

THE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF NURSES.

On the afternoon of Monday, July 19th, the members assembled at the Central Hall, Westminster, for the meetings arranged in connection with the four Sections of the Congress: I.—Nursing Education; II.—The Nursing Profession; III.—Public Health; IV.—Some Nursing Problems. Long before 3 o'clock, the time appointed for the Congress to convene, the Hall was humming with a great concourse of nurses anxious to take their places in the various halls where the Sessions were to be held, and when the Chairman called the meetings to order all the halls were filled.

We give this month an account of the Session in Section IV, at which Miss Alice Reeves, President of the Irish Nurses' Association, presided, and Miss Margaret Breay, Treasurer of the National Council of Nurses of Great Britain, presented a paper, read by Miss Gladys Le Geyt, on "Nurses as Citizens, in Parliament, and on Public Bodies."

MONDAY, JULY 19th—SECTION IV.

Miss Reeves, in opening the meeting, said that she was very diffident in occupying the chair, since, in the Irish Free State, few women were elected on to hospital committees; where this was the case a better dietary scale was provided for the Nurses.

In regard to the election of Nurses as Members of Parliament, the question was very largely a financial one. How could Nurses without private means stand for election? Yet only a limited number were so qualified.

NURSES AS CITIZENS, IN PARLIAMENT AND ON PUBLIC BODIES.

By MARGARET BREAY, S.R.N., S.C.M., Hon. Treasurer, National Council of Nurses of Great Britain.

AS CITIZENS.

One of the important functions of this great Congress is to report progress.

When the International Congress of Nurses met in London eight and twenty years ago, women had no political rights as regards the Parliamentary Franchise, but were classed with lunatics, paupers and criminals as ineligible to exercise this primary right. Those who were present at our last Congress in this city will remember that the great claimant of civic rights for women, Mrs. Henry (afterwards Dame Millicent) Fawcett, attended our Opening Session, and with clear and irrefutable logic put the case for Women's Suffrage before it, but logic and justice were of no avail at that time, and a decade passed before the women in this country were enfranchised, during which time a regiment of claimants trod the Via Dolorosa in and out of prison in their spiritual struggle for justice.

How long the battle for right against might would have continued is impossible to say, but when the Great War broke out in 1914, Mrs. Pankhurst, patriot and stateswoman, called a truce, and directed the energies of her followers into national channels, with the result that the services they rendered were so conspicuous that at the end of the War the vote could no longer be withheld, and in 1919 the Women's Franchise Act received the Royal Assent.

That is the first great event concerning which I have to report progress.

The years pass quickly, and those who were little more than infants in 1919 have grown to women's estate. Dame Millicent Fawcett has her memorial, and a statue of Mrs. Pankhurst has been placed in the Embankment Gardens close to the Houses of Parliament, and was unveiled by the Prime Minister of that day, Mr. Stanley Baldwin, who warmly acclaimed her personality and work. When as a matter of course we now record our votes in Parliamentary

elections, let us remember with gratitude the women of many nations who agonised to gain for us this fundamental right.

Let us remember also that privilege begets responsibility, and carefully study the questions on which we are called to vote, and upon which so many important issues may depend. Now that we have the vote it is our duty not only to exercise it, but to exercise it with knowledge, after careful study of the main issues before the electorate. Especially are nurses able to give a considered and valuable vote on questions of health, on eugenics—the aim of which is to "Study the Laws of Heredity as they apply to human beings with the practical purpose of improving the physical and mental qualities of the race"—a question of supreme importance, with which nurses are brought into constant contact; on education and on many other questions which will present themselves, besides those directly affecting their own profession, such as the definition of a standard of nursing education and the registration of those who have attained it. Apparently a simple proposition, but from the first it met with the most strenuous opposition, and, as many of those present know, it was thirty-two years from the time that the British Nurses Association was founded in 1887 to establish a system of legal registration for nurses in British hospitals until the indomitable leader of the demand for legal status for the Nursing Profession, Mrs. Bedford Fenwick, and the faithful protagonists of the movement, on the 23rd of December, 1919, witnessed from the vantage point of the crimson benches in the House of Lords, the picturesque ceremony of the passing of the Nurses' Registration Acts with the quaint words "Le Roi le veut." At long last, Acts for the registration of nurses in England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland, establishing a standard of education for nurses, and giving them a majority of two thirds on their Governing Body, were placed on the Statute Book of these Realms.

But there were many obstacles to be overcome before that fight was won, the force of which was not realised when the British Nurses' Association was founded. There was the opposition of the lay nursing press to the professional organisation of nurses. Many hospital committees, which were in no way responsible to Parliament, disliked the idea of "State interference" with their unrestricted power over their nursing staffs, and the majority of the Matrons of the largest training schools took the line of least resistance.

Throughout the whole campaign economics, and the right of nurses to professional self-government in their own associations, and on the General Nursing Councils under any Act of Parliament, were the points most highly contested. But, even so, had nurses possessed the power of the Parliamentary Vote is it conceivable that an Act giving them the elementary right to manage their own professional affairs for the protection of the public, and for maintaining definite standards of education and good order in their own ranks, would have taken thirty-two years of intensive and selfless work to place the Nurses' Acts upon the Statute Book? Certainly not, Parliament would have listened to reason, if not from conviction, from a keen sense of self preservation.

When we realise the potentialities of the Nurses' Registration Acts and the progress already achieved thereby, including the power to maintain discipline, progressive standards of nursing education, statutory examination and registration, the power to elect direct representatives to the governing body, presided over by a Registered Nurse in England, let us measure our gratitude to the brains which conceived this reform and their sacrifice for its accomplishment.

The future of the Nursing Profession is now in the hands of Registered Nurses—may they honour their trust.

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