

The Early Teaching of Nurses at the Salpêtrière Hospital, Paris.*

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Fifteen years ago, the Salpêtrière Hospital was entirely unlike any other of the hospitals in Paris.

Its distance from the centre of the town, its important buildings, its immense gardens and its beautiful avenues of old trees, gave one, on entering, the impression of a pretty little provincial town, where the mind could repose in perfect calm. The population, too, was far from being a noisy one. It was, and is still, composed of old and infirm women, lunatics, and those suffering from nervous complaints. Poor creatures, all of them, to whom perfect rest and quiet is a necessity.

As to the staff of the hospital, it was composed of two distinct elements. The first consisted of young girls from the provinces, Bretons for the most part, called to Salpêtrière by their friends or relations, who were already employed there. The second element was composed of families, parents, and children who sometimes for three successive generations had been employed in the establishment. We can imagine the profound dissimilarity which existed between this staff and that of the other hospitals, supplied in so different a manner. Trained by tradition, as one might say, the nurses of the Salpêtrière followed in the steps of their predecessors; so much attached to the house, that sometimes they refused all preferment rather than leave it.

In 1835 a preparatory school was established in the interest of the ward maids of the Hospital. It consisted of three or four classes, and did duty till 1845, at which epoch it was closed under new management.

After that, no attempt was made to re-establish the school, and those of the ward maids who wished to improve themselves, could only do so by applying to one of the officials, who, in return for a small salary, would teach them to read and to write.

When in 1878 it was decided to start a Training School for Nurses at Salpêtrière, it was found that the greater part of the staff (with the exception of the children of the officials and some of the nurses) were incapable of following the lectures with profit, or to write the compositions that were required

of them. The idea was then formed of re-starting the Primary School, and it was opened in 1878 with 60 pupils. The "Cours" were held every evening and the pupils were divided into classes, which by reason of the inequality of the knowledge of the pupils, were again sub-divided into several divisions. The greater number of the girls could neither read nor write, and a certain number, by reason of their Breton origin, could not even speak French. In 1888, out of 728 pupils who attended the lectures, 293 had acquired there all their primary knowledge.†

In 1891 the organisation of the school remained the same. The division of the two classes still existed. They were held every evening from seven till nine o'clock. Three days were reserved for the pupils of the first or superior class, and the other three days for the pupils of the second or elementary class.

But the law on compulsory education has now commenced to bear fruit: the number of "illiterates" has greatly diminished, and the result of instruction becoming more general is that the best pupils are able to be prepared for the certificate of primary studies.

Of the programme of the studies, there is no need to speak, because it is the same as that for the evening classes for adults. At the same time we must notice one important innovation, which makes this course of primary instruction a preparatory course for the professional teaching. It is, that the readings and the dictations are of a special kind. The lessons in orthography are taken out of English hand books of nursing, treating of the care of the sick and insane; the ordinary reading lessons are compiled from the "Practical Manual of Nursing," by Doctor Bourneville, in the parts corresponding to the lessons given by the professors. This enables the teachers to make in some sort a repetition of the lectures, and to give to the pupils any explanations on points which they have not understood. As for the dictations, they have almost always for object, subjects touching on the duties of nurses.

This teaching would be incomplete without moral instruction. To this end we and our teachers profit by all the circumstances which offer themselves to call the attention of our pupils to the high character of their mission, to the necessity of absolute probity and of a demeanour inspiring at the same time both respect and confidence. We tell them of the importance of the moral side of a nurse's work, and how after having cared for the

* Read at the International Conference on Nursing at Paris, June, 1907.

† Stated by Dr. Bourneville.

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