

The Hospital World.

A GROUP OF OUT-PATIENTS.

A novel in a nutshell may be heard any day by walking across the length of the waiting-room of the out-patient department during the hours that it is thronged by the ailing poor who are attending for the purpose of free advice and medicine. There are corpulent men and women, and thin men and women, men and women who are tall, and men and women who are short, who are old and who are young, who have the appearance of enjoying robust health, and who are presumably on the verge of the grave. Their attire is no less remarkable than their physical state. There are weird coats and preposterous trousers and rusty bonnets, and faded mantles, and broken boots. However, no one man would be capable of dealing with the dress of these worthies, so I pass on with a sigh of regret (for it is a delight to linger over a shawl that you are told went with an old mother right through the Franco-German war) to the attempt of presenting pale side-lights on mankind.

There is Mrs. Clifford, who has brought one of her daughters for treatment. The daughter is one of ten children, and the father, as a scavenger, is earning twenty-two shillings and sixpence a week. The official, who is known to the out-patient folk as the inquiry officer, has authenticated this, so that to shudder and say with cheap fluency that it is impossible to keep twelve persons for a week on twenty-two shillings and sixpence would clearly be vain. It is done by Mrs. Clifford, and there the matter ends. The daughter is the eldest of the family and is just eighteen. She has "had to work very 'ard indeed," Mrs. Clifford is telling Mrs. Pontifex, who is sitting at her right hand on the form, awaiting her turn in the consulting room.

"Yer see, when there's such a lot on 'em, Maggie 'ere 'as to 'elp me all she can. And the boys is such worrits. Ben and Sam, the twins, is jist turned eight, and they eats as much bread and fat as would keep four on the gels. An' we've never done sewin' for 'em, 'ave we, Maggie? Their coats and caps and trousers is allus in 'oles. I niver did see sich boys in all me life. I 'ope, please Gord, as there'll be no more on 'em at our 'ouse. If there is, then Gord 'elp us.

"Maggie's got a bad leg. She's allus kneeling now, for since I got so dreadful stout I ain't been able to do the floor and steps as she likes 'em done. An' her young man—a very respectable sort of young chap 'e is too—who was on seein' us the other nite, said that if I brought 'er up to this orspital the doctor would give 'er something as would very soon mend it.

"They're a wonderful 'ealthy lot is my family. Nothing niver ails 'em 'cept jist now and then they gets a knock or a fall as makes 'em feel shaky for a

bit, but that ain't nothin' to speak on. Now my neighbour, Mrs. Boddington, who only 'as four, and all on 'em old enough to go to school, is allus in trouble. First it's this 'un and then that, as she have to tike 'em to the doctor with a long tale as 'ow summat or other 'as gorn wrong.

"I'm telling my 'usband every day that we'll niver see 'is club money back if we go on a-keeping strong and well as we do. An' all 'e says if 'e's in a good temper is: 'Gord be prised!' and if 'e's in a bad temper 'e says: 'Damn the club money!'"

Mrs. Pontifex, who has lost her voice, says something in reply to this information and moves off with several others into the surgeon's consulting room, leaving Mrs. Clifford and Maggie and fifty others chattering away on fifty subjects.

By-and-by Maggie's turn comes and she sees the surgeon, who insists that complete rest and some ointment and a tonic, which he prescribes, are all that are necessary for the making well of the poorly knee.

On returning to the outer corridor again, mother and daughter meet Mrs. Pontifex, who has secured her bottle of physic and is about to depart.

"They make you piy for the bottle," she whispers hoarsely to Mrs. Clifford.

"Wot!" exclaims that good woman, "piy for the bottle! Wot next! I niver 'eard o' such a thing! I understood from Maggie's young man as they giv you everything at this 'ere 'orspital."

"That's wot I says to the chemist, who they call the dispenser, through the little 'ole there where you gits the medicine; but 'e says, 'Oh, no; we give you the physick, but you must bring your own bottle or else piy me a penny for one,'" answered Mrs. Pontifex, with conviction founded on experience. "An' 'ere I only 'ad a penny on me for the tram-car arf the way 'ome, and now I bet I'll 'ave to foot it."

"I'll lend you a penny, Mrs. Pontifex," says Mrs. Clifford, opening her much-worn and greasy leathern purse, and displaying at least six bronze coins. "I put something in me pocket afore I started orf, knowing, as I allus do, that something would turn up to piy for at this 'ere free institoo-tion."

Mrs. Clifford thereupon handed Mrs. Pontifex a penny with which to pay her tram-car fare half the way home, and she gave Maggie another penny for a bottle, and bade her hurry off to take her place in the single file of patients waiting in front of the railway-booking-office-like dispenser's counter. During Maggie's absence, Mrs. Clifford and Mrs. Pontifex espy the tea and coffee stall that is a feature of the out-patient department. It meets a real need in supplying tea and coffee at a nominal charge to the weary and foot-sore patients who have in many instances tramped several miles for medical treatment.

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