

HOSPITAL SISTERS AND THEIR DUTIES.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

It may seem almost superfluous to add another to the many useful books on nursing already in existence, but I have not succeeded in finding one exactly adapted to meet the special want that this is intended in some measure to supply.

A trained nurse, placed in charge of wards, may seek in vain amongst the various manuals on nursing for any systematic instruction on the duties of a hospital sister, as distinct from those of a staff nurse or probationer. I hope that a few suggestions, gathered from the experience of others, may prove of service to the anxious beginner when she takes up a sister's work. Many of the inevitable difficulties may be diminished if the best method of meeting them has been carefully studied, and if the new sister is to some extent prepared for them.

People who are unacquainted with the actual, practical work of a hospital suppose, not unnaturally, that when a probationer has learnt to be a nurse she is fit to be a head nurse, or what is now gener-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05307-5 - Hospital Sisters and Their Duties

Eva C.E. Lückes

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 HOSPITAL SISTERS AND THEIR DUTIES.

ally termed a sister. They imagine that the satisfactory fulfilment of the duties appertaining to one position ensures the same result in the other. A better understanding of the qualifications required for a sister would immediately show that this is a very inadequate view of the subject.

I do not mean to imply that nothing has hitherto been done to help hospital sisters in the discharge of their duties. Many hints especially for them, as well as for those engaged in district or private nursing, will be found amidst the general instructions written for all nurses. But the fact remains, that much is involved in the efficient discharge of a sister's duties which appears to be but little understood. A thorough knowledge of nursing is only one out of many qualifications that are considered indispensable. It is not surprising that those who have no personal experience of hospital life should fail to perceive this, but it *is* curious that some who have had this advantage should lack sufficient penetration to discover how much is required in addition to the technical knowledge of nursing, before the satisfactory discharge of a sister's duties becomes a possibility.

Though writing for hospital sisters and nurses rather than for the general public, I wish to speak to them not of nursing, but of other duties which devolve upon them in connection with that work. All the qualities needed to make a good head of a household are essential for a good head of a ward. The same constant thought for others; the same

method in arrangement of work; the same forethought to meet the expected incidents of the day; the same readiness to bear the brunt of the *unexpected*, and to make the best of circumstances; the same cheerfulness and sweet temper to allay the friction so apt to rise between even good workers; the same unflinching courtesy to stray visitors of all kinds, however inopportune their visits may be,—all these and other qualities, too many and too obvious to enumerate, which go to form the guiding spirit of a well-ordered household, are at least equally indispensable in a hospital sister. The character of the sister in charge of any set of wards will not only affect the comfort and well-being of the sick or injured under her care, but will also exert a distinct influence over the members of the nursing staff who look to her for instruction and guidance.

I do not wish for one moment to exalt hospital at the expense of family life. On the contrary, I am desirous of showing the necessity for importing all the sweetest home virtues into it, and of impressing upon every woman who considers that a sister's post is the exact office to suit herself, what the nature of a sister's work really is, and what qualifications it demands from her.

If we accept the general axiom that some kinds of work are best adapted for men and some for women, we shall readily understand that women will best succeed in their own particular work by bringing into it their special characteristic of *womanliness*. I am inclined to emphasise this because

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05307-5 - Hospital Sisters and Their Duties

Eva C.E. Lückes

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 HOSPITAL SISTERS AND THEIR DUTIES.

many people seem to think that if they take up work outside their own immediate home circle, they may dispense with the very qualities which render them of service inside that circle, and it appears to me that there can scarcely be a greater mistake. We need the same qualities, and we need them rather intensified than diminished, if they are to aid in the achievement of really successful work. The invaluable characteristics of which I speak will prove themselves to be of a very strong and genuine kind if they stand the severe test put upon them by hospital work. They will gather strength from constant exercise, and thus become of more value to the possessor and of increasing service to her work. It is not difficult to understand that if these are mere surface qualities in the woman who comes forward to take a position of such responsibility, her deterioration will be more or less rapid, and her work suffer sadly, because her character is altogether unequal to bearing the strain put upon it.

