

CHRIST IN THE MODERN HOSPITAL

A BOOK OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

BY

PHILIP INMAN

Director of Charing Cross Hospital

Author of

THE HUMAN TOUCH

THE SILENT LOOM

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OIL AND WINE

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THE AUTHOR'S FAITH

FOR MANY YEARS I have been living amongst sickness, disease and death.

A distinguished scientist said to me:—

“I don’t know how you stand it, I should either break down or go raving mad.”

If I have kept my sanity through all these years, there is one supreme reason.

I believe in God. There is no earthly explanation of some of the things I have seen happen inside the walls of a hospital. They tell of a power that is greater than human.

AND THAT POWER IS GOD.

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TO
T. HENRY RANNS
MY FIRST TUTOR
AND
MY FRIEND

CONTENTS

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|---|------|
| I HEARTBREAK HOUSE | 9 |
| II BETWIXT HEAVEN AND CHARING CROSS | 22 |
| III THE SUNSET GATE | 36 |
| IV MORE THINGS ARE WROUGHT BY PRAYER | 49 |
| V INASMUCH AS YE DID IT TO ONE OF THESE | 61 |
| VI A MODERN GOOD SAMARITAN . . | 72 |
| VII THE LITTLE SANCTUARY . . . | 84 |
| VIII MR. GREATHEART | 93 |
| IX THE PREACHER WITH A HEAVENLY FACE | 101 |
| X THE MOTIVE BEHIND THE SERVICE . | 111 |
| XI THE GREATEST POWER OF ALL . . | 120 |

CHAPTER I

HEARTBREAK HOUSE

I WAS walking through the wards of the hospital with a distinguished scientist. As we passed row after row of white-covered beds upon which lay stricken and smitten men and women, he turned to me and with a strange sadness in his voice asked, "How long have you been here?" And when I told him, he gasped. Then he went on, "And every day through those sixteen years you have gazed upon sights like these. I don't know how you have done it. I could never stand it. I should either break down or go raving mad." That feeling is shared by a great many people. I know men and women who shudder every time they enter a hospital. They visualise the patients in their pain. They imagine scenes that are always sad and often sordid. "Why make me more depressed than I am already?" said one man when I invited him to come with me round the wards. And Sir Gerald du Maurier, the famous actor, answered a similar invitation in these words, "No thanks. It would give me the creeps."

A hospital to some folk is not far removed from a chamber of horrors. I have read recently a book by an American writer called, *The House of the Crucified*. In the preface the author describes it as an eye-witness account of what he has seen in a famous New York institution. He tells of the agony and bloody sweat that he found within those walls. He speaks of the destruction of faith, the desolation of defeat. From the first page to the last he makes the lives of all those patients a tragedy. "Life," he says, "goes out in darkness. Any suggestion that there is light at eventide is a sham and a delusion." I put down that book with a nasty taste in my mouth and a feeling of rebellion in my soul. It is not a picture of hospital life that author has painted but a grotesque caricature. And yet, on second thoughts, his viewpoint is not entirely surprising. He has seen—what many others have seen—only the surface. The superficial observer can only detect the darkness of the sky and what looks like a shadow over each bed. Nobody in his senses would call pain and suffering anything else but ghastly ogres. And if that were the whole story, that distinguished scientist would be right. Doctors and nurses and administrators would all break down or go raving mad. But there is something else which can only be discovered by long and close association with the patients.

It is this. Underneath the externals are to be found the finest flowers that ever bloomed. Faith and hope and love; patience and cheerfulness and forbearance; gratitude and sympathy and kindness. "In the wards of the hospitals of to-day," said the late Lord Moynihan, "you will see finer examples of the great human virtues than anywhere else in the world. You will see in your patients things that move you until you can hardly speak of them—courage, unfaltering heroism, readiness to meet, without a whimper or whisper of regret, anything that is to be sent into their lives. That is why men come from hospitals, not only cured of their diseases or relieved of them, but changed in almost every cell of their being by contact with something greater and holier than anything they may ever have known in their lives before." And Gerald du Maurier himself, who later became one of our most regular and welcome visitors, said to me, "This hospital has restored a faith which I thought the war had destroyed for ever."

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Now, strange though it may sound to-day, there was a time when I too would have endorsed the views of that American author. My early experience of hospital work saddened and sickened me. It did for me far more than that. It destroyed my

faith utterly and completely, until like the Psalmist of old I found myself asking, over and over again, "Where is thy God?" It is necessary to go back to my earlier days. I had been brought up in the religious atmosphere of a good home. A home which lived up to a motto hanging upon the walls of our sitting-room. "Christ is the head of this house, the unseen guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation." And nursed and nurtured in that faith I arrived in London at the end of the War. Amongst the few personal possessions I brought with me was my mother's copy of the Methodist Hymn-book, upon the fly-leaf of which she had written these words :

"Leave God to order all thy ways
And hope in Him whate'er betide.
Thou'lt find Him in the evil days
Thy all-sufficient strength and guide.
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
Builds on the rock that nought can move."

