

mentally and physically, is an open secret. But we had no time to complain; a great pioneer work of reform had to be done, and we did it. It was not until some ten years later, in the year 1887, that the women who had survived this ordeal, and who in the great struggle found themselves in the leading, and therefore responsible, positions of the nursing profession, met together and discussed, with an earnestness and enthusiasm which many disappointments have not yet crushed out, the vital question of how the vocation of nursing—performed under a terrible physical strain—could be organised into a clearly defined profession, which would give to its members the protection of legal status, and in consequence, make it possible to organise and improve their conditions of labour. (Loud applause.)

The meetings of those practical and conscientious women were held at my house, and I suggested that trained nurses should co-operate for mutual help under the title of the British Nurses' Association; and our programme of work, approved and printed, is even to-day in advance of its time. The first object of the Association was to obtain efficient training—a definite curriculum of education for nurses. We approved of public examinations for nurses, and registration of trained nurses by Act of Parliament was our ultimate goal. If we attained these desirable ends, we were fully aware that we could obtain reasonable hours of labour and other improved conditions, and that the disgraceful "nurse-sweating" by hospital authorities would speedily be swept away. (Applause.)

It must be noted, then, that it was the nurses themselves who took the initiative in this great movement for nursing reform. We invited medical men to help us to attain our ends. Her Royal Highness Princess Christian graciously became our President; the nurses flocked to our standard, and at the end of our first year's work we had nearly 2,000 members on the Roll. (Loud applause.)

The battle of the nurses—for of course we met with bitter opposition from the professional philanthropist and employers of labour—is now ancient history; but for five years the women who had founded their Association worked together early and late, and in the utmost harmony, until in 1893 our Royal Charter was won; and it is from that date that our present troubles began.

We all know the proverbial characteristics of the cuckoo—he is not a desirable bird—and he has his human imitators. (Much laughter.) In short, when the hard work was over, and success seemed to have crowned our efforts, persons joined us who had previously opposed us, or had certainly stood aside during the struggle. They explained that they joined so as "to keep an eye" upon us, and they were certainly never in sympathy with the idea of professional organisation for nurses.

Dr. Bezly Thorne, who was the Medical Hon. Secretary at that time (Long continued cheers and hisses), was the author of a very undesirable element of dictation upon the part of the medical members which crept gradually, but none the less surely, into the work of our committees. This disposition to dictate, and I may say to oppose, the natural desire for progress upon the part of the matrons, became more and more marked.

The leading hospital matrons, who took an active part in founding the Association, were at its inception pro-

mised permanent seats on its General Council and its Executive Committee—promises which were incorporated in the first Bye-laws. When the Charter was granted in 1893, the Bye-laws had to be re-drafted. In February, 1894, Dr. Bezly Thorne announced that he had discovered a flaw in the Bye-laws which implied that these ladies must retire in rotation from the Council. Some 69 members immediately requisitioned for a special general meeting of the Association to amend the Bye-laws, and so enable the pledges given by the Association to its founders to be kept. The Charter and Bye-laws expressly authorised such a general meeting. Nothing could have been easier or more simple than to have altered the Bye-law. The requisition came before the Executive Committee in March, 1895, but was ignored, and the meeting was never summoned. The Bye-law could not be altered; and, in April, the matrons who had been promised permanent seats on the Council were compelled to retire from it. (Cheers and hisses.)

They were very indignant, however, and proposed to make a public protest at the annual meeting in 1895. Just before the meeting, several of the medical members persuaded a number of the matrons to meet them in "friendly conference." They did so, and they were promised that if they would raise no protest at the meeting all their grievances should be redressed. They actually believed those promises. Nothing was said at the annual meeting, but when they subsequently claimed the fulfilment of those promises, these were calmly repudiated. (Cheers and hisses.)

What has been the result of this breach of faith with the founders? The Association has gone steadily downhill ever since. The matrons could feel no confidence in a body which deliberately broke its pledges, and in the last two years at least one third of the old members have resigned or ceased to pay their subscriptions. During the last financial year only 1,285, instead of more than 2,000 members as formerly, paid their annual subscriptions. (Hear, hear.)

Then, in 1896, there took place the great betrayal of our Association on the fundamental principle of Registration of Trained Nurses. Extreme indignation was aroused by the action of Miss Wedgwood, delegate, and of Mr. Fardon, the Medical Secretary, of the Royal British Nurses' Association, voting at a conference convened by the British Medical Association on the subject, for the following resolution:—"That a legal system of Registration of Nurses is inexpedient in principle, injurious to the best interests of nurses, and of doubtful public benefit." (Hisses and cheers.)

In October, 1896, the Hon. Officers presented a report to the General Council—ignoring the Executive Committee—recommending that male and female lunatic attendants without training in a general hospital should be placed on the Register of Trained Nurses, and be admitted to the full privileges of membership. A public meeting of protest was convened and held last January, and the attempt to depreciate our Register and deprive us of the benefits we had acquired was condemned root and branch. (Loud applause.)

I have little to add to the black page of personal intimidation of matrons and nurses. I say nothing, because we are fully determined that this system shall not prevail. We demand a public inquiry into the affairs of our Association, and we are prepared to stand or fall by the result. (Loud applause and hisses.)

Mrs. Bedford Fenwick was frequently interrupted

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)