

A Question of Character.

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Miss Lucy Rae's article which appeared in the *NURSING RECORD*, of June 28th, under the title of "A Question of Class," opens up debatable ground, and I have pleasure in responding to the Editor's invitation to take up the subject, to which she justly says there are two sides. As indeed there are to most questions.

The essence of Miss Rae's thesis is contained in one sentence: "If hospital officials would recognise the fact (?) that the question of 'class' is at the root of the evils in the nursing profession, there might be some chance of a remedy."

A subsequent paragraph modifies the above to some extent: "It would not be reasonable to suppose that if the profession were composed of gentlewomen only it would even then consist of angelic beings; that state of perfection is out of the question under any circumstances; but it is reasonable to say that some of the complaints at present made by the public would never require to be made about a refined class of women."

Even so, many will dissent from the writer's deductions; I for one. I join issue on the ground of the alleged "fact" and suggested remedy.

The root of the evils which we all acknowledge goes deeper and requires more radical treatment.

In my judgment the problem resolves into a question not of "class" in the social sense, but of character. We need simply the best type of women as nurses, but how are we to get such?

It is a difficult question, how "faithfully and wisely to make choice of fit persons," but I am persuaded it will not be solved by treating it as a question of class.

The test would prove a failure even in a superficial sense. The "society" which prides itself on being "good" is not always gentle, whereas Nature's gentlewomen are found in every rank.

But let it be admitted that as we move upwards in the social scale we find generally, as might be expected, a higher level of refinement and culture; yet this is "but the guinea stamp." The higher social status affords a presumption in favour of good breeding, but no guarantee, and still less a guarantee of that true refinement which is the outcome of a noble nature.

The democratic character of the nursing profession is a source of peculiar pride and pleasure to many, to whom it would appear not elevated but lowered by subordination to petty social distinctions. Rather may we be proud to consider it above such, conferring honour, not honoured through the individual. A nobler ideal is expressed in the often-quoted words of Florence Nightingale:—"Nursing is an art demanding as hard

a preparation, as exclusive a devotion as any painter's or sculptor's work. For what is the having to deal with dead canvas or cold marble compared with the living body, the temple of God's spirit? It is one of the fine arts, I had almost said, the finest of the fine arts."

An artist is of no class.

This is not abstract, fanciful ideality. If we bring the question to the test of actual experience and search the records of our memory for the best nurses, the finest women we have known, can anyone say that these have belonged exclusively to the so-called higher classes?

Culture and refinement are good, but in so far as these form but the superficial polish, they are not essential. Moreover, given the true raw material, nursing itself will prove an education. It has a refining, softening effect, very noticeable in those who undertake it in the right spirit. But the spirit is all essential. For this work by its very nature, by the familiarity with suffering, and the sad initiation into life's darkest secrets which it brings, must either ennoble or debase, refine or coarsen, according to the mind's original bent.

It is far more difficult, doubtless, to select on a basis of character than of class, but not impossible. For efficiency in this direction we need women of character and judgment as matrons. Was it not Madame de Staël who said that the great need of France was of mothers? "Give us mothers!"

The nursing profession may say, "Give us matrons!" Who can estimate the power and influence for good of a strong and noble character in such a position?

To come to the consideration of means. A personal interview with the candidate is usually demanded, and although character can only be judged to a limited extent in a single interview, much may be elicited. Probationers are not accepted as a rule before the ages of twenty-two or twenty-three (and few who know all that nursing involves would lower the age of entrance), and considerable light is thrown upon character by the way in which the would-be nurse has spent her time since leaving school. Tried by this test the daughter of well-to-do parents may possibly be at a disadvantage. I would accept a housemaid who had a good record for thoroughness, neatness, and punctuality, who was also refined and gentle in manner (and there are many such), with more confidence than one who has spent the years from eighteen or nineteen to twenty-three in pursuit of pleasure, although the latter *might* settle down and make a good nurse.

The various answers received to the question, "What made you think of taking up this work?" are also evidence of character, though not conclusive. Sentiment, gush, or flippancy at once repel; but a sensible, thoughtful reply, showing that the candi-

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