

Robert Baker, The Insane in the United States and Canada, a Review (York 1885)

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183 Euston Road
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T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
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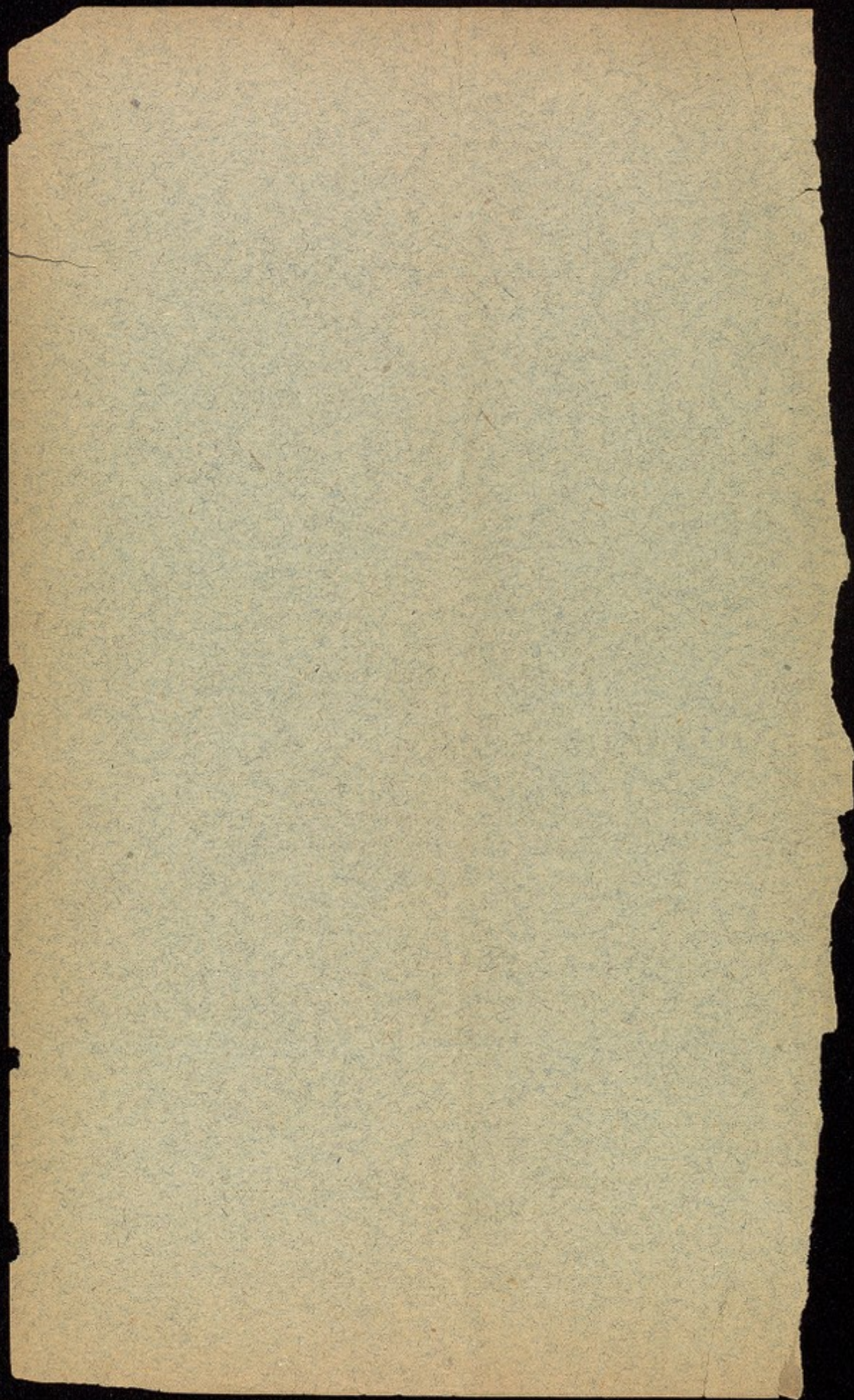
A REVIEW

By ROBERT BAKER, M.D.,

Physician Superintendent of the Friends' Retreat, York, and Honorary
Member of the New England Medico-Psychological Association.

