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John Conolly

Excerpt

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THE
TREATMENT OF THE INSANE,

&c., &c.

PART I.

THE LAST DAYS OF THE OLD METHODS OF
TREATMENT.

WHEN the close of active professional exertions is felt to be approaching, and the pressure of that period "*aut jam urgentis aut certe adventantis senectutis*" becomes perceptible, a natural wish arises in the mind of any man who has been especially engaged in what he regards as a good and useful work to leave the work, if not finished, yet secure; or if not yet secure, at least advanced by his labours, and as little incomplete as the shortness of his life, and the limitation of his opportunities, permit. The accordance of such a privilege must have imposed obligations which his

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imperfect powers can never have fulfilled satisfactorily; and consolation under a consciousness of deficient performance can only arise from a trust in that Higher Power which allows men to be the instruments of any kind of good. Influenced by some feelings of this kind, I am anxious in these pages to explain, as distinctly as I am able, the nature, as well as the rise and progress of that method of treating the insane which is commonly called the Non-restraint System: so as to contribute to its preservation and further improvement, and perhaps to its wider adoption; or at least to prevent its being abandoned, or imperfectly acted upon, or misrepresented, when those by whom it has been steadily maintained in its early days of trial and difficulty can no longer describe or defend it.

The extent to which neglect and cruelty had reached in lunatic asylums towards the close of the last century, and which continued to prevail until a very recent period, must not be forgotten. Those who dread the accusation of a morbid philanthropy, or of visionary benevolence, may hold up in justification of their zeal the dreadful records of asylums when no pretext was given for any such accusations, and when the miserable lunatic appeared to be deserted by God and man.

Nothing, in fact, is more difficult to account for than the long neglect, in communities calling

themselves civilized, of those afflicted with a malady so much the more dreadful than other maladies, that before it destroys life it may be said to destroy all that makes life valuable or desirable. Struck with this affliction, man can no longer enjoy the chief distinctions of his nature. He can no longer pursue truth, nor do good, nor govern himself. If he is a person of rank, all his power and influence depart from him. If he lives by the exercise of a profession, hope flies away, and poverty overwhelms him. If he is enterprising and speculative, prudence forsakes him, and success crowns his enterprises no more. If he belongs to the classes in which daily subsistence is provided for by daily toil, he becomes destitute of the means of living. No malady effects such wide destruction, or creates so much and such varied distress. It extinguishes knowledge; confuses eloquence, or buries it in everlasting silence; it lays waste all accomplishments; renders beauty itself painful or fearful to behold; whilst it breaks up domestic happiness, and perverts or annihilates all the habits and affections which impart comfort, and joy, and value to human existence. Yet nothing is more certain than that this complicated misery, including every other form of misery and mental suffering, has been, not only the subject of neglect, but of most general abuse and cruelty in all ages, and even down to the times

in which we live. Knowing, as most of the readers of these observations must do, how many commodious asylums have been lately built in this country for the reception of the pauper class of the insane, they will with difficulty believe that the treatment of the maladies of the mind, or of the brain, manifesting itself in mental disorder, seems to have undergone no previous improvement, from the time of the earliest physicians whose works we possess, down to sixty years from the present day, or for about 2,500 years; and that the general management of deranged persons continued in every respect barbarous, in every country, and in every age, until Pinel in France and Tuke in England effected reforms, great in their time, often interrupted since, and even yet not universally adopted.

Up to the middle of the last century, and in many countries much later, harmless maniacs, or those supposed to be so, were allowed to wander over the country, beggars and vagabonds, affording sport and mockery. If they became troublesome, they were imprisoned in dungeons; whipped, as the phrase was, out of their madness—at all events subdued; and then secluded in darkness, in the heat of summer, and in the cold and dampness of winter, and forgotten; always half famished, often starved to death. There was not a town or a village in all the fairest countries of Europe, nor in

all this Christian land, in which such enormities were wholly unknown.

At length the condition of the mad obtained some attention; and then massive and gloomy mansions were prepared for them. These were but prisons of the worst description. Small openings in the walls, unglazed, or whether glazed or not, guarded with strong iron bars; narrow corridors, dark cells, desolate courts, where no tree, nor shrub, nor flower, nor blade of grass grew; solitariness, or companionship so indiscriminate as to be worse than solitude; terrible attendants, armed with whips, sometimes (in France) accompanied by savage dogs, and free to impose manacles, and chains, and stripes, at their own brutal will; uncleanliness, semi-starvation, the garotte, and unpunished murders: these were the characteristics of such buildings throughout Europe. There were, I need scarcely add, no gardens for exercise and recreation, and health, such as surround all our new asylums; no amusements, no cheerful occupations, no books to read, no newspapers or pictures, no evening entertainments, no excursions, no animating change or variety of any kind, no scientific medical treatment, no religious consolation. No chapel bell assembled the patients for prayer, or suspended the fierce and dreadful thoughts and curses of the dungeon; no friendly face did "good like a medicine." People looked with awe on the

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outside of such buildings, and, after sunset, walked far round, to avoid hearing the cries and yells which made night hideous. Those who visited them, on some charitable mission to some not quite forgotten inmate, received impressions of terror never afterward effaced :

Fast they found, fast shut,
The dismal gates, and barricaded strong ;
But, long ere their approaching, heard within
Noise, other than the sound of dance or song ;
Torment, and loud lament, and furious rage.

