Our Over-crowded Lunatic Asylums. By S. W. D. Williams, M.D., Medical Superintendent of the Sussex Lunatic Asylum, Haywards Heath.

"Utpote cum jure naturalis omnes liberi nascerentur."
Institutes of Justinian.

We have it on the word of Justinian, that "by the law of nature all men were born free." Yet the Blue Book of the Commissioners in Lunacy, recently published, shows that 36,871 Englishmen are deprived of their liberty, and confined in lunatic asylums. And if we compare these numbers with those in the Report for 1869 it will be found that during the year 1870 the insane of all classes have increased in number by 2,042, or 174 private and 1,868 pauper patients. This increase is not exceptional, but has been going on for many years.

The consequence is, the large asylums that have been built in nearly every county in England (indeed some counties, as Middlesex, Yorkshire, and Surrey contain two or three monster establishments for the insane poor) are filled to overflowing. And, as will be seen in Appendix C of the Blue Book, which contains a special report of each asylum, they are nearly all thus suffering, and the justices are devising means to meet this difficulty, either by extending their already too large establishments, by refusing admission to recent cases, or building new asylums.

I do not for a moment wish to infer that now-a-days any persons are illegally detained in asylums, but I think that if the mind of the public can be, to use a Carlylism, attempered to the proper point, a more extended trial might be made of discharging harmless and chronic lunatics.

Truly the importance of this question is rapidly becoming imperial. Our already over-taxed ratepayers suffer from the expense entailed on them in building and keeping up such monster establishments, and the poor lunatics suffer in that their comfort and freedom from ill-treatment must be in an inverse ratio to the size of the asylums. Moreover, the asylums themselves lose their proper characteristics as *Curable Hospitals for the Insane*, and rapidly degenerate into vast poor houses for incurables.

The remedy for this state of things is not easily to be found. The boarding-out system, as practised in some parts

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.17.80.515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of Scotland, has its advocates; but the application to England of this "lay speculation in lunacy," as an able and well-known writer has termed it, is open to many objections. Others, as the authoress of "Gheel, the City of the Simple," advocate the plan adopted at Gheel, in Belgium, where a whole peasant population, spread over a large area, have devoted themselves for ages to the care and treatment of the insane. And certainly it is there a great success; but this lunatic colony is the growth of centuries, and who can point out in England a spot where such a plan could be carried through? Some years ago a commencement of such an undertaking was attempted at Haywards Heath, which in those days was isolated enough; but even there, with the advantages of isolation and close proximity to the parent asylum, it had to be abandoned, as the patients were always full of complaints, and all anxious to return to the asylum.

In a recent amendment to the Lunacy Laws it was provided that the guardians might fit up certain wards in the poor houses for chronic and harmless insane, and medical superintendents of asylums were to promote the discharge of such cases to the union houses. But the plan has only partially succeeded, and at the best is of doubtful efficacy. Indeed, in the county of Sussex, it was a complete failure, as I believe every union, with the exception of Brighton, refused to provide the necessary accommodation, naturally objecting to alter the character and spoil the already meagre comfort of their poor houses by the addition of a number of lunatics.

In the county of Sussex an asylum was built about twelve years ago for 450 patients. On three occasions since an enlargement has been necessary, and there are now beds provided for nearly 800 patients. Therefore, at the present rate of increase, in another twelve years something like 1,200 beds would be required; and unfortunately, with our present system, the question appears to admit of no finality. The Commissioners in Lunacy, and all the highest authorities on the subject, are strongly of opinion that for efficient management no asylum should exceed from six to seven hundred patients. Such, also, is decidedly my opinion; and, alarmed at the proportions to which the Sussex asylum is growing, I have for the last eighteen months put in practice a plan which has answered in so far, that whereas the number in the asylum had steadily hitherto increased by about twenty a-year, there are in it at the present moment seven less than

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.17.80.515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there were last year, notwithstanding that the deaths have been below the average, and the admissions have been much as usual.

It is an unpleasant fact, but nevertheless a true one, that the Lunacy Laws utterly ignore the possibility of the relatives of pauper lunatics having any affection for their afflicted kin. The relations of a pauper lunatic have no voice in the question of sending him to an asylum, and still less in his discharge therefrom.

My experience has strongly impressed me with the fact that, as a rule, the poor are more willing and anxious to have the personal care of their insane relatives than those in a higher station of life. My plan of *partial relief for the over-crowding of our asylums* is founded on this knowledge. Scarcely a week passes by that I am not earnestly solicited, either personally or by letter, that some one or other of the patients under my care may be discharged to the care of his or her relatives. These applications I have encouraged, and have from time to time laid before the Committee of Visitors, who have invariably entertained them favourably, and have in this way discharged many patients, only one of whom has yet returned, and I have not heard that any of those thus discharged have in any way misconducted themselves, so as to be a nuisance to the public. I have, of course, been careful not only to recommend none for discharge in whom there was, as far as I could judge, any homicidal or suicidal tendency, but I have also made all the enquiries in my power as to the respectability of the persons demanding the care of the lunatic, and their fitness for the charge they solicit.

As far as I can judge this scheme admits of even further development than I have as yet attempted. At all events, I do not doubt that, for many years to come, I shall be enabled by its aid to put off any further extension of the asylum, by which means the ratepayers will be relieved of any further burdens, the over-crowding of the asylum, so inimical to its welfare, will be delayed, and the minds of the poor will be eased of one of their great superstitions, viz., that their relatives, when once sent to an asylum, have little if any chance of leaving it alive, the belief of many being that it is to the interest both of the justices and doctors not to discharge the patients.

There is, however, a strong prejudice in the minds of many, especially of the middle and higher classes, against the discharge of lunatics, and one of my objects in writing this short

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.17.80.515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

paper is to deprecate their opposition, and assuage their fears. To me it appears the grossest injustice, that because a father, or husband, or wife, is poor, therefore he is not, if he desires it, to be allowed the charge of his relative afflicted with the most distressing of all maladies, always provided he be fitted for such a charge and will not abuse it.

The old Roman law sets us an example here that we might well follow. In the Law of the Twelve Tables legal curators were provided for the acutely insane (furiosi), but no such provision was considered necessary for the chronic insane, imbeciles (dementes).

I am aware that my plan has its objections, but though it may be a trite saying, it nevertheless is true, that nothing human is perfect. The only great objection I can see to it is the possibility of the malady of the patient thus discharged suddenly taking on a new phase, and causing him to become dangerous to himself or others. This danger is, however, but small, and should not be allowed for one moment to weigh in the balance against the advantages my scheme affords. No less an authority than John Stuart Mill says "It is not a merely constructive or presumptive injury to others which will justify the interference of law with individual freedom." Surely, if we are to consider this an axiom of political economy, it should apply alike to the insane as the sane. And we should give a man mentally afflicted, even though he be plebeian, every possible chance of "individual freedom" before we consign him for life to a lunatic asylum.

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.17.80.515 Published online by Cambridge University Press