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NOTICE

OF

DR GUGGENBÜHL'S HOSPITAL FOR INFANT CRETINS.

(Extracted with permission from Chambers's Edinburgh Journal.)

THE unfortunate beings whose destiny forms the subject of this memoir are well known to travellers in Switzerland, whose enjoyment of the beauties of that glorious country has often been clouded by the sight of what has hitherto been considered as incurable suffering. The benevolent have sighed over their degradation, the political economist has calculated the dead weight that they must prove on so poor a population, and the Christian has mourned over immortal souls enveloped, as it were, in a chrysalis, which will open only when the cerements of the tomb shall burst.

They have existed for centuries—indeed no one in the country knows the time when there were no crétins in the land; they have existed as an unavoidable evil, and no means had hitherto been sought to turn away so great an affliction, or modify its intensity, till one of those noble and unselfish characters which the world sees from time to time stand forth from the crowd, rose up to help them, giving his powers of mind and energies of heart to the subject, and devoting himself entirely to the cure or amelioration of *infant crétins*.

It is now seven years since the simple-hearted and benevolent Dr Guggenbühl founded his asylum on the heights of the Abendberg, a spot which poets and painters might choose as the scene of their reveries, and which is singularly well calculated to supply the wants of its inmates for their physical and intellectual development. A purer air cannot exist, nor a scene of more exquisite beauty. It is an open space three thousand five hundred feet above the level of the sea, between the lakes of Thun and Brienz, and overhanging the towns of Interlacken and Unterseen; below, the mountain is thickly covered by a fine forest, and opposite rises the giant form of the glorious Jungfrau, a sovereign among the mighty Alps. The buildings which form the hospice are extremely modest, but convenient; and on that height is to be found nearly all the necessities of daily life. The produce of the kitchen-garden is in general very abundant; and Indian corn, and even other corn, grow well there. The inmates bake their own bread, and sometimes kill their own meat. Poultry and goats complete their stock.

Almost always the winter, which is severe in the valley, passes gently over the heights. Two unfailing springs of water supply them amply with baths, as well as what is wanted for household use.

In this retirement, with all the ardour with which discoveries inspire genius, and the patience and affection with which the love of his fellow-creatures has filled his heart, the young and scientific physician we have named has resolved on spending his life, surrounded by objects for the greater part of a disgusting nature, and without companions of like education with himself, except in the valley below. Before this living

example of Christian love we bow with feelings of unmixed veneration; for when he began his work, there were no admiring crowds to fan enthusiasm; there was every thing to fear from want of funds; and little co-operation to hope for from the medical practitioners of the country. There were deep-rooted prejudices to overcome; money never is abundant in Switzerland, and one canton takes but little interest in the institutions of another.

Once inspired with this generous determination, and prompted by scientific knowledge, Dr Guggenbühl gave himself up to the study of the probable causes of this mysterious disorder, and of the probable means of curing it. For this, he availed himself of the researches and opinions of others, and also of what is always a sure guide—the hereditary wisdom of the inhabitants of those places where crétinism is most prevalent.

He found that from the celebrated De Saussure, down to the living physicians of Switzerland, all agreed that the disorder never showed itself *above* the height of four thousand feet on the mountains; and that children attacked by it, and immediately carried up into a purer and keener air, were sure to recover, and even to be more lively, and forwarder on returning again into the valleys, at the approach of winter, than the other children of those parts; but also, they easily fall back again into the same state as before, and require more than one summer spent upon the heights, to free them entirely from all symptoms of the disorder.

He found also those who were rich enough sent their offspring away while infants to healthier spots; and that the inhabitants of Sion, in the Valais, who possess *mayens*, or pastures, and chalets on the heights, send their wives up to them to be delivered there, with the conviction that the infants so born are freer from attacks of crétinism than those born in the valleys. All these undoubted facts led him to found this establishment at the height so indicated, and in the healthiest spot possible, where the little crétins can spend the winter as well as the summer in comfort, and be not only under the care of nurses and physicians, but also under that of schoolmasters and mistresses, and so receive bodily care and intellectual instruction at the same time.

