

Among the many wants of society at this period, there is perhaps none more imperative, and none more inadequately supplied, than that of good nurses. The need is not only for a band of educated professional nurses, who shall be fitted to enter the sick homes of strangers, bearing soothing kin their very footsteps and anodyne in their quiet touch; but also for that knowledge and training among women generally which may enable them to sooth and nurse into health their own beloved ones when smitten with disease.

Here in the beginning it may be well to ask what are the qualities and attainments requisite in a good nurse? and how may they be possessed?

It is interesting to observe that the first virtues in character must form the basis upon which to develop a good nurse, as well as a good worker in any of the important departments of society. Conscientiousness and benevolence, as well as good common sense and clear perceptions must exist in the first place, and then careful training and the knowledge derived from experience, or peculiar natural insight must be added, before we can say of any woman, "she is one of the best of Nurses."

First, as regards the specific value of conscientiousness in this matter, I think it may be set down as a rule that the comfort of the very sick depends largely, often principally, upon the Personal character of the nurse.

No matter how enlightened and comfortable may be the general regulations of a home or of a public institution, that person who is constantly with the sufferer and applies or excludes the various appliances, determines at last whether or not they ensure his comfort and help, or whether their end is altogether defeated. A damp sheet, a badly prepared meal, the neglect of an hour in administering restoratives or food, a rude jar at the critical period when a quiet sleep is the one thing needed, often may determine the issue of an illness; and the nurse without a strict inward sense of rectitude to keep her steadily in the path of duty, cannot be safely intrusted with the helplessness of her charge. Besides this, there is very commonly an extreme susceptibility in the sick to the moral atmosphere about them. They feel the healthful influence of the presence of a true-hearted attendant, and repose in it, although they may not be able to define the cause; and dissimulation, falsehood, recklessness, coarseness, jar terribly upon their heightened sensibilities.

"Are the Sisters of Mercy" – the Catholic nuns – "really better nurses than most other women?" I asked of an intelligent lady who had seen much of our military hospitals. "Yes, they are," was her reply. "Why should it be so?" "I think it is because they are more unconscious of self," she replied; adding, "with them it is a work of self-abnegation, or duty to God, and they are so quiet and self-forgetful in its exercise that they do it better; while many of our women who go there show such self-consciousness! O they are so fussy!"

The importance of benevolence – of overflowing kindness *will be readily perceived. There is a great difference in diseases as regards the influence upon the temper, but the sick, with many beautiful exceptions, are irritable and exacting; they make heavy demands on those about them and often never know it. Dr. Johnson says "every sick man is a rascal;" Dr. Holmes affirms that we are all egotists in sickness, and that after a month or two of fever and starvation, the greatest man comes near that definition of an animal – "a stomach ministered to by organs." I confess it has surprised me to see the most self-sacrificing and considerate of others in health, seem, in the many and imperative wants of sickness, to lose all consideration for the weariness and privations of those who attend them, even though these be the nearest and dearest relatives. Doubtless this is a wise provision in nature, to ensure them the attentions they need, and upon which their lives may depend; and beneficently they are spared the additional suffering of realizing how terribly they are draining the strength of others; but it is also a trial of patience and endurance on the part of the nurse, which only overflowing benevolence or warm personal attachment can meet with perfect sweetness.

It seems almost impossible to make the strong believe that things "light as air" – the very grasshopper – become to the sick a heavy burden that cannot be borne; the sunlight of heaven, so necessary and healthfully stimulating, grows too sharp and exhausting; the sound that was once unheeded strikes like a dagger. A little impatience or severity, reproving tones or looks, neglect of real or fancied wants, may depress or agonize the nervous system of the sufferer, and prevent the rest, or sleep or appetite for food which comfort and recovery may depend.

A woman, a few days before her death, and struggling with extreme weakness and suffering, once told me that a common acquaintance that morning had scolded her for not bearing her sufferings more patiently. "It seems very hard," she said, to be thus reprov'd when one feels that she is straining every nerve to the uttermost to endure." Yes, it is hard and unjust as hard; but little did that self-complacent reprove comprehend the amount of suffering to which she was adding that last bitter measure. A few more drops of the milk of human kindness, however, might have quickened her insight. "I wouldn't humor such notions," is a common remark from some impatient Mrs. Wise-one, who will sometimes cruelly recite a long story of the whims and complaints of the sufferer to justify the harsh word and severe judgment, and end by saying, "she needn't be so unreasonable even if she is sick!"

