

Among the Mad.

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I.

Become insane? and through my own desire be confined as a lunatic in a mad-house; bring upon myself all the mental torture of being day and night with those staring, senseless creatures, whose proximity alone fills our souls with sickening horror?

And to what end? In order to make for myself a position whereby I could earn a livelihood.

A few months previous I had come to New York a stranger. I had never been in the city before, and had not one acquaintance among its million and more inhabitants.

"We have more women now than we want," was the invariable reply of the editors to my plea for work, while some added, "Women are no good, anyway."

At last my purse, containing all my money, was stolen from me, and I was penniless. I was too proud to return to the position I had left in search of new worlds to conquer. Indeed, I cannot say the thought ever presented itself to me, for I never in my life turned back from a course I had started upon. I borrowed ten cents from my landlady for car-fare, and in my desperation sought out Col. Cockerill, managing editor of the New York WORLD. I had to do a great deal of talking before I was allowed to enter the elevator which carries visitors to the sacred precincts of the editor's sanctum.

An editor is always a hard-worked man, and if he saw every person who called with some crank notion, his life, which now lasts but half the allotted time, would reach but a quarter, and the newspaper would never be issued. I really think at last I gained admission by saying that I had an important subject to propose, and if the editor-in-chief could not see me, I would go to some other paper. I always say energy rightly applied and directed will accomplish anything. I accomplished my purpose.

Without wasting any time, I laid before Col. Cockerill some plans for newspaper

work, as desperate as they were startling for a girl to attempt to carry out. He gave me twenty-five dollars to retain my services while he would think over my suggestions. When the time expired, I called for his decision.

"Do you think you can work your way into an insane asylum?" he asked.

"I can try," I answered.

"You realize that it is a difficult thing to do," he continued. "The slightest false move means exposure and failure. The doctors are all clever experts. Do you think you can feign insanity well enough to pass them?"

"Yes, I believe I can," I replied. "At least I will make the attempt. I don't know what I can do until I try."

"Well, you can try; but if you can do it, it's more than anyone would believe," he said.

We decided that I should call myself Nellie Brown, so he could keep track of me.

"How will you get me out," I ventured to inquire, as I started to go.

"I don't know," was the answer, "only get in." I smiled a little grimly at my hope for liberty; but, as I have said, I was desperate.

That evening I paid twenty dollars on a past board-bill, packed my clothes away, and wrote some letters home, telling my friends not to write until they heard from me again, as I was going away for a week to do some work. I did not state where. That was known only to Col. Cockerill and myself. I felt sad as I sealed the letters, for naturally the thought came that perhaps they would be my last, as the nervous strain might make me mad.

My only orders were simply to go to work as soon as I felt that I was ready. I was to remember faithfully the experiences I underwent, and, once within the walls of the asylum, to describe its inside workings, which are so effectually hidden by closed-mouthed doctors and nurses, as well as bolts and bars, from the knowledge of the public.

"Write up things as you find them, good or bad; praise or blame as you think just; tell nothing but the truth," said Col. Cockerill, and so I went away to plan the details of my delicate and difficult mission.

I had little hope in my ability to deceive the insanity experts and I knew my editor had less. Even if I did get into the asylum, I concluded my experience would not contain anything else but the single tale of asylum life. The many stories I had read of abuses in such institutions I had regarded as wildly exaggerated, and yet, the more I thought of it, the stronger grew my desire to be convinced that the most helpless of God's creatures were cared for kindly and properly.

I shuddered when I thought how completely the insane were in the power of their keepers. How one could weep, and wail, and plead for release—for bread—for kindness even, and all to no avail. I lost all thought of what I was bringing on myself in the new desire to know positively the true life of asylum patients. By thinking of the greater misery of others, I forgot the sting of my own. I decided to begin my work at once. I had received no instructions or suggestions as to what course to pursue. I only knew I was to be crazy. I had never been near an insane person in my life, and I had not the faintest idea of what they were like. How then could I hope to personate one, and to convince learned physicians who make insanity a speciality, and who daily come in contact with lunatics, that I was insane?

It must be done. I flew to the mirror and examined my face. I remembered of reading that crazy people have staring eyes, so I opened mine as wide as possible, and stared unblinkingly at the reflection of myself. It was the dead of night, and my own eyes and streaming hair, as they were given back by the mirror, made me shudder.

The weather was not cold; nevertheless, thoughts of what was to come, mingled with the effects of an impossible and improbable ghost story I was trying to read, made wintry chills chase up and down my spinal cord even in mockery of the perspiration which was slowly but surely taking the curl out of my bang.

