

SKETCHES FROM THE LIFE SCHOOL. NUMBER THREE.

Blackwell's Island—The Lunatic Asylum.

Ho, the merry madmen! How jovial they are lolling about the pleasant walks and corridors of their picturesque home, or engaged in their several occupations within their neat and comfortable chambers. Occupations, forsooth? Aye, and why not? Who shall tell whether the dreams, the reveries, the imaginings, of these unconscious happy creatures, are not as valuable and as real as the baffled hopes, the bankrupt aspirations, of the throng without their peaceful walls? They add to their other troubles and anxieties, an intense consciousness of all they suffer, hope, dread, love, hate, and are responsible for; while the lunatic is happy and careless as a child, and knows none of the only sorrows which really have power to sting the soul,—those arising from inability to help and protect the loved ones. And after all, who shall say that the schemes and pursuits of the lunatic are folly, while all his own are founded in wisdom? Is not yonder poor fool, with a paper crown on his head and a lath in his hand, who fancies himself the Emperor NAPOLEON at Waterloo, quite as much entitled to our respect as many who rush wildly through life in the mad pursuit for wealth, sacrificing in the chase not only their peace, their comfort, their tastes and their affections, but even their honor? Or, how much more to be admired is even the great Emperor himself? What was he, after all, but a terrible blood-stained madman,—a human locomotive on the track,—that crushed and trampled thousands upon thousands in its fierce career? Whither did he tend? What did he accomplish? It still puzzles the historians to agree upon an excuse for his existence. Somebody asks, "What if, after all, we are not, and that some God has only dreamed us?" What, indeed? And in that case our paper-cap NAPOLEON is as real a hero as the best of them.

In the olden time, it is true that lunatics in civilization—much more unfortunate than their brethren among the wandering nomadic races—were treated with great barbarity, and made to suffer physical privation and outrage. But thanks to the philanthropy ever generated by science and intelligence, all this has disappeared. In the handsome and comfortable home provided for these beings, by New-York—one of the nobles of all her long list of noble public charities—the utmost peace and harmony reigns. It would be quite out of the question to establish and keep together an equal number of *sane* men and women with equal favorable results. Owing to the enlightened and truly scientific treatment pursued in this asylum, no such thing as an "ungovernable patient" is heard of. By gentleness and faithfulness in promises—by logical and rational regularity and habits, occupation and discipline—(for the insane are proverbially logical and rational in their reasoning on subjects which do not appeal to their morbid faculties or sentiments)—universal docility, good feeling and strict obedience reign throughout the establishment. All the inmates, too, are cleanly and conscientious in the discharge of their various tasks and duties. In fact the institution is a little world, conducted upon reasonable principles, and moving on with as much regularity and propriety as any in which the *sane* alone mingle. The confidence, the good order, the busy and cheerful activity which prevail in this institution, are really one of the most touching and beautiful spectacles we ever witnessed, and constitute a more effective eulogy on the officers than any which we could write.

We do not propose to give a detailed and statistical description of this place—that has been already and often done. Our object is to give a general and effective idea of the *moral* of the institution. There is no doubt that the treatment of the insane is better understood and practiced in this country than in any other. The public asylums of England are imperfect and badly managed, to a degree very remarkable in a country so renowned for its charities; and its private mad houses have long been a reproach and disgrace. In France, since 1838, every department is compelled to maintain a hospital for the insane; but these asylums, for the most part, are situated in old convents which have been taken for the purpose. It may well be conceived that the location is not at all favorable to the patients; and those who enter with diseased minds and morbid imaginations into these gloomy walls, stand little chance of alleviation or recovery. The Roman Catholic Order of the Sisters of Charity has especially dedicated itself to the care of the inmates of these establishments. What energy, what patience, what watchfulness, what courage, do not these women—of the young, beautiful and high-born—display in their self-imposed task! And, in the most violent paroxysms of the lunatics, when every other authority has failed, their terror and rage are hushed beneath the voices and in the presence of these angels of mercy and benevolence. In this country the same result has been produced by enlightened and faithful scientific and anthropological research.

One great secret of the great success of the modern treatment of mad people, is to keep them employed about something. They generally make good gardeners, carpenters, or any sort of mechanics, whose work keeps the *hands* employed. They seldom or never read, whatever may have been their education or previous habits, but they are generally extremely fond of writing; and even those who never held a pen, will amuse themselves for hours together in drawing figures and imaginary letters. We saw one poor fellow, who had slaved at newspapers for many years, who had a fancy for stringing together big words, without any regard to their meaning—a habit which we fear, if established as a sign of insanity, would consign some to the asylum who have now the freedom of the printing-office. He insisted on reading us a very important article he had just written on the state of Europe; which began, as nearly as we can remember, something in this fashion:

"When the ambiguities of extradition had overwhelmed the concatenation of flabbergasted iconoclasm, hypertrophy asserted its inalienable privileges, and the functions of animadversion became unsuspectingly metamorphosed into the regeneration of adolescent humbuggiveness. We hope the reader will not recognize this style as stolen from any of our cotemporaries; we assure them quite seriously, it is fresh from the Lunatic Asylum.

It was dinner, when the animal appetites of the inmates came into active play, that the dark side of lunacy became most strikingly apparent. It was easy to imagine every misfortune, fatality or crime, in gazing on those countenances. Some were ferocious and cunning; others giggled stupidly and mopped their heads about like orang-outangs; some were babbling, yelling, screaming, starting up every second; others, with a glimmering of intelligence, seemed to look with contempt on the confusion around. Then, worse than all, here and there gleamed a pale face and motionless eyes, totally unconscious of existence, and looking as stonily on the pandemonium around as if they were corpses just risen from their graves. As we gazed, we felt the blood rush to the brain, and our own ideas began to get strangely confused, and to take on a startling sympathy for this terrible mystery of nature which we have consented to call madness.

