

MARTINEAU, Harriet. 1854. "Idiots Again".
Household Words 9 (212), 15 de abril: 197-200.

crowded up to the edge of the precipice from which we obtained our first view of the Oasis of Garah.

IDIOTS AGAIN.

PEOPLE whose ancestors came in at the Conquest, are apt to have one idea overruling all others—that nobody is worthy of their alliance whose ancestors did not come in at the Conquest. Of course, this has been an idea ever since the Conquest began to be considered an old event; and, of course, there have been fewer and fewer families who had a right to it. Of course, also, those families have intermarried, and the intermarriage has been more and more restricted. Another “of course” follows, on which we need not enlarge. Everybody knows the consequences of prolonged intermarriages between any sort of people who are few enough to be almost all blood relations. The world was shocked and grieved, some years since, at the oldest baronage in England “going out at the ace of diamonds”—expiring in the disgrace of cheating at cards. The world ought to be quite as much shocked and grieved at seeing—what has been seen, and may be seen again—the honours of the same ancient birth being extinguished in a lunatic asylum.

It used to be thought a very religious and beautiful thing (it certainly was the easiest thing) to say that it pleased God to send idiots, and other defective or diseased children, to try and discipline their parents by affliction, and so on; but religious physicians now tell us (showing reason for what they say) that there is something very like blasphemy in talking so,—in imputing to Providence the sufferings which we bring upon ourselves, precisely by disobedience to the great natural laws which it is the best piety to obey. It is a common saying, that families who intermarry too often, die out; but no account is taken of the miseries which precede that dying out. Those miseries of disease of body and mind are ascribed to Providence, as if Providence had not given us abundant warning to avoid them! Dr. Howe, the wise and benevolent teacher of Laura Bridgman, says, in his Report on Idiocy in Massachusetts, that “the law against the marriage of relatives is made out as clearly as though it were written on tables of stone.” He gives his reasons for saying so; and of those reasons, the following sample will, we think, be enough. When the tables of health and disease were compiled for Massachusetts, a few years ago, the following was found to be the state of seventeen families, where the father and mother were related by blood.* Some of the parents were unhealthy, and some were intemperate—but to set against this disadvantage to begin with, there is the fact, that the evil consequences of such intermarriage very often do not appear until the

second generation, or even later. However in these seventeen households there were ninety-five children. What were these children like? Imagine a school of ninety-five children, of all ages, or the children of a hamlet at play, and think what the little crowd would look like; and then read this! Of these ninety-five children, one was a dwarf. Well, that might easily be. One was deaf. Well, no great wonder in that. Twelve were scrofulous. That is a large number, certainly; but scrofula is sadly common, and especially in unhealthy situations. Well, but FORTY-FOUR were IDIOTS.

Of all the long and weary pains of mind to which the unselfish can be subject, we know of none so terrible as that of the mother attaining the certainty that her child is an idiot. Reviewing the whole case as we have ourselves observed it, it seems to us an affliction made tolerable only by its gradual growth, and the length of years over which it is spread. How sweet was the prospect of the little one coming—not only in the sacred anticipations of the parents, but when the elder children were told, in quiet, joyful moments of confidence, that there would be a baby in the house by-and-by! And when it came, how amiable, and helpful, and happy everybody was—keeping the house quiet for the mother's sake, and wondering at the baby, and not minding any irregularity or little uncomfortableness while the mother was upstairs. Perhaps there was a wager that baby would “take notice,” turn its eyes to a bright watch, or spoon, or looking-glass, at the end of ten days or a fortnight, and the wager was lost. Here, perhaps, was the first faint indication. But it would not be thought much of, the child was so very young! As the weeks pass, however, and still the child takes no notice, a sick misgiving sometimes enters the mother's mind—a dread of she does not know what, but it does not last long. You may trust a mother for finding out charms and promise of one sort or another in her baby—be it what it may. Time goes on; and the singularity is apparent that the baby makes *no response* to anything. He is not deaf. Very distant street music probably causes a kind of quiver through his whole frame. He sees very well. He certainly is aware of the flies which are performing minuets and reels between him and the ceiling. As for his other senses, there never was anything like his keenness of smell and taste. He is ravenous for food—even already unpleasantly so; but excessively difficult to please. The terrible thing is his still taking no notice. His mother longs to feel the clasp of his arms round her neck; but her fondlings receive no return. His arm hangs lax over her shoulder. She longs for a look from him, and lays him back on her lap, hoping that they may look into each other's eyes; but he looks at nobody. All his life long nobody will ever meet his eyes;

