

REFLECTIONS ON THE STATE REGISTRATION OF NURSES.

It is a matter of only one generation since the Medical Register was established, and the Dental Register dates from the twentieth century. Now the profession of Nursing is being similarly reorganised—or rather, organised for the first time, for it has hitherto been in the position of the Medical and Dental professions before they were controlled. Henceforth, a Registered Nurse will be universally recognised as one who has satisfied a Central Authority in the matter of proficiency in her calling, and the public—so long unable to distinguish between the sheep and the goats—will be assured of getting what it wants.

Naturally, there will still be the unqualified Nurse available, just as there are unqualified doctors and dentists; and the success, in both a professional and a commercial sense, of some of these worthy people augurs well for the Nurse who does not think it worth while to register. On the other hand, there can, I think, be no doubt that, just as the introduction of State control in the Medical and Dental professions has led to an enormous improvement in the general standard of proficiency of these practitioners, so the same reform should prove no less advantageous where Nurses are concerned. Before registration was introduced one became a doctor by a kind of apprenticeship—one simply worked under the more or less watchful eye of a more or less capable master, and the results were as indeterminate as the data; in fact, more so. And there is a similar state of affairs in the nursing world of to-day—the uniform of a Nurse gives one no assurance that its wearer has been adequately trained.

So far there is fairly general agreement. But beyond this there is a wide field for discussion. In the present controversy one has, on the one hand, the stern, rather uncompromising Matron of the old school, jealous of tradition, and profoundly suspicious of any change which might be calculated to allow "these girls to give themselves airs," or "fill their heads with all kinds of ideas"—as though, forsooth, "ideas" were intrinsically dangerous or deceptive! On the other hand, there is the enthusiastic reformer, upholding the standard of Invincible Woman, who has conquered Medicine, and Dentistry, and Law, and Commerce, and Engineering, and a thousand other hard-fought fields, calling upon Nurses far and wide to weld themselves into a single, well-organised body, with a strong, intelligent, central authority; and ramifications extending ultimately into the smallest Cottage Hospital and the most obscure Nursing Home. The dangers of these two extremes are sufficiently obvious—in the one case, conservatism, ignorance, uncertainty, and violent contrasts between the products of isolated and uncontrolled training-schools; or, as the alternative, a tendency towards the multiplication of a type of Nurse who is already a source of grave anxiety to Sisters and Matrons—active and alert enough, it is true, but impatient of routine,

restive under discipline, apt to shirk some of the thousand petty details of ward duties, oppressively independent, and a little inconsiderate in dealing with the pathetic helplessness or the wearisome fretfulness of her patients.

The heart of the problem is just this—nursing is more than a mere means of livelihood, more even than a skilled and honourable profession, it is, in a very real and essential sense, a vocation. One becomes a Nurse in the same spirit as one takes the veil or as one approaches the holy sacrament of marriage. There is, and always has been, and always must be, this aspect of Nursing, that it calls for personal devotion, for self-sacrifice, for deliberate and sustained self-denial. In this it differs fundamentally from most of the other careers which women enter. If a business girl dislikes her post she can give it up and take another appointment without any sacrifice of principle; a professional woman can, with no qualms of conscience, refuse to undertake a task which she regards as disagreeable; but a Nurse, whose patient is personally objectionable—coarse, or ill-mannered, or vindictive, or filthy, or merely intolerably stupid (and there is scarcely a ward without one or two such) is expected to adapt herself to the position, to show no sign of the disgust, or resentment, or ennui, which she very naturally feels; hers is a life of unflinching forbearance, she must ever be true to the Divine instincts of her womanhood.

"The very first
Of human life must spring from woman's
breast,
Your first small words are taught you from
her lips,
Your first tears quenched by her, and your
last sighs
Too often breathed out in a woman's hearing,
When men have shrunk from the ignoble care
Of watching the last hour of him who led
them."

No organisation, or lack of it, can eliminate this vitally essential factor. Nursing would be simply impossible without these lofty ideals.

The opponents of State Registration are often imbued with the idea that this point of view would not be adequately recognised under the new order; that the old, homely system of patriarchal (or matriarchal) government is more conducive to the cult of the nurse who, even at the expense of a little book-learning, is, on the whole, eminently conscientious and sympathetic.

Well, here again there is an analogy with the Medical profession. However one may emphasise the intellectual side of medicine, one can never evade what is vaguely termed the "Human Factor," which, I suspect, is simply what we men, in our clumsy, self-conscious way, feel to be very much the same thing as calls forth the silent, sublime heroism of Nurses. We can, it is true, tell an undesirable patient to apply elsewhere for relief, but such advice, based merely on personal objection, is as rare as it is unworthy. Here and there, of course, one finds the man who has taken

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