

A Month Among the Mad

By A Chaplain's Substitute

THE QUIVER – 1878

"The chaplain of the Kent County Asylum requires a substitute from August the 20th to September the 20th."

This advertisement caught my eye as I was seeking a change for myself and my family, this summer; and it resulted in my undertaking the duties.

"A strange holiday this!" some may be ready to exclaim. And in truth, such it seemed to me after the idea of offering myself had suggested itself. But the locality was attractive, and the novelty of the work had a sort of fascination. So I went; and being much interested in what I saw and heard, I have thought others might be interested too in my experience.

The Asylum which was the scene of my temporary labours is situated about two miles out of Maidstone. It is encircled by hills; and very fair is the scene all round. Graceful hop-gardens—just in their prime at the time of my visit—clothe the slopes and mantle the vales, interspersed with cherry-orchards and woods of blended verdure. Parks surrounding substantial houses enrich the landscape here and there. And shingle spires or stone towers, peeping out from clustering houses, link the present with the past, and earth with heaven—from which heaven comes freshening breezes when the air stagnates below.

No better position could have been chosen for the Institution. The pile of plain buildings has, however, not improved the panorama; and it has left but one little patch of heath of a broad expanse, once tapestried with broom and gorse and heather, where blue-bells could claim the sky as their own, and insects could waver in affluence from flower to flower.

The Asylum holds over one hundred and fifty acres of land, the portions not covered with buildings or used for recreation-grounds being cultivated as a farm.

The large erection, with little architectural adornment to mitigate the bulk, and with associations so painful connected with it, appals the passer-by whose heart is of penetrable stuff. But the dismal impression is softened by a survey of the premises. Within, everything wears as cheerful an aspect as is consistent with economy. There is no prison-like sternness; there are no ugly signs of coercion. True, the door of each gallery is locked, and the clank of the key as we enter grates upon our feelings; but, beyond this necessary precaution there is nothing that strikes harshly. The walls are hung with bright pictures; there is abundant light; fuchsias hang from pendants in the ceiling, well-grouped flowers deck the tables; bagatelle-boards invite those so disposed to forget their malady in diversion; parrots, starlings, squirrels, and other pets, are provided for the amusement of the patients; and illustrated books lie about for their use.

Nothing, however, it may be thought, can sufficiently brighten the aspect of the place to render it otherwise than depressing to the visitor; and to some extent this is

so. To know that nearly twelve hundred, with minds "jangled and out of tune," are under treatment, and that these are the insane poor of only one county—here indeed is enough to sadden the heart! But for the most part the reality is less painful than the fancy would picture it. Many of the patients show to the passing observer scarcely any signs of unsoundness of mind. A goodly number may be seen working on the farm or in the shops attached to the premises: wielding the sledge at the forge, plying the plane at the carpenter's bench, repairing clothes on the tailor's board, assisting in the kitchen, scrubbing the floors or washing the clothes; while, of those not capable of hard work, many are engaged in lighter employments: the men helping in the garden, the women using deft fingers on those seeming inutilities which men are apt to scorn in the process, but acknowledge when completed to be no ungraceful adornment of room or person.

But I would ask my reader to go with me through the Institution. Having passed through the outer gate, and walked up an ample lawn planted with fruit-trees, we enter the front door. A wing stretches on either side. Turning to that for males, and applying our pass-key, we find ourselves in a long room, distempered and painted with cheerful colours, and decked as described. Along the side are isolated sleeping places for the worst cases, the others sleeping in dormitories. The attendant comes forward, and conducts us through. As we pass along we address one and another. Some look up vacantly, some are sullen, but others are glad to be greeted; and many droll things do we hear from them. One tells us he has means of telegraphing all over the world; another, when asked the meaning of a boss of brass which studs his shirt, says it is a symbol of Him who is "the bright and morning Star;" a third is making strange passes over his person, which he explains are an antidote to witchery. Having passed through the wards, we go out into the airing-ground, which we find laid out with grass, bordered with bright flowers. We express surprise that these are uninjured; but, we are told that, with occasional and decreasing difficulty, the gardens are preserved from harm.

From the men's side we pass to the women's. The only difference noticeable here is the greater excitability of the patients, which is painfully apparent in the airing-ground of the refractory, where several wild creatures run up and down the central mound, dance grotesquely about; or, coming up, pour out a farrago of absurd talk, "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Coming out, we cross a yard, and find ourselves among the workshops, where many of the patients are industriously employed. We then visit the bakery, and find four hundred loaves in course of making; and thence we make our way to an immense kitchen, round which are ranged coppers in which stew is simmering. The cook shows his appliances with pride, including chambers in which many joints can be cooked together by gas, and others in which big dishes of potatoes are being steamed. The magnitude of his operations may be judged from the fact that he sometimes has a thousand pounds of meat to cook at once. Opposite the kitchen is the store from which all that is required in the establishment is given out.