Ladies, Sick people are like children. They feel what they want without reasoning much about it. Let us now, while in comparative health, fortify ourselves by self-discipline and self-renunciation, by reason and religion, all that we may; let the children be trained to endurance and self-restraint, let home discipline be thorough, and let no weak tenderness give present gratification at the expense of future suffering; but in the sweet name of mercy, spare the racked with illness * the smitten of nature all your homilies and wise reproofs. The sick bed has its own teachers - teachers as stern as justice - and needs not our additions; and they who will not try to humor the little harmless whims and notions of the sick, who indulge in sharp words and tones and looks, and will protest and argue before they are willing to stop the rattling of the windows, the grating conversation, or any other disturbing thing, and who do not know, through the intuitions of their own good hearts, that annoyances drain the vitality of the weak, and that a word or act that banishes doubt or anxiety is a healing elixir, may indeed be fitted for some rough work in this work-day world, but they are surely out of place in that chamber which weakness and suffering should ever make sacred. "Don't cross me", said a sick friend, whose temper in health was the sweetest, "I can't bear it;" and they soothed her in her need, and soon she could bear crosses.

God himself made and commissioned one set of nurses; and in doing this and adapting them to utter helplessness and weakness, what did He do? He made them love the dependence and see something to admire in the very perversities of their charge; He made them humor their caprices, and respect their reasonable and unreasonable complainings. He made them bend tenderly over the disturbed and irritated and fold them to quiet assurance in arms made soft with love, in a word He made mothers! and other things being equal, whoever has the most of the material tenderness and warm sympathy with the sufferer, is the best nurse.

Common sense, which is closely related to good judgment, is also essential in the nurse, but as this is the gift of Providence and "comes by nature," and as those who are deficient will never be taught it, and never be aware of their deficiency, we need not dwell upon this point of the subject.

But persons may be conscientious, benevolent, and also possess good judgment in many respects, and yet be poor caretakers of the well and miserable nurses of the sick, for want of training and right knowledge upon the subject. And this fact is the especial point of the present effort.

We are not all fairly dispossessed of the idea that if people are cured of their diseases it is the doctor alone that cures them, and if they die it is the doctor's fault - as, indeed, sometimes it may be - and we are slow to learn the mighty influence of common agencies, the greatness of little things in their bearing upon life and health. Many things, it seems, we must learn by stern experience. "It takes no strength to stand," says the thoughtless, vigorous boy: but, when on arising from a sick-bed, his knees smite together, his brain reels, and he falls from weakness, he has a new insight as regards the strength required to stand. So the woman who believes that it takes no strength to bear a little noise, or some disagreeable announcement, and losses all patience with the weak, nervous invalid who is agonized with creaking doors and shoes, and loud, shrill voices, and rustling papers, and sharp, fidgety motions, and the whispering so strangely common in the sick room and so generally and acutely distressing to the sufferer, always corrects this misapprehension, during a spell of nervous fever.

"Why did you not keep your nurse?" asked an intelligent and very healthy woman of one who had charge of several sick persons. "Because the patients disliked her, and always seemed disturbed by her presence." "But it does not seem to me that their whims should be consulted in the case" was the reply.

Ladies, sick people have their whims by right. "Instinct is a great matter." It exists before reason and it is true. Instincts are the great conservators of animal life. They are most obvious and guiding before reason is developed in the child, and they return in primitive force and for preserving purposes, in the weakness and

helplessness of extreme illness. Even in the wanderings of delirium, their pointings cannot be rightfully disregarded. The instinct of the sick that loves the presence of one person, and is disturbed and fretted by that of another, is unerring nature pointing to the means that may be potent either for increased suffering or for soothing or healing. We may think it all foolish and disagreeable for patients to be so whimsical, but a Reason finer than our clumsy understandings decided these repulsion and attractions, and it is the part of wisdom to respect them.

"Oh!" said an invalid, "it was so refreshing to have _____ come to my sick room; she glided in so gently; she never began to speak till she reached the bedside, and then she said just the right thing."

A rapid refinement, an exceeding acuteness of the senses, is the result of many forms of illness. A heavy breath in the nurse, an unwashed hand, a noise that would not have been noticed in health, a crooked table cover, or bed-spread, may disturb or oppress; and more than one invalid has spoken in my hearing of the sickening effect produced by the nurse tasting her food and blowing into her drinks to make them cool.

One woman, a sensible woman too, told me that her nurse had turned a large cushion upon her bureau with the back part in front, and she determined neither to be disturbed nor to speak of such a trifle, but after struggle three hours in vain to banish the annoyance, she was forced to ask to have the cushion put right.

