AN ADDRESS

ON

THE MEANS OF CHECKING THE GROWTH OF
INSANITY IN THE POPULATION.*Read before the South Wales and Monmouthshire Branch.*

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ONE of our unsolved social problems is "how to check the growth of insanity amongst our population." There are at present in England and Wales about 60,000 persons of unsound mind; and it is my purpose to bring under your consideration the causation of probably the greater number of these cases, and some of the means whereby we may hope to diminish the multitude of those so afflicted.

It is often advanced that insanity is a product of civilisation, and the alleged comparative freedom from mental disease of savage tribes is adduced as a proof thereof. In support of this theory, however, there is not a shadow of evidence; statistics, of course, are not procurable. The mere fact that but few insane persons are found amongst uncivilised nations affords no indication of the numbers attacked by brain-disorder. As well might we argue, from the paucity of individuals *minus* a limb, the non-existence of accidents and diseases necessitating amputation. Amongst barbarous tribes the feeble and diseased insane would be allowed to die; those with suicidal tendencies would be soon initiated into the mystery of the "happy despatch;" the violent and troublesome would become victims of the stripes they had themselves engendered; and only a few harmless monomaniacs could survive. Even the civilised nations of antiquity allowed such as were of defective physical constitution to be put to death. But under the Christian dispensation we get a correct view of the sacredness of human life; and our highest earthly aims are to prevent disease and suffering, and to prolong life. It results therefrom, that we have our existing accumulation of chronic incurable lunatics. While, however, much has been done for the proper care and protection of those diseased in mind, it cannot be asserted that a corresponding amount of effort has been expended on the prevention of insanity, by combating the causes which produce it. This is a most grave error, tending to perpetuate in our midst a vast calamity, which brings greater and most lasting woe than does any other disease, into every family it enters.

A certain amount of insanity we must always have. We cannot hope to prevent atheromatous deposit in the cerebral vessels, and over the other structural changes which accompany old age, we have equally little power; and to these unpreventable causes we must add injuries to the head, and the occasional results of fevers and other physical diseases. The anxieties and trials of daily life also claim their victims; but they are comparatively few, and rarely include persons who are otherwise healthy.

Intemperance is the most prolific cause of insanity; especially amongst the labouring classes. Besides the action of the stimulant on the brain influencing its nutrition, we have weakened powers of digestion and assimilation, and also, owing to wasted means, absence of the solid food by which the body should be nourished—conditions aiding and preparing for the advent of madness. And it is much to be feared that this evil habit is gaining year by year increased numbers of devotees. A most careful and reliable observer, Dr. Thurnam, of Devises, states that, of those insane who came under his treatment during the year 1872, 34 per cent. were manifestly attributable to habits of drunkenness. The observations of many independent authorities support the probability that a like percentage obtains throughout the country. Yet even this is not the whole truth; we must add to this 34 per cent. the cases of those who owe their insanity to the intemperate habits of their parents. It must not be considered necessary for the causation of insanity, in themselves or their offspring, that persons should be notorious drunkards; it is sufficient that there should be habitual abuse of intoxicating drinks, such an amount as reaches the earlier stages of excess. That this lamentable evil is stealthily gaining ground cannot for a moment be doubted, and the increase appears to be solely amongst the poorer classes, who drink chiefly gin and beer, as is evidenced forcibly by the addition of two and a-half millions during the past year, to the excise from these liquors. Such national inebriety is measureless in mischief, and, as it strikes its roots deeper and deeper among the populace, so it gradually undermines domestic life and morality, and tends to destroy both physical and mental health.

Amongst the causes that have tended to build up the habit of excess

we may place:—1, prolonged periods of labour and consequent exhaustion from excessive toil; 2, deficiency, or entire absence, of education; 3, dwellings uncomfortable, ill-ventilated, and crowded; 4, absence of all opportunities for rational amusement, recreation, or mental improvement, in fact, a life from which every amenity is thoroughly excluded; 5, the evil example of neighbours or parents; 6, the ever present conveniences for intemperate indulgence.

