# Royal British Nurses' Association.

Incorporated by Royal Charter.

THIS SUPPLEMENT BEING THE OFFICIAL ORGAN OF THE CORPORATION.

## LECTURE.

### THE GREAT PLAGUE.

By Major Rigg, O.B.E., T.D., M.A., F.S.A.

Major Rigg is always assured of a large, appreciative and friendly audience when he comes to give a lecture to the Royal British Nurses' Association and on this occasion the subject was one of more than antiquarian interest to the audience he addressed. In commencing, Major Rigg referred to many visitations of plague that had appeared throughout the centuries. In the reign of Edward III, there was a visitation of what was spoken of as the black death; this occurred in 1349. It attacked the whole community and about one third of the population of the country was wiped out. During the fifteenth century there were many instances of plague but the method of recording details regarding it were very inefficient and people tried to avoid publicity. In the reign of Henry VII, in 1485 there occurred a very serious visitation of plague. In London alone 12,000 people died from it; two successive Lord Mayors died in a single week from plague and also six aldermen. Down through the Tudor period there were other visitations, and from 1516 there were continual epidemics of sleeping sickness which exacted a heavy death toll during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary I. A few years after Elizabeth came to the throne there was an outbreak and another occurred in 1563. The Queen actually insisted on those, who escaped from London to Windsor, being executed as she wished to insure the safety of herself and the court from infection. In 1603 there was another fierce visitation of the plague. Of these instances of the ravages of the plague in the Middle Ages it is very difficult to gain reliable information, but a little later what were known as Bills of Mortality were established and were entrusted mostly to the Parish Clerks. They give, however, no index of the gravity of the plague because the people attacked by it, and their friends, always sought to conceal the fact that they were suffering from plague. There were 107 parishes in London, and in one of these alone 1,000 people died of plague in 1665. This was the year of what is known as the Great Plague, and although the number of medical men in those days was not large, they may be said to have remained at their posts and worked with very great self sacrifice and also at very great personal risk. Dr. Nathaniel Hodges was one of those. He was an outstanding member of the Royal College of Physicians; this and the Royal Society and similar bodies had become more active after the Restoration in spite of the less sombre conditions of life which it introduced. Dr. Hodges contended that infection arose from merchandise from Holland carried by goods which came originally from Smyrna and thus infection was brought from the East. Another splendid physician, Dr. William Boghurst, worked self-sacrificingly in St. Giles, St. Clement Danes and other places where the plague was raging and he held it to be of local origin. In support of Dr. Hodges' case it is to be noted that in 1664 and 1665 the plague was very severe in Holland, but it is more than probable that local conditions were to be regarded as the direct cause of the plague. In the reign of Henry VIII, Erasmus had written a terrible indictment on the filthy conditions under which the poor of London lived.

The Great Plague of 1665 may be regarded as a tragedy of errors. Everthing that was done to stop the plague was the wrong thing. The air was blamed and fires were lit opposite houses where the inmates were victims of the plague and sweet herbs were thrown on the flames to purify the air. Dogs were regarded as being to blame for the spread of the plague and 40,000 dogs and cats were destroyed when actually they might have helped to improve matters, for the real cause of the plague was rats. These were thus allowed to grow and multiply through the slaughter of their enemies; they grew tame and waxed fat at the open sewers. A great Japanese physiologist, Kitsato, made a study of this aspect and showed, in 1894, during the Hong Kong epidemic, very clearly, that the rats were the actual culprits—not the brown rat to which we are accustomed, but the black rat from the East. These last are small and black and become domesticated; they seek human habitations, while the ordinary brown rat prefers sewers, river beds and the like. The flea of the black rat was the actual carrier of infection, and this has been abundantly proved since by certain observations and statistics on the course of a visitation of plague which occurred in Bombay by the Indian Plague Research Commission. The terrible condition of the water supply was also partly to blame for the Great Plague of London. The open Fleet River and Tyburn were sources of supply and the water carriers of the Thames were well known and patronised in those days; every sort of filth could gain access to the water supply. The wells were filthy and polluted by other streams which ran through churchyards and other contaminated soil. It was not until after the Great Fire, so beneficial in exterminating the plague and its infections, that a more reliable water supply was established for the population of London, thanks to Sir Hugh Myddleton's New River Scheme. A curious fact about the visitations of plague is that they usually commenced in the suburbs and worked their way into the centre of the town. The Great Plague commenced first in St. Giles', spread to St. Clement Danes, St. Paul's and Holborn (places where Dr. William Boghurst worked so altruistically). It reached Cripplegate and worked its way through the City of London, Stepney and Southwark. The death toll within the City walls was not so great as in the outlying districts. It is difficult to estimate the population of London at that time but it is believed that it would be about 450,000 in the City of London, its Liberties and its Outparishes as they were called. The Liberties were the parishes that lay outside the gates and inside the bars, while the outparishes were those beyond the bars such as St. Giles', St. Martin's and others.

About 100,000 people fell victims to the Great Plague between the early days of May and the last days of October,

previous page next page