If persons generally were taught to appreciate, properly, the great difference in the constitution and requirements for different persons, and to respect more fully the instincts of nature, good nurses would not be so few; but certain notions claim the first place. For instance, it is known that the sick take cold readily and to prevent this, I have seen windows and doors closed in the heat of summer, where a child, sinking with dysentery, and wet with perspiration, was lying beside its sick mother; both suffering, sinking for the want of the pure air that all were afraid to let into that polluted room. Again, I have known clothes heaped upon a sufferer despite of his agonized protestations that he was oppressed with heat, and that by kind hands, too, but they valued their own notions of his requirements more than his feelings; and they were wrong.

Others, in carrying out the newly grasped truth, that all need fresh air, pay no respect to the chilly, susceptible condition, of one who, from constitution or some peculiar condition, requires more clothing, and invariably takes cold when exposed to the slightest draught or dampness,. "Fresh air is poison to me," said a sick one who had suffered in this way; and many illnesses, doubtless, owe their fatal result to a want of discrimination in the use of the great gift of pure air.

The conversation which is so easy and delightful to the strong is often prolonged by friends, and physicians, too, to the serious injury of the sufferer. "I grew hot and I grew cold," said a lady, "but I said nothing still hoping the friends would withdraw, but they talked on and on, and the air in the room grew close, and, afterwards, I tossed and turned and sleep would not come." Evening visits are especially exhausting and injurious.

Although it is true that visitors are commonly drains upon the strength of the weak, yet it is also true that sometimes the sufferer needs the assuring visit of some judicious friend, and there is no place in which fitting words are more emphatically like apples of gold in pitchers of silver than in the sick room. A distressing incident or bitter memory, cannot be put aside and forgotten as may be in health; it clings, and haunts, and stings; some friendly assistance is needed to drive away the tormentor, and they who, from the pure fountains of their own hearts, bring fitting and comforting words, mingled with the "silence which is golden", whether they be called nurses or by some other name, are truly ministering angels, bearing sweetness and healing to the chamber of suffering.

But comforting words are not the only means of soothing the invalid. They who have seen despondency made restful composure by the taking of some suitable nutriment, and fever, and even delirium relieved by the judicious change of clothes and the admission of pure air into the room, know how much right attention to bodily wants can alleviate mental disquietude.

I have seen a child seized with convulsion because its head had been covered and greatly heated while it slept, and I have known convulsions also occur in a child from eating the almonds beneath coats of sugar.

Few realize the importance of rightly feeding the sick, the medicine all believe in. Some knowledge of the nature of foods and their relation to the living organism should be possessed by every nurse and every woman. As an illustration, a distinguished physician, of this city, in speaking of the fact that sick people, especially children, often die for want of nutriment, and no one suspects the cause related to this case: A lady lately made a long sea voyage with a child that she did not nurse, and gave it on the voyage, only sweetened farina and farina water for food. When it arrived here, sick, emaciated, old-looking, and apparently dying, the doctor was called in. He was sagacious enough to perceive that the child was starving, and that milk was the medicine it needed. It was soon well, but that mother evidently was ignorant of the important fact that sugars and starches (farina) is pure starch do not contain the materials that will nourish all parts of the body, and cannot of themselves long sustain life; and this ignorance came near leaving her childless.

A lady lately related to me the case of her friend whose darling little girl was very ill, and grew weaker and weaker, until it was given up to die; a few weeks ago the lady met the mother with this same little girl, plump and rosy and on inquiring what miracle had so renewed that young life, was told that it was raw oysters; That the child had at first sucked a raw oyster and seemed eager for more; That it would awake in the night and cry for oysters, and still it grew stronger and stronger, as the mother, who read the wisdom of nature in the want of the child, fed it as it desired. It is by no means certain, however, that some other mother, hearing of this marvelous oyster cure, may not cram oysters down the revolting stomach of some little victim, to its serious injury; for thus people do.

A medical friend lately related his own experience in his youth in a similar case. He had been sick a long time, his physician came day after day, and still he grew no better. That dear aunt with whom he lived forbade this article of food and the other, and only his prescribed, hateful, sick diet was permitted. But one day when the table was set for the family, and the aunt was absent, he succeeded in obtaining from it a large platter of chipped beef, and ate and ate until it was finished. The aunt came in and was alarmed at the terrible thing that had happened. She sent post haste for the Doctor, but he was away and no other was within reach; She moaned and clasped her hands and waited in terror for the fatal effects of that beef! The morning came and the boy had only slept; the midday brought the Doctor; he heard the aunt's story, but thought it too late to give the emetic that ought to have been administered the night before. He looked at the patient's tongue, it was better, the expected chill had not occurred, the boy was lively, and in short, had no occasion further for the Doctor. I have a friend who when a young girl and very ill, cried for ham until her physician at last said "give it to her, she can't live anyhow." She did live, however, and to this day stoutly maintains that she was cured by that ham! So again, one man told me that his convalescence from a terrible illness dated from the hour that he obtained a jar of pickles and consumed them, to the horror and alarm of his friends; and another described the healing that came from long, deep, interdicted draughts of cold water, "stolen waters" so sweet and healing that their remembrance was a lifelong refreshment.

