

The Nurses' Settlement in New York.*

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About eight years ago tenement-house life in its most pitiable aspect was presented to me. I had been giving a course of lessons in home nursing to a group of proletariats from the older world—people who find a renewal of hope in New York, if not for themselves, at least for their children. One morning one of the women of the class was not present, and her little daughter came to ask me to call upon her mother, as she was ill. Despite my experience in a large metropolitan hospital, and the subsequent knowledge gained through a year's residence in a reformatory and asylum for the waifs of New York, the exposure of that rear tenement in the lower East Side was a most terrible shock—a shock that was at first benumbing. A picture was presented of human creatures, moral, and, in so far as their opportunities allowed them, decent members of society, in rooms reached through a court that held open closets to be used by men and women, from some of which the doors had been torn away; up dirty steps into a sick-room where there was no window, the one opening leading into a small, crowded room where husband, children, and boarders were gathered together—impossible conditions under which to attempt to establish a home and bring up children.

Upon further acquaintance with the house and neighbourhood I learned that kindly intention from the outside had not been wholly absent. The visitor from a medical dispensary had called, and, touched by the poverty of the place, had sent a bottle of beef extract with directions for use printed upon it, but there was no one in the house who could read English. Other charitable persons had sent coal; but my nurse's instinct revolted at the knowledge that nobody had washed the woman, made her bed, or performed any of the offices that every human creature should feel entitled to in like condition. I will not take time now to describe all of the circumstances, nor my reflections on the responsibilities of the community, as they appeared to me, to this one family; to me personally it was a call to live near such conditions; to use what power an individual may possess as a citizen to help them, and to give to all of my world, wherever it might be, such information as I could regarding conditions that seemed to be generally unknown.

To a friend the plan was revealed: "Let us two nurses move into that neighbourhood; let us give our services as nurses, and let us contribute our

sense of citizenship to what seems an alien community in a so-called democratic country." Having formulated some necessary details of the plan, we proceeded to look for suitable quarters, and in the search discovered the "settlement." In the stress of hospital training neither of us had learned that men and women, moved by some personal experience or by theoretical training, had arrived at the same impulse to action and had established themselves in the crowded quarter of cities and called themselves "settlement workers." The idea was identical with our own, and though many activities have grown from that idea, the fundamental principle remains; that people shall take up their residence in industrial communities, giving what they may have of public spirit, and partaking of the life about them; preserving their identity as individuals and endeavouring to keep the settlement free from the institutional form of philanthropic work.

For the first two months of our experiment we two nurses lived at the College Settlement. After that the top floor of a tenement that gave reasonable comfort was our home for two years, and that was practically the beginning of the present association of workers known as the "Nurses' Settlement." The life possible through making our home among the people in a simple, informal way led us easily and naturally into all the questions that affected them.

Through our visits to the children and our interest in their general welfare we learned of the unsatisfactory school conditions, and of the absurdity of a compulsory school law when there was not adequate school accommodation for the children. Such knowledge as came to our notice, such effective protest as would illustrate the conditions of our neighbourhood, was brought before a suitable public, individuals, or societies especially concerned whenever occasion could be found or made.

The women on the lower floors in the tenement where we lived were employed in the needle trades, and unbearable treatment at the hands of a foreman had moved them and their fellow-workers to agitate for trade organisation. In the search for someone of their own sex who could speak for them in what they called "better English" they came to us, and that was our first introduction to the protest of the workers which is expressed in Trades Unionism.

A semi-official recognition by the Board of Health gave us the privilege of inspection of the tenements, and valuable information was thus stored up on the housing problem. The experience thus gained had its share of influence in the general education of the public which later led to the Tenement-House Exhibit; to the appointment of a Tenement-House Commission, under Governor Roosevelt, and the final creation of a separate department for the city of New York. One of the members of the settlement took active part in the

* Read at the International Congress of Nurses, Buffalo.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)