"Nought can move." It was not long before that "trust" was put to the test and I was soon to discover how insecure seemed that "rock."

During my first week at Charing Cross Hospital I met with experiences that baffled and bewildered. I saw the cruel hand of death rob a young husband of his wife and three little children of their mother ; the excruciating agony of a man stricken by cancer ;

the torture of a boy of twelve who in his young life could have done nothing to deserve such a fate. Amid those scenes of grim tragedy I felt my faith slipping away. Why should these things be? I asked. Why should a God who was supposed to be all-wise and all-powerful allow men and women to be broken upon the wheel of life? Why, if he were really love, did he allow innocent children to be racked in the torture chambers of disease? And to all those questions only echo seemed to answer Why?

Then as the time passed, other disturbing episodes contributed to my spiritual distress. From doubting the very character of God I came to doubt the very existence of God. One day a man was brought into the hospital mortuary. He had lost his life by falling from the fifth floor window of an hotel in the Strand. He was a prominent person in the town in which he lived and he had only been married the day before. It fell to my lot to break the news of his death to his widow, the bride of a day. I shall never forget the scene that followed. Stunned by the tragic news, that girl stood there dazed—not comprehending what it all meant. Then she broke down completely and I left her alone, for I knew that relief sometimes comes with the shedding of tears. When I returned half an hour later the storm had spent

itself and she was perfectly composed. In slow and subdued tones she started to talk. She spoke with pride of the wedding ceremony, the day before, at which a well-known bishop had officiated. She told of the loving care that had been devoted to their new home. She talked of the hopes and plans they had made for their future lives. Then in a voice which sounded far away she started to repeat the words of the marriage service. When she came to "Whom God had joined together" she stopped. "God," she said, "God, but how can there be a God to allow this to happen?" How indeed! And another nail went into the coffin in which my faith was to be interred.

One shattering experience led to another, for shortly afterwards there followed the case of Mrs. Evelyn. She lay in the wards—this woman of thirty—condemned by the doctors to an early death. Evidently she divined the hopelessness of her condition for one day she had a visit from her husband. "Harry," she sobbed, "it isn't true, tell me it isn't true." For a moment he looked at her tenderly, and then he bent down and kissed her brow. "My dear, oh, my dear." And like a man demented he turned his head and walked blindly out of the ward.

An hour later a Roman Catholic priest was sitting by the bedside of that patient. In words of sublime tenderness he breathed his message of consolation.

When he had finished a new light came into her eyes. Through her unshed tears she smiled her gratitude. "Thank you, Father," she whispered, "I feel better about it now." Then suddenly the whole scene changed. In that hospital ward the cry of a child was heard. "Mummie, Mummie," it called. When the patient heard it the colour mounted to her pale face and her eyes became strangely excited. "Darling," she called, "I'm here." And a little boy of about four years of age ran up to her. As she looked at him her face became hard, and set. The look of rebellion returned. With words of cold precision she turned to the priest. "Tell me," she insisted, "would you be ready to die if you had to leave behind you a child like that?" That question required a lot of answering. The more I thought of it the more unanswerable it became. To take a young mother away from her child was sheer cruelty; to rob a child of four of mother love—the most precious thing life holds—was malicious in the extreme. It could not be the work of a benign God. I felt sure it was not the work of any God at all but the machinations of a blind irrational fate.

The thought of that little fellow played havoc with me all through that day. It brought to mind a childish experience of my own. I could not have been more than eight or nine when it happened.

The doctor had been called to my mother and as he went away I ran after him to ask if she were going to die. He looked at me kindly for a minute; then he patted me on the head and said very tenderly—"Poor lad." Whether it was the tone of his voice or a childish presentiment that something terrible was to happen I cannot say but I do know that I sobbed unrestrainedly. It was only later I discovered that on that day my mother was as near death as it was possible to be. And I felt a great wave of pity sweeping over me for that little and soon to be motherless child of four. But there was one thing for which I was thankful. He at least was too young to understand what it all meant. And yet even that did not lessen my abhorrence of the whole thing. How senseless life was to be sure.

But it was in the children's ward that faith received its death knell. The chaplain had been giving a talk to the little patients and afterwards I heard one of them—a little girl of eight—say to him, "Can Jesus do everything?" "Yes," he answered. "And is it true that he loves me?" Again the answer was "Yes." "Then," said that child, a puzzled expression in her eyes, "why doesn't he make my leg better?" There was that eternal Why cropping up again. It brought to mind the scene depicted by Tennyson in "The