He began in the spirit of Franke, whose example he so often alludes to; and relying on the fulness of Christian benevolence to realise what he felt sure of executing, were the means obtained. His difficulties were great, and the sympathy he met with at first amongst his own countrymen next to nothing; but we cannot but regard the neighbourhood of Interlacken, which in summer is filled with tourists from every country, as a most providential circumstance for the success of the rising hospital.

The first news that we received of its existence was from the graphic pen of one of the daughters of the Russian ambassador, the Baron of Krudener, then at Interlacken, who had accompanied the Princess Rephin on a visit to it, and who described its very infancy with enthusiasm. Some time after, the king of Wurtemberg, while resident at Interlacken, inspected it himself, and gave substantial marks of his interest; and the scientific of all countries, as well as the philanthropic and the curious, who visit the Bernese Oberland, have spread a knowledge of its foundation throughout the continent more rapidly than otherwise could ever have been hoped for.

Nevertheless ill-natured doubts were thrown on the facts which Dr Guggenbühl published, and ridicule even was not wanting to dishearten and distress him. Some generous-minded persons were, however to be found, who held out a helping hand, and assisted him to put his benevolent designs in execution.

As soon as the establishment was opened, the government of Berne granted it a sum of six hundred livres; and those of Fribourg, the Valais, and St Gall, sent crétin children to be maintained there at their expense. The king of Prussia likewise took notice of it, and ordered two children to be placed there from the principality of Neufchatel; the Countess of Hahn Hahn, who had taken her daughter to the Abendberg, in the vain hope of effecting her cure (but her age, sixteen, rendered it impossible), with a most natural sympathy for others similarly afflicted, requested that a Valasian child should be always maintained there at her expense, to be called *her child*, one succeeding the other when cured, and for which she gave the necessary funds.

Associations began then to be formed in many of the capitals of Europe, beginning with Hamburg, Amsterdam, &c.; and finally, Dr Troxler, professor at Berne, gave the establishment the sanction of his powerful name. Subscriptions were made which have enabled Dr Guggenbühl to extend his operations wider than he possibly could have done; and last year he ventured to add a second building to the original one, that the children might be enabled to continue their gymnastic exercises through the winter, whereas before, they could only be performed in the open air. He has also added two or three rooms in the new building, which can be occupied by parents of the children, who may wish to remain with them for a longer or a shorter time; for amongst the sick, whom Dr Guggenbühl's rising reputation has brought to the Abendberg, are some of high rank, who, though not precisely crétins, were yet of that class of patients in whom the brain appears not to have been properly developed, and to these he has been of very great use. When we visited him in 1846, and fully enjoyed the sight of so much natural and moral beauty, we saw two titled little girls who had been taken to him from Germany, to die, as it was thought, but who have, on the contrary, lived and prospered under his roof.

Of the number of children hitherto admitted, one-third have been sent back to their families quite cured, others more or less ameliorated, and some few have died. In general, Dr Guggenbühl complains that they are not left long enough, and assures that a long space of time and continued care are absolutely necessary to insure perfect success,—not less than three years in general. Some have appeared to baffle every effort, their bodies presenting an ensemble of deformity, their tongues obtruding from their mouths, their heads hanging down, their skin wrinkled like a person of eighty, their limbs dwindled to nothing, their bodies enormous, and neither sign of intelligence nor any articulate sound to be drawn from them. Even these, by his kind and judicious treatment, by unwearying care, by baths, by aromatic frictions, by electricity, by goat's milk, by exposure to the air and sun, by every means of infant development, playing, talking, laughing, by lessons with pictures, and by singing—even *these* have acquired the use of their limbs, the power of speech, the faculty of learning, and have, after a long stay on the Abendberg, been sent back as well as, and even more forward

in most branches of instruction, than the generality of children of their age. Their progress is never uniform or regular, but always by fits and starts, and all at once, as if a cell were opened in their brain, or a veil withdrawn from their understanding, and that, too, when least expected. Parents and schoolmasters might learn many a useful lesson on that Alpine height, and find data which would save more than one dunce from the rod, and teach the master that he is far more to blame than the scholar.