A Revised Reprint from "The Friend" of Eleventh Mo. 2nd, 1885.

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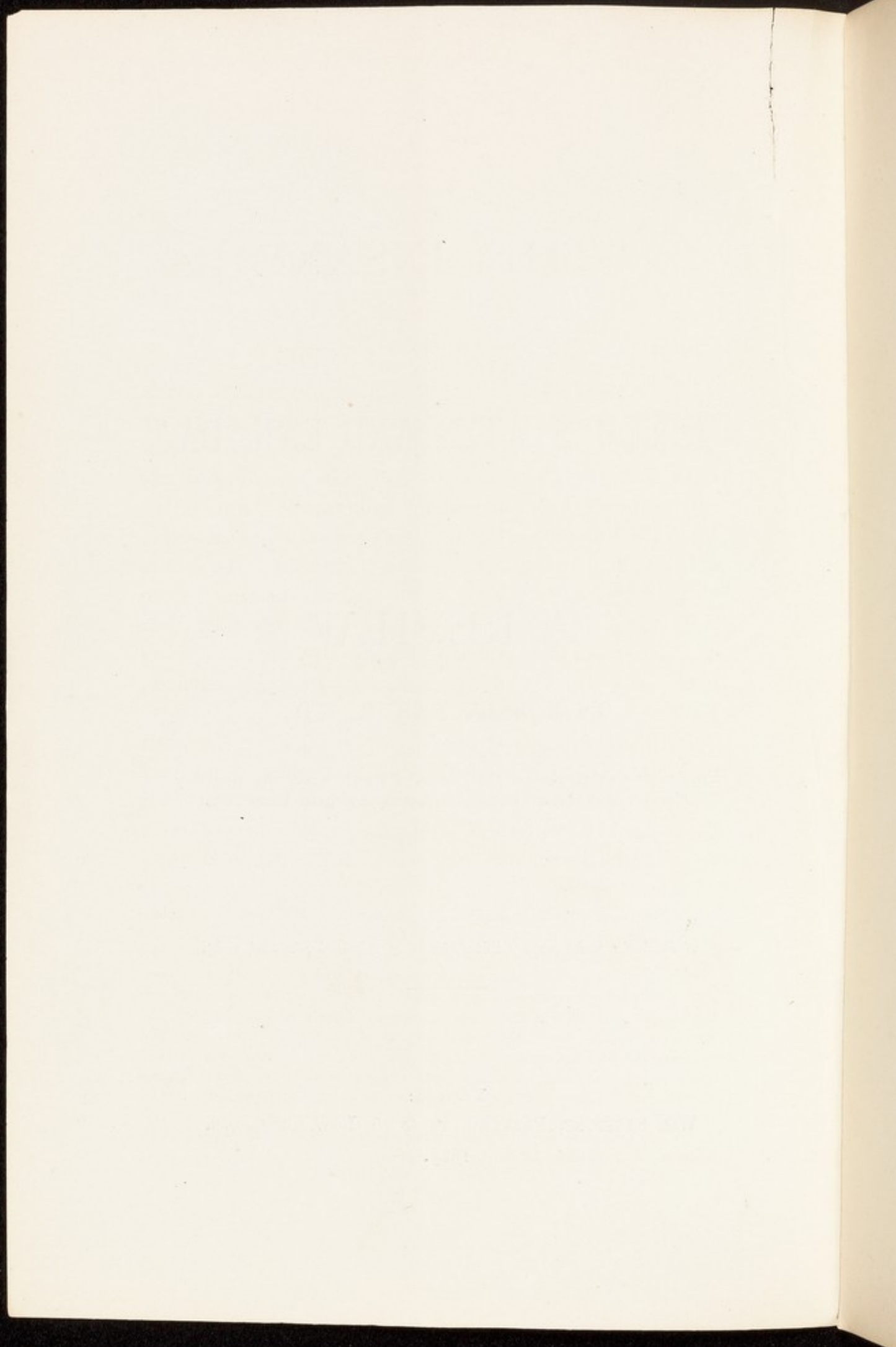
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THE INSANE IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA.*

