Royal British Nurses' Association.

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THE CARE OF LEPERS IN MEDIÆVAL ENGLAND.

The Secretary, Miss Isabel Macdonald, recently delivered a lecture at the Headquarters of the Royal British Nurses' Association on "The Care of Lepers in Mediæval England," of which we publish the following summary :—

In commencing her lecture Miss Macdonald indicated how it was necessary to re-adjust one's attitude of mind somewhat in connection with what are the generally accepted traditions regarding leprosy, and explained also that both the name Lazarus and the term Lazar House implied "Helped of God." It was also pointed out that the lazar houses of an olden time succoured many besides the lepers—in fact, the latter were usually in the minority. Also, although the name may actually be taken as coming either from the Lazarus whom Christ raised from the dead (often regarded as the patron saint of lepers) or from the beggar Lazarus, there is no reason to believe that the latter suffered from leprosy ; the Bible merely states that he was "ulcerous" and "full of sores."

Some particulars were next given to show how the restrictions placed upon lepers differed in various places. In one district they might have perforce to wander far from the haunts of their fellow men, robed in cloak and cowl, shod with ox hide, carrying a bell or "clappers" and, sometimes, a beggar's bowl. In other places they were spoken of as "Christ's Poor" and an amount of often ill-directed charity was bestowed upon them. A list of diseases often classed as leprosy was given, and that there should be much confusion is not surprising seeing that the authorities who made the diagnosis were usually monks or barbers, and frequently, indeed, it lay with the night porter or watchman at the gate.

It is exceedingly difficult to estimate the number of leper hospitals in the middle ages ; one chronicler has placed it at least 200 and reckoned the accommodation in each as varying from 50 to 100 beds. The best known was that of St. Giles, built by that visionary, Matilda the Good, wife of Henry I, and it stood in the fields of Holborn. Prior to the foundation of St. Giles there was a hospital for "leprous maidens" where St. James's Palace now stands and there are also indications of another leper hospital at Bridewell where Katherine of Arragon's Palace stood later and within which her trial took place. Most of the benevolent founders of leper hospitals stipulated that the poor were to share in their bounty as well as the lepers. Descriptions of several of the earliest leper hospitals were given, more particularly of those at Rochester, Sherburn and Harbledon ; the first of those (St. Bartholomew's) "was founded by our goode olde King Henry who married the Goode Queene Maud" (i.e., Matilda of Scotland), and he assigned it for "the receiving and susteyning of infirme leprose folke." It is interesting to note that this hospital was ruled by a leprous prior and any hospital ruled by a leper was freed from taxation.

A misunderstanding very universally exists in connection with the small narrow openings in the walls of many old churches. Those are believed by many people to have been provided in order to allow the lepers to have opportunity to listen to the church services. The lepers were not allowed inside the churchyards at all, and an authority on old church architecture states that these so-called "leper windows" existed either to throw light on the pulpit desk, or, in other cases, that a bell might be rung to indicate to the peasants in the fields that certain parts of the service had been reached and they would stop their labours and participate in spirit in the celebration.

A short account of various royal patrons of the lepers was given and also of great men in the Church and State, nobility and soldiers who had endowed institutions for the benefit of lepers. Lanfranc, one of the greatest of the Archbishops of Canterbury, took a special interest in such hospitals and insisted that those appointed to manage them should be "men of whose skill and gentleness and patience no man could have any doubt"—a far-sighted mandate from the great churchman this, when we remember how loathsome and repulsive is the disease and how prone to mental depression and even to mental disease are those suffering from it.

Many curious details were given in regard to the diet for mental patients. One old volume states that "Olde beef doth engender melancolye and leprous humours," but less hygienic is the outlook in one district where it was decreed that dying cattle were to be slain and their flesh given to the lepers or, "if none of these could be discovered," to the poor. The lecturer next gave particulars regarding allowances made at the different hospitals for the lepers' food.

Hospitals for lepers were very frequently built near to old medicinal wells ; at Bath, for instance, "an ancient alms existed for the poor and leprous of the foundation of Athelstane, Edgar and Ethelred." A sort of bath was provided at this hospital ; it was connected with the well and was frequented "of folke diseased of lepre, pokkes, scabbes and great aches." Sometimes barber-surgeons were called in "whanne some doughtie workes were to be donne on the lepers," and in such cases the friars were in attendance, "leste hurte or scathe be donne to the lepers." Barbers were compelled to attend the lepers without pay and we are left reflecting how many other people were infected later as a result of their ministrations.

The diagnosis of leprosy was often a matter of dispute and the most prominent instance of this was the case of Johanna Nightyngale, who, in the fifteenth century, was charged with being a leper and, with great pertinacity, fought out her case before a special jury in the presence of the "chancellory" and submitted herself to some 40 different tests. Even the royal physicians were brought into consultation and it was "proved by scientific process that she was free and untainted." Leprosy was prevalent in England during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and