Gentle, kindly natures may be made capable of much good under the fostering care of watchful home influence, even if the lovable disposition be combined with considerable weakness; but such women are not well fitted for hospital life. Being more dependent upon others than upon themselves, they are overwhelmed by the constant demands made upon them, and do not possess sufficient depth of character to help to guide others. Such women, if thrown upon hospital work, often make excellent subordinates, especially if brought under the personal influence

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05307-5 - Hospital Sisters and Their Duties

Eva C.E. Lückes

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTORY.

5

favourable to their individual development ; but it is not of this type of woman that the best sisters are made. They have the right qualities, but on too small a scale, and allied with a weakness which renders them unadapted for responsibility. A hard, unsympathetic person is manifestly the most unfit of all others for work that is essentially adapted to women who possess in a marked degree those characteristics that we best describe as womanly. The harder-natured women may have their special work in other paths, no doubt, but wherever it may be, it should never lie in a direction which brings them in daily contact with sickness and suffering. We cannot help others if we have no perception of their needs, and this will be pre-eminently the case with the woman of narrow sympathies, who imagines that she is or could be a first-rate sister.

Women whose sweetness and tenderness are rooted in great strength of character, whose perception of the needs of those dependent upon them is quick, and who are thoroughly trustworthy and cheerfully earnest in all that they undertake—these are the characters best fitted for the care and guidance of others, and they will find in a hospital a splendid opportunity for the exercise of true and noble influence towards useful ends. But I should be loath, in an enthusiasm for nursing as woman's work, to exalt it unduly to the disparagement of other vocations, and particularly at the expense of the home lives, with their round of domestic duties,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05307-5 - Hospital Sisters and Their Duties

Eva C.E. Lückes

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 HOSPITAL SISTERS AND THEIR DUTIES.

which give so much more scope than is often supposed for the development of character.

It is obvious that the kind of woman I describe would make the best head of a household as well as the best hospital sister, and the inadequate characters are equally insufficient in both. But as the evil of mismanagement in a small household, while lamentable in itself, is less deplorable than the sight of a large family in the same condition, so incapacity in the person who is responsible for a large charge is a fact to be regretted in the same proportion. A great amount of good remains undone, and more harm is wrought by an incompetent person undertaking public work than is ordinarily the case if she confines her efforts to private life. It is best that those who are incapable of giving a sufficient response to the claims made upon them should not accept posts which bring them in contact with large numbers of people, but that they should exert their influence and example for good in a more limited circle, leaving the other appointments to be filled by those qualified to meet the demands which will be made upon them.

It is a mistake to suppose that there is no advantage in possessing a thorough education before entering upon hospital work, or to imagine, as some have stated, that any general knowledge previously acquired is thrown away in a life of this kind. Familiarity with several languages, for instance, though by no means essential, is a qualification that is certain to prove of frequent service in the wards of any

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05307-5 - Hospital Sisters and Their Duties

Eva C.E. Lückes

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTORY.

7

large hospital. The cultivation of mind, which is one of the best results of a good education, is certainly not of less value to a hospital sister than to women engaged in other work. It enables her to do more for her work and to gain more from it than is otherwise possible. There are many who, in some respects, are very slow to recognise the claims which their office has upon them for the exercise of these mental and moral qualities to which I refer. The failure to perceive the many and varied directions in which their influence should be extended is naturally more marked in those who are new to the work of a sister, but, unluckily, this lack of perception is not confined to novices. In some cases many things that would be helpful to the sisters themselves and others, remain undone, not so much because these sisters lack the power to do it, as because they have failed to see the necessity or, at any rate, the desirability of exerting themselves in these directions. It is universally acknowledged that we approach a higher standard by steadily working towards an ideal, even though that ideal may be impossible of actual attainment, than we are likely to do if we are contented to take our duties mechanically, without a clear view of the possibilities that lie before us.