But you will say are not the sick often injured by over-eating? Do they not sometimes desire things entirely unsuitable, and is not great caution requisite? Yes, this is true also. The weakened digestive powers often are greatly disturbed by articles that might have been taken with perfect impunity in health, some persons are not so perfect in their instincts as others, and the nurse and the invalid learn by observation and by suffering that some things are not to be taken at all and others in small quantities; but these exceptions do not disprove the interesting and important truth that generally the persistent craving of the sick is the pointing of nature as to the article of food needed and the amount required, and that that is disgusting is injurious.

I saw a family alarmed lately on accident of the illness of a member, whose politeness had caused her distressing symptoms. She had been in a disordered and rather depressed condition bodily, but had ventured out to dine, and veal was the meat of the occasion. She felt sick; nature, ever faithful, in the shape of a recoiling stomach, hinted that veal was not the thing for her just then, but her entertainer would feel sorry and disappointed, so determinedly she forced it down, and this was the secret of her illness. She was almost as polite as an urbane man I know, who, at the expense of subsequent illness, ate an addled egg, lest his kind hostess should suspect that her breakfast was not altogether good. Whether this excessive politeness should not "be more honored in the breach than in the observance" is here a relevant question.

But I have known patients greatly in need of food, and who could have taken it if it had been nicely prepared, turn away unable to eat, solely because the nurse did not know how to make it palatable and attractive. Great chunks of sour or badly baked bread, beef tea with a curious taste from the vessel in which it was prepared, Milk warm and sour, tea cold and smoked, butter soft and stale, meat tough and burned,

soup salt as brine, have often lost a needed meal for a shrinking sufferer, while the cook, with the usual pride of women in regard to their own culinary powers, never believed it was a defect of hers, but only the notion of the invalid, that the meal was not good and not eaten.

It is often exceedingly important to the very weak who can take but little nutriment, to have that little often, and just when they want it. I have known invalids sustain great injury and suffering, when exhausted for want of food, they have had to wait and wait, feeling as if every minute was an hour, while some well fed nurse delayed its coming.

"You ought to have my nurse," said a lady. It makes me hungry now to think of the meals she brought me upon that little waiter when I was sick. Such brown thin toast, such good broiled beef, such fragrant tea, and everything looking so exquisitely nice! If at any time I didn't think of anything I wanted, nor ask for food, she did not annoy me with questions, but brought some little delicacy at the proper time, and somehow, when it came I could take it.

The stories of some of our ladies who go week after week on errands of mercy to our military hospitals are instructive, and some of them very instructive.

One lady told me of several young men in one hospital, sick, and apparently unable to rally from their diseases. They couldn't eat; they couldn't bear the hospital fare, it disgusted them, and they seemed doomed to sink. One of them, however, asked for stewed chicken: others begged the ladies to try to do something for one young man whose only hope was to get well enough to be taken to his home in Ohio to die. The ladies hastened back to the city they bought and stewed chickens, and with these and sweet home-made bread, and butter, returned to the hospital. By consent of the physician in charge they heated the chicken, spread the nice bread and butter, and bore them round to the proper recipients. "Oh, this is like my mother's stewed Chicken said one; "this tastes like the bread and butter my wife used to prepare," said another. Some, at first, thought they did not want any food, they had no appetite: but they were induced to taste, this stimulated and gave a little tone to their stomachs, and they desired more, - they could eat.

Time after time, the ladies repeated their visits and their sustaining gift and several of those whose cases were considered hopeless recovered. One of these, happy in renewed health, said to the ladies, "I owe my life to your stewed chicken. My appetite returned, and I began from that time to recover."

People may say that there is no use and propriety in ladies frequenting these Hospitals, and that government provisions are sufficient, but there is many a generous life preserved by the insight and enlightened ministrations of these noble women; and in far away homes, by eastern hills and western streams and prairies, shall mothers and sisters cover with blessings the names of those whose true womanly hearts and hands soothed, perchance saved, the beloved of their hearts.