* Dr. Howe's Report on Idiocy, 1848. P. 30.

and neither in that way nor any other way will his mind expressly meet that of anybody else. When he does at length look at anything, it is at his own hand. He spreads the fingers, and holds up the hand close before his face, and moves his head from side to side. At first, the mother and the rest laugh, and call it a baby trick; but after a time the laughter is rather forced, and they begin to wish he would not do so. We once saw a child on her mother's lap laughing at the spinning of a half-crown on the table, when, in an instant, the mother put the little creature down—almost threw her down on the carpet, with an expression of anguish in her face perfectly astonishing. The child had chanced to hold up her open hand before her face in her merry fidget; and the mother, who had watched over an idiot brother from her youth up, could not bear that terrible token, although in this case it was a mere accident.

The wearing uncertainty of many years succeeds the infancy. The ignorant notions of idiocy that prevailed before we knew even the little that we yet know of the brain, prevent the parents recognising the real state of the case. The old legal accounts of idiocy, and the old suppositions of what it is, are very unlike what they see. The child ought not, according to legal definition, to know his own name, but he certainly does; for when his own plate or cup is declared to be ready, he rushes to it. He ought not to be able, by law, "to know letters;" yet he can read, and even write, perhaps, although nobody can tell how he learned, for he never seemed to attend when taught. It was just as if his fingers and tongue went of themselves, while his mind was in the moon. Again, the law declared anybody an idiot "who could not count twenty pence;" whereas, this boy seems, in some unaccountable way, to know more about sums (of money and of everything else) than anybody in the family. He does not want to learn figures, his arithmetic is strong without them, and always instantaneously ready. Of course we do not mean that every idiot has these particular powers. Many cannot speak; more cannot read. But almost every one of the thousands of idiots in England has some power that the legal definition declares him not to have, and that popular prejudice will not believe. Thus does the mother go on from year to year, hardly admitting that her boy is "deficient," and quite sure that he is not an idiot—there being some things in which he is so very clever!

The great improvement in the treatment of idiots and lunatics since science began to throw light on the separate organisation of the human faculties, is one of the most striking instances in all human experience of the practical blessedness induced by knowledge. In a former paper of this journal an account was given* of the way in which, by beneficent

training, the apparent faculties of idiots are made to bring out the latent ones, and the strong powers to exercise the weaker, until the whole class are found to be capable of a cultivation never dreamed of in the old days when the name IDIOT swallowed up all the rights and all the chances of the unfortunate creature who was so described. In those days the mother might well deny the description, and refuse the term. She would point to the wonderful faculty her child had in some one direction, and admit no more than that he was "not like other children." Well, this is enough. She need not be driven further. If her Harry is "not like other children," that is enough for his own training, and that of the rest of the household.

A training it may be truly called for them all, from the father to the kitchen-maid. The house that has an idiot in it can never be like any other. The discipline is very painful, but, when well conducted and borne, it is wonderfully beautiful. Harry spoils things, probably: cuts with scissors whatever can be cut—the leaves of books, the daily newspaper, the new shirt his mother is making, the doll's arm, the rigging of the boat his brother has been fitting up for a week, the maid's cap ribbon, his father's silk purse. It would be barbarous to take scissors from him, and inconvenient too; for he spends hours in cutting out the oddest and prettiest things!—symmetrical figures, in paper; figures that seem to be fetched out of the kaleidoscope. Lapfuls of such shapes does he cut out in a week, wagging his head, and seeming not to look at the scissors; but never making a wrong snip. The same orderliness of faculty seems to prevail throughout his life. He must do precisely the same thing at precisely the same moment every day: must have always the same chair, wailing or pushing in great distress if anybody else is using it: and must wear the same clothes, so that it is a serious trouble to get any new clothes put on. However carefully they may be changed while he is asleep, there is no getting him dressed in the morning without sad distress. One such Harry, whom we knew very well, had a present one day of a plaything most happily chosen;—a pack of cards. There was symmetry in plenty! When he first took them into his hands; they happened to be all properly sorted, except that the court-cards were all in a batch at the top, and one other—the ten of spades—which had slipped out, and was put at the top of all. For all the rest of his life (he died at nineteen) the cards must be in that order and no other; and his fingers quivered nervously with haste to put them in that order if they were disarranged. One day while he was out walking, we took that top card away and shuffled the rest. On his return, he went to work as usual. When he could not find the ten of spades, he turned his head about in

