

ARE SICK WOMEN BRATS?

BEING a woman myself, I have never questioned the theory, nourished by the screen and the novel, that the sick woman is sweet and undemanding (shot of gentle old lady, propped on pillows—shawl and knitting) and that the sick man is, on the contrary, inclined to be baffled and belligerent (cf. comic strip colonel with gout, Lionel Barrymore as Dr. Gillespie, or Charles Boyer dying slowly).

My own experience of days in bed has been nothing to destroy my belief in my own sex—I distinctly remember being sweet and undemanding. It was therefore with some indignation that I happened upon an article by a Miss Julia Debarry in *Coronet* entitled "Sick Women Are Brats."

"Now that I can afford to be choosy, I no longer accept a woman patient," says Miss Debarry. "When I first finished my training eight years ago I greeted every case, man, woman or child, with intense enthusiasm. But to-day, after caring for some three hundred assorted patients, I know that most sick men are nice people, but that most sick women are complete brats."

"Tradition, of course, is all to the contrary. Women have always remarked: 'Men are such babies when they're sick. They fuss so.' No doubt this is an accurate wife's eye view of the sick-a-bed situation. When a man is ill at home, his wife is worried. Naturally, her fretting irritates him. She is probably inept as a nurse. She knows none of the professional tricks of making him comfortable. Subconsciously, she resents his being sick. Sickness is her delicate feminine prerogative. But does she herself make a good patient? No."

"Air of Gloom"

"Take a look at Women's Surgical in any hospital. There is an air of gloom about the ward. Each woman intensely alone, concentrating upon her unique suffering. If two convalescents are talking together their conversation covers only the fascinating details of their own cases. There is no world beyond this hushed one of their martyrdom."

"But glance in at Men's Surgical. The radio is playing. The patients who are well enough are talking sports and politics. There is an atmosphere of camaraderie. Even the very ill are uncomplaining. There is no problem of discipline in the men's ward. The boys keep one another up to a 'good soldier' standard of behaviour."

"Night duty shows up another contrast between the wards. If a woman wakens and cries out while the nurse is busy at another bed, the rest of the patients stir and whimper. Wildfire

demands for service run throughout the room. Let a man rouse in pain, and how differently his ward-fellows respond. 'Pipe down, boy. She's coming in a minute.' 'Hey there, what'll you have? Maybe I can get it for you.' All down the long dim room men lift from sleep. Not to complain or demand attention, only to light cigarettes that glow steadily through the dark until peace settles again."

More Complaints

And, says Miss Debarry:

- (1) A woman usually treats her special nurse as a slave; a man regards her as a professional person doing a job.
- (2) A woman patient has a passion for paraphernalia, and likes being surrounded by her own belongings.
- (3) Nursing being a female occupation, a man reconciles himself to the fact that he knows nothing about it, whereas a woman feels she has a Florence Nightingale streak of her own, and offers interminable and usually foolish suggestions.
- (4) In personal comments there is a marked difference. Whereas a man says something like, "You certainly look nice in white." A woman's typical comment is, "Low heels always make the feet look big, don't they?"

In short, says Miss Debarry, women whine.

"It is part of such a patient's infantilism that impels her to make a handsome parting present to her nurse. There is the child's feeling that you can kiss it and make it well. And so madame subconsciously apologises, and consciously rewards, with some such extravagance as a wrist watch. I have eleven of these, to date, not one of pleasant association. Men know that they pay only for expert care. Any plus they may get cannot be bought, and they take out their gratitude, if any, in a different fashion. Instead of buying us farewell gifts they're just nice all along. And in those rare instances when they're not, we have our private revenge. We call them 'perfect women.'"

Miss Debarry's comments rankled. I objected to relinquishing my mental picture of woman as the Perfect Patient, brave and sweet and gentle, frail hand outstretched to bless. But could my mental picture be wrong after all? I decided to find out whether my nursing acquaintances felt as bitter about women patients as did Miss Debarry.

Probationer's Views:

"Are women patients more difficult than men?" I asked a probationer.

"I'll say," was the colloquial reply. "We always hate it if we're posted to a woman's ward. For one thing, it's twice as much work. They need so many more things; they're always ringing for you to fetch their face powder or their knitting



or wanting their pillows straightened, or a fresh nightgown. And if you really can't come and say I'm sorry Mrs. Smith, I'm busy, they threaten to report you to the sister. And what's more they do it. Then they're fussy about their food, and if one person in the ward has something special they all want it."

Another Probationer:

"Women patients always think they know a lot better than the nurse does. If you're dusting they say, 'Don't you think you'd get on better if you did it the other way?' or 'Are you sure you swept under there properly, nurse?' And you're not in a position to suggest they do it themselves."

Second Year:

"Women are admittedly a lot more trouble than men. But they're more grateful to you for any small services than men are. Men are used to being waited on at home and so they take things for granted. And women patients are far more generous. The other day the husband of one of our patients sent her thirty pairs of silk stockings from Egypt, and she gave me a pair."

Almost Qualified Nurse:

"As patients, women are more difficult than men. But then their querulousness is partly explained by the fact that their nervous system is more delicate than men's, and more easily upset by such things as operations. But when they're first admitted to hospital, they're usually model patients, because they're pathetically grateful for rest and attention. They're used to struggling on without. But towards the end of their stay they're so anxious to get back to their husbands and children that they tend to be impatient and difficult."

Registered Nurse:

"Conditions vary. I should say a man is a better hospital patient than a woman because he responds to discipline more readily. A woman is usually more of an individualist and therefore finds it more difficult to conform to rules and regulations and group discipline. In the home, however, the woman patient is easier to nurse than the man. A man being nursed at home refuses to take orders from his wife, even though he will obey a hospital nurse's orders unquestioningly."

Private Hospital Nurse:

"I spend half my day arranging flowers for my women patients, brushing their hair, manicuring their nails and telling them they look sweet in bed. I find it a strain."

Fully Qualified Nurse:

"After many years of nursing in the home and in both public and private hospitals I can state quite definitely that I would much rather nurse women than men. Here are my reasons:

"1. They respond much more readily to psychological treatment. If you tell them they're getting better it helps them, and if they have the will to recover they can triumph over mere physical weakness."

"2. They show greater fortitude and patience in long and difficult illnesses and are definitely more courageous in facing critical operations."

"3. Women show greater appreciation of everyday kindness."

"I admit that women take more running after than men, but I think they're worth it."

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So perhaps we can keep some of our illusions about gentle white-haired invalids with shawls. Perhaps we can discount, at least in part, the verdict of the probationer and draw some comfort from the fact that as a nurse grows in experience our virtues loom larger and our defects smaller. Or are we deceiving ourselves and is her good opinion merely the result of being several years removed from the dusting and the cosmetic fetching?

—M.B.

GIFT BOOKS

Whitcombe and Tombs have recently published a set of little booklets, the "Courage and Friendship" series, at 1/6 each.

No. 1: *Not Understood* (Thomas Bracken).

No. 2: *Ribaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.

No. 3: *Sprigs of Heather* (Songs and Poems of Robert Burns).

No. 4: *Great Thoughts* (Gleanings from great writers).

No. 5: *Golden Threads* (Extracts from *In Tune with the Infinite*).

Each booklet is attractively printed in two colours, and is complete with a special gift envelope.