

While things were in this state, the Vicar, who was most diligent in his inspection of the hospital, discovered that each morning, cases which had been going on well the night before, had either failed in making the expected progress, or had relapsed; and consulting with the doctor, they both resolved to visit the hospital at midnight; and there they discovered—what the doctor had from his experience of such places feared—that the nurses, worn out with fatigue and weakened by fear, were in the habit of partaking freely of stimulants, and so were, to a certain degree, incapable of doing their work.

The moment the Vicar discovered this, he came to me to say that he was about by that day's post to write to a sisterhood with which he had some connection, and ask for nursing Sisters to come to his aid. I was startled by the proposal, knowing, as I did, the strong prejudice existing against them, and fearing lest they would rather embarrass than help.

However, our friend seemed nowise moved by such fears. He saw, he said, no other way by which to take care of the sick, and he was determined that they whom he had drawn out of their homes into the hospital should not be neglected. So I left him to take his course. What else could I do? I could not deny the facts he had put before me. I was not prepared to go and nurse the poor patients myself. I knew well he could not do it, though I was perfectly certain he would sit up, night after night (as I found afterwards he did), till the Sisters came, to watch the nurses, and thus perhaps after the fatigue of the day expose his own precious life to danger.

So my mouth was closed, and by return of post the Sisters came; came late one evening, in the dusk, and were in the hospital and at their work before any one was aware, or had time to take or sound alarm at the importation of such strange visitants.

The nurses, when they found they were to be under their direction, at once struck work, thinking to bring the Vicar to terms. But he, after a vain remonstrance, finding then indisposed to yield, quietly paid and dismissed them, the Sisters undertaking for the time the whole care.

Of course the disappointed and dismissed nurses made the most of their grievance, and soon succeeded in exciting alarm in the parish by their stories of nuns come amongst them to pervert all the poor patients to popery. This spread like wild-fire, and ere long a large and angry crowd assembled round the hospital.

Many of the most violent and vociferous were afraid to go in, but others, whose hearts were more in earnest, ventured to do so. Their horror at what they had heard was nowise abated by what they saw when they entered. From room to room, from bed to bed, glided these gentle women, on their missions of mercy, so noiselessly and lightly that the very stillness and charm of their manner, with their strange dress, such as no one had ever seen before, awed those who went in to make remonstrance and disturbance.

In an inner apartment sat the Vicar, making up, under the doctor's directions, various medicines; and there, on their beds, in all the fever and languor of their disease, were their relatives and friends, receiving every care, and apparently quite content with all that was done for their comfort. None of them had probably ever seen a nun in their lives, but they had heard and read of such lately; and what with their black dress and white close-fitting caps, and, above all, the silver crosses worn round their necks, there could be no doubt that there they were, actually living nuns in Protestant England, having in their hands the entire care of husbands, wives, and children. The anger, so loud without, was not less intense than the silent indignation within, and looks which did the office of words wanted no audible language to make them intelligible.

The Vicar saw all this at a glance, though he did not seem to observe it until he had disposed of that in which he was engaged. And then, one of the Sisters having come to him and whispered something, he rose and went to the side of a bed, where lay one who had no friend or relative in the parish, but who, when passing through it, had fallen in the village under the disease, and had been carried to the hospital. There kneeling down, the doctor and Sisters kneeling also, the

Vicar with the commendatory prayer delivered up the brief trust of that soul to Him who gave it. The eyes were fixed, the last breath breathed, before the prayer had ceased; and one Sister, gently rising, composed the limbs and features of the dead.

The Vicar rose, and, beckoning to the group who stood astonished by, motioned them to follow him as he left the hospital. Outside, with a wave of his hand, he hushed the rising murmurs of the angry crowd, as he led them to a little distance from the door. Then he turned and spoke, and never (as the doctor told me, for it was from him I had the story), never since he came amongst us did he speak with more power and love.

He said not one word to blame; he justified rather their apparent indignation. He admitted that to all appearance, when people knew no better, they had ground for alarm. But he told them first why he had sent for these Sisters, and then who they were. He pledged himself to the fact that they were as genuine members of the Church of England as he was; that they had no connection with or leaning to the Church of Rome; that they were good Church of England ladies, who had given themselves to God for the comfort of His people and the glory of His name; and if they would believe him—and he thought he had a right to their confidence—they might leave the souls of their friends as safely in their keeping, as he had no doubt those who had been just now in the hospital, and had seen their ministrations by the sick bed, could leave their bodies to their care.

One of the people attempted a reply; but the Vicar invited him to come into the hospital, and see the Sisters for himself, and test the whole matter by personal observation. There was a quiet smile gathered round his mouth as he made this proposal, and drawing near the door laid his hand kindly on the man's shoulder to move him in. But he shrank back with a horror so apparent that every one perceived it, and, as the Vicar re-entered the hospital the crowd dispersed.

