

**EXPERIENCES OF
AN ENGLISH SISTER
OF MERCY**

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Experiences of an English Sister of Mercy by Margaret Goodman

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MARGARET GOODMAN

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BY
MARGARET GOODMAN.

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EXPERIENCES
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CHAPTER I.

THE DEVONPORT SISTERHOOD.

PROBABLY in every step in life which is the result of deliberate choice, with the leading motive mingle many of less force; but led chiefly by the wish to minister to untended suffering, in the summer of 1852, I joined the Sisters of Mercy at Devonport. As time went on, Miss Sellon thought fit to develop such conventual rules as pressed too heavily upon many of us; and, therefore, after a sojourn of six years I returned to my former occupation.

The following reminiscences were jotted down

at the suggestion of a friend, who remarked that the simple delineation of the everyday life of a Sister of Mercy might prove interesting, and even serviceable; and he added, that their being written by one whose view was in a great degree limited to everyday life, would not be a disadvantage.

Before recounting my own experiences, it may be proper to advert briefly to the origin and extension of the Society of Sisters of Mercy of Devonport, and also to the rules of the Society, together with a few details which I conceive exemplify the practical working of these rules. It will be perceived that they are by no means creations of Miss Sellon's, but rather adaptations of existing conventual rules, and which, in the ordering of her household, are more fully developed by her from year to year.

In the following simple manner the Society originated: Miss Sellon, deeply moved by the wretchedness of many of the poor, especially in our maritime towns, took her portion, whatever it might be, and, with the consent of her father, determined to devote her little fortune, together with what other talents God had committed to her, to the relief of misery. With this intention, in 1847, she came to Stoke, part of Devonport, where she lived in humble lodgings: after a short

time, being joined by another lady, a small house was taken, and the two continued working amongst the poor with all simplicity. In a few months several other ladies came to cast in their lot with them, amongst whom was one of high standing, and of showy, but somewhat superficial attainments, and who was deeply imbued with fantastic notions gathered from reading the accounts of the mediæval ages, and the practices of the saints of old; a kind of literature perused in some circles about that time. It is often seen that persons of good sense suffer themselves to be guided by weaker minds, and it is said that from the mediæval lady came the original impulse to the mode of life existing in Miss Sellon's houses in 1859.

At this date the Society consisted of about twenty ladies, who were scattered at five or six different houses in various parts of the country. The "Abbey" at Plymouth was devoted chiefly to the "Order of the Holy Communion," which was the outer order; the Priory at Bradford, Wilts, to the "Order of the Sacred Heart," or the enclosed order; St. Saviour's, in London, to the "Order of the Holy Ghost," or to sisters who, while living ordinarily in their own homes, conformed to certain rules, and from time to time resided for a period at the London house, and

devoted themselves to visiting the sick poor. The sisters of this order are not included in the twenty I have mentioned as belonging to the Society, and with whom they had little intercourse. Some years previous to 1859 there were double this number residing with Miss Sellon.

The Sister of the Order of the Sacred Heart wore but one under garment, a long, rough, flannel chemise, of which article she possessed two. Those who kept the rule in all its integrity wore no stockings, and sandals in the place of boots; their dress was of white serge, over which they wore, out of doors, a cloak of brown serge topped by a bonnet of black alpaca, to which was suspended a long alpaca veil: the colour of the dress was afterwards changed to brown. On a wet day, when it was necessary to hold up the dress, our great enemies, the little boys, were in a state of considerable excitement; but sisters of this order seldom went abroad except to church.

The dress of those belonging to the outer order was sufficiently peculiar to make the wearer known as a Sister of Mercy, and, therefore, she could pass at any hour through the worst localities without hearing an unseemly expression. I suppose it would be considered by most people a decent, grave, and becoming dress for women engaged as