Many who apparently quite recover their senses in the Asylum, go mad again as soon as they get out, and are returned to its parental and watchful care.

The hallucinations of the patients would form the material for a volume. Strange, strange work-

ing of the fibres which compose the human brain! Where flies the soul when this wild and unmeaning *thinking* (for it is thinking) is going on?

One man fancies himself General TAYLOR and his horse, and rushes round the garden until he is exhausted, saying his horse will not stop. Another, who was condemned to be shot as a deserter in Mexico, and went mad with joy at his reprieve, goes through the whole ceremony of his condemnation, omitting the circumstance of the pardon. He kneels down, receives the soldiers' fire, and falls dead—and this he repeats several times a day: Poor fellow! his reprieve was worse than death; for, in reality, he would have suffered but once, while now his fancy inflicts upon him the tortures of a perpetual execution.

Here is a woman whom joy has deprived of her senses. Her husband and child were on board a vessel which was wrecked. Going down to the shore every day, as if with the wish of thus being nearer the beloved objects that lay buried beneath the sea, suddenly she beheld them landing from a ship which had picked them up and saved them. One overwhelming flood of joy pervaded her bosom—and then was gone forever. She never has known them since, but sits on what she thinks the same rock where she used to bewail their fate, wringing her hands and moaning most piteously—while every week the husband and the son come and gaze on her with despair, take her hands, and call on her name, in hope to rouse one gleam of memory—but in vain.

The principal causes of insanity, so far as they can be discovered—besides the horrid and disgusting one we cannot name—are drunkenness, debauchery, avarice, religious superstition. In a word, ignorance and dissipation may be set down as the great prevailing causes; and as fast as the world becomes educated and virtuous, madness will diminish, and, it is fervently to be hoped, will cease to exist, save in those rare cases where a heart-quake sweeps over some fine and delicate organization, leaving both shrine and temple in ruins, and extinguishing the sacred light of reason upon the altar of the soul.

Until 1826, there was no special institution for the insane, but they were awarded separate wards in the Bellevue Hospital. Since that year, upwards of six thousand patients have been treated for insanity. The present institution on Blackwell's Island was established five years ago, and during that time it has contained 2,561 patients. In 1847 there were nearly four hundred patients in the Asylum—more than twice as many as could be comfortably or decently accommodated. Consequently, the poor crazy people fared but badly; and, being chiefly attended by convicts from the Penitentiary, who frequently beat, and otherwise maltreated them, they were likewise very badly fed; and from the almost total absence of vegetables in their diet, many of them were afflicted with the scurvy, which rapidly thinned off their numbers. The Asylum at this time was truly a frightful spectacle. Irritated by these discomforts, by disease, by hunger, the poor irrational creatures broke out into frequent fits of uncontrollable fury, and thirty or forty of them were continually in close confinement.

In 1848, an extension of the building was completed, and several improvements were effected in the management of the inmates. The attendance by convicts was partly dispensed with, and the quality of the food was improved. Things went on from this time improving, up to the present time. The accommodations and attendance are now fair, and the mode of treatment humane and enlightened. Seldom, if ever, are more than three or four patients now confined in their rooms, and other modes of restraint or punishment are almost unknown. Being comfortably fed and lodged, the scurvy has disappeared, and the introduction of the Croton blessing has made the Asylum at all times clean and wholesome. These changes have produced even more than a corresponding improvement in the manners and habits of the patients; and the resident physician well observes that the worst class of patients are now far better off and better behaved than the best class in 1847.

At the close of the last year, there were 464 patients in the Asylum, and during the year 441 were admitted—making the whole number treated during the year 905. There had been 338 discharges and deaths. Of those admitted, 175 were emigrants who had been in the United States less than three years: 308 had been discharged, of whom 209 had recovered, 90 were improved, and 10 unimproved. The ratio of recoveries on the whole number of admissions, is 47 per cent.—an increase of one per cent. over the last year.

The Lunatic Asylum made a terrible mistake in the outset, by the employment of penitentiary prisoners for attendants and nurses, and by an atrocious economy of room and food, exercised upon the only class of grown-up people who are incapable of even asking for redress. This mistake has been, we have already stated, nearly remedied; yet something still remains to be done. In one of the halls, and in the "Lodge Building," prison help is still employed. This is barbarous, and altogether behind the age. Nothing more preposterous can well be conceived than entrusting the care and management of the insane to convicts and felons, destitute of care, morality, judgment and responsibility. The resident physician very properly recommends the building of a wall across the Island, entirely separating the Lunatic Asylum from the other institutions, and wholly dispensing with prison help in every department.

There is already a decent library attached to the Asylum, and the resident physician suggests that a museum should be added. He observes that the insane, unless hopelessly demented, exhibit a lively curiosity in things new and interesting, and will amuse themselves, like children, for many hours, with trifling objects that appeal to their morbid fancies. There is scarcely a family who could not easily make donation of some small articles, shells, prints, minerals, or some objects of curiosity, natural or artificial, which might make happy many a weary hour to these poor children, whose lunacy has become so well-pronounced as to have withdrawn them from the great lunatic world, and confined them by themselves.

No more interesting or profitable expedition can employ a day than a visit to the Lunatic Asylum.

No. IV. will treat of the "Tombs."