A sister should work with a definite determination to extend the legitimate influence which appertains to her office in every direction in which it may render good service.

I should like it to be understood that I speak with the fullest sympathy in, and regard for, all the diffi-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05307-5 - Hospital Sisters and Their Duties

Eva C.E. Lückes

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 HOSPITAL SISTERS AND THEIR DUTIES.

culties and trials which beset the daily life and work of a hospital sister, recognising the strain which the truly noble fulfilment of her duties cannot fail to be. I am sincerely desirous of helping those who have recently entered, or who intend to enter upon this work. It will be apparent in reference to many details that I write more especially for London Hospital sisters, although I have been frequently assured that the want of a clearly defined standard of a sister's duties, as distinct from those of staff nurse or probationer, has been felt in other directions also, and doubtless many of the duties referred to are common to the post of charge nurse or hospital sister in whatever institution the appointment may be held.

Earnest workers need a definite object, upon the attainment of which they may concentrate their energies. It is encouraging to realise the great capabilities which the work of a hospital sister contains, and, at the same time, important to see in what direction lie the hindrances to its fuller development. It can scarcely be necessary to say that such criticism as is involved in the process of pointing out those errors and failings, which, in my judgment, detract from the merit and efficiency of a sister's work, is made in no unkindly spirit, and, above all, with no personal intention towards those who may be conscious that some details of their own work and management might serve as illustrations of what I regard as defects. All suggestions, to be of service, must be practical; and it would be

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05307-5 - Hospital Sisters and Their Duties

Eva C.E. Lückes

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTORY.

9

impossible to improve any branch of hospital work from a purely theoretical point of view. Therefore we must take the subject as it exists to-day. It is only by endeavouring to understand the present condition of hospital work, and the immediate possibilities of improvement which that condition presents, that we can hope to achieve anything in the matter.

In contemplating the various branches of a sister's work, we must study in each instance what to do and what to avoid, for we can gain assistance in both directions. If only every sister would determine to resist practices that are not commendable in themselves, but which have been unreflectively followed, solely because they have been inherited from predecessors in office, that would in itself be a distinct step gained. It may be that ascertaining what is unsatisfactory in systems with which we are already familiar, is not the least important part of the task that lies before us.

With these considerations in view, it is not very remarkable that even after thorough training as a probationer, and practical familiarity with the work of a staff nurse, there is much in the duties and position of a sister that, at first, fills a novice with surprise, inasmuch as she had not previously realised to a full extent what the charge involved.

I do not mean to say that there are none, who, amidst their own work as probationers and staff nurses, possess sufficient sympathetic insight and practical observation to understand *what the sister's work means to a sister*, but those who do this will be

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05307-5 - Hospital Sisters and Their Duties

Eva C.E. Lückes

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 HOSPITAL SISTERS AND THEIR DUTIES.

the exceptions. For the most part they will very naturally and rightly be fully occupied with their own important duties, and be giving all their attention to what more immediately concerns themselves. Given an earnest, conscientious woman, well-grounded in nursing and showing signs of those administrative capabilities which are essential for the management of large wards, her predominant feeling in taking sister's duty for the first time is a sense of well-nigh overwhelming responsibility. She is constantly thinking: "Suppose anything goes wrong with the patients?" "Suppose the doctors are not satisfied?" "Suppose the nurses are disagreeable?" "Suppose I make mistakes in the papers for the office?" and a variety of other such-like tormenting suppositions!

A very little experience proves that these "terrible" things are by no means certain to happen, and that if they do, the chances are very much against their happening all at once! No one entering upon such an important charge as wards containing fifty or sixty patients, as is the case with almost every individual sister at the London Hospital, could be without this sense of responsibility if she were in the least fitted to undertake it. The lack of such a feeling could but indicate that a sister had failed to perceive the nature of her appointment. Gradually this extreme sense of personal responsibility yields to custom; and it is *then*, when sisters have gained a certain amount of confidence from some proof of their own fitness which, we will hope, has come to them in the actual doing of the practical work, that