

OCCASIONAL NOTES OF THE QUARTER.

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*The "Lancet" on Asylums for the Insane, and Zoological Gardens.*

It must no doubt be very difficult for the editor of a weekly medical paper to find subjects of interest for his leading articles. And when found, men to handle them competently must be still more difficult to secure. For, psychologically, the leading article writer and the successful physician or man of science are usually incompatible. We can understand the real physician after mastering a special subject, giving his professional brethren the benefit of his knowledge in the shape of a condensed and readable abstract. But we never could understand the state of mind of the medical politician, or the medical writer who has to fill up so many columns on any subject he may be called on to write about, from consultations with homœopaths to the latest medical bill. But so great is the sympathy usually felt for the unfortunate writers of these necessary lucubrations, that without complaint we skip them in reading our weekly papers, with an inward feeling of thankfulness that there are men who can take to uncongenial tasks. It is seldom that their common-places, if they do not instruct, offend any one. As a general rule the high and serious aims of our profession in all its various departments are recognised; the difficulties we have to encounter are taken into account, and a charitable construction is put on well-intentioned professional failures. Professional *esprit de corps* and comradeship commonly soften the acerbity of the medical critic. Some sense of responsibility generally underlies the fault-finding, and some smattering of knowledge of the subject treated of is usually to be found, even if the logic is halting, the style dull, and the information bald. Utter flippancy, total disregard of the feelings of professional brethren, and crass ignorance, are rare. And most fortunately of all, smartness has not hitherto been cultivated in medical journalism. The innate dignity of medicine in its daily fight with disease and death, has hitherto saved us from that.

In the "Lancet" of May 7th, there is a leading article about asylums for the insane and those medical men whose

lives are devoted to psychiatry and asylum government. It is divided into three sections. The idea pervading the first is that now-a-days there are vast numbers of "so-called lunatics" in asylums who are perfectly responsible, but who are "absolved from the duty of restraining their impulses by the fact of being under certificate." The second section, with the good taste that pervades the whole, has this for its key-note:—"The modern lunatic asylum and the Zoological Gardens of fashionable resorts are conducted nearly on the same principle, and with the same object." The third section, full of combined logic and paradox, is devoted to this thesis, that the modern asylum "is filled with tokens of peace and comfort, and even enjoyment," but "little, if anything, is done to restore the sufferer from mental disease to his right mind." Now, if we discovered in this article any trace of that knowledge which alone entitles any man to criticise the work of his professional brethren, or any spark of medical comradeship, not to speak of professional sympathy, we should endeavour seriously to argue the questions at issue, to state the present position of the psychiatric and asylum departments of medicine, and while admitting our weak points, endeavour to make some serious suggestions for their gradual amendment. But really the only thing that can be done in such a case is to answer a fool according to his folly. When a leading and responsible medical paper sees fit to entrust its leading article writing on lunacy to a man whose sole qualifications seem to be self-conceit, ignorance, prejudice, and want of sympathy, one cannot seriously argue with such a person. When all that has been done is ignored, when the difficulties of the subject are utterly passed by, when the old popular prejudices about the analogies between the insane and wild beasts are deliberately trotted out by a "medical brother" for the edification of medical brethren, and when all this is done in a mixture of flippancy and fine writing, one can find no common standing ground with such a writer.

If there are a number of persons who are "absolved from the duty of self-control" through having been placed "under certificate" by medical men, then they have been improperly placed under certificate, and it behoves the "Lancet" to stir up our profession to educate itself in mental disease, so that this may be no longer done. But all the world knows that nothing of the kind really occurs. The "Lancet" writer simply could not resist saying what

seemed to himself a smart thing that would look wise. That was all. Then the whole section about zoological gardens, "wild men and women," a "happy family," "mournful jingling of chains," "rags of the raging maniac," &c., is simply the ignorant effort of the medical penny-a-liner to spin out his task to the requisite length. Like all his kind he is too dull in heart and head to see how such a mode of talking of them degrades the insane, tortures their relatives, and calumniates our profession. If it is really the case that through the present management of asylums for the insane and the moral treatment of their inmates "quiet reigns" instead of turmoil and disorder, then the applied science of psychiatry has reached a very high point in our country. Human nature and mental disease have been studied to some purpose. So far as it goes, an eminently good result has been attained that is worthy of something better than sneering. If that result has been attained to any degree, then beyond all doubt and question the proposition in the third section of the article, that "little, if anything, is done to restore the sufferer from mental disease to his right mind," is emphatically disproved. Were the supposition not an inherently impossible one, we would ask the writer if he had ever had a case of acute melancholia in an exhausted subject to treat in a lodging, and if the "quiet" that had resulted in a few days from good skilled nursing, constant feeding, and outdoor exercise, with a little employment, and cheerful society, without physic and without further "treatment," was not in the direction of "restoring the sufferer to his right mind?" Now all these things are done in every good asylum in the case of any poor man or woman who is sent there, labouring under this disease. But the writer is clearly full of that most vulgar of all medical notions that "treatment" is physic, and nothing else. We could point out to the writer of this would-be offensive article asylums by the dozen where every patient on admission is carefully examined, mentally and bodily, his case as carefully taken as in any hospital, his treatment, moral and medical, as thoughtfully adapted to his individual wants, as our present knowledge enables us to do, where the new cases are kept by themselves, and not "huddled" together, so that they are not lost in a crowd, and where they are specially studied and reported on. The writer must know that the facilities for the study of mental disease by medical students are few, and the encouragement for them to do so, nil; and yet when did the

“Lancet” exert itself to remedy this most crying want in our system of medical education? A vigorous effort to make the study of the deranged mental functions of the brain a reality in our schools would do more for the insane and for asylums than all the leading articles that have ever yet appeared in the “Lancet,” or any other medical paper. But we trust when that effort is made, as made it must be soon, that persons will be selected to do so who have as qualifications for the work, enthusiasm, knowledge, fairness of mind, and a true sympathy for professional brethren, who have to do an extraordinary variety and amount of work, medical, legal, and administrative, and who, we affirm, do it, as a rule, in a most praiseworthy manner.

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*The “Open-door” System.*

The abolition of locks and keys, and the adoption of what is known as the “open-door” system, appears to have gained so much ground in Scotch asylums, that English superintendents may well be excused for asking for further and more exact information with reference to its possibilities for introduction into English asylums. No one will dispute that, however necessary it may be to deprive insane persons of their full liberty of action, in the interest either of their own safety, or of that of society, they have an absolute right to demand that such privation shall be strictly limited by the actual necessities of the case, and that that degree of liberty which they can enjoy without serious risk shall be carefully secured to them.

It appears to me, therefore, that when such a system as that of open doors in asylums has assumed the practical form which the superintendents of some of the Scotch asylums claim for it, it becomes the obvious duty of all asylum superintendents to make careful enquiry into its possibilities of application to their own institutions and patients, with the view of at once seeking to render justice to those who are confined, and merge their own character of gaolers in their true functions as physicians. I venture, therefore, to ask from those who, by practical experience, are qualified to give it, for information upon the following points:—

1.—Has the open-door system been tried in mixed asylums or in asylums exclusively for patients of the private class—and, if so, with what results?