What the Twentieth Century Nurse may Learn from the Nineteenth.*

By Miss E. M. Fox,
Matron, Prince of Wales' General Hospital, Tottenham.

"The present is the child of the past," and the parent of the future. This should be remembered when we are inclined to think slightingly of what is over and done with. It is rather the fashion nowadays to look down upon the immediate past with something very like contempt, to relegate it to the lumber room of our minds; probably, not until the dust of ages has settled upon it, will it once more be brought forth, like a child's discarded toys, with all the charm of novelty.

Real antiquity appeals to us all more or less, whether in architecture, literature, art, or what not. The early Briton is more interesting to us than the early Victorian: a book dated 1780 attracts our attention before one dated 1870: fashions of two hundred years ago teem with interest, but those of ten years ago only excite our ridicule. In everything we seem anxious to shake off the shackles of our immediate predecessors. The term "Mid-Victorian" is apt to express the scorn we feel for a lately discarded method, whether of travelling, education, dress, or literature. Nothing is worth our attention unless thoroughly "up-to-date." Slightly altering the well-known standpoint of obstinacy which declares that "whatever is, is right," the modern attitude is rather "whatever has been, is wrong." Both points of view however, are mistaken. We must not forget that to the nineteenth century we owe the inception of much which the twentieth has developed so rapidly. The nineteenth was a century of new ideas, of steady progress. Great men flourished. Medical and surgical science advanced by leaps and bounds. Good women strove earnestly for the improvement of the condition of their poorer sisters, of young children, of prisoners and captives, encouraged and helped by the example of the highest in the land—"Victoria, the Well-Beloved." It was a century, not only of golden dreams, but of many golden deeds, deeds, too, which had to be performed amidst difficulties undreamed of at the present day, that might well have given pause to the bravest, deeds done by hands and inspired by minds only partially freed from the iron shackles of a narrow outlook, the swathing bands of a false convention. I think we little realise what it meant for a woman to take up an independent position as late even as the middle of last century. To strike out a line for herself meant to be misunderstood, often to be unkindly treated, estranged from her nearest and dearest, pointed at as "peculiar," dubbed "fanatical." In every age it has required much moral courage to be a Daniel, and "dare to stand alone." The den of lions and the burning fiery furnace, heated seven times hotter than it was wont to be heated, have never been lacking for the trial by ordeal meted out to those who have had the courage of their convictions; but surely, it meant a stern fibre in the character of a woman that she was able to take up such a stand in those days against public opinion and private disapproval.

As nurses, we stand to-day upon the sure foundation of professional security, a foundation laid for us in darkness, toil, and a most unfaltering determination, by those intrepid leaders of the nineteenth century whose skill, energy, and sterling character have made nursing what it is at the present time. Who among us can think of our late beloved Florence Nightingale without a thrill, or refuse admiration to the devoted, if wilful, Sister Dora? But besides these and other well-known names, a silent host of unpretentious workers have preceded us along the intervening years, patiently toiling on their monotonous daily march round the walled Jericho of prejudice and tradition, until, lo! at last the walls have fallen flat, so that we of to-day may enter into the possession stretching straight and smooth before us. Quoting from the official organ of one of our largest hospitals, we may well apply what is said there of the medical, to our own profession: "The greatness of the past may make us humble when we think of the present, but it should make us ambitious when we think of the future. Contemplation of the past is a worse than fruitless pursuit, if, instead of leading us to emulate the achievements of our elders and betters, it makes us sneer at their imperfections."

Contrast the condition of nursing at the beginning of the nineteenth century with that in the beginning of the twentieth. Why, it was simply nil. Some of you have no doubt read Sarah Tooley's "History of Nursing in the British Empire," and will remember these words: "Lacking knowledge, refinement, and the religious stimulus, which was a powerful factor in early times, the nurses in hospitals and kindred institutions had become at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a social scandal, and a menace to the community."

We are told that women without a character, who could get work nowhere else, clustered

* Read before the Nurses' Missionary League, November 22nd, 1910.

previous page next page