

THE ROYAL HOSPITAL AND COLLEGIATE CHURCH OF ST. KATHERINE'S BY THE TOWER.

Address given by Miss Isabel Macdonald, F.B.C.N., on Registration Day, 1933, at the British College of Nurses, London.

It has become the custom at this particular gathering to take some special event or personality from the past and to place it before us as a subject for contemplation and consideration; it seems particularly fitting after certain events of the past summer to choose for the subject of this year's address the ancient Royal Hospital and Collegiate Church of St. Katherine's by the Tower. Also, before I recommence my series of articles on the historic Royal Nurses, some reference such as this to St. Katherine's will help to make clear its connections with many of those Queens and furthermore will allow me to curtail my sometimes rather lengthy dissertations. Shortly, it will indicate our reason for placing certain Queens in the category of Historic Royal Nurses, and that is why this afternoon I propose to lead you on an excursion into the past and to reconstruct, from among the shadows, the ancient Royal Hospital and Church of St. Katherine's by the Tower, which stood only some 350 yards outside the boundaries of the City of London itself. Probably the day will come when the study of history will be carried out on quite different lines from those of the present, a day will come when history will no longer be a mere record of events as seen from the standpoint of this or that historian, but will involve an almost scientific research into the impulses that, in later times, had their fulfilment in historical events and the evolution of national and world development. In that case, though in a very humble way, we may perhaps be doing some small service to the future to-day, for there can be no doubt that one of the first impulses in England towards an organised system of nursing for the community is to be found in the inspiration that led to the establishment of that truly ancient foundation of St. Katherine's by the Tower. Its fate has rested in a kind of trinity. First there was the sorrow that brought it into being. Then there was the struggle between a Queen and a Pope underlying which there are many important points in the development of St. Katherine's which I should have liked to analyse this afternoon, but, alas, time forbids that and I shall just refer to a favourite axiom of your President which sums up well what would have been the result of such considerations—"All progress is strife to the end." The result of the struggle of Queen Eleanor of Provence, wife of Henry III of England, to maintain her royal prerogative and the autonomy of St. Katherine's really preserved for centuries the very being of that foundation; but for her, owing to a series of facts, again too long for recapitulation to-day, St. Katherine's would in all probability have disappeared at the Reformation. And so in this trinity, which contains the fate of St. Katherine's, we have first the sorrow of one Queen and then the courage of another. And then comes the last side of the triangle which sounds the death knell of St. Katherine's—avarice—the materialism of the nineteenth century. But of that more later. These are impulses that make the story of St. Katherine's by the Tower—sorrow, courage and avarice.

In a curious way, in the course of the world's story, foundations like St. Katherine's come and go and, in the perspective of the years, all but people with the most materialistic perceptions must realise that they are not mere stone and lime, neither are they to be regarded as merely communities which have come together and dispersed again; rather, if we view them in the vistas of time—I can only express myself very clumsily—we have to acknowledge that they become in themselves entities and play a part in the long progress of history; they develop, so to speak,

a kind of independent soul that lives on in the foundation from one generation to another, taking to itself no doubt a certain colouring from the habits and customs of each. However scanty the records and details that are left to us—and scanty indeed they are in the story of St. Katherine's—yet the fruits of those details, those seeds, we can, if we choose to, recognise in later times. We must realise from the start that the word hospital had a somewhat different meaning in those days from that which it carries at present to the mind. While taking on a religious character this foundation concerned itself with the care of the sick and the poor—and the poor were nearly always sick in those days—and it linked with its beneficent purposes a fostering care for learning and its progress.

The spirit of the river is full of mystery and memories, and as you pass St. Katherine's Dock you may be tempted to think of the year 1148, when a great and courageous Queen sorrowed for the death of two little children, laid to their rest in the church of the Holy Trinity at Aldgate. Matilda, wife of Stephen, mourned their physical death, but she raised a monument to her conviction that the soul does not experience death when she reared St. Katherine's by the Tower in "pure and perpetual alms for the souls of Baldwin and Maud." She purchased the site from the Priory of the Holy Trinity of Aldgate, and almost the only information regarding this piece of land which has drifted down to us is that there stood on it a mill when it was bought by the Queen. The devoted General of her army, William of Ypres, who championed her cause so valiantly during Stephen's imprisonment by the Empress Matilda, made a gift to the Priory of Holy Trinity of the lands of Edredsheda (since named Queenhithe) and charged the Priory with an annual payment of £20 to his Queen's foundation. About this time the Crusaders had brought to England the story of St. Katherine, a martyr of the early part of the fourth century, and the Queen decided to dedicate her foundation to this saint. Saint Katherine professed her faith in Christ at Alexandria, but the legends about her are so confused that it is difficult to gain much information from the mass of them. We learn from the works of an old Greek writer that she was a great scholar and of royal blood. She confuted a company of the greatest heathen philosophers whom Maximus II had commanded to enter into disputation with her; they were converted to Christianity as a result and all were burned in one fire. Katherine herself was at last beheaded, but was first put on an engine made of four wheels joined together and with sharp spikes which, when the engines moved, would tear her body to pieces. Legend has it that at the first stirring of the terrible wheels the cords with which the martyr was bound were broken by the invisible power of an angel and the wheels separated so that she was spared that form of death. Hence you see in many old carvings and emblems of St. Katherine's by the Tower the symbol of the wheel. The body of St. Katherine was discovered by the Christians in Egypt as early as the eighth century at a time when they groaned under the yoke of the Saracens. They carried it to a monastery on the top of Mount Sinai* which had originally been built by the Empress Helena and enlarged and beautified by Justinian. Fallonius the Archbishop speaks of this translation of the body of the saint as follows:—"This body was carried by the Monks of Mount Sinai to their Monastery that they might enrich their dwelling with such treasure." I make no apology for this digression. This Royal martyr has indeed her place in the history of St. Katherine's by the Tower. Was she or Matilda its real Founder? Was Matilda overshadowed by this saint's inspiration when she raised St. Katherine's, like a star by the dark river, to shed its ray for the amelioration of the lot of those laid on the wheel of an earthly existence and subject

* The same in which the Codex Sinaiticus was found.

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