

## PROFESSIONAL REVIEW.

## A GENERAL HISTORY OF NURSING.\*

"A General History of Nursing," by Mrs. Lucy Ridgely Seymer, M.A. (Oxon), S.R.N., merits attention both as the work of a Registered Nurse (certificated at St. Thomas' Hospital, London), and because it is evidently the result of much painstaking research.

In her preface Mrs. Seymer pleads the difficulty of "compressing into these pages so vast a subject" as an "historical sketch of an ancient and almost world-wide art which is still rapidly developing," and, indeed, in this, she has our sympathy, for the information contained in the book is well condensed and arranged, and numerous footnotes give references to authorities who can be readily consulted by those who wish to pursue any special subject further. Acknowledgment is given by the author in the Preface to Miss Nutting's and Miss Dock's monumental work, "which can never be superseded," to Mrs. Bedford Fenwick, Miss Lloyd Still and others, as well as to her parents and her husband who have given her unsparingly of their time and advice, and to Miss Nina D. Gage (a past President of the International Council of Nurses) who revised the book for the American edition and made many valuable additions and corrections.

## ORIGINS.

The author begins by examining the medical notions current amongst ancient peoples as "from the crude conceptions of the healing art have originated all modern methods of caring for the sick and both those that we call medical or surgical, and those that we class as nursing." Their origins in Egypt—in the dry sands of which were preserved the papyri containing our most complete examples of ancient medical literature—Mesopotamia, Palestine, India, Greece and Rome all come under observation. A famous Egyptian physician, we are told, was Imhotep, who lived about 3500 B.C., came by degrees to be regarded as a god, and in later days was identified by the Greeks with their god of healing, Asklepios.

The name Imhotep means "He who cometh in peace," and on the wall of his temple at Philæ (erected under the Ptolemies in the third century, B.C.) he is called "the good physician of gods and men, a kind and merciful god, assuaging the sufferings of those in pain, healing the diseases of men, giving peaceful sleep to the restless and the suffering."

"Of the existence of any building identifiable as a hospital we have no trace, nor do we know if, apart from midwives who were plentiful, there were any men and women corresponding to our nurses. Nursing was then most probably done, as much later it was in Greece and Rome, within each household by the women and slaves."

"Hygiene was then in advance of medicine—the curious thing about Egyptian medicine is that it never developed into a scientific system."

As in Egypt so in Mesopotamia the scanty records tell nothing about nursing as such; our knowledge of ancient Jewish medicine is derived entirely from the Old Testament and the Talmud. "The outstanding interest of the Mosaic books lies in the pre-eminence achieved by the Jews in public and social hygiene, a pre-eminence not then attained by any other nation of antiquity. These health regulations were all calculated to improve the general stamina of the race, and so were particularly in keeping with the Israelites' regard for themselves as the chosen people."

In ancient India the earliest literature consists of the Sanskrit Vedas or Sacred Books, to which the most usual

date assigned is about 1600 B.C., in which medicine has an important place.

The one of most interest to us as nurses was in eight parts, treating of medicine, surgery, children's diseases, etc., and probably also from other lost medical books various authors made *Samhitas* (compendiums), one, we are told, being primarily a surgical, the other a medical treatise. The chief interest of these for us lies in the details about hospitals and attendants (nurses).

## DEACONESSES AND EARLY CHRISTIAN HOSPITALS.

Concerning the work of deaconesses and the early Christian Hospitals we read that "with the beginning of Christianity the history of nursing first becomes continuous; our records, hitherto fragmentary and scattered, now follow uninterruptedly down to the present day. Between pre-Christian and post-Christian care of the sick there was this great difference—that love and service toward one's neighbour were regarded as Christian duties no less binding than love towards God and as essential elements in the character of Christ's followers—what had formerly been a mere occupation of slaves, or a service of necessity in any household, became a sacred vocation based upon Christ's actual command. Thenceforward it was the avowed duty of all Christian men and women to go outside the narrow limits of their own homes and tend others in sickness and distress."

It is interesting to learn of Nicarete (St. Chrysostom's contemporary, but not a deaconess) that "since she had a humane character she also prepared a variety of remedies for the needs of the sick poor, and frequently succeeded in curing patients who had derived no benefit from the skill of the customary physicians." This influence of personality is a point meriting the attention of psychologists, since it can scarcely be that Nicarete had greater medical knowledge than the customary physicians.

## HOSPITALS AND NURSING IN THE MIDDLE AGES.

It was in about the twelfth century that a definite separation took place between establishments intended for sick persons only and those destined for the aged, the indigent, etc., and the era of hospitals began. The hospital was then, says a recent writer, "an ecclesiastical, not a medical, institution. It was for care rather than cure; for the relief of the body, when possible, but pre-eminently for the refreshment of the soul—Faith and love were more prominent features in hospital life than were skill and science."

It was at this time that we find various religious orders, whose main duty was the care of the sick, developing from the earlier monastic system. "These nursing orders," says the author, "fell roughly into three groups. First there were the military nursing orders, or Knights Hospitaliers, the outcome of the Crusades; secondly, there were the so-called 'secular' orders, and thirdly, there were the regular orders like that of the Augustinian Sisters of the Hotel Dieu in Paris." To each of these Mrs. Seymer refers in detail.

## FROM THE REFORMATION AND RENAISSANCE TO THE END OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

"To the sixteenth century" we read "belong two great movements, the Reformation and Renaissance, which seem to have had (except in England) surprisingly little direct effect on nursing. The great revival of learning left the care of the sick untouched and unenlightened, possibly because the feeling was still current that such an occupation being religious rather than intellectual did not give scope for scientific improvement. In England, however, the Reformation if not the Renaissance did definitely affect nursing. After the dissolution (1535-7) of the monasteries by Henry VIII and the consequent collapse of the monastic system of philanthropy including hospitals, great misery

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