His great principle is to strengthen the body before he attempts to develop the mind. He even goes so far as to say, that to venture on the second before the first is accomplished, is productive of the most disastrous consequences; and were his warning voice but listened to, how many victims of precocity, how many little wonders, who minister to parental self-love for a time, and then sink into mediocrity afterwards, might be saved from subsequent suffering and nervous irritability!

Dr Guggenbühl divides crétinism into several different species:—1st, Atrophy, in which the spinal marrow has suffered mostly, and the extremities are nearly paralysed: 2d, Rachitæ, where the bones have become soft and spongy, and out of proportion: 3d, Hydrocephalie; the disorder being occasioned by water formed in the cells of the skull, which ought to be occupied by the brain: 4th, Inborn, of which the germ is in the infant at its birth, and which presents any or all of the foregoing principles, and varies in intensity, from the slightly affected, down to the mass of animal matter which lies where it is placed, and can neither move nor speak. In this class are to be remarked those who have imperfect bodily growth, and the head out of proportion to the body; and also those who do not speak, yet are not deaf, but who have great difficulty in articulating, and are too lazy to attempt it.

We might give some striking extracts from the German report published by Dr Guggenbühl in 1846, illustrative of each of these forms of crétinism; but perhaps the following case of the first-mentioned form of crétinism (atrophy) will be considered sufficient in a non-professional journal like this:—

“L——, a little girl of six months old, was brought to us. Her mother is strong and healthy, but her father weak and scrofulous. Till she was four months old she was in good health, but weaker than children of that age generally. A violent cold was the beginning of her illness; and when brought to our house, her appearance was so wretched, as to procure her the name of *the little worm*, from the Princess-Royal Henrietta of Wurtemberg, during her visit to us; and truly was she so named, for she was frightful to look upon. Her body was more like a skeleton covered with skin than anything else, and that skin was cold and wrinkled. All her muscles were immovable, and the extremities of her body like miniature hands and feet. Her face was deadly white, her forehead and cheeks wrinkled like an old person's, while her black and piercing eyes had a singularly knowing look. She slept ill, her pulse was feeble, and she had no natural heat. She came to us in July; the weather was beautiful, and the keenness of our mountain air, the uninterrupted sunshine of our unclouded sky, the electricity which predominates in the atmosphere, all which have so great an influence on our invalids, were furthered by strict regimen and constant care. This delicate little creature, who so soon

after her birth had begun to lose all resemblance to a human being, and that so rapidly, now made as rapid strides towards recovery. In three months' time the deformities of her person began to disappear, her skin recovered its natural warmth, the wrinkles vanished, and her face grew young again, with the hue and the charm of infancy; and at the same time her smile, and the manner in which she took notice of those around her, showed that the faculties of her mind were awakening also. In the space of twelve months, she had lost the appearance of a little doll, and had regained that of children of her own age—proof sufficient of the efficacy of proper treatment begun without loss of time, and of the disorder being more efficaciously treated in earliest infancy than at a later period. It is now eighteen months since she left us, and we have had the happiness of learning from the Pastor Bitzius of Lutzelflück, so well known as a popular writer, in whose parish she is, that she continues in perfect health, and can talk and express herself well."

Dr Guggenbühl makes a distinction between *crétinism* and *idiotism*, and after illustrating his ideas on the subject by the description of two brothers who are in his institution—the one *crétin*, the other *idiot*—he proceeds thus:—

"*Crétinism* shows itself sometimes in the physical development, and sometimes in the intellectual, and sometimes in both, and to about the same degree. It is always accompanied by some great defect in the constitution; while the intellect is nevertheless capable of being acted upon.

"*Idiotism*, on the contrary, is often found in a beautiful, well-proportioned body. It is occasioned, without any exception, by a fault in the formation of the brain—sometimes too large—or an organization of it which excludes the possibility of any but a very slight degree of cultivation.

