

Mrs. GAMP.

BY PROFESSOR ROBERT STRACHAN.

MARTIN Chuzzlewit, like most of Dickens's novels, is crowded with characters, each possessing a well-marked individuality of his or her own. Three at least of these are familiar to every reader of Dickens and may fairly claim to rank among the immortals. I mean of course Mr. Pecksniff, Mark Tapley and Mrs. Gamp. It is the last named that forms the subject of this paper. I wish I were able to do her justice, but in the time at my disposal I can only touch on a few of the features of her many-sided character. I shall as far as possible allow her to speak for herself, which she is very well qualified to do, for she is nothing if not voluble.

When we first make Mrs. Gamp's acquaintance, she is already past her prime and a widow of twenty years' standing. Her experience of married life had not been particularly happy. Her husband and she had had frequent quarrels, and had at last separated "on the ground of incompatibility of temper in their drink." She bore permanent marks of his attentions in the loss of four teeth, two single and two double, which her bosom friend Mrs. Harris had taken as a keepsake and carried in her pocket along with two cramp-bones and various other odds and ends. It illustrates at once her strength of mind and her public spirit that when Mr. Gamp died in Guy's Hospital, she not only bore up wonderfully under the blow, but also disposed of his remains for the benefit of science.

In appearance Mrs. Gamp was rather a stout lady, with a husky voice and a moist eye, which she had the power of turning up till only the white was visible. Mr. E. F. Benson, in describing one of his heroines, says that "the glorious white column of her neck supported her head like the stem of a flower." This description would scarcely fit Mrs. Gamp. On the contrary she had a remarkably short neck, so that, as the author puts it, "it cost her some trouble to look over herself, if one may say so, at those to whom she talked." Her face, especially her nose, was somewhat red, no doubt from exposure to the weather, though uncharitable persons sometimes attributed it to a different cause. Altogether as her youthful admirer Mr. Bailey once remarked, there were "the remains of a fine woman about Sairah." She dressed simply in a rusty black gown, with shawl and bonnet to match and as her inseparable companion she carried a large umbrella "of the colour of a faded leaf, except where a circular patch of a lively blue had been dexterously let in at the top."

So much for the outer woman : let us now turn to her mental and moral qualities.

1. Her professional zeal must impress the most casual reader. She is ready to turn out at any hour of the day or night, or as Dickens not too delicately expresses it "she went to a lying-in or a laying-out with equal zest and relish." According to her own account her sole desire is to relieve suffering humanity, and if she could afford to give her services for nothing, she would gladly do so. "I feel the suffering of other people," she says, "more than I feels my own, tho' no one mayn't suppose it." "What a blessed thing it is," she soliloquizes on one occasion, "—living in a wale—to be contented ! What a blessed thing it is to make sick people happy in their beds, and never mind one's self so long as one can do a service !" Again, "Our charges is but low, sir, considerin' the nater of our painful dooty. If they was made accordin' to our wishes, they would be easy paid." If in such a matter she should be thought a prejudiced witness, we may at least accept the evidence of her friends Mrs. Harris and Mrs. Prig, as faithfully reported by Mrs. Gamp herself. Says the former, "Mrs. Gamp, if ever there was a sober creetur to be got at eighteen pence a day for working people, and three and six for gentle folks—night watching being a extra charge—you are that inwallable person." Mrs. Prig's testimony is no less emphatic : "The soberest person going, and the best of blessings in a sick room, is Mrs. Gamp. Send a boy to Kingsgate Street, and snap her up at any price, for Mrs. Gamp is worth her weight and more in goldian guineas."

Her professional methods are somewhat drastic, and may not altogether commend themselves to her successors in the present day. Thus we read of her administering one patient's medicine "by the simple process of clutching his windpipe to make him gasp, and immediately pouring it down his throat." The following is her original recipe for fainting fits :—"Bite a person's thumbs, or turn their fingers the wrong way, and they comes to wonderful, Lord bless you". She has also her own ideas as to the best way of managing lunatics. "Me and Betsey Prig, sir, would undertake Mr. Chuffey reasonable, and give every satifaction. Betsey Prig has nussed a many lunacies and well she knows their ways, which puttin' 'em right close afore the fire, when fractious, is the certainest and most compoging."

In spite of her untiring efforts on behalf of her patients, their ingratitude sometimes leaves her mourning. Referring to one such case, she says, "If you could have heard the poor dear soul a-findin' fault with me and Betsey Prig, not half an hour ago, you would have wondered how it is we don't get fretted to the tomb." She finds some consolation, however, in the theory that patients who grumble at their nurses must

be more or less mentally deranged and are therefore scarcely responsible for what they say.