We wish to direct the attention of our readers to this volume of admirable essays, descriptive of Dr. Hack Tuke's recent visit to many of the transatlantic asylums. We believe that Dr. Tuke visited during his tour forty of the representative institutions for the treatment of the insane in the United States and Canada. We know that his description of many of these is able, correct, and impartial. We believe that no one could have more successfully described these institutions, or shown us more clearly and faithfully their excellences and their faults. As essays they are almost perfect. They will undoubtedly not only sustain, but enhance, his high literary reputation.

Dr. Tuke commenced his tour by visiting the Canadian asylums. This portion of his book shows him at his very best. Here we see that he inherits not only the ability, but the power and fearlessness, of his famous forefathers. Listen to him, as he describes his visit to the Longue Pointe Asylum, near Montreal :—

“Far be it from me to attribute to these Sisters of Charity any intentional unkindness or conscious neglect. In the vegetable kingdom I would allow them undisputed sway. It is the farming-out of *human* beings by the Province to these or any other proprietors against which I venture to protest. . . . Passing from this gallery, which I can only regard as a chamber of horrors, we proceeded to the corresponding portion of the building on the female side. This was to me even more painful ; for when after seeing the women who were crowded together in the gallery, on benches, and in fixed chairs, many also being restrained by the various mechanical appliances, we went into the narrow passage between the pens and the outer wall, the frantic

* *The Insane in the United States and Canada.* By D. H. Tuke, M.D. London : Published by H. K. Lewis. 7s. 6d.

yells of the patients and the banging against the doors constituted a veritable pandemonium. Into this human menagerie what ray of hope can ever enter! In one of the wards of the asylum I observed on the walls a card on which were inscribed words to the effect that in Divine providence alone were men to place their hopes. The words seemed to me like a cruel irony. I should indeed regard the Angel of Death as the most merciful visitant these wretched beings could possibly welcome."

Since this was written a Bill has been introduced into the Canadian Legislature, which will, it is hoped, effect a marked improvement in the condition of the insane in the provinces of Canada; but it is intolerable that in an English dependency such soul-saddening spectacles should still be possible.

Dr. Tuke describes with equal clearness the many excellent asylums in Canada and the United States which he afterwards visited. He records diligently what he saw, and what he was told. As we read his essays we admire the literary skill, the knowledge, the industry, the endurance of the author; and we find evidenced on every page that he possesses the unique faculty of an infinite capacity for asking questions. We rejoice to welcome Dr. Tuke back amongst us bearing such an abundance of sheaves with him, and we believe that his book will be read with pleasure by all interested in the treatment of the insane.

But whilst we speak thus in terms of unmixed praise, recognizing that he has written a really good book, we believe that he might have written a more useful one.

We are distinctly the poorer in that Dr. Tuke has given us proportionally so much more of the contents of his note-books than of himself.

We had hoped that he would have stepped up higher, remembering that he is no mere essayist, but possessed of the power and ability which should make him a great teacher of men. We hoped that he would have remembered that his book would be eagerly read by men and women who are

conscious of the defects in our own Lunacy system, and who are deeply desirous of introducing into our English asylums every possible improvement for the amelioration of the condition of the insane. We had hoped, therefore, that he would have spoken out more plainly to us, teaching us how to apply the information he had gained in rectifying our own present faults. It is not essays *we* are dealing with, it is human creatures' lives.

Failing to find at the conclusion of his volume the summarised teaching chapter our minds longed for, we have tried to compile from his pages the lessons scattered through his book, and we have endeavoured to supplement these with the thoughts resulting from our own smaller experience.