"Anatomical researches on the bodies of *crétins* have shown that the seat of the disorder is almost always in the brain. Sometimes its substance differs from that of healthy subjects by being too hard or too little, sometimes it is watery, and sometimes its fibres are flat and small, as in animals. Yet a cause still hidden from us, either before or after birth, hinders the proper development of the brain and of the spinal marrow, both so essentially necessary to the growth and the progress of the child.

"*Crétinism* is also closely allied to *scrofula*: the symptoms of the latter being often, if not always, found in *crétins*, and the same remedies being generally good for both. (*Goïtres*, also, often accompany or precede it, and are sometimes enormous in old *crétins*.) *Scrofula* is frequent in the valleys, very fatal, and its effects dreadful, even where it does not kill."

Such, then, is *crétinism*—a disorder which is sometimes brought into the world by the unfortunate child at its birth, and which in that case has a stronger hold over the constitution than when it attacks it at a later period; but which the oftenest shows itself in the first few weeks, or months, or years of its existence: seldom or ever after the age of seven years; and if met by a change of air and diet, by strengthening and exciting remedies, by action on the nerves, the bones, and the muscles, can be stopped short, and finally cured if taken in time after the moment when it first manifests itself, and if the treatment is continued long enough; and which can almost always be modified: thus differing entirely

from idiocy, which is incurable and unmodifiable. Crétins, at the highest point of the disorder, never live longer than twenty-five years, and pass as it were at once from childhood to old age in their appearance.

They are, even in that extreme state of disgusting helplessness, the objects of tenderness and superstitious reverence in their families; according to the beneficent dispensations of a merciful God, who never permits a want in the human race without implanting a feeling in the human heart which is to lead men to minister unto it. Their heads are almost invariably larger than those of other men, and offer some singular and defective forms, through which one feature runs without exception—the depression of the forehead. Unfortunately those prejudices which exist everywhere amongst the poor, have hitherto greatly hindered all anatomical researches in crétins, and rendered the study of the *causes* of crétinism so vague and unsatisfactory.

We will now turn to the remedies which Dr Guggenbühl has employed with the greatest success, and which he recommends to the notice and use of the scientific world.

They are, in general, the same, with little variation, and consist in electric shocks on the head and on the feet, given during sleep or in the bath, where generally the little patients pronounce their first distinct words; of aromatic frictions on the back, with baths of the same; of preparations of steel, bark; of the waters of Wiedegg, which are in the neighbourhood; of cod liver oil; of iodine; of juglam regia; of a diet composed of goats' milk, which is peculiarly aromatic on the mountains; of meat, some few vegetables, with the entire exclusion of potatoes; but above all, and the most important, is continual exposure to the air and sunshine—those who cannot walk being laid out on the grass to inhale the wholesome breezes of that high, pure air;* cold baths they cannot bear. Gymnastic exercises, which require the daily use of every muscle, are also very important, and excite the children to emulation in their feats; whilst the exercise of the faculties of the mind are equally carried on in mental gymnastics, according to the powers of each little scholar. Music has been found to be a powerful aid, soothing, interesting, and refining; and we can bear witness ourselves to the thrilling effect of the voices of the happy little group, who sang to us in their infantine manner the praises of their God. Few persons, we think, could have restrained their tears while listening to that infant choir, and reflecting that but for the Christian love which has watched over them, their voices might still have uttered nothing but groans, and their souls remained ignorant of God their Maker.

Let us now turn to the difficult question, What *are* the causes of crétinism? and set forth the various suppositions which have been given down to the present day.

From all the observations made by Dr Guggenbühl himself, and collected by him from others, from those also published by the different societies which have examined into it, there seems to remain no doubt that it arises from local causes affecting the state of the atmosphere in which

* Messrs Schublu and Buzzorini have shown by their experiments that the human lungs absorb in the mountain air a much greater quantity of oxygen than in the plain; for which reason the nervous system is more active, animal heat is stronger, and the nourishment given to the body more abundant.