When morning dawned I felt that I was in a fit mood for my mission, and yet, like the condemned murderer, I had a craving for a breakfast I knew I could not relish. Quietly I bade farewell to a few of the most precious inventions of modern civilization. Slowly and sadly I took my morning bath. Tenderly I put my tooth-brush aside. "It may be for days, and it may be—for longer," I murmured and took a final rub of toilet soap. Quietly I donned the old garments I had selected for the occasion. Every thought was dead. A calm and quiet feeling which I was unable to analyze possessed me. I glanced, in silent farewell, at everything in my little room which was so closely associated with my new life. I never expected to get back, yet not once did the idea come to me of abandoning my mission.

II.

I had intended to go to a boarding-house, representing I was a poor girl in search of work, and while there assume a madness. Later, I decided the scheme would be more successful if worked at a boarding-house for women only. For this purpose I selected the Temporary Home for Working Women, at 84 Second Avenue, New York.

It was a tall, dark building, set back from the street, leaving a little paved space in front. I walked up and pulled the bell-knob. From the sound I concluded they used a cow-bell fastened to a wire in the hall to announce visitors. An original piece of humanity, long in legs, arms and feet, and short in hair, skirts, nails and speech, flung the greasy door back and stuck out her bushy, yellow head. To my faint inquiry for the matron, she answered:

"She's in. She's busy. Go to the back parlor."

The hall was dark and uncarpeted, and the back parlor, into which I groped my way, was still darker. The only light that entered was through the window of a room in the rear and the windows of the front parlor. The furnishing was scant and cheerless, the surroundings altogether so uncomfortable that I decided to make my stay as short as possible. I would become insane at the first opportunity. The assistant matron, a slender woman, with a mild, care-worn face, came to me

after some time, and told me that if I would share a room with another girl she could keep me. She charged thirty cents a night for a bed, and food was extra.

At noon a large bell, such as is used on farms to call the harvesters to dinner, brought women from all parts of the house to the basement, where dinner was served. At the invitation of the matron I also went down. It was a dismal sight. Women of all ages and conditions were crowded on benches, around bare, unpolished tables. Of napkins and tablecloths there were none. The women ate hungrily of what they could afford, some being able to buy but a bowl of bread and milk.

The afternoon was spent in the same way as the forenoon. Towards evening the matron came to talk with me, and I began to utter all sorts of rambling things. It did not take much work to implant in her mind the impression of my insanity. I kept it up all the evening in a quiet way, and refused to go to bed. This I did for two reasons.

The more sleep I lost the more insane I would look to the doctors. This would make my second sleepless night. Even had it not been for that I was afraid to sleep, lest when they called me they would find—before I could collect myself—that I was sane.

Finding the next morning that I did not intend to leave the house, the matron called in two policemen, and I was taken to a station house. From there the officer and the matron were sent with me to the Essex Market Court. I felt ashamed of walking along the streets in the custody of an officer; yet the remarks the street children hurled after us amused as well as confused me.

"Wha's she up fer?" "Soy, kop, where'd ye git 'er?" "Wher'd you pull 'er?" "She's a daisy!" "Get onto her jags!" "What did she swipe?"

Even men stopped to gaze at me, and one young fellow put a single glass in his eye and stared. So English, you know, that I had a great desire to yell "Booh" at him.

The entrance to the court-house was surrounded by a crowd of ill-looking, unkempt creatures. I was led through their midst by the officer.

The court-room presented a more miserable scene. The spectator's benches were occupied by a wretched mob, who had a morbid desire to see the battered, afflicted and criminal objects of humanity judged for inherited weaknesses, as well as for wrong doing.

Other cases were stopped and I was taken before the high desk where sat Judge Duffy. The policeman told his story:

He had been called into the Temporary Home to take away this girl whom they said was crazy. She would say nothing except tell her name, and when asked about her home, would answer that she had a headache, which made her forget all about it. She also said she had lost her trunks, and he had enticed her to the station-house by saying he could find them there for her.

The judge then called me to him, and in a very kind tone endeavored to get me to tell something. I protested that my name was Nellie Brown, or in Spanish, Moreno. Then he asked me if I had not come from Cuba, and, instead of denying or affirming, I merely said, "How do you know?" This, with my slight accent, convinced them that I was a Spanish girl; so I determined to make no effort to tell a story. It is always easier to accomplish a thing by allowing the other people to tell the stories, do all the talking, while you listen. The decision of the judge was that I had been drugged and robbed. With the tenderest care he took me to a private office, and left the policeman in charge of me while an ambulance was sent for. How I dreaded the arrival of the doctor. I thought of my embarrassment, when after his examination he told them I was only shamming insanity. I wished I might escape before he came and reach the asylum by less difficult means.