We think he might have said in this missing Manifesto, "Possibly you may differ from the opinions I have formed, and you may draw different deductions from the descriptions I have given you; but I who have been on this interesting and instructive tour, and have seen all these things with my own eyes, and have since pondered over all these problems in my heart, am bound to give you the mature thoughts of my own brain. Lend me your attentive ears whilst I speak briefly on some of the various points in which I think I can give you material assistance in the performance of your onerous duties.

"1. I believe we make a great mistake in building such large asylums, in adding wing to wing, and corridor to corridor; I believe we should do much better for all our insane patients if, instead of enlarging our parent buildings, we surrounded them with skilfully-adapted villas and cottages. I am of course fully aware that patients in an acute phase of mental illness require all the resources of a fully-equipped hospital; but I am sure that when this phase begins to give way to appropriate treatment, removal from the inevitable annoyances of an asylum-ward is most desirable, not only in expediting recovery, but in preventing, when recovery is established, the mind being oppressed with the painful memories of the past. I also believe

that there are many of our chronic insane patients who would be infinitely happier in a pleasant cottage home, than in the rooms of an asylum-ward. This leads me to say that I am of opinion that many of our asylums have been built with an abundance of bricks and mortar, but with an extreme paucity of brains. They seem to me to have been constructed on the assumption that every insane person is a furious lunatic, and that hence all the windows are to be iron-barred, and that the presence of a lock and key is to be always with us. Is there any earthly reason for this? Does one patient in a hundred require these special prison-like surroundings? But, even if so, what is the sense of building large institutions disfigured with provisions only needed for the one, and so compelling the other ninety and nine to dwell in the wilderness of unnecessary and irritating restraints?

"2. I know that many of you agree with me in the belief that many insane and all convalescent patients ought to have living amongst them a larger element of sanity. Some of you have tried to carry out this advance by employing lady companions, but you are now discouraged under a sense of partial failure. In America I have seen this problem successfully solved. There the patients have with them proportionately a very much larger number of resident medical officers. There hospital schools for teaching ladies how to minister to the insane have been established, and there are gradually being trained for this high vocation women who have proved their capacity for this difficult ministry. If you would succeed as they have done, you must cease from your present practice; you must have nothing to do with hysterical girls who have failed as governesses; you must be willing to begin at the beginning, to learn that here, too, as you sow, so shall you reap.

"3. My American tour has impressed me with a belief that a much more varied diet ought to be introduced into our asylums. I wish specially now to speak plainly on the subject of stimulants, and to say that I have returned home fully satisfied that alcohol is not required as an article of diet in an asylum.

I ask you at any rate for six months to entirely cease from using any form of alcohol as an article of diet, and to substitute milk in its place. I feel certain that at the expiry of that time you will not revert to the old practice.

"4. And lastly—if I may venture on so high a theme—I would allude to another advance that struck me most forcibly, viz., the increased power possessed of ministering to the spiritual wants of the insane.

"There being no State-Church in America, there is no artificial class distinction between the ministers of the various divisions of the Christian Church. In some of their asylums the various pastors of the different religious denominations in turn visit and take duty, conducting a strictly non-sectarian service. It seems to me that if we who are strong find that at different times attendance at varying religious services is helpful to us, how much more so should we expect it to be the case with the convalescent insane. Would not one irritated mind be soothed with the silver tones of a Fleming, and would not another gain strength from the tonic ability of a Vaughan?"

If after this manner—but with his own unique ability—Dr. Tuke had poured out his own individual mind to us, and showed us how he thought he could guide our steps into a more excellent way, how gratefully would we have listened to him. But instead of this, he gives us a superfluity of details, and leaves us sometimes uninformed of the convictions of his own mind. His book resembles the very able report of the evidence presented to a Royal Commission, with the report of the Commissioners on the evidence accidentally omitted. No wonder, then, that we close his volume under a sense of partial disappointment, realizing once more the truth of the ancient aphorism, "There is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty."

ROBERT BAKER, M.D.

York Retreat, October 19th, 1885.