* Vol. VI. pp. 313—317.

the way which was his sign of distress, gave that most pathetic sort of sigh,—that drawn-in, instead of breathed-out sigh, which is so common among his class,—and searched everywhere for the card. When obliged to give the matter up, he mournfully drew out the ten of clubs, and made that do instead. We could hold out no longer, and gave him his card: and he seized upon it as eagerly as any digger on any nugget, and chuckled and chuckled, and wagged his head, and was perfectly happy. We once poured some comfits into his hand. They happened to be seven. At the same moment every day after, he would hold out his hand, as if by mechanism, while his head was turned another way. We poured six comfits into his palm. Still he did not look, but would not eat them, and was restless till we gave him one more. Next day, we gave him nine; and he would not touch them till he had thrust back two upon us.

In all matters of number, quantity, order and punctuality, Harry must be humoured. It is a harmless peculiarity, and there will be no peace if he is crossed. If he insists upon laying his little brother's tricks only in rows, or only in diamonds or squares, he must be coaxed into another room, unless the little brother be capable of the self-denial of giving up the point and taking to some other play. It is often a hard matter enough for the parents to do justice among the little ones: but we can testify because we have seen what wonders of magnanimity may be wrought among little children, servants and every body, by fine sense, and sweet and cheerful patience on the part of the governing powers of the household. They may have sudden occasion for patience on their own account too. Perhaps the father comes home very tired, needing his coffee. His coffee is made and ready. So they think: but lo! poor Harry, who has an irresistible propensity to pour into each other all things that can be poured, has turned the coffee into the brine that the hams have just come out of; and then the brine and the coffee and the cream all back again into the coffee-pot, and so on. Such things, happening every day, make a vast difference in the ease, cheerfulness and economy of a household. They are, in truth, a most serious and unintermitting trial. They make the discipline of the household: and they indicate what must be the blessing of such institutions for the care and training of idiots as were celebrated in the paper we have referred to.

As for the discipline of Harry himself, it must be discipline; for every consideration of humanity, and, of course, of parental affection, points out the sin of spoiling him. To humour, in the sense of spoiling, an idiot, is to level him with the brutes at once. One might as well do with him what used to be done with such beings,—consign him to the sty, to sleep with the pigs, or chain him up

like the dog, as indulge the animal part of a being who does not possess the faculties that counteract animality in other people. Most idiots have a remarkable tendency to imitation: and this is an admirable means of domestic training,—for both the defective child and the rest. The youngest will smother its sobs at the soap in its eye, if appealed to, to let poor Harry see how cheerfully everybody ought to be washed every morning. The youngest will take the hint not to ask for more pudding, because Harry must take what is given him, and not see anybody cry for more. Crying is conquered—self-conquered—throughout the house, because Harry imitates everything; and it would be very sad if he got a habit of crying, because he could not be comforted like other people. As the other children learn self-conquest from motive, in this way Harry will be learning it from imitation. He will insist upon being properly washed and combed, and upon having no more than his plateful—or his two plateful—at dinner: and so on. The difficult thing to manage at home is the occupation: and this is where lies the great superiority of schools or asylums for his class. His father may perhaps get him taught basket-making, or spinning with a wheel, or cabinet-making, in a purely mechanical way; but this is less easily done at home than in a school. Done it must be, in the one place or the other, if the sufferer and his companions in life are to have any justice, and any domestic leisure and comfort. The strong faculty of imitation usually existing among the class, seems (as we said just now, in reference to the faculties of idiots in general,) a sort of miracle before the nature of the brain-organisation was truly conceived of. How many elderly people now remember how aghast they were, as children, at the story of the idiot youth, not being able to do without the mother, who had never left him while she lived: and how, when everybody supposed him asleep, and the neighbours were themselves asleep, he went out and got the body, and set it up in the fireside chair, and made a roaring fire, and heated some broth, and was found, restlessly moaning with distress, while trying to feed the corpse. And that other story,—a counterpart to which we know of our own knowledge,—of the idiot boy who had lived close under a church steeple, and had always struck the hours with the clock; and who, when removed into the country, far away from church, clock, and watch, still went on striking the hours, and quite correctly, without any visible means of knowing the time. What could we, in childhood, and the rest of the world in the ignorance of that day, make of such facts, but that they must be miraculous? The most marvellous, to our mind, is a trait which, again, we know of our own knowledge. An idiot, who died many years ago at the age of thirty, lost his mother when he was under two years old. His idiotcy had