From the balance-sheet of last year it appears that the annual expenditure amounted to £37,299 15s. 4d. This sum in the gross appears very large; but it is calculated that the average cost of maintenance, medicine, clothing, and care, is only ten shillings and sevenpence a week for each patient. Close by is a fine dining-room, where some of the patients are laying the cloths on the tables, under the direction of an attendant. Coming out again into the corridor, and turning to the left, we find a door which leads into a new building, a large brick erection. In this for the most part the patients are superior to those in the other buidling, especially in one ward, a large square room, provided with a good piano. In this are the paying patients, and the better class of convalescents.

One gallery in this building is devoted to epileptic cases—"fitty patients," as the nurses name them. This room is a very dreary one to visit. The countenances of the inmates have been terribly darkened by disease. One of the nurses told me they had had as many as seventy fits among the patients in this ward in one day, and that they found the work in it so trying, that it would be unendurable did they not change from time to time to other galleries.

Another of these wards is used as an infirmary. In this are two women who are suffering from catalepsy, which has reduced them to so piteous a state of lethargy that they seldom move, and are too inert even to brush away the flies which settle on their faces with the same impunity as on dead flesh. One of these moves her limbs, but is almost entirely dependent on the will of another to excite her volition. When bidden to raise her arm, she does so, and then keeps it erect until it falls by the relaxing of muscle force. But, the most distressing form of mental disease is melancholia. Yonder, for instance, sits a poor creature in whose heart every gleam of gladness has been quenched. She was once a schoolmistress, and the light of joy kindled in her countenance; but now she sits, in utter helplessness and abject misery, with her finger against her wan cheek, and as she lifts her sad eyes, she says in piteous tones: "I know my fate, I have murdered my mother. They are going to take me to prison." And no pains can disabuse her mind of the delusion, for such it is entirely.

Or, to turn to but one other of such painful cases, we enter one of the small sleeping-rooms of the ward, and find a poor emaciated woman, with her head half-hidden in the coverlet. This is gently raised, and she is asked whether she would like to listen to a few words of scripture; but she replies: "No, it is too late, too late!" She is told that Jesus is able to save to the uttermost, but she repeats the dreary words of despair. And the only words of prayer she will offer is a petition to us to extinguish her life, in pity, by some quick quietus. Truly sad are such cases as these, and a fearful warning are they of the danger of neglecting salvation. But with reference to some, at least, of these instances of despondency, we may apply the fine words in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning says so tenderly and truly of Cowper:—

"Oh Christian! at your cross of hope
A hopeless hand is clinging!"

And herein is comfort for the friends of those who are suffering from this most fearful form of depression.

Happily, these extremely distressing cases are exceptional. Many of the patients look up cheerfully, and seem happy in their day-dreams. One such, for instance, whose mind was put out of gear by a railway accident, always spoke gaily and made quaint remarks in a ringing treble, flowing like a brook, with pleasant sharps and glancing lights. Another is constantly nursing two black dolls with the glee of a child. Some who are well enough to leave the Asylum do not seek their discharge because they prefer being there to going into a workhouse.

Very amusing, of course, are some of the delusions. A woman with about as much music in her voice as a rook tells you calmly that she is Jenny Lind; a meek creature protests that she really has not usurped the throne, with a tone of quiet earnestness which is very grotesque as coming from about the last person in the realm whom one could suspect of high treason; another may decline to sit down, because she has the uncomfortable impression that her back is made of glass.

But let us step outside into the airing-ground of this department. It is large, nicely laid out, and open to the glimpses of the hills, along which softening shadows creep to soothe the eye. Some of the patients are sitting at work; others are engaged in conversation; while here and there an individual is indulging in monologue, or is walking with the fancied air of a duchess, with head erect, and dress held with supposed dignity. We cross this garden, and find a low building, before which several lads are playing. There are, the keeper tells us, eighteen in all—mostly epileptic. A most dreary spectacle are these poor lads, with their idiotic shambling and slavering speech. And it is no wonder that they are responsible charge, for Dr. Maudsley states in his work on "Body and Mind," that "a single epileptic attack has been known to change entirely the moral character, rendering a child rude, vicious, and perverse, who was hitherto gentle, amiable, and tractable." Looking at these poor youths, who had never known the elastic vigour of boyhood, and would never know the gratification of an advancing intelligence, I thought of the remarkable statement of Dr. Howe, that of 300 idiots in Massachusetts as many as 145 were found to be the offspring of intemperate parents, an outcome of the laws of heredity which surely should make the father or mother who is in danger of transmitting disease through the effects of alcoholism recoil from the degrading, selfish habit which so frequently affects their innocent children.

