

Matrons in Council.

THE DUTY OF THIS SOCIETY IN PUBLIC WORK.*

By Miss L. L. Dock.

A long paper on this question is, naturally, not to be expected, but a few suggestions arising from the intimate following of the Society's affairs during a period of seven years' secretaryship may, perhaps, be useful, especially to those members who, from the compulsory absorption of their own urgently pressing duties, have not given special time or attention to the question of the character and efficiency of the Society as a whole.

The question which instantly arises when one considers the Society as an organisation, and which arises constantly before the vision of those who conduct its affairs, is, "How to make the Society more effective." If we compare in a historically impersonal manner the objects of the Society, the women of whom it is composed, the training-schools which it represents, and the enormous *latent* power and influence which it possesses in these members, with the actual influence exerted and made manifest, we must confess that the Society is not effective—at least, vastly less effective than might be expected of it. True, it has done some sporadic pieces of good work: it has planted and cultivated the Associated Alumnae, established the Teachers' Course, and assists in various good enterprises as they come along, such as congresses, &c. But to what extent is the Society an influence? To what extent does it affect the public? How much does it actually guide nursing education? What weight has it with hospital managers and staffs? What amount of force does it bring to bear on its own members in questions of education, ethics, &c.?

An honest searching after true answers to all these questions will inevitably bring the admission that the Society, in all these rather abstract but most important ways, has not done what it might do; has not made itself a moral force; is not a public conscience; takes no position on large public questions; is not feared by those of low standards; allows all manner of new conditions and developments in nursing affairs to arise, flourish, succeed, or fail without taking any notice whatever of them, apparently not even knowing about them. I am speaking—let me repeat—of the Society as a body, not of individual members. Yet this Society, as one body, would often be astonished at the actual extent and weight of its influence if its whole latent and at present unsuspected power were actually to be systematically exerted in an intelligent and energetic manner.

* Read at the tenth annual meeting of the American Society of Superintendents of Training-Schools for Nurses, held in Pittsburg, Pa., October 7th, 8th, 9th, 1903.

In the past no committee on current events—as one might call it—has ever existed, and the secretary has never been empowered to speak for the Society, as it were, on public questions; yet several occasions have arisen in which your ex-secretary did upon her own responsibility undertake to speak for the Society, the matters being such that she felt certain of the Society's position, and the tone of the replies strikingly demonstrated the fact that the Society possesses a latent strength which it does not wield often enough.

The present secretary can mention one or two instances which will illustrate. A practical suggestion seems to be that a small standing committee, carefully chosen, might be authorised to watch public events as related to nursing and to make the voice of the Society constantly heard, whether in criticism, in commendation, in warning, or in petition. Many important developments are looming up. A complete revolution in methods of teaching nurses seems to be imminent. A quite determined movement on the part of certain elements of our masculine brothers to seize the helm and guide the new teaching is also most undeniably in progress. Several of these same brothers have lately openly asserted themselves in printed articles as the founders and leaders of that nursing education which, so far as it has gone, we all know to have been worked out by the brains, bodies, and souls of the women to whom this paper is addressed, and who have often had to win their points in clinched opposition to the will of these same brothers, and solely by dint of their own personal prestige as women.

The different State laws now in progress all vitally affect the nursing education of the future. This Society ought, beyond a doubt, to make itself heard on all principles involving points arising in these legislative acts. It has also for some time been a vexed question in the mind of your ex-secretary whether glaring professional injustice and indignities suffered by its members at the hands of political jobbers or overbearing medical or lay managers should be allowed to pass in silence, or whether the Society should not, to some extent at least, resent or take cognisance of such incidents and exert some slight degree of protection of its members.

There is also the very delicate question of ethics as to one another which has been suggested to the writer by more than one active member, and that is how far a member of the Society may feel justified in following another in a position where some question of principle was involved without first making it clear that the principle must be upheld?

These and other points I commend to the Society in the hope that it may truly become an effective public force.

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