been obvious from the earliest time that it could be manifested; and when the eldest sister took the mother's place, the child appeared to find no difference. From the mode of feeling of the family, the mother was never spoken of; and if she had been, such mention would have been nothing to the idiot son, who comprehended no conversation. He spent his life in scribbling on the slate, and hopping round the play-ground of the school kept by his brother-in-law, singing after his own fashion. He had one special piece of business besides, and one prodigious pleasure. The business was—going daily, after breakfast, to speak to the birds in the wood behind the house; and the supreme pleasure was turning the mangle. Most of us would have reversed the business and pleasure. When his last illness—consumption—came upon him at the age of thirty, the sister had been long dead; and there were none of his own family, we believe, living; certainly none had for many years had any intercourse with him. For some days before his death, when he ought to have been in bed, nothing but a too distressing force could keep him from going to the birds. On the last day, when his weakness was extreme, he tried to rise,—managed to sit up in bed, and said he must go,—the birds would wonder so! The brother-in-law offered to go and explain to the birds; and this must perforce do. The dying man lay, with his eyes closed, and breathing his life away in slower and slower gasps, when he suddenly turned his head, looked bright and sensible, and exclaimed in a tone never heard from him before, "Oh! my mother! how beautiful!" and sank round again—dead.

There are not a few instances of that action of the brain at the moment before death by which long-buried impressions rise again like ghosts or visions; but we have known none so striking as this, from the lapse of time, the peculiarity of the case, and the unquestionable blank between.

There are flashes of faculty now and then in the midst of the twilight of idiot existence—without waiting for the moment of death. One such, to the last degree impressive, is recorded by the late Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, in his account of the great Morayshire floods, about a quarter of a century since. An innkeeper, who, after a merry evening of dancing, turned out to help his neighbours in the rising of the Spey, carelessly got upon some planks which were floated apart, and was carried down the stream on one. He was driven against a tree, which he climbed, and his wife and neighbours saw him lodged in it before dark. As the floods rose, there began to be fears for the tree: and the shrill whistle which came from it, showed that the man felt himself in danger, and wanted help. Everybody concluded help to be out of the question, as no boats could get near; and they could only preach patience until morning,

to the poor wife, or until the flood should go down. Hour after hour, the whistle grew wilder and shriller; and at last it was almost continuous. It suddenly ceased; and those who could hardly bear it before, longed to hear it again. Dawn showed that the tree was down. The body of the innkeeper was found far away—with the watch in his fob stopped at the hour that the tree must have fallen. The event being talked over in the presence of the village idiot, he laughed. Being noticed, he said he would have saved the man. Being humoured, he showed how a tub, fastened to a long rope would have been floated, as the plank with the man on it was floated, to the tree. If this poor creature had but spoken in time, his apparent inspiration would have gone some way to confirm the Scotch superstition, which holds—with that of the universal ancient world of theology—that "Innocents are favourites of Heaven."

It is for us to act upon the medium view sanctioned alike by science and morals—neither to cast out our idiots, like the savages who leave their helpless ones to perish; nor to worship them, as the pious Egyptians did, and other nations who believed that the gods dwelt in them, more or less, and made oracles of them;—a perfectly natural belief in the case of beings who manifest a very few faculties in extraordinary perfection, in the apparent absence of all others. Our business is, in the first place, to reduce the number of idiots to the utmost of our power, by attending to the conditions of sound life and health; and especially by discountenancing, as a crime, the marriage of blood-relations; and, in the next place, by trying to make the most and the best of such faculties as these imperfect beings possess. It is not enough to repeat the celebrated epitaph on an idiot, and to hope that his privations here will be made up to him hereafter. We must lessen those privations to the utmost, by the careful application of science in understanding his case; and of skill, and inexhaustible patience and love, in treating it. Happily, there are now institutions, by aiding which any of us may do something towards raising the lowest, and blessing the most afflicted, members of our race.

GRADATION.

TELL me not of insulations, of affinities distinct,
For all things with one another are indissolubly
link'd:

Nature's work is in gradations, from the life-blood
to the stone;

Oh, the infinite commingling! Nothing, nothing
stands alone.

Know ye when the gates of morning close against
the twilight gray,

And the setting sun's wet purple flushes out the
glare of day?