

THE OCTOCENTENARY OF THE FOUNDATION.*

2.—THE SISTERS.

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The patients and the Sisters alone have come down to us from the most ancient time with the least change. At the beginning the Sisters tended the sick poor as an act of charity and to the best of their ability without special training. The religious motive may now be less conspicuous and is in part obscured by the professional aspect, but it nevertheless exists. No nurse worthy of the name can take upon herself the manifold cares and responsibilities of a Sister without having in her heart those feelings which actuated her early predecessors. The four Sisters formed an integral part of the original foundation of the Hospital. They were professed Nuns—probably of the Order of St. Augustine, for the Saint gave his rule to women before he placed it on men. They were chosen by the Prior of the Convent on the recommendation of the Master and Brethren of the Hospital, and swore fidelity to the Prior and Convent and obedience to the Master. They lived in a common refectory and slept together in a dormitory. They received daily four loaves of white bread, three loaves of second quality bread, half a flagon of ale, and the better of the two dishes of cooked food supplied to the Brethren. They wore tunics and overtunics of grey cloth, and it is expressly stated that the tunic was not to reach lower than their ankles. But this was at a time when long, trailing skirts were in fashion.

One of the four was detailed to take charge of and to issue to the inmates of the Hospital all articles of clothing and other necessaries from the common stock. No doubt with the intention of making her position easier, it was a part of the rule that no one should grumble if he did not get as good a suit as he expected, or if the garments he received had been already worn by someone else. But there is no mention that one Sister was before another though all were under the Master. Their work was lifelong, and in some cases they held good social positions, and were able to make substantial bequests to the Hospital.

In the course of ages some must have become specially skilled in midwifery, for many women were delivered in the Hospital; others must have made that tradition of skilled but unscientific nursing which still exists as the hallmark of the best type of St. Bartholomew's nurse. The patient first and always, gentleness, courtesy, and the numberless minute tricks and details which have been learnt and carried on from generation to generation by observation and not by precept. The numbers remained unaltered for four hundred years, and although the duties were nominally unchanged, it is manifest that four persons could not have nursed from 60 to 100 patients, even where many could help themselves, and all were

made to do more for themselves than is now required of them. There must have been subordinates, but of these we hear nothing.

There was no break in the tradition when King Henry VIII took the revenues of the Hospital into his own hands, but there was a great re-organisation. A few patients remained in the Hospital, and the Sisters must have been there to attend upon them. In 1544 five Sisters were appointed, and in 1551 the number was increased to twelve. One of the twelve was chosen to act as Matron, and to her was attached "a fool." Sir Norman Moore, in his history of the Hospital, rather unkindly counts the fool as a Sister, and thus makes the number thirteen, although in reality there were but twelve. The Hospital is so conservative, however, that in the opinion of some the type still recurs at long intervals, though it is no longer a professional office. Under the new constitution the Matron and Sisters had duties and perquisites which have now lapsed. The Matron had personal charge of all the bedding in the Hospital, and she was enjoined to see that the Sisters did their duty in spinning, and did not enter their wards after seven o'clock in winter or nine in the summer, except to attend to patients in danger of immediate death or suffering from extreme sickness. She was allowed as a perquisite to sell ale, and receive a shilling for the use of a pall when a patient died. The Sisters, on their side, had to wash the patients' linen as well as to scrub the floors.

The appointment of Sister carried with it a habit or uniform, just as in the pre-Reformation days when the Sisters were nuns. Six yards of cloth were allowed yearly at 22s. 6d. The cloth was at first brown, but was soon changed to light blue, and blue in various shades has remained the colour of the Sisters' uniform since 1555. The common dormitory remained until 1787, when the Sisters began to sleep and live, as they now do, in the little room partitioned off from the ward. The change was probably for the better, as there are several orders for the Sisters' wards to be cleared of bugs by the Hospital bug-catcher. They appear to have been a strong and self-reliant body of women, for on one occasion they made a determined attack upon a Sheriff's officer, and obliged him to relinquish a patient whom he had captured in one of the wards. As early as 1647 women helpers had been introduced, who sometimes claimed the reversion to the place of Sister. They represent the original of the Staff Nurse. A regular nursing staff was in existence in 1818, for the Physicians and Surgeons in that year represented to the Governors that one Sister and two Nurses were not sufficient for a double ward. In 1821 the Nurses were ordered to wear a brown uniform, and in 1868 scrubbers were appointed to undertake the drudgery of scrubbing the floors and passages. In 1877 an institution was opened for the training of Nurses, and from this time onwards nursing in the Hospital has become more and more a skilled profession.

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* Of St. Bartholomew's Hospital in Smithfield.

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