

International Congress of Nurses.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 21st.

10 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.

THE NURSE AS CITIZEN.

In opening the Session, LADY HELEN MUNRO FERGUSON, who presided, said:—It seems to me that the great success of this Congress is proof of the growing self-realisation of the nursing profession, while the solidarity of its members is shown in the fact that nurses have come here from all parts of the civilised world to compare their experiences and to note the promise and progress of their work as it unfolds itself in the various countries they represent. And in doing this I think there are two special points which they will find they have every reason to congratulate themselves upon. The first is the remarkable and varied development of nurses. Fifty years ago there were no trained nurses even in our hospitals. To-day we find them in every institution where the sick are nursed—in hospitals and private houses, in our schools and in our prisons. We see them lecturing for County Councils and for health societies; we see them doing administrative work; we see them doing pioneer work among the settlers in the far West of Canada, or helping to fight against those climatic diseases which harass our countrymen in the tropics. The quality of the trained nurse has improved a hundred per cent., and the training has been extended and intensified, and whereas a generation ago it was not necessary to know much of the practical and still less of the theoretical side of her work, to-day nurses are expected to have an intimate knowledge of the scientific side of nursing. They have to attend many lectures, pass innumerable examinations, and many of them take a splendid course in domestic economy, and other subjects having only an indirect bearing upon their work.

Then the second point on which you are to be congratulated is that, while with the expansion of industry and the growth of organisation, the work of many bread-winners has become so specialised that many spend their whole lives doing one monotonous process or some uninspiring work, your horizon has been set back. New fields of work have been opened out for you, whilst the intellectual interest of your work has increased with every advance in medical and surgical knowledge, and on the social side your opportunities have increased and with them your responsibilities also. Thus, while so many workers have to fight against the contraction of character, with impoverishment of soil which comes through the

narrowed scope of their work, you nurses can rejoice that every quality which you possess can be brought into play, and that your sphere of usefulness may be just as extended as you like to make it every hour of your day, and may be fruitful in self-development. This is important from the point of view of citizenship which we are considering to-day, for though it is true that every individual who lives worthily, however narrow his sphere, is contributing to the good of the State and borough, the most useful citizen will be the one who brings the greatest amount of capacity to bear on the greatest number of opportunities.

From the point of view of personal satisfaction, there can be no comparison. It is as if to one was given to sound one note, and always the same note, in the harmony they never hear, and to the other is given the whole keyboard and the privilege of striking through it any melody they chose. Of course, it is possible for nurses also to harp always on the same note. We can all resign our opportunities; but, if she will, it is given to the nurse to lead the conscious citizen life without stepping outside her professional sphere, and whilst following the round of duty in one of the many lives that have opened out to her.

The great enlargement of the quality of the trained woman worker and this great expansion in her sphere of usefulness, has not taken place without a great change in the outlook of nurses, and a great many other people.

In the old days, when public affairs meant practically foreign affairs, no woman, either hard worker or leisured individual, ventured to intrude on the demesne which was pointedly labelled, "No admission for women, criminals, and idiots." Though that ancient legend still hangs over the principal entrance into public life, its wording has become obsolete and useless, because the demesne is no longer isolated. It has opened out and spread till it covers every province in life, and until public and private affairs are practically indistinguishable. To illustrate this I need only remind you that in this country only last year, fireguards and cradles were introduced into every house in the country by the action of Parliament. It is obvious that in spite of recent events, which many of us greatly deplore, it is not the women who are forcing themselves on the State, but the State which has forced itself on the women, and taken possession of our health.

Under the circumstances it has been impossible for women to remain in the old allotted groove. Under the passive elements they have developed civic consciousness and had

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)