A more quiet or utter discomfort of opponents the doctor told me he never witnessed. Still, I want to hear more about these Sisterhoods; for though I know a good deal more than our villagers do, I do not yet know as much about them as I ought.

## XXII.

### REPLY.

You ask my mind about English Sisterhoods. I give it gladly and freely. I consider them amongst the best blessings that the revival of modern days has brought into our Church. They are a wholesome outlet for our energy—a delicate utterance and expression of her love. They give to those who otherwise had no place in her work assigned and natural duties. They provide for those who are in sorrow or sickness or sin, the gentlest hands and tenderest hearts to smooth a pillow, accept a confidence, or lighten a care.

Our Church, in her essential and great features, in the orders of her ministry, and the provisions of her parochial system, has all within her that is generally necessary for the salvation of her people. But there are finer portions of her work which she had not hearts delicate enough, nor hands cunning enough, to deal with; until she added, to those who minister by the beds of sickness, and in the haunts of sin, to the hitherto uncared-for thousands for whom the Great Sacrifice pleaded at the altar is ever pleading above.

Those minute and personal offices of spiritual sympathy and bodily care, which are so essential to the saving of the sinful, or the healing of the disease, she could not engage in. She wanted, not the numbers only, but the very material necessary for such a work; until she found woman, gentle woman, with her strong loving heart and pleasant household ways, longing to be permitted to be to His mystical Body what Martha and Mary had been to Himself, when God was incarnate, and, in His human weakness—that leant upon and found solace in the strength of human love—made intelligible to human souls the depth and meaning of the Love that is Divine.

The admission of these blessed helpers into her authorized and defined work gave to that work a completeness which it wanted before: finding for woman her true place, where all the

love and self-denial of her nature might pour out their odour and refreshment at the feet of her Redeemer, dedicating to His service, in the regular order of its courses, the purest portion of her handiwork; spoiling not the material used by assigning duties which would be hard, unwomanly, ungenial; enlarging only the boundaries of home, asking only for those offices by which home is blessed and beautified, and woman made more womanly.

From the earliest time of Christianity, woman has been an acknowledged servant in the Church of Christ. "Phœbe, our sister, a deaconess of the Church;" "Priscilla, my helper in Christ Jesus;" "Mary, who bestowed much labour on us;" "Tryphena and Tryphosa, who labour in the Lord." These are the names and records of some to whom not only the Apostle "gave thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles." It seemed a sad feature, or rather defect of feature the fairest, in the beauty of our reformed Church, that she wanted this development so long. And now that she has it, all her care should be to keep it pure from those errors which once spoiled and periled its existence.

An English Sisterhood and a Roman Sisterhood are and ought to be as different as the English Church and the Roman Church. And though from the larger and unbroken experience of the Church of Rome in this we may obtain many valuable hints in our revival of Sisterhoods, we should be careful not to borrow from her any of these distinctive features which belong more to the principles of her own faith, and the habits of her own clime, than to our English Church and nation.

Our Church is the Reformed Church of England, and our Sisterhood should be such in every particular as the Reformed Church of England can honestly and heartily use. Not only should they avoid all affectation of Romanism—words, or ways, or dress, or customs,—which seem so much to identify them with that against which their Church protests; but all appearance even of party within the pale of our communion should be carefully shunned.

The work of Sisterhoods is too pure to be soiled by party strife, too essential to every section in the Church (if the Church must have sections) to belong only to one. Therefore, while it preserves its own distinctiveness unaltered, as regards all that is essential to its being and its work, it should be as simply Catholic as if the words Romanist and Protestant had never been heard of; with as little in its form to excite prejudice, and as much to provoke to love and all good words and works, as can possibly be.

The easy mistakes into which persons are liable to fall, in the formation and carrying out of such a system, seem to be these:—First, the desertion of natural duties for duties which will be understood when I call them those of a religious life. Secondly, the taking of life-vows of perpetual separation and celibacy. Thirdly, the recognition of ecclesiastical authority as paramount to the natural authority of the parents. Fourthly, the adoption of a dress too easily mistaken for that of the Sisterhoods of Rome. Fifthly, the use of language and outward forms, such as crossings and manifold genuflections, which the Church has not generally adopted. Sixthly, a prominent position given, in reverences, processions and ceremonials, to the Blessed Virgin. Seventhly, confessions made compulsory; either by external rule, or the tacitly acknowledged, though not promulgated, law of the habit of a religious community. And lastly, an undue exaltation of the celibate above a married life.

To every one of these there seems to be a natural snare. First, a dull home, with commonplace uninteresting duties, sickly and perhaps fretful parents, to be exchanged for the æsthetic beauties of a convent-home, where religious services and companionship, together with an inward sense of self-devotion to God's work, brighten and sustain.

Secondly, the shrinking of an honest earnest soul from the idea that, once given to God, it could ever return to the world—longing for the protection of a life-vow to seal and secure.

Thirdly, the parental character which ecclesiastical authority naturally assumes, and the dependence upon it which, in the absence of other authority, becomes habitual—making it appear