

THE NURSES' UNIFORM.

Its History and Aim

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THERE are few subjects apparently on which less has been written, in English at any rate, than the subject of the evolution of the Nurses' Uniform and its Aim. It is a matter which, in the United States at least, has had but little discussion given to it. In looking over the reports of the proceedings of the last fifteen annual meetings of the National League of Nursing Education, there is not one mention of this subject on the programmes. An enquiry at the Department of Nursing Education of Teachers' College, New York, brought forth the information that the library there, probably the most complete library on nursing subjects in the United States, had nothing that would be of special help along these lines, except that a year ago a student of the course wrote a brief paper on the subject. This nurse when written to very cordially lent her paper with permission to use her material. She, however, wrote that she too had found it very difficult to find much on the subject. It has not been possible to consult many original sources and in consequence this account is very incomplete.

Since the most dominant influences on the development of nursing throughout the ages has been religion, with war and science as secondary forces, we must look to these factors in the evolution of the uniform. In the long period before the Christian era, the religious influence was the most powerful force that affected nursing and in this period since it is almost impossible to differentiate medical and nursing measures from ceremonials of worship, of purification and propitiation, it follows that the earliest form of costume for nursing was the garb of attendants in temples and shrines. The history of nursing shows that the supernatural theory of disease, whether it is attributed to evil spirits, or gods and demons, resulted inevitably in a crude and perverted system of nursing and medical treatment, but that out of this chaos of religious and medical ritual and magic evolved the first feeble beginnings of medical art and science.

With the dawning recognition of certain principles of prevention and treatment usually symbolised in medical gods and goddesses who were worshipped in special temples devoted to medico-religious rites, nursing measures represented by massage and other manual forms of treatment became roughly standardised and certain skills developed in these arts.

Although the medicine man or priest probably first monopolised all the functions of priest, teacher, law-giver and physician, it is reasonable to believe that in time he began to hand over certain of the more practical duties to lesser and more specialised assistants who were sometimes men, and sometimes women—often old women. As they served in temples with the priests, their clothing was similar to that of those functionaries.

While there is little doubt that the first organised and systematic care of the sick probably was associated with religious shrines and temples, still undoubtedly a contributory influence in the establishment of institutions for the sick is to be found in the ancient rites of hospitality which was practised in some form or other by all primitive and ancient peoples². Some provision for the poor and sick stranger in the form of hostels or inns was found even among most primitive races, and in these institutions as they gradually developed, the religious influence of their origin was carried over and to them we can trace the beginnings of the religious nursing orders.

With the beginning of the Christian era and the new motives of brotherhood and service, and emphasis upon the duty of charity and self-sacrifice as preached by the Christian religion and accentuated by the poverty and sufferings of the early Church under persecution, there developed workers whose main function was the care and relief of the sick and unfortunate³. Organised under the auspices of the early Church, these workers developed into special groups with well defined duties along lines of what now-a-days would be called social work and visiting nursing. The most important of these groups were the deacons and deaconesses whose costumes were dictated by the simplicity and poverty of their life. With the development of state care of the sick, the old and the poor, and the spread of Christianity, nursing costumes developed with the kind of women who served in these institutions. When in the fourth century there was a great outpouring of religious zeal and great growth of charitable work, wealthy and aristocratic women took up the lowly task of nursing as penance and a guarantee of heavenly reward, nursing costumes were the characteristic flowing garments of the rich ladies of the day. When, however, this period was followed by the era in which monasticism was the prevailing influence, and in which self-abnegation and the elimination of all worldly elements led to multitudes of men and women secluding themselves in monasteries and nunneries or limiting all their activities to institutions for the care of unfortunates, the effect upon nursing costumes was the adoption of the simplest and coarsest religious garb in accordance with the regulations of the particular orders.