The recent publication of an elaborate and able Report on the General Management of the Insane of the Department, addressed by the Director of the Administration of Public Assistance to the Prefect of La Seine, including Paris, comprehends many particulars which, if not before unknown, were scattered over various publications, and scarcely available to the physician or the statesman. This report is one of three, the latest being published in 1854. All of them abound in information on every point in the management of the insane, and contain statistical tables of great interest and value.

The department of La Seine contains the large and important asylums of the Bicêtre and the Salpêtrière, to which the labours of Pinel and of Esquirol, and of their distinguished successors, Ferrus, Falret, Baillarger, Mitivié, Lélut, Trélat,

Voisin, Moreau, and others, have given the highest celebrity.*

It appears that before the period of the first great French revolution, or until the year 1790, there was no legislative protection thrown round the insane of France. In that year a law was passed to enforce the seclusion or imprisonment of the deranged and dangerous. Beyond this imperfect legislation nothing seems to have been done for nearly fifty years afterward, or until 1838, when, besides the seclusion of the insane and the mere safety of the public, the protection of their property, and the charitable care of those having no property, and the general care and comfort of persons so afflicted, first obtained public attention in that country. Attention had been given to separate the curable from those supposed to be incurable. Any arbitrary division of that kind consigns many to incurability whose recovery might be possible. But the position of the curable, who were placed in the Hôtel-Dieu, was not attended with any peculiar advantages. The wards in which they were placed were contiguous to those for patients suffering from accidents, or affected with fever; and they slept four in a bed. The wards were narrow, and contained many rows of beds. Each ward was

* Rapport du Directeur de l'Administration de l'Assistance Publique à Monsieur le Préfet de la Seine, sur le Service des Aliénés du Département. Paris, 1852, 1853; 1854.

both a day-room and a dormitory. The treatment of all the cases was indiscriminate. The majority of the patients were fastened to their beds. For the rest there were no airing courts. It is not difficult to imagine the wretchedness and dirtiness of such wards, and their unsuitableness to allay mental irritation.

It would appear, from the representation of Rochefoucault-Liancourt to the Constituent Assembly in 1791, that the insane in England were at that time more cared for than in France, although we shall find that we have really little reason to boast of our superiority at that time in this matter.

Such was the condition of the curable in the French asylums. What, then, was the condition of those of whose cure no hope was entertained?—These were lodged at the Bicêtre and the Salpêtrière; and, in both places, in cells either attached on one side to higher terraces, or formed below the level of the surrounding earth; and in both cases damp and dreadful. These cells (at the Bicêtre) were only six feet square. Air and light were admitted by the door alone. Food was introduced through a sort of wicket. The only furniture consisted of narrow planks fastened into the moist walls, and covered with straw. At the Salpêtrière, where the cells were below the surface, and level with the drains, large rats found their way into them, often attacked and severely

wounded the unhappy lunatics, and sometimes occasioned their death.*

And all this existed after the luxurious age of the 14th and 15th Louis; when arts and arms, science, letters, and polished manners, made France the boast and the model of Europe.

Of the two large asylums of Paris, the Bicêtre (for men) was still the worst. In an *Éloge* of the famous Pinel, Dr. Pariset paints its character with his usual eloquence. The insane, the vicious, and the criminal, were mingled together, and treated alike. Wretched beings, covered with dirt, were seen crouched down in the narrow, cold, and damp cells; where scarcely air or light found way, and where there was neither table nor chair nor bench to sit upon, but only a bed of straw, very rarely renewed. The attendants on these unhappy lunatics were malefactors, selected, not for any of the gentler virtues, from the prison. The patients were loaded with chains, and defenceless against the brutality of their keepers; and the building resounded, day and night, with cries and yells, and the clanking of chains and fetters. We cannot wonder that the keepers were sometimes murdered: that the maniac, more maddened by pain and insult, often learned to dissemble his revenge, and waited to effect it.

Happily, even in the dismal period just alluded to, three enlightened and humane men were appointed

* Report to the Council of Hospitals, 1822, by M. Desportes.

administrators of the hospitals of Paris. These were Cousin, Thouret, and Cabanis. More happily still, all the three were friends of the physician PINEL; a physician whose name has become immortal. All three were of opinion that he was the only man in Paris, or even in France, who could remedy the evils which they deplored. They appointed him physician to the Bicêtre. He entered on his duties there towards the end of 1792; and with him entered, says his affectionate eulogist,* “pity, goodness, and justice.” And now, slowly and cautiously, all was changed; and that amelioration commenced which, however yet imperfect and impeded, all the world acknowledges.

It is not easy to give as clear an account of the ancient state of English lunatic asylums as is afforded of those of France by the late French official reports. Long screened from public inspection, the actual condition of their inmates seems to have attracted little regard. Removed from the world, and immured in buildings on which no eye rested with pleasure, the insane were almost wholly forgotten. Everybody acknowledged that such places were repulsive in aspect, and bore a suspicious character; but it occurred to few or none of those whose thoughts were now and then turned to the probable life of the lunatics within those walls, that their condition was rendered even

* Pariset.