2. Like every self-respecting person Mrs. Gamp is rather particular as to what she eats and drinks. She repudiates with scorn dishes like hashed mutton, and she will have nothing to do with such abominations as aerated waters. "I'm easy pleased" she says; "it is but little as I wants, but I must have that little of the best and to the minute when the clock strikes, else we do not part as I could wish, but bearin' malice in our arts." What Mrs. Gamp's little is may be gathered from the order she gives to the assistant chambermaid at the Bull in Holburn, where she had been called in to nurse a patient. "I think, young woman, that I could pick a little bit of pickled salmon, with a nice little sprig of fennel, and a sprinkling of white pepper. I takes new bread, my dear, with just a little pat of fresh butter, and a mossel of cheese. In case there should be such a thing as a cowcumber in the 'ouse, will you be so good as to bring it, for I'm rather partial to 'em, and they does a world of good in a sick room. If they draws the Brighton Old Tipper here I takes *that* ale at night, my love; it being considered wakeful by the doctors. And whatever you do, young woman, don't bring more than a shilling's worth of gin and water—warm when I rings the bell a second time; for that is always my allowance, and I never takes a drop beyond."

She particularly resents any attempt to stint her in the matter of liquor. "My half a pint of porter fully satisfies; perwisin', Mrs. Harris, that it is brought reg'lar, and draw'd mild. Whether I sicks or monthlies ma'am, I hope I does my duty, but I am but a poor woman, and I earns my living hard; therefore I *do* require it which I makes confession, to be brought reg'lar and draw'd mild." "What I always says to them as has the management of matters, be they gents or be they ladies, is, don't ask me whether I won't take none, or whether I will, but leave the bottle on the chimley'piece, and let me put my lips to it when I am so disposed."

3. Mrs. Gamp is an adept in the art of flattery and cajolery. Her compliments may not always be of the most delicate kind—indeed they border at times on the fulsome—but they seldom fail to give pleasure, which is after all the main thing. Her chief efforts in this direction are reserved for her clients, actual or prospective, and for her patron Mr. Mould the undertaker and his amiable family. A single example must suffice. "Wishing every happiness to this happy family," said Mrs. Gamp, "with all my heart. Good arternoon, Mrs. Mould! If I was Mr. Mould, I should be jealous of you, ma'am; and I'm sure if I was you, I should be jealous of Mr. Mould." "Tut, tut! Bah, bah! Go along, Mrs. Gamp!" cried the delighted undertaker. "As to the young

ladies," said Mrs. Gamp, "bless their sweet looks—how they can ever reconsize it with their duties to be so grown up with such young parents, it an't for sech as me to give a guess at." "I'll tell you what, my dear," said Mr. Mould, when Mrs. Gamp had at last taken her departure, "that's a very shrewd woman. That's a woman whose intellect is immensely superior to her station in life. That's a woman who observes and reflects in an uncommon manner. She's the sort of woman, now, one would almost feel disposed to bury for nothing, and do it neatly too!"

4. Mrs. Gamp can scarcely be called a pious woman, but she possesses at least the rudiments of a religious sense, and she can discourse in a most edifying fashion when it suits her purpose. "Talk of constitooshun!" Mrs. Gamp observed. "A person's constitooshun needs to be made of bricks to stand it (that is, the wear and tear of nursing). Mrs. Harris jestly says to me, but t'other day, 'Oh! Sairey Gamp', she says, 'how is it done?' 'Mrs. Harris, ma'am.' I says to her, 'we gives no trust ourselves, and puts a deal o' trust elsewere; these is our religious feelins, and we finds 'em answer.' 'Sairey,' says Mrs. Harris, 'sech is life. Vich likeways is the hend of all things.'"

In the same connection may be mentioned her Biblical allusions, which occasionally betray a slight confusion of ideas. "I will not deny that I am but a poor woman, and that the money is an object; but don't let that act upon you, Mr. Mould. Rich folks may ride o' camels, but it ain't so easy for 'em to see out of a needle's eye. That i m, v comfort, and I hope I knows it." Or take the following curious fragment of conversation. "And which of all them smoking monsters is the Ankworks boat, I wonder. Goodness me!" cried Mrs. Gamp. "What boat do you want?" asked Ruth. "The Ankworks package," Mrs. Gamp replied. "I will not deceive you, my sweet. Why should I?" That is the Antwerp packet in the middle," said Ruth. "And I wish it was in Jonadge's belly, I do," cried Mrs. Gamp, appearing to confound the prophet with the whale in this miraculous aspiration.

5. Among Mrs. Gamp's mental gifts, a high place must be assigned to her inventive and dramatic faculty. To spin a long yarn about an event which has never happened is a comparatively easy task; but to retail a purely imaginary conversation and give it all the appearance of reality is a much more difficult feat. Now this is what Mrs. Gamp does, not once or twice, but habitually and without apparent effort. I have already had occasion more than once to mention the name of Mrs. Harris. No human being had ever set eyes on Mrs. Harris, and she was generally believed to be a creation of Mrs. Gamp's own brain; yet that lady claims to be in constant communication with her, and she is for ever quoting what Mrs. Harris said to her and what she said to Mrs. Harris.

