

THE SPIRIT OF INTERNATIONALISM.

A PAGE OF NURSING HISTORY.*

Many times I have thought I would place on record just how the International Council of Nurses came to be formed. Now, in as few words as possible, I will do it.

In the year 1893 I attended the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago, as President of the Nursing Section of the Women's Committee of the British Royal Commission, and was at the same time appointed its Delegate by the Royal British Nurses' Association to represent it at the World's Women's Congress held in Chicago in May of that year, from which great meeting of the women of all nations may be dated the birth of internationalism amongst us. At this most inspiring Convention, where I had the happiness to meet—never to forget them—the fine pioneers of the true spiritual awakening of women—Puritan bred, American born—now passed to spheres of light where their sweetness and courage have found serenity, I came for the first time into actual touch with life as I had dreamed it might be—life simple and beautiful, which these stately, pure-minded, white-haired, eloquent women proved it could be.

At this Convention seventeen rooms were provided in which sessions could be held, some large and some small, in which at times just half a dozen women met, and spoke simple truths not always to be told.

I listened.

One afternoon, wandering through the corridors, I observed on a door a notice headed "The International Council of Women," notifying that a meeting would be held quite early on the following morning. I paused, and took notice of the title, the hour of meeting, and the number of the room. My attention was arrested for quite a while. Why? You tell me. I do not know.

I knew I was booked to take the chair at a meeting in the Woman's Building in the Exposition grounds—ten miles away from the city—on the following morning, at which questions of National Health in England were to be discussed, and that it was not possible to be in two places at once—at least, in the flesh.

What happened was this—I was strongly urged, by what influence I cannot say, to attend the meeting of the International Council of Women—of which, until that hour, I had never heard—so strongly influenced, indeed, that I excused myself from presiding at the meeting—long since arranged—and at 8 a.m. on the following day found myself before the little room in which the International Council Meeting was to be held!

The room was not yet prepared, and a scrub-lady was languidly wielding a broom. I waited in the corridor until her somewhat superficial flipping was at an end, then seated myself in a corner.

The meeting was called for 9 a.m. The hour struck, yet the room was empty. Another hour passed; it was still empty. Then I made inquiries, and learned that the advertised chairman, Mrs. May Wright Sewall, of Indianapolis, was unavoidably detained.

"Would she ever come?" I questioned.

"Maybe," was the casual reply.

Down I sat.

An hour later a gracious woman, followed by others,

hurried in, smiling and apologetic—a gay and gentle personality, who at once stepped on to the little platform, and, sweeping aside such inconsiderable items as hours ticked off by clocks, began to speak with us, and we all floated away on the wings of her eloquence from mere mundane surroundings into realms of delight. Inspired by the International Idea, she emphasised her belief in the oneness of the world, and even of all worlds. She had conceived of a vast sisterhood of women of all peoples, of all lands—meeting together, speaking with one another, learning from one another, becoming known to one another, working for the blessed ideal of kindness to one another, and to this federal idea she had given the title of the International Council of Women. Five years before in Washington she had delivered her message and formed the nucleus of the International Council, by associating together a few kindred spirits into the National Council of Women of the United States.

From this meeting she told us we must all go forth—even to the uttermost parts of the earth we must presently go—and teach the lesson of the common right of humanity to communion, participation, and fellowship. How infinitesimal are worlds—or spheres—even the whole universe—how pale, inert, how lifeless, deprived of the affluence of human feeling! The spiritual and intellectual forces of love and learning, the germ of the Divine in man, are these not the forces through which worlds are enlightened and kept sane?

Thus May Wright Sewall, apostle and prophet.

She ceased speaking.

Then matters of business were discussed. Councils must be formed in every country in the world, and those present must just go out and do it. Names were tossed about—international officers nominated.

Suddenly, smiling upon me in my far corner in her enticing way, she said: "I was aware whilst speaking of a personality in this room very much in sympathy with the International Idea."

"That is so" I answered. Someone introduced us, and suffice it to say in a few minutes I had been commissioned straight away to see Mrs. Eva McLaren, "of England," nominated International Secretary, and urge her from that meeting to form a National Council of Women of Great Britain and Ireland, preparatory to affiliation with the International Council.

This, upon my return to London, I did, and Mrs. Eva McLaren invited me to act as honorary secretary to a provisional committee, which ultimately, in conference with representatives of the National Union of Women Workers, decided to extend the constitution of that Union, by forming a governing body of affiliated societies of women and branches; and this organisation, under the title of the National Council of Women of Great Britain and Ireland, has long since formed a part of the great International Council of Women.

So far, well.

But what of the nurses? Year by year, all over the world, their usefulness to the community and their own professional needs grow and grow. How find time or interest to deal with them effectively in a general assembly? It did not appear possible. Why not commune together?

*Written in 1912.—Ed.

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