The hours of labour have of late years been considerably abridged, chiefly owing to the efforts of the labourers themselves, assisted as these have been by legislative interference. Prolonged toil is no longer a cause of intemperance, save with a few workers in our great cities, yet it has had its share in producing our existing drunkards.

The education of the young is now being attended to, and with the rising generation ignorance will be no plea for over-indulgence. The precepts inculcated at school, however, will, in too many instances, be overbalanced by the example of ill-conducted parents, and these parents we must endeavour to reach and to influence.

The state of the dwellings of the working classes is still a crying evil, and can only be thoroughly remedied by rousing the people to appreciate the necessity, physical and moral, of a proper attention to the decencies of life. This is a work of education. We read of our most highly paid labourers herding together like pigs.

Mr. Justice Quain speaks of a crime perpetrated "as the woman lay in bed by the side of her husband, three other men sleeping in the same room;" and of a second case where "a young woman slept in a room with other people—another young woman and a brother." Three men appeared to be in bed in another part of the same room."

A Durham miner tells us he "knew of a boy lying in bed with a broken leg, and an umbrella had to be put up to keep the rain off him, and men had to rise during the night to bail water out of their houses. These were the kind of houses they had in Durham, and the system was killing thousands of miners, their wives, and children." From such a mockery of home what wonder that our workmen fly to drink and other sensual indulgences? But, even where no necessity exists for such overcrowding, so strong is the habit with a large number of the labouring classes that to carry out the needed reform will be no easy matter. A large landed proprietor, who takes great interest in the welfare of his labourers, lately told me he had built some "model cottages," and in the best had placed one of his most worthy men. After allowing a reasonable time for the family to accommodate themselves to their new abode, a visit was made, and it was found that the sleeping-rooms were not made use of, one apartment sufficing for both day and dormitory requirements. To amend these evils, teaching the young is not sufficient; we must reach and educate their parents. Not only must properly constructed houses be provided, but the people must be impressed with the advantages derivable from these and other home comforts.

The absence of all opportunities for rational amusement and mental improvement is probably the most fertile cause of dissipation and intemperance. A tithe of the amount extracted from the ratepayers for the care of criminals and others, who have become burdens on the public from the effects of drink, would be more than sufficient to provide places of healthful resort for the multitude as would prove powerful counteracting agents to the seduction of the taproom, and such a sum devoted thus to the prevention of drunkenness could not prove other than a most profitable investment. Much can be done, however, without the aid of rates. National schoolrooms may now be said to exist in every parish. Why should not these be utilised during the evening, and converted into reading-rooms for the labouring classes of the district? Every schoolmaster should give instruction in elementary physiology and chemistry to his pupils. And this instruction, repeated during occasional evenings in the form of lectures, illustrated by a few simple experiments, would be sufficient to convey such an amount of knowledge to even the most illiterate as would enable them to understand the value of pure air as a health giving agent, and the pernicious results of hygienic neglect and dissipation. In the larger towns, working men's clubs are found to be powerful agencies for good. The Grosvenor Club in London, which has been open for about a year, numbers one thousand members, and "the books of the manager show already a remarkable decline in the demand for liquors, and an increasing taste for the beverage dear to good morals and Sir Wilfred Lawson." In country districts such places cannot be supported, but in the village schoolroom our labourers should be able to find all, save food and drink, that is required for rational enjoyment of an evening—conversation, books, newspapers, draughts, chess, and the like.