One peculiarity of these dialogues is, that whatever their subject may be, they invariably introduce one or more compliments to the excellence of Mrs. Gamp's own nature.

It was reserved for Mrs. Prig finally to explode the Harris myth. Her conduct was all the more inexcusable that she was at the time enjoying Mrs. Gamp's hospitality in her lodgings at Kingsgate Street. Mrs. Gamp might well have used the words of the Psalmist, "Mine own familiar friend, who did eat my bread, did lift up his (or in this case *her*) heel against me." For some reason Mrs. Prig was rather out of humour that day, and she set herself deliberately to provoke a quarrel. She became more and more insulting, till at last, Mrs. Gamp happening, as was her wont, to make some reference to Mrs. Harris, she rudely interrupted, "Bother Mrs. Harris." Before Mrs. Gamp had time to recover from this blow she followed it up with another, uttering the memorable and tremendous words, "I don't believe there's no sich a person!" This one short sentence was enough to cause a lasting breach between the two ladies. In relating the incident afterwards to her friend the barber, Mrs. Gamp says, "Oh, Mr. Sweedlepipes, wot I have took from Betsey Prig this blessed night, no mortal creetur knows! If she had abuged me, bein' in-liquor, which I thought I smelt her wen she come, but could not so believe, not bein' used myself, I could have borne it with a thankful art. But the words she spoke of Mrs. Harris, lambs could not forgive. No Betsey! nor worms forget." Then still apostrophising the absent culprit, she goes on, "Oh Betsey Prig, what wickedness you've shod this night, but never shall you darken Sairey's doors again, you swining serpiant."

Besides dissolving the friendship of twenty years this episode had another unfortunate result. For long afterwards Mrs. Gamp experienced the utmost difficulty in pronouncing the name that used to fall so glibly from her lips. The first time she made the attempt she had to gasp repeatedly before she could get it out, and when at length she did succeed, she pressed her hand against her side and turned up her eyes like a person about to faint. It was as if, once having been thrown down from her pedestal, all the king's horses and all the king's men could not put Mrs. Harris together again.

The Mrs. Gamp type of nurse is now almost as extinct as the dodo, and Dickens, we are told, has had a good deal to do with its extinction. From a humanitarian point of view this is perhaps not altogether to be regretted. There is however, another side to the question and I venture to submit that what the modern nurse has gained in efficiency she has lost in picturesqueness and individuality. Where in these degenerate days is the nurse who could furnish such copy as Mrs. Gamp, whether for the journalist or the novelist? Where is the nurse who can entertain

her patients with such a feast of reason and a flow of soul? As Mr. Chesterton remarks—and with this I conclude. “To any one who appreciates her unctuous and sumptuous conversation it is difficult not to feel that it would be almost better to be killed by Mrs. Gamp than to be saved by a better nurse.”

NURSE DISTRICT VISITORS IN MADRAS CITY.

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(Read at the All-India Sanitary Conference in Lucknow.)

IN May 1913 owing to the prevalence of Malaria in an acute form in the northern portion of the city a grant of Rs. 1 lakh was made by the Madras Government to the Corporation to be spent in Malaria preventive measures. Among other measures it was decided to employ six nurses on house to house work on a maximum salary of Rs. 200. In May 1913 applications were called for but although the number of applications was very large I was only able to select three women, two lady doctors and one nurse, who appeared to me to be really suitable for the work. Later on I was able to make three more appointments and the staff of six nurses was completed on 1st July 1913. I mention this because I think it very important that the greatest care should be taken in the selection of nurses for this work.

The northern portions of the city were divided into six areas and a nurse was put in charge of each. Her instructions were to go round the district in the morning and evening, to make herself known to the people and advise them either to send fever cases to Hospital or to let her treat them. She was on no account to attempt to use compulsion of any kind and if the people did not wish to take her advice she was to leave them alone. With the exception of one lady doctor, who was already known in the District where she had to work, all the nurses had very much the same experience. The people were at first suspicious and averse to allowing themselves to be treated. After a very short time however they began to bring their children for treatment; later the women came to be treated themselves and finally the men either allowed themselves to be treated or consented to go to one of the Malaria Dispensaries.

From the beginning of their operations until the end of September the nurses and lady doctors treated 3,411 malarial cases and distributed 24 lbs. 2 oz. of quinine.*

Though these nurses were appointed primarily for Malaria work they are doing very useful work in other directions. They instruct mothers in home and personal hygiene and in the care and feeding of infants. One

* The statistical tables given in the paper are omitted for lack of space. Editor.