

International Congress of Women

NURSING SECTION.

AFTERNOON SESSION.

COUNTESS OF ABERDEEN presiding.

THE ORGANISATION OF DISTRICT NURSING.

As Illustrated by the Victorian Order in Canada.

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THE nineteenth century has been one of wonderful advancement in every branch of woman's work. As we stand in its closing year and look back to its beginning, we are struck by the number of avenues to self-support that have been opened to woman during its course, by the high level to which their work has risen, and by the respect which is accorded to the position they have won for themselves in the callings they have chosen.

In no occupation has the progress been more marked than in that of nursing. The care of the sick has always been women's particular province and prerogative, but it is less than fifty years since it first occurred to anyone that a special training and preparation were necessary to fit her for the adequate discharge of her task.

Nursing is now a great profession, numbering its recruits by many thousands, giving congenial employment to hundreds upon hundreds of women who, without the training they have received to fit them for it, would have wasted their energies in ill-directed effort, if, indeed, they had taken up the work at all.

To whom is the establishment of this profession due?

Primarily, of course, to Florence Nightingale, who is the originator of trained nursing among English-speaking people, and who founded at St. Thomas's Hospital the first training school for nurses in England. It was not, however, in a hospital that the germ of trained nursing came into being, it was in the little home at Kaiserworth, under the fostering guidance of Pastor Fliedner, where Miss Nightingale received her own training. The first trained nurses were not hospital, but district nurses.

As the work extends, it is district nurses who are destined to carry it to its utmost limit of usefulness. It is they who bring the benefits of trained nursing to the great army of the poor, who are able to pay nothing in return for the service rendered to them. It is district nurses who alone can bring skilled attendance within the reach of that large class that can afford to pay but little, yet is not willing to receive charity

in the shape of gratuitous service, but to whom the expense involved in the employment of a trained nurse during her whole time of duty would render her an unattainable luxury.

District nursing had been recognized as a powerful agency for good in philanthropic work in the United States of America as well as in the United Kingdom before the establishment of the Jubilee nurses, and this gave to it a fresh impetus.

The President of the International Council of Women, Lady Aberdeen, whose husband was at that time the Governor General of Canada, conceived the idea of extending the benefits of this system of nursing in that country and of organizing the scattered forces into the Victorian Order, which should do for the colony what the Jubilee nurses were doing for the mother country.

To cover a continent with a network of district nurses seems a stupendous undertaking. It is, and as yet only the seed is planted; but it is a seed, a living organism, that will grow and spread under favouring conditions.

Few who have not been there have a true conception of the kind of country Canada really is. The popular idea is formed from photographs of winter scenes through a vista of toboggans, fur garments, snow shoes, and skates. Our Lady of the Sunshine is lost in Our Lady of the Snows.

Yet Montreal and Ottawa are in the same latitude as Milan and Venice. Grapes and peaches ripen in the open air in the southern part of Canada; the beautiful scarlet of ripe tomatoes is seen in countless gardens, unsheltered by glass; and maize, or Indian corn, which will not come to perfection under the cold English sky, is a common cereal.

I have seen the thermometer register 100° Fahrenheit in the shade at Fredericton, the capital of New Brunswick, on the eastern coast of Canada, just across the Atlantic, and not so very far from you, as we count distance in the great western land. It is true that in winter the mercury sometimes falls to 36° below zero, even there, and much lower farther west, but the blue sky and the brilliant sunshine rob the cold of half its terrors. The severe weather lasts usually for only three or four days at a time, and then there is a respite, and it is comparatively mild again.

The conditions of life in the cities of Canada are not very unlike those which prevail under similar circumstances in England. There is ample work for the district nurse in both fields, and she does it with an efficiency which no amateur service can rival. Still, in towns there are usually friends, or neighbours, who will see that the sick poor do not absolutely die for want of care.

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