We next make our way to a larger erection, an additional building for men. We find the wards almost empty, so we step out into the airing-ground. Some of the older men are sitting against the wall, smoking; others are conversing with the attendants, or are walking along the paths. One advances to you, and in loud bass announces his respect to the clergy. You start at the explosive tones of his voice, but the keeper reassures you by telling you that it arises from deafness. Another, a Scotchman, with fantastic air, pours out a torrent of words, from which you gather that he considers himself a genius, and thinks it a pity so much ability should be lost to the world by his

detention. This man, we are told, did not speak for three years; but suddenly his tongue was loosed, and he has been making up for lost time ever since.

There are several cases, by-the-bye, of dumbness from simple restraint of the power of speech. One man, showing this peculiarity, and exhibiting no other eccentricity, works in the carpenter's shed. A woman who was almost always mute, struck me as being so from a proud reticence. But, with others it seemed a strange whim. What is remarkable is that it should last so long as it often does.

Before leaving the wards I must point out the new system of communicating, through the agency of electricity, a record of the visits of the night-watches. A plug of metal is placed by the person on duty in the wall, while he remains in the ward, and the electric circle being completed thereby a small wheel is drawn down in a tell-tale clock in the superintendent's room, which makes a groove on the slip of paper kept in motion, and records thus the time and length of the visit. The extent of the premises may be judged from the fact that seven miles of wire were required for this apparatus.

We have now visited all the buildings except that in which the chaplain is especially interested, namely the church, which is a plain structure, of Early English style, left to the custody of a meek-looking patient, who diversifies the duties of his office by winding up the sun. In this church I said prayers every morning at half-past seven, except on Sundays, when there is a service with sermon at ten o'clock, and evening prayers at four o'clock.

It might be supposed a difficult thing to minister to minds diseased, but I found the services differ but little from those with an ordinary congregation; and I kept in mind with reference to them the principle laid down by Goethe, that the insane should be treated as if they were of sound mind.

Two or three of the patients may have to be removed in the course of the service, but the frequency of these occurrences prevents the others from being disturbed by them, and the sufferer is quietly taken to the wards, or to one of the padded rooms in the porch provided for such casualties.

In his visits the chaplain frequently hears that his ministrations have carried comfort to the heart and have awakened better feelings, and he is thereby much encouraged in a work in which he must often fear lest he should be spending his strength for nought.

As to the bearing of the work of the chaplain on the malady of those under his charge, Dr. Tuke, no mean authority, has said:—"Close bonds knit together the duties of the divine and the general physician, but in no branch of medicine, when admissible at all, is religious consolation more necessary than in the treatment of mental depression or morbid fear; no functions can be more closely united than those which require as firmly, yet trustfully, to attempt to heal those who are broken in heart, and to give medicine to heal their sickness."

While in all diseases the physical and the spiritual inter-act, this is especially so in insanity.

In the course of the past year 317 new cases were admitted into the Asylum, and the report attributes forty-one of these to moral, and the rest to physical reasons. In intemperance, to which twenty-four are assigned, these meet most intimately.

One of the cases which excited my sympathy extremely may be cited as an example. Cast upon the world by the death of her father, a young girl, with refinement in her conversation, and considerable grace in her manners, suffered herself to be deceived by a reprobate of position. By-and-by she woke from a wild romance to the reality of a commonplace desertion, and her mind was dizzied. I would that all heartless ones could be haunted as I was by her plaintive appeals. And hers, the superintendent told me, is, alas! too common a case.

As to the success of the healing influences brought to bear. I find from the report that last year 150 patients were discharged "recovered," and fifty-three "relieved;" the per-centage of recoveries being 48-26 in proportion to the admission, and 7-64 to the number under treatment. This proportion would have been larger but for the fact that since the Government have made a capitation grant to the paupers in an Asylum there has been a general transference of the chronic cases from the workhouse. The effect of this is disadvantageous to the better class of cases. It is very trying for convalescents to find so many around them drivelling in imbecility, and it is painful for those brought into dependence simply by their affliction, and for such as having a small income are not in a position to pay the cost at a private Asylum, to have to associate with chronic paupers. And there are several in the Kent Asylum to whom this applies. Thus, I found there a medical man, a commercial traveller, shopkeepers, schoolmasters and mistresses, and several women with small annuities. One of these put the matter to me in a droll way, saying, "I have been accustomed to clean my teeth with tooth-powder, and have lavender-water on my handkerchief, and now I am obliged to sort with these people." It seems to me therefore that a classification is needed such as cannot be made without the establishment of institutions with some adjustment of grades.

In speaking of recovery, it may interest my readers to know of a novel mode of mitigating madness, introduced from Italy, which is being tried with some success—namely, placing aggravated cases in rooms tinged with a sobering or cheering hue, according to the nature of the affection—the chamber for the excited being tinged with blue, while red is diffused through colored glass and harmonising distemper in that for the depressed.

Much more could I write on the subject, but my article has been sufficiently extended. Therefore, asking my readers to thank God for the blessing of sound reason, and bidding them to pray for the poor sufferers from insanity, I close my account of my experience as a Chaplain's Substitute.