

Nursing as a Profession.*

BY JOSEPHINE L. DE PLEDGE.

IN casting a retrospective glance over the past half century nothing strikes us more forcibly, amid the many remarkable changes that have taken place in the condition of women, than the position she now occupies as a recognised attendant on the sick. "Shall I become a Nurse?" is among one of the first questions an actively disposed woman asks herself. The intense desire, latent in the breast of every true woman, for occupation and to be of use in the world, is a powerful incentive to many in their desire for a life which, as every one knows, entails much hard work, entire self-surrender, and perpetual risk. To many also, it affords an honourable means of livelihood, and is more attractive because more independent than going out as a governess on the one hand, or as a domestic servant on the other. There is a commonly received impression abroad that any woman with common sense can act as a Nurse should occasion arise, and to this fallacy, it is to be feared, many precious lives have been sacrificed. The mother asks, "Who so fitted to nurse my child as I am? Will a stranger understand it as its mother does?" Forgetting that her very love and anxiety blind her eyes to what ought to be, and render her agitated when she should be most calm. People have often said to me, "how can a stranger be expected to take the same interest in a sick person as his own relatives." The interest is there, nevertheless, as every trained and conscientious Nurse knows. An interest not personal but professional, and I venture to think of infinitely greater use to the patient.

To a large section of the public, Nursing is a system which deals with the application of poultices and the pouring out of physic. It begins no doubt with these two important matters, but certainly does not end there—at least not now-a-days.

Look around and see the marvellous strides made in medicine and surgery during the last few years! Could the same brilliant results have been achieved without the aid of a skilful and intelligent Nurse? What avail the most brilliant operation, if the patient bleed to death afterwards, through the ignorance or incapacity of the Nurse to detect the symptoms that precede and accompany hæmorrhage? Of what use the physician drawing up rules for diet in case of typhoid fever, if the Nurse

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does not recognise the necessity for carrying them out? Trained Nursing has therefore become a most valuable handmaid to medical and surgical skill. It is instructive to look back with the light of our present experience to a date when Nursing, as we understand it, was almost unknown—certainly not recognised. Natural aptitude and experience were the only qualifications deemed essential in a Nurse fifty years ago. Personal character was of little consequence. Betsy Prig and Sairey Gamp were, unfortunately, types only too true to life. Ignorant, incapable, and vicious, what possible confidence could the public have in such women. It is not very surprising that, in a majority of instances, their services were either dispensed with altogether, or they were called in, when all hope was over, to assist in the performances of the last sad offices. Their presence in the household thus became synonymous with death, and added to the repugnance with which they were universally regarded. Even to this day, among old-fashioned people, we find a survival of the same spirit, as evidenced by the characteristic reply of a certain old lady when it was suggested that she should have a Nurse during some temporary complaint. "Have a Nurse!" she exclaimed. "Certainly not. I am not going to die."

There is no doubt that the first impetus towards a better system of nursing was given in the year 1855, when all England was thrilled with horror and indignation at the miseries and privations experienced by our sick and wounded soldiers in the Crimean War. In response to an appeal from the Government of that day, Miss Florence Nightingale, at the head of a small band of devoted women, offered their services as Nurses, and after some demur, accompanied by many restrictions, the offer was accepted. The idea of educated gentlewomen volunteering for such duties, was somewhat of a shock to the prejudices of that day; but in the heart of the nation it quickly gave place to the unbounded admiration and enthusiasm which such a splendid exhibition of self-devotion, sympathy, and courage, could not fail to evoke. The need for some organised system of nursing, resulting from the experience of those dark and terrible months, became obvious. Training schools for Nursing in connection with the principal hospitals and nursing institutions sprang up. The first being attached to St. Thomas' Hospital, and called after its revered foundress by the name of the Nightingale School.

The difficulty for some years was considerable in obtaining suitable women, or, indeed, any women at all, to come forward as Nurses for the sick. In the year 1858, at the suggestion of several eminent

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