He came. The judge brought him to me and told my story, while the doctor's bright eyes never left my face. "It's no use," I thought, "I can never deceive him."

"Put out your tongue," he ordered briskly.

I smiled at the thought of sticking my tongue out at a sanity expert.

"Put out you tongue, when I tell you," he repeated.

"I don't want to," I said truthfully, and I smiled. At last I obeyed him. He examined it so minutely and with so much interest that it escaped my power and slipped back into my mouth as I broke out in a laugh. They all smiled in sympathy, though they evidently thought, by the sad looks they gave me, that my laughter was but the evidence of a diseased brain.

The judge, policeman and matron, maintained an unbroken silence, while the surgeon tried the effect of the light on my eyes, and listened to the beating of my heart, and then—he pronounced me—INSANE!

The judge blew his nose hastily as he said, with a deep sigh, "poor child!" Mrs. Stanard wiped her eyes and the officer twirled his hat nervously in his hands.

"Be kind to her, and tell the nurses to be kind to the poor child," said the judge to the surgeon as he pressed my hand in a sad good-bye.

Between the officer and the surgeon, I was led out to the court-yard and put in the ambulance. I was forced to lie on the bottom of the conveyance, which was covered with a yellow blanket. The surgeon got in at the end and the door was closed. It was backed out the gate and we started on a swift drive to the insane pavilion at Bellevue Hospital.

I felt happier now and quite proud of myself. I had been pronounced insane by a sympathetic judge, a surgeon, and a number of different people. I felt more confidence now in my ability to reach the goal I was striving for. I had less respect for doctors, however, and was bound to lose all before the finish.

The driver rang the ambulance-gong as we entered the gates to the hospital. It sounded most dismally. The heavy gates clanged shut after us and the ambulance stopped, the door was opened and the surgeon got out and assisted me to alight. A man who had come to meet us took me by the arm and half-led, half-dragged me into the office. I was saved all conversation there by the surgeon handing over the papers and saying I was too demented to tell anything of myself. He then gave me his arm and together we walked down the smooth paths, between bloom-

ing flowers and velvety lawns, to the insane pavilion opposite the hospital. It was a low, one-storied building, with heavy doors and iron-barred windows.

A nurse in white cap and apron, with a bunch of heavy keys strung to her waist, admitted us. The surgeon told her, for my benefit, that I was to wait there for the arrival of the boat which was to take me home, and then he left me.

Pronounced insane! Locked with lunatics in an insane pavilion! I stood with my back to the door, refusing to sit down, and contemplated the scene before me. I saw a long, bare hall, scrubbed to a cheerless whiteness characteristic of charity institutions. On either side were long rows of doors, which I knew instinctively opened into the cells where the inmates slept. At the rear of the hall were heavy, iron, folding doors fastened with a padlock. Along the wall, and between the cell doors, were benches and willow chairs. On these sat some unhappy looking women patiently doing nothing. And they are to be my companions, I thought.

Just then the most heart-rendering cries came from behind the iron doors. I shuddered as they grew louder, then muffled, and then fainter and fainter and at last ceased.

It was noon, and the patients were fed. A bench was drawn up to a bare table, and each woman was given a tin plate, holding some boiled fish and a cold potato. I refused it, so the woman brought me a glass of milk and a soda cracker.

"Have ye any pennies with ye, dearie?" she asked in a whisper.

"What?" I asked in my surprise.

"Give me your pennies, dearie; they'll take 'em from ye any way," she said.

I had no intention of buying kindness, so I denied having any money.

During the afternoon I watched the other patients and thought over my position. By this time the evening papers had published my story. Did my editor know it by this time and was he pleased? Had I done right, and had I been sent to the right place? Had I passed all the examinations, or would there be more? I worried myself over these questions until one, at least, was answered by the arrival of a physician.

He looked at me and listened to my story, which the nurse related. Then he asked me for my name and home, and if I knew what his watch chain was. I told him I did. He turned his back to me, and said significantly to the nurse: "softening of the brain." I smiled.

At supper we were given a cup of tea, and a double slice of bread. Then, although it was not yet dark, we were told to go to bed, because the nurse wanted to go out. We were each given a room and a night-slip of cotton-flannel. After I had undressed, the nurse rolled all my clothing into a bundle, and labeling it "Brown," took it away with her. I heard the reporters who called to see me talking in the hall, but with two or three exceptions they were denied admission. One, who came into my cell with the nurse, leaned over the bed, and spoke to me in a very quiet, tender voice.

