

I LEARNT A LOT

AS an N.A. of the Red Cross Society I have learnt much in recent months about germs, the incubation period of scarlet fever, Taenia Echinococcus, methods of ventilation and many other interesting and uninteresting things. But last week-end I embarked on my first practical experience in nursing—ward work in a hospital.

As I rushed home from the office on Saturday morning, changed into crisp white uniform, and finally presented myself at the hospital for duty, I felt quite important and, at the same time, very much afraid. But the feeling of importance at least soon vanished. While I was still floundering in the hall entrance someone really important-looking rushed up to me and thrust a bundle of blankets into my arms. "Here, take charge of the baby, Nurse," she said and was soon out of sight. I was so amazed that for a few moments my mind registered a complete blank. Then I realised that I was standing in the main entrance, holding an awkward bundle which investigation proved did contain a tiny scrap of humanity undoubtedly a baby; as the important person had said.

Mother And Baby

I should never have said it was a baby myself without another opinion. I folded back layers of blankets and saw a tiny wrinkled face the colour of weak coffee, and two large, black eyes staring at me with such solemn scrutiny that I wanted to confess all my past on the spot. I was not afraid that it would suddenly scream, or do any other thing in which babies specialise, because I don't think it *could* do anything childish. The puckered face was so serious, the eyes so piercing they seemed to belong to some little mannikin of the old fairy tales.

I was still standing there, fascinated by this old-man infant in my arms, when a woman came up to me shyly, and in fact half afraid. "Is that my baby, Nurse?" and her voice was low and sad, too, I thought. I pushed down the blanket for her to see, and she took the bundle so gently, so possessively, that I knew it was her baby. "This is the first time I have nursed him for a fortnight." She spoke apologetically, excusing herself. I felt superfluous, and didn't say anything. She didn't seem to want a reply, for she spoke again. "He's our only one and means such a lot to Frank." And then, apparently noticing that I wasn't a regular nurse, "I hear the young nurses saying to each other, 'How ridiculous visiting a baby. It shouldn't be allowed.' But some day they might have to stand in a doorway and watch their own baby twisting with pain, and not be allowed to do anything for him."

I looked at the tiny mite again. But his face was no longer coffee-coloured, nor wrinkled like a little old man's. I saw him through his mother's eyes—he was a laughing healthy baby, throwing toys out of his cot and shrieking and

gurgling with happiness. He must get well, and play with Frank on the kitchen floor again.

Ancient Women

Another nurse came hurrying along the corridor, looked at us with some surprise—not very much, since nurses soon get used to anything—and then briskly bid me follow her. I hurried after her retreating figure, smiling good-bye to the mother and baby over my shoulder, and found myself at the end of the corridor, but there was now no sign of the nurse. I made a frantic dash for a door on the right, but with burning cheeks, beat a hasty retreat. Then the nurse reappeared, and we went into a ward occupied by some extremely ancient and decrepit women. I wasn't left much time for introspection, but mentally decided to start saving for my old age right from next pay-day. Nurse Blank called me over to the far corner, to a bed whose occupant looked to be about a hundred, at least. We began making preparations for a sponge, but the old lady would have none of it, protested very loudly, and it proved very effectively. "Oh, no!" she said, "to-day's only Saturday, and I'll wash on Sunday." She did not get excited, or at all annoyed, but remained calmly adamant, and just refused to be touched. So after a few minutes of this, the nurse gave in with surprisingly good

grace. "Come along, nurse," she said to me, "we'll leave her just now," and as we went to the next bed, the autocratic old thing picked up a pad and pencil and began to write. "That's not the worst of her tantrums," Nurse Blank was telling me. "Quite often she gets out of bed and flatly refuses to go back. We can't do anything but put a dressing-gown over her, and let her wander about the hospital as she likes."

Nurses' Conversation

When we had finished in this ward, Nurse Blank said, "We'll go and have afternoon tea now," but even that was a revelation. The conversation of the nurses amazed me. "The poor old thing's pretty low, won't last the night"—"Perfectly awful, dear, I can't bear Clark Gable now"—"Have a bun, dear?"—"Yes, I'm on night duty next week, damn it all"—"And, by golly, we just missed matron by a whisker." Everyone called everyone else "dear," and so infectious is the habit that I found myself saying "Yes dear" to a cast-iron figure in a sister's uniform, who came in and told me to report in Ward 3.

When I at last "came off," I felt more ready for the morgue than for a brisk walk home. But when I did get home all I could say in reply to questions was, "No, I didn't do much nursing, but I've learnt an awful lot."

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