The Curability of Insanity

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THE

Curability of Insanity:

A SERIES OF STUDIES.

BY

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"One principle may be sufficient to rule you,—that of standing rigorously by the fact, however naked it look."—Thomas Carlyle.

PHILADELPHIA:
J. B. Lippincott Company.
1887.
PREFACE.

It is now nearly ten years since my essay—"The Curability of Insanity," enlarged from the original in the annual report for the official year 1875–76 of the Northampton Lunatic Hospital—was read before the New England Psychological Society, and published, by direction of that association, in pamphlet form. Meanwhile, seven other articles upon the same subject have been embodied in my annual reports to the trustees of the aforesaid institution. Those papers have been favorably received by a large number of readers, both at home and abroad. It is not presumptuous to claim that they have greatly modified the aspect of insanity, as a curable mental condition, in the view of a large proportion of the persons most interested in the subject. They have thus been an important agent in stimulating the minds of philanthropists to seek—and in several notable instances to adopt—other methods for the custody and care of a large part of the insane than that of collecting them in expensive and unwieldy curative institutions. They have caused a very important change in the statistical methods of Massachusetts, in this
country, and Great Britain in Europe, whereby the reader is informed of the number of persons, as well as of patients, or cases, that recover. This more nearly perfect method will undoubtedly gradually find its way to other States and countries, until it becomes universal.

Under these circumstances, hoping that they may still be beneficial in the directions indicated, and by the expressed desire of some of the leaders in the great work of public charity and beneficence in this country, I have here brought those papers together, in a form convenient for preservation, perusal, and reference. The book, as a book, is simply what it is represented to be in its title,—“A series of Studies,”—each of them essentially, or to a great extent, independent of the others. It consequently follows that any criticism of it on the assumption, either expressed or implied, that it is, or that it professes to be, a well-digested, logically-constructed monograph, would be unjust, and hence worthy of depreciation.

Some of the repetition, which, in the original publication, was a necessary consequence of several discussions of one and the same subject, has here been avoided; and it is hoped that no more of it remains than is necessary effectively to impress upon the mind of the reader the points which are intended to be illustrated or enforced by it.

P. E.

August 28, 1886.
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THE CURABILITY OF INSANITY.

STUDY FIRST.
(WRITTEN IN 1874)

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

Within the last few years, calculations have been made, in more than one of the States, for the purpose of showing the pecuniary loss that has accrued to those States, respectively, from a failure to cure that portion of their dependent insane assumed to have been curable in the early stages of the disease. In Pennsylvania, the calculation was made by the Board of Public Charities, and is based upon the estimated number that became insane in the decennium from 1864 to 1873, inclusive. The author of it assumes, upon what he considers unquestionable authority, that seventy-five per cent. of them, if properly and seasonably treated, might have been permanently restored to health and usefulness. Had this been done, the total cost of treatment, together with the support, for life, of the twenty-five per cent. uncured, would, according to his estimate, have been
only $6,540,066. On the contrary, had all these patients been placed in poor-houses, where it is assumed that seven per cent. of them would recover, the cost of support, during life, would have been $11,271,932. “This,” says the writer, “shows a clear saving of $4,731,866.” He then proceeds to show that, if the seventy-five per cent. had been cured, their earnings would have amounted to $4,945,000 more than they would if only seven per cent. had been cured. Adding these sums he obtains a total of $9,676,866, “a gain,” he says, “of that much to the wealth and power of the community.” Having completed the calculation, he says, “we urge a very careful attention to, and also criticism of the above demonstration.”

But a few months have elapsed since, in an official report of the Commissioner of Insanity in Vermont, it was alleged, as a condemnantory fact against the hospital for the insane of that State, that the proportion of recoveries among the patients has recently been less than it was in the earlier history of that institution. In view of this allegation, and of the main proposition of the foregoing paragraph, it has appeared to me that a review of the subject of the curability of insanity might not be wholly useless at the present time.

The “demonstration,” a criticism of which is invited by the Board of Public Charities of Pennsylvania, will not suffer, as an intellectual process, either in its logic or its mathematics, from the closest scrutiny. The serious question in regard to it is, are the elements of the calculation true? If either of them be false, the deduction from them cannot be otherwise than untrue. Although not directly so stated, it is evident that the seventy-five per cent. of assumed curables relates to