"Are you feeling better this evening? Are you comfortable? Does your head still ache?" were some of the pleasant things he asked, and, tucking the clothes closer in around me, he said, "Good-night; try to sleep," so quietly and soothingly that I found a great big corner in my heart for him.

I was very tired and had just fallen to sleep when the nurse said: "Nellie Brown; here's the doctor; he wants to see you." I uncovered my head. My heart beat rapidly and my temples throbbed. Such a late visit from the doctor could only mean some unpleasant thing, I thought, and I shuddered. Shall I endure it if the worst comes, or shall I tell who I am? I asked myself.

It was nothing so bad. Only a handsome young doctor accompanied by a friend. The doctor sat down on the side of the bed, and slipping his arm soothingly around my shoulder endeavored to make me tell something of my home and friends. It is needless to add that I would not.

Tired as I was I found it impossible to sleep on account of the noise made by the nurses. They walked up and down the bare halls as loud as a regiment of soldiers. At other times they read aloud to each other.

Sunday was a tiresome day between the doctors, reporters, people in search of

lost friends, and those who were curious to see the crazy Cuban girl. One of the doctors, who was to test my sanity, asked me if I saw faces on the wall; if I heard voices, and if they called my name. The other doctor told me to stretch out my arm, move my fingers, and open and shut my eyes. I followed their orders as any rational person would do, and they both pronounced me incurably insane!

These doctors are considered experts, and are often called to court to decide the sanity of people. They examined the other patients in the same manner, and all were given the same condemnation as myself.

On Monday the reporters and visitors were all denied admission to me. We were waiting to be taken away, I knew not where, except that it was to a place less comfortable. I had complained of the bitter cold to the nurse, and she had retorted, "You'll get it far worse where you're going." And indeed I did.

At noon we were given our hats and then two men marched us out, one by one, and put us in the Black Maria, which was guarded lest we make a hopeless break for liberty. A guard got in after the last woman, the doors were closed and locked, and we were driven to the pier.

Then the aid of the police was called in order to make a passage for us to the boat. We were put on board just as we had been put in the wagon, one by one. I walked into the dirty cabin where my companions had been taken. Two women in bed-ticking dresses, who tried to outdo each other in chewing tobacco and expectorating tobacco juice, had charge of us. We made two landings. At the second we were taken off, one at a time. As a rough fellow with a strong whiskey breath dragged me up the plank, I asked where we were being taken. This was his answer:

"A place you'll not get out of—Blackwell's Island Insane Asylum."

III.

Although a year almost has passed since I spent the ten longest days of my life on Blackwell's Island, I cannot even yet sit down and think of the helpless creatures confined there without feeling that I shall be punished for not awakening the world to the wrongs done the in-

sane. If I could only show what dens of horror asylums are! I have but one consolation. The grand jury investigated the truthfulness of my experience and not only upheld me, but recommended the changes I suggested. So through my work the State appropriated \$1,000,000 more than ever given before for the benefit of the insane, and have adopted one of my suggestions, and appointed two women doctors to superintend the baths, beds and eating.

We were first taken to the office on our arrival, where a doctor, assisted by a nurse, informed himself of our names, homes, height, weight, complexions and as much of our histories as he could glean from us. These facts, together with other details of our afflictions, he registered in a large book. Then we were taken to the sitting-room, where we made our first acquaintance with other patients.

The room opened into the hall by two doors. On the other side it had iron-barred windows set about five and a half feet above the floor. The walls were white-washed and adorned with several lithographs. On the benches, which surrounded the room, were seated the patients. They presented anything but a prepossessing appearance. They wore dresses of gingham and different colored calicoes with straight waists and skirt attached. Their hair was braided in one strand. The nurses, sitting around a center table, wore large white aprons and caps, stiffly starched blue dresses closed with brass buttons, and from a green cord about their waists dangled large bunches of keys.

Our meals were served in the basement, where we marched, two by two. A slice of bread and a bowl of tea was supper; a bowl of coffee and a slice of bread was breakfast, and occasionally, red-letter days, we got a spoonful of boiled rice covered with molasses. Boiled fish, unsalted, a potato and bread, or boiled meat, without coffee or tea, was dinner. We never had any salt and the food was cooked entirely without it. We were given stone plates, but no knives, forks or spoons.

The tables were placed in long rows, with just enough room between to allow

us to step over the benches and sit down. When patients found their stomachs revolting against the unpalatable and often spoiled food, and were unable to eat of it, they were fed through a tube.

