

The Beggar's Nurse

George Gissing

Table of Contents

<u>The Beggar's Nurse</u>	1
<u>George Gissing</u>	1

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THE BEGGAR'S NURSE Mrs. Hinton, a lady in happy circumstances, with the obedience of her husband and the admiration of many friends, received one morning a letter which greatly shocked her. The tenor of the first line or two prompted her to turn to the signature, which was simply 'Adeline.' Mrs. Hinton had known but one Adeline a close friend of her girlhood, now lost to sight and inquiry for some ten years; she it was who wrote, who told of sickness, destitution, despair, and besought the help that could hardly have been refused to a stranger.

The same day they met. As a representative of society, Mrs. Hinton had something to forgive; as a woman with a heart, she disregarded all but Adeline's necessities. The sufferer was tended, solaced, and, as her strength allowed or occasion offered, she made known the course of her obscure life to this sympathetic hearer. The story ended, as it had begun, with the statement that, for more than a twelvemonth, she had acted as nurse in a country infirmary.

'I remember,' said Mrs. Hinton, 'that you often spoke of nursing thought you would like it. Did it prove too much for your strength?'

Adeline shuddered, looked away, seemed unable to talk of this experience. But at length she forced herself to do so. In a low, unsteady voice, she gave answer:

'It not only ruined my health it made me a devil.'

The lady of delicate sensibilities was startled, and frowned a little.

'Ah, you don't understand,' pursued the other; 'you can't. Before that, I was never bad. Believe it or not, I kept the purity of my heart. You used to think me too sensitive, too compassionate; I was still the same when I began my work in the infirmary. When I left it, I was base and cruel everything that my true self had always loathed. I think I hope that bodily weakness was the chief cause of it. But I know now how women, not originally bad, grow corrupt in soul. I know what is meant by moral poison.'

Adeline's age was about five-and-thirty. Her voice had not much changed since Mrs. Hinton knew it in gardens and drawing-rooms; but her features the eyes, the mouth were hard to reconcile with memory.

'Yes, when I undertook that work I thought it was not only a means of support, but a privilege a way of recovering my self-respect, and more than that. At first I welcomed every hardship all the things how could I describe them? that I had to break myself into enduring. I had no experience of nursing, and no one expected me to have. They doubted whether I was fit for the post, but only because I didn't seem strong enough, and, as I afterwards understood, coarse enough. Paupers can be looked after by any one who will undertake it. No knowledge, no training at least, it was so in that workhouse.

'There were two of us nurses, only two. Often I have had forty patients to look after, and for twelve hours at a time. Ah! often for longer. I have sunk down and fallen asleep by dying people.

'But the toil wasn't the worst of it. That harmed only my body.'

The Beggar's Nurse

'I don't understand you,' remarked the listener. 'Do you mean that you had such dreadful people to look after?'

'They were dreadful often; creatures your mind could never form an idea of; much more like animals than human beings. But I didn't mean that. To begin with, I suffered most from never having any privacy. I had no sleeping-room to myself; two servants shared it with me when I slept at night, and when I had my rest in the daytime the other nurse kept coming in and out for things that were kept there. Later, she did it just to annoy me, for we hated each other. She was the first I hated—a heartless, vile-minded woman. She got jealous of me for all sorts of reasons, and told horrible lies of me to the matron, and raged because she couldn't get me turned away. At last, whenever I saw her asleep, I used to wish to kill her. It was a sort of madness; I used to go about saying to myself that it would be a good and right thing to kill her.

'She had been there a long time, and suffered from all sorts of ailments—the common ailments of overworked nurses. She was flat-footed, and had dreadful varicose veins, and—oh! I can't tell you. The one before her died of consumption—worked almost to the day of her death.

'I used to pray for strength against my horrible thoughts and passions. I prayed silently as I walked about. And I exhausted myself with conscientious nursing, because I thought it was Christian work and would keep my heart pure. That other woman took her duties as carelessly as she could. Poor agonising wretches would cry to her by the hour, and she wouldn't heed them—either because she hated them for the trouble they gave, or because it was cold and she wanted to sit by the fire.

'The worst was when I found that my own heart was hardening against the patients. At first, I pitied them, shed tears by the bedside; but that lasted only a short time. For one thing, to nurse them properly was impossible; no one could have done it. The doctor knew that well enough, and when I spoke of it to him he shrugged his shoulders. He used to sing to himself some lines—I don't know where they come from—"Rattle his bones over the stones, he's only a pauper whom nobody owns." And I got into the way of doing the same, though I loathed myself for it.'

Mrs. Hinton interposed.

'Oh! but surely this kind of thing doesn't go on in our day?'

'Not everywhere, of course not; but in a good many of those out-of-the-way places. I heard stories of some that were worse than ours. I am quite sure the workhouse patients are sometimes killed by nurses—killed by neglect and ill-usage, if not in more violent ways. And I tell you that I can understand it.'

Her voice quivered; a dreadful light gleamed in her eyes.

'You see, I could never enjoy food; what I swallowed there in the ward, or in some other hateful place, seemed to poison my blood. I saw everything with diseased vision. The whole world seemed to me—you remember that passage of Milton, about the "lazar-house"? That was one of the words that haunted me—lazar-house. It was the true word, you know—the house of Lazarus, the sick beggar. And all the world seemed no better. I really forgot what the outside world was like, and my heart grew full of evil passions. I—I can you believe it? I got, at last, so far that I tortured the patients who gave me most trouble. I purposely neglected their wants, like the other woman. I took away the cup before they had drunk enough, and had a dreadful pleasure in their complaining or their abuse. No, I am not worse than other people. I believe there is not a woman living who wouldn't fall to that in such a position—not one—not one!'

Mrs. Hinton said musingly:

'I know what it is to be impatient with sick people.'

The Beggar's Nurse

'Yes, and one must be more than human, one must be a saint, to nurse professionally and keep one's tender heart. I believe it is so under the best circumstances. In such places as that, it is the school for devils. I will never speak of it again, and pray to lose the memory of it.'

'Did you leave of your own accord?'

'Yes, thank heaven! In a moment when strength was granted me. Rather death by starvation.'

Mrs. Hinton, after reflecting, said quietly:

'I know a girl who is consumed with a sentimental desire for hospital-nursing. I shall speak to her mother.'