Knowledge, the assurance that one knows what to do, always gives presence of mind, and presence of mind is important in a sick room, and indeed in every home. Who has not known cases of consternation in families when someone has fainted, or been burned, or cut, and none was present who knew how to revive the sufferer, or stop the streaming blood, or promptly make the soothing and saving application to the burn? and yet efficiency of this kind would doubtless save many a life, and be a most fitting and desirable accomplishment in every woman.

And have we not many of us known of instances in which when doctors gave up the case as hopeless and death seemed near, some wise friend, some wife, or Mother, who watched with "the patience of hope" and the faith of love; who when the body was cooling placed the warm bottles or bricks at the feet, and poured in the stimulant or nutriment just at the right moment; who, stilled all harsh sounds, and soothed even delirium with tenderest tone or words, has been rewarded by seeing health return, and by being ever after revered by the sufferer as the restorer of his life?

The good nurse is an artist. Oh, the pillowy softness of her touch, the neatness of her simple unrustling dress, the music of her assured yet gentle voice and tread, the sense of security and rest inspired by her kindly hopeful face, the promptness of her attention to every want, the repose that like an atmosphere encircles her, the evidence of heavenly goodness and love that she diffuses! "May you die among your kindred." was an Eastern benediction; "May such a nurse bless your sickness" is one not less comprehensive.

If there is one purpose of a personal kind for which it is especially desirable and proper to lay up means, it is to be well nursed in sickness; yet in the present state of society, this is often absolutely impossible, even to the wealthy, because of the scarcity of competent nurses. Families worn down with long and extreme illness of a member require relief, and a stranger whose feelings will be less intensely taxed, and who can therefore better endure the labor, for a time, is desirable. But, alas, how often it is found impossible, "for love or money", to obtain one capable of taking the burden from the exhausted sister, or mother, or daughter, and how often in consequence these lie down themselves upon a sick bed to die prematurely, or struggle through weary years with a broken constitution. Appeal to those who have made the trial, and you will find that very seldom have they been able to hire those who by nature, or knowledge and training, were competent for their duties. Ignorant, unscrupulous, inattentive, how often they injure and disturb the patient. A physician told me that one of his patients had died, because the nurse, contrary to order, had at a critical period, washed her with cold water. I have known of one at least who quieted a fretful child by stealth, with laudanum; and of very many who drained and exhausted the sick by their incessant talking! One lady said, that when to escape this distressing garrulity, she closed her eyes in weariness, the nurse exclaimed aloud, "Why, she is going to sleep while I am talking to her". A few only, of those sensible and "quiet and loving women" whose presence everywhere is a blessing have qualified themselves for nursing as a business, and have followed it. Heaven bless that few! What a sense of relief have I seen pervade a family when such a one has been procured; what a treasure seemed found!

A distinguished citizen of Pennsylvania wrote to me not a year since, saying that he was anxious to engage a number of regular competent nurses of specified age and requirements to repair to a Military Hospital in Washington, and hoped I would be able to refer him to such. I could only reply, That I could not do it; That the number of such as he desired, had been entirely inadequate to the wants of the community in time of peace, and that the need of such was one of those great needs that the future must supply. Evidently he, in common with most others, was totally unaware of the fact that such could not be had for the asking.

Ladies those who were most active and interested in founding and starting the Woman's Hospital of Philadelphia, aware of this condition of things, knowing the injury and suffering sustained for want of a greater number of high-toned and well-trained nurses, as well as the need among woman generally of more knowledge in regard to the right manner of taking care of the sick, made the training of an enlightened and refined class of nurses one of the objects embodied in the charter of that institution. They believe that this is a demand of our civilization, needed not only to bear comfort to the stricken with disease and relieve the near connections, but to afford fitting and congenial employment to many women whose abilities may thus be made a blessing to society. With this view, it is proposed that my friend, Mrs. Cleveland, should give a short course of instruction to ladies generally, as well as to those who may incline to make the care of the sick a business, upon the practical art of nursing.

Her knowledge and power of imparting instruction with clearness will enable her to initiate those who may attend, into an understanding of the common indications of the pulse, the tongue, the skin, into the mode of arranging the bed and turning the very weak, the manner of preparing certain articles of food, and of performing those many indispensable acts which sickness necessitates.

As this is an effort intended for a most benevolent purpose, we trust the ladies of this community will become assistants in the work, by seeking out suitable women and encouraging them to qualify themselves for nursing as a business, and by infusing among ladies a due appreciation of the importance of familiarity with those practical details which will make them everywhere so invaluable in sickness and sorrow.

[The words underscored are in italics in the original lecture from which this was copied.]

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