The first night we new-comers were given a bath. I was put in the tub first and scrubbed with soft soap and brush by an insane woman, much to my dismay and the amusement of other patients and nurses, who gathered around to watch the proceedings. It was useless to beg even for privacy. Insane people are not supposed to have any feeling that should, in any way, be respected by nurses. The five other women were put in the tub after me without a change of water.

After three buckets of cold water had been dashed over me, I was jerked from out the tub and put in a cotton slip labelled on the wide part, in large black letters, "Blackwell's Island Insane Asylum, Hall 6."

Wet and cold, I was shown to bed all alone in a small cell. The bed was hard, and the cold from a rubber sheet struck through the bones. The bed was the only piece of furniture in the cell, and it was iron. My clothing was all taken away from me.

I did not sleep much the first night. At intervals, two nurses with a lantern would unlock my door and enter to see if I was all right. This and their heavy walking along the bare halls was annoying. Different sounds came from different cells. Some women cried, some swore, some raved, some prayed.

At five o'clock the doors were unlocked, and the bed-clothing was pulled off me, accompanied by a harsh command to get up. A plain calico dress and a dark muslin skirt were given me to wear. I dressed and followed the other women to the bathroom, where fifty patients washed in four basins and dried on three towels! The nurses combed our hair and arranged it in the ugly braid. At half-past six o'clock we were taken to breakfast, and thus began the long days.

So they pass life on the Island. The saner patients do all the work in the ward, and make all the garments worn by them. They very seldom get anything to read; but, when they do, it is greatly enjoyed. No one is permitted to walk

about in the wards. Before half a day is past, they grow stiff from sitting still on the benches. Once a week there is a general bath given, and gowns are only changed when too dirty to be worn. When the days are pleasant, the patients are taken out for a walk. They are out a certain time, and then a gong rings to tell the nurses to take them back to the building.

I shall never forget the first sight of those fifteen hundred crazy women on a promenade. An unbroken double and treble line of women, walking two by two, extended from one end of the long promenade to the other, and at every other walk we saw long lines waiting their turn to walk out. They all looked alike in their straight dresses and cheap straw hats. Up and down, up and down they walked, chattering, screaming, crying, singing, fighting—one sickening mass of demented humanity. The worst was yet to come.

Two by two, locked with a leather belt to a chain, came fifty-two women. At the end of their line, dragged along by them, was a heavy iron wagon, on which was chained two screaming mad women. Some had blackened eyes and bleeding faces; some were encased in straight jackets; each one was shouting her own special craze. I heard the din while they were yet in the distance, my eyes riveted on them in all their misery as they drew nearer, and nearer, and finally passed.

Old grey-haired women, tender young girls, ugly and pretty, straight and crippled, black and white, they went staggering, pulling, jerking, screeching, crying, singing, preaching, swearing, praying past, like lost souls marching into a furnace in Hades.

Where could Dante have gotten a truer description of the tortures of Hell? Where could Doré have found a greater illustration?

I learned later that they were usually confined in the Lodge, the bad-smelling,

isolated building, devoted to the most violent patients on the island.

The patients who were not violent had times when the noisy spells came on them. Often, had one not realized the sad side of it, they would have been amusing in their delusions. I have seen them at these times treated very cruelly by the nurses, being choked, beaten and teased as it pleased the fancy of their torturers. They are continually dosed with chloral to keep them quiet, which results in stupifying what remnants of mind they have. With few exceptions they are obedient, but they are never so crazy but that they long for freedom. They are kind and sympathetic to each other, and what little quarreling occurs among them is not of a serious nature, and is soon forgotten.

For six nights I was locked in a room where slept six insane women. They raved the whole night long, and one was always creeping about, hunting, she raved for the man who ruined her home, to kill him. I often thought, as I lay there awake, watching her never-ending search, how utterly impossible it would be to defend myself should her crazy fancy select me as the object of her murderous hatred.

At last Colonel Cockerill sent a lawyer to get me out. I had looked forward so eagerly to leaving the place, and yet when the time came when I knew God's sunlight would be free to me again, there was a pain in leaving. For ten days I had been one of them. Their sorrows were mine, mine were theirs, and it seemed intensely selfish to accept freedom while they were in bondage. I felt a Quixotic desire to suffer with them if I could not aid them. But only for a moment. The bars were down and freedom never seemed so sweet. I bade them farewell. I left them in their living grave, their hell on earth—and once again I was a free girl, after ten days in the mad-house on Blackwell's Island.

