

TRADE UNIONISM FOR NURSES.

The following address was given at St. Thomas' Hospital, S.E., on November 17th, by Mr. Minet, Treasurer of the Nightingale Training School, at the annual presentation of Nightingale Medals:—

"Those of us who have had a long acquaintance with nursing, and with some it has been life long, when we remember the old days and compare them with what we see to-day must perforce become aware of a great change.

In its inception nursing was essentially a vocation, nor would those who were drawn to it ever have thought of themselves as following a profession. Florence Nightingale was their lodestar. In her were combined the two characteristics which have ever marked the prophets of a new gospel, for her personal devotion was seconded by a marvellous power of organisation. To the attraction of Miss Nightingale's personality was added the nature of the field in which she called for disciples, for the work she summoned her nurses to do was work which the Master himself had consecrated when he said "forasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these ye have done it unto Me."

Nursing in those days was then more than a vocation, it was a religion; and it drew to itself mainly, almost entirely, those characters which most feel the call of a master mind, of a new crusade, minds, that is, of high purpose and of lofty ideals.

Little by little, as the field widened and organisation grew, many who were not so strongly influenced by such idealism were drawn to nursing and the inevitable happened, namely, that nursing came to be regarded, to some extent at any rate, as a profession. So much has this been the case that this newer view of nursing has with some come to take the first place.

This is neither to be wondered at nor blamed, for in nursing as in all else, the labourer is worthy of his hire; and in these days, since women have won to equality with men, so it is but just that they should receive fit recompense for their labour.

Had I noticed no more than this change, I should not have chosen this topic to speak to you on, for there would be no more to be said on it; but times of change are ever dangerous times, for in them we move from the known to the unknown, and I have some fear lest, if we be not wise in time, this new spirit may not carry us too far.

If nursing is to be ranked as a profession it may be argued that it should follow as a corollary that what has been found helpful in other professions should be equally applicable to nursing as bringing with it the same advantages.

Now one of the main methods common to every occupation in the present day is the idea of union among all who follow a common employment—to

adopt the technical name, a trade union. We can neither wonder at this, nor should we regret it, indeed it is the inevitable result of the industrial growth of recent years. Faced with competition in its manifold forms the individual has been forced into "union" from the dread that without it he could not stand.

Now in so far as nursing is to be considered as a profession this would not be in any way to sin against the logic of the case, for, if union be found good for barristers and bricklayers, so might it equally advantage nurses.

The question to be considered is whether it will be good that nursing should follow this special development of other occupations, unheeding of the high thought and spiritual wisdom which have so far been the attributes of real nurse-hood.

At first sight the argument is specious, but some understanding of the real trend and aim of nursing, some knowledge of its actual work as of its fundamental conditions, bid us pause ere we fully accept it. If, as we claim, the first aspect of nursing is that of a vocation then, dealing as it does with the control of life in all its physical and mental difficulties, nursing should not be in bondage to the self-seeking of the strike, or to the dictated measures of an "union."

No, the vital principles of nursing are the devotion and self-sacrifice of a Florence Nightingale. She, we may be sure, so broad and deep was her intellectual and spiritual outlook, would have felt nothing but regret and condemnation for any movement which could associate her nurses, to whom is entrusted the care of body and mind, with the mere trade or self-interested principles of strike or counterstrike.

Of course, and from the nature of things the first principle of an union is selfishness, nor by this is anything wrong imputed; indeed from the very necessity of the case it must be so. The main, indeed the only, object of an union is to advance the personal interests of its individual members; to increase their remuneration, to limit their labours; and in pursuing these legitimate ends the effect on the work done is, and must be, lost sight of. The work suffers, the worker gains; and of this the present time brings daily proof.

Now apply this principle, which is, as we have shown, the necessary essence of an union, to a nurse. Her work lies with humanity; if then, this idea of an union is to come into nursing bringing with it, as it must, its inevitable concomitants, the nurse will come first, humanity last. Selfishness will take the place of self-sacrifice; religion—we use the word in no narrow sense—will die out of nursing.

At all time mankind is blown about with every wind of doctrine; to-day there is but one wind, and that a strong one, and its trend is towards some form of democratic future. In winning to this, "unions" for all trade purposes are a necessary step, nor do we dispute this; but as nothing is altogether good in this world, so unions

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