

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

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

(Concluded from page 434.)

I believe, too, that there was then a greater keenness over the acquisition of technical knowledge, all the greater because of the difficulties of acquiring it. Remember, there were no nursing journals until the latter part of the nineteenth century, only one or two books on nursing, and very few lectures. The pressure of work in the wards was too great to allow of much organised clinical teaching, while study, or "wasting one's time over books" as it was too often called, was not encouraged. A probationer, humbly inquiring the reason for some line of treatment would most likely be told not to "bother, but get on with her work." Here and there, a good teaching Sister, or homely, experienced Staff Nurse, would pass on what she knew to an inquiring junior, but more often they would hide ignorance beneath the cloak of dignity, and survey with a cold eye and critical air the tiresome probationer who persistently "wanted to know." She had to pick up her crumbs of information from her own observation, from scanty hints conveyed by others, from occasional lectures attended as it were by the skin of her teeth, after a breathless rush to compress the evening's work into an hour's smaller compass than usual, in order to be allowed to go at all. And when there, poor soul, she was often so physically tired as to be mentally inert; thereby profiting little by what she heard.

Yet, in spite of all these difficulties, or was it *because* of them? I still contend there was a greater keenness among nurses—a swifter garnering of the precious ears of knowledge—a wholesome covetousness of the best gifts of experience. Owing to lack of trained helpers, a nurse became sooner self-reliant, responsible, resourceful. Before the system of three years' training became general, she was frequently found in some post requiring skill, judgment, and foresight at the end of 12 months at the most, and as often as not, proved herself quite capable of filling it. She took a keen personal interest in her patients, and often followed their cases up after leaving the ward, sacrificing precious off-duty time in visiting wretched homes. As nurses' tennis clubs had not yet been heard

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

of, nor cycling become general for women, she necessarily interested herself less in so-called pleasures than in her work, and found her chief delights within the hospital walls.

This, of course, was not entirely beneficial, and here the hospitals of to-day are learning a valuable lesson from the nineteenth century in recognising the need of proper recreation for their nurses if they would preserve their physical and mental health.

Only crass ignorance and prejudice would be shown by extolling the past to the wholesale detriment of the present, or by declaring that in every way, the "former days were better than these." They were not. While overwork—metaphorically speaking—slew its thousands of nurses, insanitary conditions slew its ten thousands. More nurses broke down through bad feeding, insufficient sleep, unventilated and crowded bedrooms than through actual overwork. Given a thoroughly healthy body and strictly hygienic environment, it is surprising how much work a person can do, if it be of a congenial and suitable character. But no amount of devotion and energy can sustain failing health beyond a certain limit; no doubt, many and many a worker had to retire worsted from the unequal conflict, who might have done long years of excellent service under different conditions. The body is a good servant, but a bad master, and once its mortal weaknesses get the upper hand, neither religious zeal nor the grimmest determination can withstand the inroads of disease. There must be reasonable care "as well for the body as the soul," and this happily is being recognised to-day far more than in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. The hospitals have learned to take care of their nurses. Good food, airy rooms, an insistence on out-door exercise, encouragement of games and recreation generally, increased off-duty time, and lengthened holidays are all part of the usual routine of every good training school for nurses in the country.

Her professional education is also receiving more and more attention. She has courses of lectures to attend, leisure for study, books galore. The danger indeed of modern times is not that she is taught nothing, but that she has to learn much which only bears indirectly upon her actual work, and that she may be tempted to step beyond her province into that of her brother, the doctor.

Nurses of to-day need to watch themselves, lest their interest in the scientific aspect of disease should in any way warp or destroy their true nursing instincts.

Another lesson culled from the errors of the past, and being, I trust, gradually learned, is

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)