With diminished hours of labour and increase of wages, our labourers have the means of profiting by such opportunities for education as may be provided. Hitherto, however, the pecuniary improvement has made them more ready to yield to the temptations offered by the public-houses, which abound on every hand. In a town of about 8,000 in-

habitants we find a "number of hotels, inns, and other licensed public-houses, amounting to 107", or one to about every 78 persons, including children. Such a number is out of all proportion to the requirements of the community. I am no Good Templar; I do not believe that a people can be made virtuous by Act of Parliament, or that sobriety can be invented; but I think it is urgently demanded that the number of these places should be restricted, and judicious rules enforced for regulating the sale of all intoxicating drinks. We have in Sweden an example of the good that may be thus effected.

Hereditary taint—insanity inherited from parents—is a more difficult matter to deal with than even intemperance; yet it is certain that much may be accomplished in decreasing the numbers who suffer from it. Lord Bacon tells us that "man commands nature by obeying nature". Let us, then, examine the lines laid down by nature for checking the growth of hereditary insanity, as shown in the three following histories.

1. A man, A. B., of congenital weak mind, has six children; three die during childhood; the other three, one male and two females, are imbecile, and at the ages respectively of 40, 42, and 44, are sent to an asylum. The male previously married, but had no children; the females have had no issue. This family, therefore, becomes extinct with the present generation.

2. A man, C. D., labouring under dementia, whose first wife died insane, had by her a large family, four of whom, two sons and two daughters, inherited mental unsoundness. The two daughters have had no children; one of the sons is unmarried; the other is married and has had four children, all of whom died in childhood. But C. D., by his second wife, who also is insane, has had six children. Of these, five died young, and the survivor is mentally defective.

3. E. F., while insane, committed suicide. His history, on the maternal side, is as follows. His mother was insane, and her sister died in an asylum; his grandmother was insane, and his grandfather was drunken. On the other side, his father is "eccentric", a morose recluse; his uncle is extremely morbid, and has had a drunken son, who committed suicide. The other members of this family are, as far as I have ascertained, without offspring, and unmarried.

These cases are examples of what is at present taking place around us. The insane are allowed to propagate their kind with scarce an effort made to check so deplorable an event, though the thorough working of the lunacy acts would certainly impose the needed limit. Our duty is as clearly to endeavour to prevent insanity as to endeavour to cure it when it exists. Though the laws of Nature doom to extinction families thus saturated with madness, it is only after they have endured misery and suffering for generations, and have exercised a proportionately deteriorating influence on the surrounding community. There is a feeling, shared by many, which has its advocates even amongst our leading specialists, that chronic lunatics should not be detained in an asylum unless they are dangerous to themselves or others; and this feeling operates strongly in keeping the so-called harmless insane at their homes. Hard it is, doubtless, that a wife, though insane, should be separated from her husband, who is able and willing to take care of her; but it is harder still that they should procreate, with the almost certainty that their offspring will inherit the mother's disease, and be the possible agents of extending the fell malady to other and untainted families. There are rights of society as well as individual rights, and to allow an insane person to beget children is not liberty but license.

Some of the accumulation must also be attributed, at least in this district, to the manner in which the insane and the idiotic are disposed of. The majority receive no treatment whatever, but are "boarded out" with neighbours and others, who receive for their care and maintenance a sum of 2s. 6d. or 3s. 6d. weekly. We cannot suppose that such people receive into their homes one or more lunatics from benevolent motives; their pecuniary wants would not allow it: we must, therefore, believe that a certain margin of profit is derived even from that miserable amount. The result is—must be—that the unsound in mind so disposed of are ill cared for, ill fed, ill clothed; that they are dirty and neglected in every way. But they do not suffer alone—they inflict a penalty on society which neglects them, that is none the less real for being seldom directly felt. Let me mention in illustration some cases that have recently come under my observation.

T. F., aged 26, one of three idiotic brothers, living together with their father, was sent to this asylum after having made a most persevering attempt at rape. He cannot see a woman without behaving in a grossly indecent manner.

C. P., aged 23, lived with his mother, shared her bed, and had frequent marital intercourse with her. He was in the habit of chasing and indecently assaulting the girls of the neighbourhood.

