

Royal British Nurses' Association.

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QUEENS IN NURSING HISTORY.

We have received a letter from a Member of the Association in Scotland, asking whether it would be possible to have the talk, "Queens in Nursing History," which was broadcasted from the Glasgow Station on August 16th, printed in the JOURNAL. We are, therefore, in accordance with her request, reproducing it in the R.B.N.A. Supplement.

"The influence of the Royal Family in the growth and development of institutions for the nursing of the sick is so well known that it might appear that the subject of Queens in Nursing History should offer unlimited opportunity for research and for the substance, not merely of one short address, but of a whole volume. Scarcely ever do we open a daily paper without finding a part of its space devoted to some action, on the part of a Member of the Royal House, which is calculated to advance the provisions already established for the relief of suffering. It is, therefore, apt to be assumed that this sympathy with the sick and the suffering has been a characteristic of the Queens of all times, but to what extent this is true it is somewhat difficult to say, for the beginnings of nursing history are shrouded in the mists of antiquity. To retrieve here a little, and there a little, of the earliest evidences of skill in nursing, must produce at best a very inadequate result, particularly as in early ages, nursing was performed mostly within the sanctity of religious houses; or at least under their ægis.

In pre-Christian times the treatment of disease was very largely undertaken in the Mysteries, in the temples, for instance, of Osiris and Isis, in the Norse Mystery Temples and the Temples of Ancient Greece, and, to go very far back, by the holy men of ancient India. Yet we find indications that the Kings and Queens of ancient India were by no means oblivious to their people's needs. Considerably over two hundred years before the Christian era a King built in India a hospital with a medical school attached, and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that his Queen participated in this good work. In one of the European museums is to be seen the medicine chest of the Queen of a Pharaoh who reigned in Egypt twenty-five hundred years before Christ; and it is on record that Flaccilla, wife of Theodosius the Great, went daily to the hospitals connected with the churches. Radegunde is another famous Queen in early nursing history. Daughter of a Thuringian King and wife of King Clothacar, she was a very brilliant woman, forceful and a scholar. Her marriage was a very unhappy one, partly, no doubt, because it was compulsory, and because the King was a cruel and licentious man. True it is that she is said to have neglected her wifely duties and kept him waiting for his meals while she conversed with the learned men of her time; but, seeing that she was his fifth wife in order of precedence, her position in his household should not have been particularly onerous* After leaving him at last she was received

into the protection of the Church. She may be regarded as one of the earliest nurse teachers of hygiene, for it is recorded that, in addition to other benefactions, she built baths for the use of the community. An old biographer states that, in her nursing work, she shrank from no disease, not even leprosy. That she was a woman far ahead of her time is shown by the fact that she studied ancient manuscripts and worked at the dramatic performances, which were the great medium of religious teaching in her time. Radegunde died in 587, and was mourned by a great community.

Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, was the first woman to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and it is recorded that she built shelters for pilgrims and sick folk on the way. In later years Queens and Princesses often accompanied their husbands to the Holy Land, notably Eleanor, Queen of Edward the First, who, according to a popular legend, sucked the poison from the wound her husband received from a Saracen dagger; no doubt the Queens and the ladies in their train took a share in caring for knights and soldiers wounded in the Crusades.

But of all the Queens and Saints in nursing history it is round a Royal lady of the Thirteenth Century that our imagination most loves to linger—the exquisite Elizabeth, daughter of a great King of Hungary, the Elizabeth of Wagner's "Tannhauser," of Kingsley's "Saint's Tragedy," "The dear St. Elizabeth," "die liebe Frau Elizabeth," "the Blessed Elizabeth, the elect handmaid of God" she has been variously named by historians of her time. She was the great Patron Saint of Nursing in the Middle Ages. At the age of fifteen she was married to Ludwig, Landgraf of Thuringia to whom she was betrothed in babyhood. This great Ruler could appreciate her beautiful character, and there are many legends showing their devotion to one another. Elizabeth devoted her life to the sick, and would find them out in hovels far remote from her castles. Many tales exist of her kindness to the lepers and of how she would cut off their horrible hair and wash and dress their sores. It is told that there was a poor little leper lad, named Helias, who was in such a condition that no one could be found who would care for him. Elizabeth put him in her own and her husband's bed, and her irate mother-in-law brought Ludwig to "see a piece of the work of your Elizabeth," as the chronicler puts it. The Landgraf listened to his mother's indignant accusations: "She loves him better than you," "she wishes to give you the leprosy," and so on, until at last, vastly irritated, he went to his wife's room and, in a rage, tore down the bed-clothes. "At the same moment," says the historian in his quaint and beautiful way, "the Almighty opened the eyes of the Landgraf's soul and he beheld the figure of the crucified one extended on the bed." His wife had followed him to calm his anger against the leper, and he turned to her, saying, "I beg you will often give my bed to such guests."

But the story which is the loveliest of the legends of Elizabeth is that relating how one day she was met by her husband as she was going from her castle to the village with her arms laden with bread for the poor. He laughingly demanded

* Dock's "History of Nursing."

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)