the children are born or live. That it is necessarily hereditary, does not appear; for children of parents half crétin, or with some signs of the disease, often escape; whereas very lively and healthy persons often have crétin children, when living in a close, steamy air, in valleys where there is not a thorough renewing of the air, or where stagnant vapours remain on the sides of the hills, by the waters coming down from the heights, and being held in by a ledge of rocks or a belt of trees. We must add also the want of cleanliness and fresh air in the habitations, which are but too often devoid of a sufficient number of windows, and which are generally ornamented in front by a large dunghill, surrounded by a pool of infectious water, from which emanations exhale which must necessarily form a part of the atmosphere of the interior of the dwellings. Want of cleanliness in their persons also—the use of fresh water being no part of their education; and lastly, the miserable food that the peasants in general live upon, consisting of salt meat at times, black bread, hard cheese, and potatoes.

What seems to justify this theory is, that along with the advancement of civilisation (the consequence of long peace), of much travelling, of money flowing into places which formerly were never visited by strangers; in consequence also of the progress made in comfort in the houses, of cleanliness in particular (partially introduced), of drainage, of better roads, &c. it is certain that the very most disgusting form of crétinism has nearly disappeared. Those unfortunate beings, who could neither move, speak, nor show any sign of humanity, except its most degraded form, are scarcely now to be met with. Such were those frightful objects which the French soldiers fired at on their first entrance into Switzerland, not from cruelty, but from the horror with which they inspired them. The inhabitants have also at the same time become more active, laborious, and sober by their intercourse with other countries;* and the great facilities of land and water carriage have introduced the produce of the colonies, and substituted a much more wholesome species of food than the indigestible cheeses, curds, salt pork, and greasy bacon, which before constituted their only nourishment.

Formerly, also, crétins but a step removed from the state we have described, were unfortunately permitted by the authorities to intermarry, and thus became the parents of wretches yet more unhappy than themselves. Now, marriages amongst near relations, especially where there is any tendency to disorder, are much discouraged, as being fatal to the health of their children. We may therefore hope that, if no great pressure of misery should fall on the inhabitants of the Alpine valleys, every succeeding year may bring amongst them some of those habits which are the best preventives of scrofula, goître, and crétinism.

But to return to the history of the Abendberg. There have been founded two other hospices in imitation of it—the one in Wurtemberg, by a few Christian friends associated together, and which is placed under the direction of Mr Rösch; the other in Saxony, formed by the unwearied efforts of Dr Carus, physician to the king. In Austria, researches are

* It is a fact, that since the opening of the route into Italy by the Simplon, the number of such wretched beings has much diminished all through the Valais. Only since then the banking up of the Rhone has taken place, and is still prosecuted by the authorities of the canton, by which the marshes, which were formerly under water on each side of the river, are drained, and formed into a fertile and salubrious country.

making, under the superintendence of the Baron de Funchtersleben, but no establishment has yet been made; and through the mountains of Caucasus inquiries are going on by the great Russian oculist, Piragoff, whose name is so well known to science. The king of Sardinia also has taken up the subject with royal munificence, and ordered an investigation of every parish throughout his dominions, which has been now at work for many months, and the report of which is expected to be published speedily.

Dr Guggenbühl's second report, as yet only published in German, is accompanied by a very large number of letters of affection and encouragement, addressed to him from all parts of the continent by men of science, learning, philanthropy, and Christian principle, many of whom have visited the Abendberg, and give their witness to its success. They are in some instances accompanied by the diplomas of different learned societies.

It is now time to close our humble tribute to the beauty and the importance of Dr Guggenbühl's bold undertaking, in a medical, a scientific, a philanthropic, a political, and, above all, in a Christian point of view; and we can fearlessly call on all those in our own happy land, where crétinism and goîtres are unknown, to whom the present and future welfare of mankind is dear, to come forward with the abundant riches with which prosperity and commerce have blessed us, so different from the scanty resources of poor revolutionised Switzerland, and help one of the noblest and the most unselfish enterprizes that the age can boast of.

Let not his confidence in the sympathy and the assistance of the wise and the good of every country be disappointed, but let those who are unscathed by such afflictions build *here* an altar of thanksgiving to God.*

* A large number of the children admitted are very poor, and many pay nothing; the benevolence of the founder preventing his turning them away from his door.