D. D., aged 21, wore no clothing, lived with his mother, two sisters, and a brother, who all slept together. He occasionally wandered about the village in a state of complete nudity.

T. T. and M. G., females, not unattractive in personal appearance, each aged 29, were in the habit of wandering about soliciting and indecently exposing themselves to their neighbours.

We have no reason for supposing that these cases are at all worse than others that still remain at home, or are "boarded out". If the number of female idiots who have borne children could be ascertained, I think it would astonish our philanthropists. But, apart together from this consideration, the effect on the morals of a community from having persons of such habits wandering about in their midst must be deplorable in the extreme, and cannot be correctly estimated. The mere fact that such indecency is tolerated indicates a deadening of that natural modesty which is virtue's great safeguard.

Since writing the above, I have received a copy of "Asylum Notes", by Dr. Yellowlees. One of these notes, bearing on the question we are considering, I will quote *in extenso*. "Every county has special circumstances which may affect both the character and the amount of the insanity which it produces. The wealth and prosperity of Glamorganshire are largely derived from coal and iron, and any arrest in their production and export is immediately and widely felt. During the last six months of 1871, and the first three months of 1873, the mines, and consequently the docks, were deserted by reason of 'strikes', and the effect of these strikes on the insanity and crime of the county was most marked and instructive.

"In the first six months of 1871, 47 men and 30 women were received as patients into this asylum, but only 24 men and 26 women in the second six months of the year. In the last three months of 1872, 21 men and 12 women were admitted, but only 10 men and 12 women in the first three months of 1873. It is thus shown, by a double proof, that during a strike the male admissions fell to *half their former number*, the female admissions being almost unaffected.

"This decrease is doubtless mainly due to the fact that there is no money to spend in drink and debauchery. On inquiry at the county prisons, I find that there was a marked diminution in their male admissions during the same periods, so that the production of crime as well as of insanity is greatly lessened while the strikes continue.

"What the effect of a very prolonged strike would be I trust we may never know, but to these results of the last two strikes I would earnestly direct public attention. They are among the most sad and significant facts of our social life, and seem to prove that high wages, without wisdom to use them, are a curse rather than a blessing."

EXTRACTS FROM THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.

Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Lancashire and Cheshire Branch.

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IN offering a welcome to the Lancashire and Cheshire Branch, on its first meeting in Warrington, a short description of the chief features of the town may be expected, or at least excused. Situated on the Mersey, here the boundary between the two counties, by far the larger portion stands on the Lancashire side. It occupies a remarkably low site, at the highest being little more than fifty feet above the datum level of high water at Liverpool, and at the lowest not more than twenty-three feet. At thirty-four feet a well-marked terrace, the bank of the ancient estuary, runs through the town, which is built chiefly on estuarine sands, deposited in various thicknesses on the boulder clay. The wells, which are bored through the clay into and through the mottled sandstone, are usually free from organic impurities, but contain large quantities of saline matter in solution, and in some instances are absolutely brackish. The general water supply of the town used to be principally surface water, collected on the high ground to the south-west of the town. Happily, another source has now been obtained by the Water Works Company, in a deep boring, three miles to the north, right through the bunter and lower mottled sandstone, to a depth of three hundred and fifty feet, to the representatives of the Permian system. This is an excellent water, but rather hard for domestic purposes, but filtered through so many series of sand-rocks, its purity may be safely assumed. In passing, I may mention the river Mersey as a curiosity in its way. For the length of its course, and its volume of water, it possibly receives more sewage matter than any river in the world. South Lancashire, North Cheshire, with Yorkshire and Derbyshire, combine to form the unpleasant mixture which flows past our doors. It is a pure chemical compound. No trace of animal or vegetable life is found in its waters; hence, perhaps, it is, that according to experience, it is innocuous in its passage through Warrington. I never detected in the houses built on its banks any form of disease peculiar to them, or in excess of what might be found in other parts of the town. Perhaps the