The stiff white cap of the deaconesses, the close fitting white linen caps of the nun which encircled the face and chin, with the variation

of fillet for the forehead, or perhaps the bib, or may be the veil of dark material, the fluted ruffle, or bows under the chin, all these were the forerunners of the present nurses' uniform cap. The cowl, or cape or hood with which at will the face could be covered in humility and the large stiffly starched white hoods and also the coloured soft long veils, all these are precursors of parts of the uniforms of present day nurses of different countries. In all of them as in the robes of linen or of stuff were found the motives of humility, cleanliness, practicability, protection, uniformity and equality. The tunics of deaconesses and the black mantle of the 13th century, the peasant dresses adopted by Ladies of Charity in the 17th century,⁴ and the silks and velvets of abbesses and noble ladies show the variations in the forerunners of the modern uniform. A white garb was decreed in 1526 for nurses in the Hotel Dieu in Paris as a means of promoting propriety outside the hospital for the nurses were often sent out to do private nursing.

It is hard to trace the influence of the Knights Hospitallers of the Order of St. John and the other medical military brotherhoods on the uniform of women nurses in armies. We know⁵ that the Hospitallers combined the religious and military types of organisation and the ascetic and romantic ideas in a very interesting way and that they were accompanied and assisted by ladies of the same social class and with similar ideals. The Knights Templar, an order founded in 1118 wore the mantle of Esculapius over their military attire to show that they united the art of healing with that of war. The Hospitallers of the same period were distinguished from the Templars by associating women in their healing work. They employed not only nursing sisters but sought the assistance of the various corporations⁶ of women in the care of the sick and wounded, and it is reasonable to assume that the lavishness and magnificence which characterised the institutions founded by them, which were often church, almshouse and fortress combined had their influence upon the costumes of the ladies of position and importance who were associated with them in their activities.

Somewhat later and about the same period as the Hospitallers in France there sprang up in Flanders another order of nursing sisters under the name of Beguines which grew into a powerful order. We read that these sisters wore black russet gowns and stiff white hoods⁷.

The establishment in Paris of the order of the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul, 1655, was the beginning of a movement which spread to many countries. The ideals of chastity, humility and poverty which characterised the order were reflected in the regulations for organisation and in its costume. The sisters were to leave their houses and go forth and visit the sick poor in every town, in every land, protected by the purity of their womanhood. There were to be no Superiores in the houses and all the sisters were to be equal. A modest dress was designed to be

worn by the sisters in all lands, and no deviation even to conform to the custom of the different localities was permitted. They wore the picturesque dress of the ordinary people, the grey-blue rough gown with the white headdress to indicate that they were unaffected, willing and ready helpers, able to go anywhere and do anything. It is interesting to note that in 1847 when the first faint dawn of our own modern nursing movement began in England, there were some twelve thousand women at work in the organisations of St. Vincent de Paul in continental Europe.

In England, too, during this same period hospitals were nursed by brethren and sisters of religious orders. They, however, with the sick, the infirm and the poor were driven out of their institutions in the complete disorganisation of all charitable work which followed the political and religious revolution of the 16th century, when most of the northern countries broke away from the Church and the religious orders which still remained loyal to the old allegiance were either dissolved or suppressed and their properties seized by the government. Hospitals were emptied for a period and there resulted a time of bitter suffering for the sick poor^s. Gradually, however, with the taking over of these institutions by the civil authorities and the employment of servant nurses of a cheap and low order we see a complete change in the type of nursing and in the appearance of nursing costumes. The ignorant, dishonest, often drunken and immoral women who were thus engaged to care for the sick wore no semblance of uniform and their ragged, untidy appearance have an implication to the word "nurse" which it has taken scores of years to eradicate.

(To be continued.)

INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC GUILD OF NURSES

The following letter has been received from the President of the International Catholic Guild of Nurses in America, from which it will be seen that a hearty invitation is extended to all members of the T.N.A.I. to attend its 1929 Convention to be held in Montreal on July 6th and 7th prior to the Conference of the International Council of Nurses.

THE EDITOR,

The Nursing Journal of India,

Government Maternity Hospital, Egmore, Madras, India.

Dear Madam:

The International Catholic Guild of Nurses held its fourth and most successful convention at Cincinnati, Ohio, U.S.A., just recently, meeting from June 18th to 22nd. The convention was held jointly with that of the Catholic Hospital Association of the United States and Canada, and the program was so planned that delegates to the Guild convention were able to attend the meetings and conferences of both organizations.