arms, became one of the famous royal abbesses of the Middle Ages, Abbess of this very convent to which her wonderful mother had brought her in babyhood.

Six hundred years after that pilgrimage to Marburg, there came another baby to dwell within those walls, who, as she grew, proved herself no unworthy successor to the venerable Abbess Gertrude. Friederike Münster, who in her turn consecrated herself to a life of religious service, found the way to it through the school of sorrow. Motherless at 16 she undertook the care of her father's household, and, when he married again, was a true comrade to his wife.

Space forbids us to interpolate here the tale of "the hunger years" of 1816 and 1817 and the sufferings which had arisen as a result of the war, succeeded as they were by the worthy Steward's entanglement in a lawsuit resulting from the intrigues which arose in the princely house he served. Neither is it possible to tell in detail of the visit of the missionaries to the Münster household, when, in his dire necessity, they gave to the worthy Steward all the money they had collected for their journey, and then set out with cheerful faces and empty pockets to continue their way. The matter demands a reference because of the lasting impression it made on Friederike as a practical demonstration of faith. The yellow pages of her diary at Kaiserswerth bear witness to this fact.

We might follow her movements after she left her father's house and learn of her experiences in the institutions founded by Count von Recke, but those would take considerable space. Ultimately, she contracted a fever, which took her back to her father's house, where, shortly after, Pastor Fliedner was introduced to her; he chanced then to be visiting his friend the Merchant Wierning, of Dusseldorf, whose sister Sophie was a friend of Friederike. Fliedner was then engrossed in the subject of prison reform, and was looking about for someone suitable to act as inspector in those parts of the prisons which were allocated to the women prisoners. He confided his schemes to Friederike, who was inspired by his enthusiasm and readily agreed to undertake the work of inspector, provided that her parents gave permission. Their consent was, however, withheld. Thereon Dr. Fliedner made a proposal of marriage. In the little church of Altenberg Friederike became his wife and proved herself, according to his later testimony, "A true life's helper in joy and in sorrow, a brave helper in the work of the house and the parish." A busy house enough it was, too, and often Friederike's sister came to help; Fliedner brought his young sisters and brothers to be reared at his home, and he took pupils besides. To all of them his wife was a true mother, ever ready to counsel and help. One of the pupils, who attained to fame, has spoken lovingly of her and told how often she would go to seek pardon from the Parson for some boyish prank or other. Yet this Friederike could herself be severe on occasion. Her daughter, after she was grown up, told a tale indicating that the patient and devout deaconess-mother was human enough in spite of her gentle, self-sacrificing ways. When

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)