

OUR FOREIGN LETTER.

SOME EXPERIENCES IN VIENNA.

By A. KNEVETT GORDON, M.B., CANTAB.

I have just returned from Vienna, and what I saw was so abnormal, that I thought a note on the conditions that prevail there just now might be of interest to readers of the Journal.

My object was primarily to investigate the histology of the blood in rickets and allied disorders resulting from malnutrition; for this it seemed necessary to study at first hand the system of infant feeding devised by Professor Pirquet. I do not propose to discourse about the scientific aspect of the subject now, though perhaps I may do so later on. I had, however, also the opportunity of visiting and talking to typical people of all classes, and finally the honour of a long talk with the President of the Republic on what I had observed.

The Hospitals are run by the State, and there is a large staff of paid assistants, who often stay on for their lifetime. The nursing staff is very large, and the sisters especially are very highly trained and skilful. In the out-patient department I saw direct smears being made by the sister from the throat of every child who had a temperature. She stained the preparations, examined them under the microscope, and called out the result to the physician in charge. Only twice was she in doubt, and then there was a pathologist to refer to. In Vienna they do not regard clinical pathology as a side show, but as an essential routine.

I cannot leave the Hospitals without a brief note of admiration for their marvellous organisation.

They do not, for instance, waste time in discussing whether the clinical symptoms of a patient point to syphilis or tubercle; instead the Wassermann and Pirquet tests are performed on almost every case as a routine practice, so that when the patient comes before the director of the clinic, the results of these and many other tests are already recorded on the notes.

Everything is done in a methodical way, but I saw nowhere any trace of harshness or callousness. In one of the large receiving rooms where the out-patients and their relatives were congregated, several sisters and nurses were engaged in sorting out the patients for the particular physicians and shepherding them for the various tests, and nothing could have been happier than the gentleness of their manner. I was told afterwards that the director did not put any nurses on in this department until they had shown that they not only liked children, but were capable of showing it steadily through long hours of routine work.

The clinical notes of the cases are very full, and are all centralised and cross indexed, so that any one who wishes to look up the statistics of any particular disease, has no difficulty in getting quickly at what he wants. In this respect the Viennese system is greatly superior to our own—when we have any at all.

The social conditions, however, impressed me

most. Before I went to Vienna I had seen horrible posters of children dying in the streets, and had imagined that they were intended to represent the state of things at the present time. As a matter of fact, however, the children are not now starving at all, because every under-nourished child can obtain at least one good meal a day for the asking from the foreign relief associations. Owing to the excellent work that these have done, there is no starvation now amongst the children, and I saw very little evidence of marked malnutrition, though I visited every place—homes, relief stations, infant welcomes, hospitals—where it could be found. I am bound to say that except for the prevalence of rickets, which is due to the deficiency of fat soluble vitamins in the diet—the Austrian régime being to supply the necessary calories by excess of carbohydrate rather than fat—the children of the clinics did not differ markedly from what one can see in the out-patient department of any children's hospital here.

Every child had one or more cards showing that it was receiving relief, which is given in two ways. From birth till the age of six the food is administered by the Friends Relief Committee, and is given to the mothers in fortnightly rations for consumption in the homes, the children being brought from time to time to the welfare centres for medical examination, weighing, and so forth. From six to (I think) twelve they are under the care of the American Relief Association, who insist on the child attending a centre where a very good meal is served out to it. In addition, both associations supply a certain amount of clothing (or materials for making it), beds, soap, and other necessaries to the home where the children come from. Expectant mothers are also given rations.

So the children are well cared for, because charitable funds from America and England (and to a lesser extent from other countries also) have been available, but the flow is now showing signs of drying up, and I understand that unless further support is forthcoming the associations will not be able to carry on after this summer. This would be disastrous.

The most serious problem now is what is going to happen to the professional classes—doctors, lawyers, musicians, artists, teachers, for instance. All are under-nourished, and many have died literally from starvation. Suicide is increasing rapidly. Tuberculosis is rampant, and claims its victims every day. It is not regarded as a scourge, but as a welcome relief from an almost intolerable existence.

Let me give instances. If one goes into the home of a formerly prosperous doctor or lawyer, one sees the bookshelves stripped and the once beautiful house simply bare walls. Everything has been sold to buy food. For these folk there is no fuel or light. Their first meal is a cup of adulterated coffee, two slices of dark bread. At 12 o'clock they go to the municipal kitchen for their food, which consists of a cup of vegetable soup and bread,

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)