A NOTE ON THE PROTECTION OF THE
INEBRIATE: A HUMAN CRY.

BY G. H. R. DABBS, M.D.

I HAVE been consulting text-books as to recommendations for the treatment of alcoholism. Of course, all agree that alcoholic stimulants should be withdrawn, and that nourishing food should be given. Then we get a list of drugs supposed to be of use—Bismuth, Calomel, Nux Vomica, Butyl Chloral, Caffeine, Cannabis Indica, Digitalis, and, finally, such hypodermic aids as Hyoscine, Hyoscyamine, and Morphine. The very list is a confession of our practical impotence!

I hold that no alcoholic can ever be cured in his own past environment, and that if you can remove him from his associations you want no drugs at all.

It may be that you have to educate his stomach back to a preference for harmless things. This surely means that you have to re-establish his will-power:

The moral suasion that will give him back his power of will may be estimated as to its efficiency by the fact of whether or not he can manage to get drunk. If he can, you are wasting your breath; if he cannot, you need no exercise of argument.

The time has come when we should "own up" and acknowledge that we cannot reform the alcoholic inebriate unless we can deprive him during cure of his liberty. And the sooner we say so and face the music, the sooner we shall obtain results.

We shall have much to bear and forbear if we dare to petition Parliament on these lines. But we are, I should hope, used to unworthy blame, and case-hardened against lay misrepresentation. If we are not, we ought to be.

Now just consider how the case stands. Supposing a man becomes maniacal from alcohol, the workhouse declines him, and he has to be sent to an asylum for the insane. Surely such institutions were never meant for these cases, and the reproach that he has once been in an asylum will henceforth attach itself not only to him, but to his family. We who have to send him there, *faute de mieux*, know quite well, while we are constrained to do it, that we are sending an improper case to an improper place.

There ought to be cure-houses for these cases, to which they should be sentenced on proper evidence, and where they could be treated, restrained, and, if need be, detained. And there ought to be no option as to their transfer and committal.

It is all very well to publish elaborate lists of drugs and panaceas and placebos. It is all very right to try what argument will do, what example will achieve, what prayers will accomplish. All quite right—all utterly useless. If these methods were of real and *permanent* utility, there would have been by this time results which would have witnessed to their own justification. But any man who looks the facts in the face must come to the sad conclusion that the vow becomes commonized; the prayer is very soon a form of ultimate indifference; the promise an attenuated shibboleth. Let a man feel that the vow, the prayer, and the promise, once ignored, will be exacted as to a penalty of forfeited freedom, and then we may get effects in spite of their exercise and expression; but not until then, I fear.

I am led to make these callous and hopeless remarks by having perused the diary of a very intellectual and accomplished man who was, in his final act of decadence—now three years ago—a patient of mine. He wishes that I should use his own record in any way I see fit, but of course impersonally.

He had had seven attacks of delirium tremens when I first saw him. He had been interested by something I had written about the composition of the sonnet, and our acquaintance was at first purely postal.

One night I was sent for to see him at a hotel, and he was then maturing his eighth attack of delirium tremens, which punctually came off, with illusive variations, chiefly intellectual.

After his recovery we talked the whole thing out, and he showed me that he had just "posted up" in his own private clinical record his last attack. He handed the book to me, and asked me to read it (the record, past and present) aloud *ab initio usque ad finem*.

I can safely say I never read so sad a confession in my life, and if my voice broke once or twice as I went over this pitiful story of the moral backwater of a really great mind, I was hardly ashamed even then that I should be so affected.

It is beside me as I write this brief article. Not written exactly in "star-fire," it is certainly stained through and through with "immortal tears." It is as though a man should with a scalpel slice open his own heart of hearts, and then subject it to a pitiless, yet never exaggerated, microscopy. It is as to style a compound of Zola and Heine, wherein, as in Pope's line, "Not a vanity is given in vain."

I do not deny that it is interpenetrated by a great egotism, but throughout its life-tragedy there is the insistence of the arising, as it were, from the darkness of the personal evil angel, the giant of his duality, that commands and leads for a time the feeble and failing good angel. It is mediæval in a way, and yet modern in its thoughts, allusions, impulses, and even ambitions.

If it ever saw the light and could be put before the public as the cycle of suffering it is, it might become a kind of cruel classic of human pain.

And its ever-recurring note of anguish is in this sentence: "Why, when we are absolutely powerless to discriminate between hell fire and heavenly light, does no strong, common, practical hand take our evil angel by the throat, and say, 'Thus far, and no further, shalt thou go'?"

Poor soul! he might well ask the question!