ASYLUM WORKERS' ASSOCIATION.

By the kind permission of the Editor of *The Asylum News*, we publish the following extract from Sir James Crichton Browne's address when seconding the adoption of the report at the annual meeting of the Asylum Workers' Association held in London on May 19th, under the presidency of Sir John Jardine:

As an asylum worker of nearly fifty years' duration—and an asylum worker still—I almost think I am entitled to a gold medal—and as a former President of the Association I have pleasure in seconding the adoption of the annual report, which has been so clearly and felicitously recommended to your favourable consideration by Sir John Jardine. The report, like all such documents at this time, has its sombre side. It records the steady progress of the Association in raising the status of asylum nurses and attendants, in affording assistance to those of them who require it in ill-health, in giving recognition to those of them who have rendered long and meritorious service, and in drawing them all together in good fellowship and mutual helpfulness, but it notes also gaps in the ranks of the Association left by those who have gone to take their place in other ranks, and some of whom have fallen in these ranks heroically, giving their lives for their beloved country. The asylum service, as a whole, has nobly responded to the call for human munitions of war. Medical officers, matrons, nurses, and attendants, have eagerly flocked to the Colours, and I think it is of vital importance that their interests should be jealously safeguarded while they are away. I think you will see the advantages of this Association, in the steps taken by it and described in the report, to protect the position of asylum officers on active service in relation to the Superannuation Act, 1909. I question whether, without the intervention of its Central Executive Committee, such a prompt and satisfactory response would have been obtained to the claim urged that the time spent by asylum officers on military service shall be regarded as time spent in the service of the asylum in respect of pensions. In one way or another, by adding years, or granting leave, that will now certainly be done, and it would be intolerable that anything else should be done, or that that should be left undone.

But while the interests of asylum officers on active military service are attended to, something should be said about those who remain on service at home. They have been left short-handed, they have had double duty thrown upon them, they have had to work overtime, they have had a most anxious and wearing experience, throughout which they have willingly done all that has been required of them, and they find, at least the married men among them, that their wages have been practically reduced, for the purchasing power of a sovereign is not now what it was twelve months ago. (Hear, hear.) That is a matter deserving of consideration, and it appears to me only equitable that married attendants should have a certain percentage of increase of wages during the continuance of the war at any rate.

Are Asylums a Costly Mistake?

The conversion of asylums containing 17,000 beds into hospital accommodation for the wounded has entailed a heavy burden on all concerned in lunacy administration, a burden, however, which has been cheerfully borne. I noticed the other day that an ex-official of the London County Council—that body which, of all bodies in this country, has the heaviest lunacy responsibilities, has been hinting that our asylums are, after all, a costly mistake, because by means of medical and surgical skill, they keep alive, at the expense of the ratepayers, numbers of patients beyond the ordinary limit of human life. The logical outcome of Sir Laurence Gomme's complaint, if it is valid, would be the addition to every asylum of a lethal chamber with a crematorium attached, into which all lunatics who have reached the stage of chronicity should be introduced, a proceeding which, it seems to me, would be analogous to killing the wounded after battle. (Hear, hear.) The chronic insane are those who have been seriously worsted and crippled in the battle of life, who have passed through great tribulation and are deserving of our tenderest sympathies. They are not insensate logs, as is sometimes thought, but human beings still, with many of our human feelings, although hidden and obscured, and medical and surgical science cannot be more nobly employed than

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.61.254.479 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in alleviating their sufferings and in prolonging their lives, for where there is life there is hope, and all of you have seen patients who have been labelled chronic, but who, like the dry bones in the valley, have been breathed upon and restored to health and usefulness. As a consequence of that arid materialistic philosophy which has too long been in the ascendant, there has been among the public, at any rate, some falling away from the comprehensive philanthropy of the days of Lord Shaftesbury, out of which our lunacy system, of which we have good reason to be proud, has grown up. It has been recommended by a Royal Commission that the married insane, after three years of insanity, should be liable to divorce, and now it is suggested that when in cases of chronic insanity hopes of recovery are practically at an end, the ratepayers should be relieved of the cost of their maintenance, by euthanasia. I am confident that such suggestions will have no countenance from you, who have ministered to the insane, who know what they are, who are full of pity for them, who devotedly do your duty to them notwithstanding the distressing and harassing traits which many of them present, and who, in some instances, have learnt to love them.

The Aftermath of War.

Asylum workers should, to my thinking, all be idealists. They should have something to look to, beyond the dull routine, the trying and sometimes repulsive task of the hour, something to sustain them in their anxious and laborious undertaking. And their idealism will, I believe, be stimulated vastly by the work which now lies before them, for it will be theirs to soothe and solace many of those who have been struck down in this terrible conflict in which we are engaged. Much of the aftermath of war will find its way into asylums. There have been a large number of cases of cranial injuries, especially in the trenches, and some of these will inevitably result in mental impairment. There have been in every phase of the war an enormous number of cases of nervous shock and overstrain which will bear fruit in neurasthenia and psychical disorders. There have been, thanks largely to the interference of the criminal cranks in dissuading men from anti-typhoid inoculation, a certain number of cases of that disease which occasionally leaves mental exhaustion behind it. There has been throughout the country immeasurable anxiety and sorrow and bereavement, and these will undoubtedly in many instances deepen into morbid melancholy. You will assuredly have to do your bit not only now, but when the war is over, and, animated as you all are by patriotic fervour, strung as you all are to everlasting hatred of German barbarities, you will, I am sure, in the spirit of the enthusiast and not of the hireling, do your best to succour those who have succoured their country in its hour of need.

MENTAL TREATMENT BILL.

(Presented by Mr. Cecil Harmsworth. Ordered to be printed April 20th, 1915.)

Memorandum.

As the law now stands nursing homes cannot receive for treatment patients who are suffering from nervous breakdown affecting their mental condition (Lunacy Act, 1890, Section 315 (2)). Such patients can only obtain residential treatment if they are certified insane and sent to an asylum or hospital under the Lunacy Acts. This applies even if the breakdown is of a temporary character and almost certainly capable of being cured. As it is found that a sort of stigma attaches throughout life to a person who has once been certified as insane, there is great reluctance to have such cases certified, and the result is that persons suffering from temporary mental disorder do not receive the special treatment in a nursing home which is suitable to their condition and which is calculated to effect a speedy cure.

The object of the present Bill is to secure the proper treatment of such cases by making the law less rigid than at present. It removes the necessity for formal certification in the case of persons suffering from mental breakdown of recent origin and arising from wounds, shock, etc. In this respect it assimilates the English law to the law which has been in force in Scotland for fifty years and which has worked satisfactorily [Lunacy (Scotland) Act, 1866, Section 13].

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.61.254.479 Published online by Cambridge University Press