

## PROFESSIONAL REVIEW.

### THE EXPERIENCES OF AN ASYLUM DOCTOR.

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#### PRECIOUS BAD BOOTS.

Dr. Lomax now invites the reader to visit with him the workshops on his morning round—the coir-picking shop, the tailor's shop, and the bootmaker's shop (the printer's shop has been closed during the war). Picking the coir, or cocoanut fibre, with which most of the mattresses used by the patients are stuffed, is "unpleasant, unhealthy work, reminiscent of oakum picking to those who have been in jail or worked as 'casuals' in workhouses—and patients with weak chests, or a tendency to bronchitis, should not be employed at it, as the dust given off causes considerable bronchial irritation; but it is very useful work from the point of view of the asylum authorities, for it saves them much expense. In the tailor's shop, some half-dozen patients are now employed, under the superintendence of the asylum tailor, who is also a part time attendant. In the bootmaker's shop only one patient is at present employed, for not many lunatics can be trusted with sharp tools; he is a mild, inoffensive old man, who has the distinction of never uttering a word. Here I may say that most of the asylum boots are made—and all of them are mended—on the premises, and precious bad boots they are. Scores of cases of blistered heels and inflamed toes and festered corns are caused every year by the roughly made and badly fitting boots which the patients are compelled to wear. This is one of the minor evils of asylum life, and has been much aggravated by the war, owing to the dearness of leather and the difficulty of obtaining it. But minor though it is, it is not negligible, and could be mitigated by allowing the patients to wear their own boots as long as possible, and when they could no longer afford this by taking more trouble to fit the boots to the wearer instead of the wearer to the boots. As it is, the boot trouble, like the teeth trouble and the spectacle trouble, is a constant source of discomfort and minor misery

#### THE CLOSET BARROW GANG.

Next we encounter "a string of patients garbed in white overalls who are wheeling boxes on barrows under the charge of an attendant. This is the 'closet barrow gang.' . . . They are mostly a repulsive and degraded-looking crew, being as a rule the most demented and imbecile type of asylum inmate. In fact, it is only this type of dement who would consent to do the work. None of them, of course, are forced to take on the job; they are persuaded to volunteer for it by the inducement of a few extra 'luxuries' such as an ounce or two more a week of asylum 'shag,' or a little snuff if they prefer it, and a little additional food. But they are so mindless that their freedom of choice is mostly nominal. . . . Were there no alternative to the earth-closet system, there

would certainly be no harm in employing healthy lunatics to empty the closets if they were not averse to the job, provided also they were well fed, well clothed, and properly compensated, and that every care was taken to make the work as little exhausting and unhealthy as possible. As a matter of fact, in the case in question none of these conditions were complied with. There was no necessity for the existence of the earth-closet system at all. Main drainage was already in existence in the asylum grounds, it was easy of access, the Superintendent's house and the Medical Officers' quarters were already connected with it, and earth-pipes had been laid to most of the main buildings. It was simply a question of expense. To save this expense an antiquated and obsolete system had been allowed to remain in use for many years, totally unsuited to the needs of an institution containing some three thousand patients. Yet the county in which the asylum stands is one of the richest in England, and the few thousands needed to connect the asylum with the main drainage system would probably not have meant more than an extra penny on the rates."

"The closet-barrow gang worked on an average four or five hours a day, beginning at 6 a.m. (an hour changed in 1918 to 7 a.m.) summer and winter, with half an hour off for breakfast. In dry weather they were provided with overalls, in wet weather with mackintosh capes. But the laborious and unhygienic nature of the work, the long hours, and the constant exposure to wet and cold, especially on the dark winter mornings, is a strain on the strongest constitutions."

Dr. Lomax relates that in the winter of 1917, when he had only been three months in office in this asylum, the charge of the hospital wards fell to his share owing to the illness of a colleague. The usual winter crop of bronchitis and pneumonia began to make its appearance, and among the new arrivals within a day or two of each other were two of the closet-barrow gang, one of whom nearly died of pneumonia and the other from—probably—acute inflammation of the kidneys. This coincidence set Dr. Lomax thinking, and he took pains to make himself acquainted with the conditions under which these men worked. He spoke to the Head Attendant on duty, who asked him if he had seen where the men had breakfast. He had not, but supposed they had breakfast with the others in the dining hall. He writes:—"On accompanying him to the place indicated I found it was a stone-paved, bleak, miserable-looking outhouse, looking due north and completely exposed to the weather. I remarked to my companion on the absence of a door. It appeared that an attendant had once been found smoking in this shed when on duty, and to prevent such a thing happening again the Superintendent had ordered the door to be taken off! To the ordinary mind this seemed a singularly futile and peevish mode of disciplinary action. I pictured to myself these men on those bitter winter mornings (it was snowing hard as we talked) working in the rain and snow and fog, coming into this shed for their

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