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MISS FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE'S "NOTES ON NURSING."*

To the Editor of the Assurance Magazine.

SIR,—The important bearing which all matters connected with social and sanitary science have upon the health and longevity of the people, will be my apology for offering a few remarks on the above work, which, though entitled by the estimable Author *Notes on Nursing*, is devoted, to a considerable extent, to household *hygiène*—a subject entirely cognate to the questions usually discussed in the pages of the *Assurance Magazine*, as affecting, in the first place, the question of sanitary reform, in which we are all alike interested, and, in the second, the deepest interests of the assurance community.

With respect to that portion of the *Notes* which refers to nursing *proper*, I have only to say that the experience of the Author most fully qualifies her to lay down rules on the subject, and that every word she utters teems with valuable advice to those who have the personal charge of the health of others entrusted to them.

In connexion with *hygiène*, Miss Nightingale lays great stress upon the importance of procuring in our houses a due supply of fresh external air, by means of proper ventilation, a matter far too little attended to in general in this country, and she shows how it is possible to secure efficient ventilation without necessarily producing draughts of cold air—by means of proper arrangements as to the opening of the windows of houses, which, even at night, she considers to be unobjectionable.

Referring to the popular idea that exposure to the night air is generally undesirable, she says, that "in great cities, night air is often the best and purest air to be had in the twenty-four hours," and quotes the opinion of one of the highest medical authorities on consumption and climate in confirmation of the fact, that "the air in London is never so good as after ten o'clock at night."

* *Notes on Nursing: What it is, and What it is not.* By Florence Nightingale. London, Harrison, 59, Pall Mall.

While giving Miss Nightingale credit for having fully considered any subject on which she expresses an opinion, I must admit that her views militate against all my preconceived notions on this subject. The fact is patent to most of us, that a change from a warm room to the cold air has a most determined effect in producing irritation of the air passages of the lungs, if there should chance to exist the least tendency to weakness in this respect; and though I do not pretend to deny that the air at night may, in large cities, be purer than in the day-time, owing to the fact that a less amount of carbon is likely to be floating in the atmosphere after the extinction of the greater proportion of the fires used for domestic purposes—still the air being at night unquestionably colder than it is in the day-time, and the irritation produced by it on the delicate passages of the respiratory apparatus being clearly in proportion to the temperature, we have to consider how far the greater purity of the night air may compensate for evils likely to be produced by its lower temperature, and we must then strike a balance between the advantages and disadvantages of exposure to it.

There are five essential points, we are told, to which due attention must be paid, if we desire to secure the elements of health in our houses. These are—pure air, pure water, efficient drainage, cleanliness, and light.

In connexion with this subject, Miss Nightingale refers to the interests of Life Offices in sanitary matters, and says—“The object in building a house is to obtain the largest interest for the money, not to save doctors’ bills to the tenants. But, if tenants should ever become so wise as to refuse to occupy unhealthily constructed houses, and if Insurance Companies should ever come to understand their interest so thoroughly as to pay a Sanitary Surveyor to look after the houses where their clients live, speculative architects would speedily be brought to their senses.”

And again: “In Life Insurance and such like societies, were they instead of having the persons examined by a medical man, to have the houses, conditions, and ways of life, of these persons examined, at how much truer results would they arrive!”

“Undoubtedly,” she adds, “a person of no scientific knowledge whatever but of observation and experience in these kinds of conditions, will be able to arrive at a much truer guess as to the probable duration of life of members of a family or inmates of a house, than the most scientific physician to whom the same persons are brought to have their pulse felt; no enquiry being made into their conditions.”

There is some truth in this; though, I fear, it would be impracticable to carry into effect our author’s suggestions.

“Minute enquiries into conditions,” she goes on to say, “enable us to know that in such a district, nay, in such a street—or even on one side of that street, in such a particular house, or even on one floor of that particular house, will be the excess of mortality, that is, the person will die who ought not to have died before old age.”

“Now, would it not very materially alter the opinion of whoever were endeavouring to form one, if he knew that from that floor, of that house, of that street the man came.”

There can, certainly, be no doubt that with reference to one large class of diseases—zymotic diseases—as has been clearly shown in communications in these pages, we hold in our own hands the key to the mode of conduct by which alone we are likely to be enabled to grapple with them—and this key is, sanitary reform.

The principal diseases of this class are, fever, small-pox, scarlatina, whooping-cough, measles, croup, and diarrhoea.

That these diseases are, to no inconsiderable extent, of a preventable nature, there is, I apprehend, no reason to doubt. I cannot, however, entirely coincide with Miss Nightingale in her views on this subject.

“It is commonly thought,” she says, “that children must have what are commonly called ‘children’s epidemics,’ ‘current contagions,’ &c., in other words, that they are born to have measles, whooping-cough, perhaps even scarlet fever, just as they are born to cut their teeth, if they live.”

“Now, do tell us, why must a child have measles?” ‘Oh, because,’ you say, ‘we cannot keep it from infection—other children have measles—and it must take them—and it is safer that it should.’ ‘But why must other children have measles? And if they have, why must yours have them too? If you believed in and observed the laws for preserving the health of houses which inculcate cleanliness, ventilation, white-washing, and other means, and which, by the way, *are laws*, as implicitly as you believe in the popular opinion, for it is nothing more than an opinion, that your child must have children’s epidemics, don’t you think that upon the whole your child would be more likely to escape altogether?’”

I fear that this is going a little too far. Though the means suggested would, and do, no doubt, tend to diminish the malignity of certain types of disease, it can hardly be predicated that the most complete attention to carry out such means to the very utmost would necessarily have the effect of eliminating the diseases in question; and for this reason, among others—that we do not find immunity from them, or anything like it, even among those classes, the sanitary state of whose dwellings, and whose position generally, is as nearly perfect in such respects as it possibly could be.

While cordially recommending Miss Nightingale’s work to the attention of the readers of the *Assurance Magazine*, and thanking her for a contribution to sanitary science of no mean value, I have felt called upon to express conscientiously in what respect I dissent from her opinions.

Miss Nightingale is, perhaps, a little enthusiastic in the subject which she has taken up so warmly; but, when we remember the extraordinary devotion with which this Lady has sacrificed herself to the interests of suffering humanity, we can hardly expect that she would be otherwise than an enthusiast in relation to any matters connected with the sacred calling she so nobly adopted at her Country’s sorest need.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

Alliance Assurance Office,
12th December, 1860.

H. W. PORTER.