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In the Magdalen's Home

Nellie Bly's Visit to an Institution for Unfortunate Women

*A Wicked Girl's Chances for Reformation—How Poor Creatures Abuse a Noble Charity—
Matron Burr's Experiences—The Girl Who Befriended an Unlucky Cat—The Toboggan
Slide of Sin*

Quite recently the thought was forced upon me by an incident which I witnessed in the street. Do women who have started thoroughly on the downward path ever reform?

I could recall hundreds of cases where men had been pointed out to me as having "once been wild, but had no reformed," but I could not remember an instance of a woman spoken of as reformed. As one thought brings another, I began to speculate on a woman's chances of reforming. I must confess I could not see many, but I knew that in new York there must be some institutions devoted to the good cause. I made inquiries and I learned of several, among them one that had been in operation for fifty-four years. I immediately decided to learn more about it. I allude to the New York Magdalen Benevolent Home, M. 7 East Eighty-eighth street.

Dressed to suit the character I wished to represent, I went late one evening to East Eighty-eighth street. I saw an old-fashioned building surrounded by a high brick wall, and I knew without looking for the number that it was the institution I wanted. The wall looked very formidable, and I felt rather homesick as I gave a strong pull at the bell-knob. I shivered slightly, as I thought they must surely have a big, brutal doorkeeper, and I wondered if I could ever get out when once inside. It is not so droll as it may appear, this being locked up of one's own accord without a surety as to how long it may last.

ENTERING THE HOME

I heard footsteps. A chain rattled heavily against the gates, a key was turned, and before me, candle in hand, stood a meek-looking, little, beat woman. She viewed me calmly, and I recovered from my amazement enough to say:

"Is this the Magdalen Home?"

"Yes," she answered, still holding the gate but not offering me admittance.

"Well, I came to see if I could stay a few days," I stammered.

"We don't take any one in here for a few days. They must stay six months. But you had better come in and see," she said, noticing my disappointed look.

I stepped inside and waited until she bolted and barred the gate; then I followed her up the steps into the house. She set the candle on a table in the hall, and knocking on a door, told me to enter. A woman and a man occupied the room, and the firmer rose and came towards me.

"Are you the matron?" I asked.

“No, the matron is out. I act in her absence,” she replied.

“I want to see if I can stay here awhile,” I said rather timidly.

“Every one who comes here stays for six months,” she answered. “There are other homes you can go to for a shorter time.”

“Six months is a good while,” I said, determined not to hear anything about other homes.

“It is not very long to those who really wish to reform. Have you been doing wrong?”

“Well, I thought it might do me good to get out of the city a while,” I answered, non-committal.

“You know, I suppose, that we have here only drunkards and those who have sinned? You should know if it is well for you to be among them, if you have done enough to merit it.”

I began to think that for once I had failed in my attempt to dress the character I wished to represent. I had even put whiskey on my coat to create the impression that the color of my nose was not just due to the weather.

“I think it is just as well for me to flee,” I stammered by way of explanation when she asked me to sit down.

“We think six months is short enough time for a girl to break off from old associates and form new habits. Those that come here know what is before and those sent by parents or Judges are kept whether they want it or not.”

“But they always reform?” I asked.

“No, very seldom, I am sorry to say. They come here and what they did not know before others tell them.”

“Any one can come here?” I asked.

“Yes, any girl who wishes to reform can come here and after she tells her story and it is decided that she is a fit inmate for the Home she remains for six months. Clothing and food are furnished free to all. We give them every chance to do right. It is a very discouraging work though. I have spent years at it and I find we make very few, indeed the very fewest reformations. If you do not think you would like to stay six months you can stay any way tonight and have a talk with the matron, Mrs. Burr, in the morning. She went to the Florence Mission tonight to attend the wedding of one of our girls.”

“They do marry, then?” I said.

“Oh, yes. That girl was in here for six months and when she went out she fell in with bad company again. While intoxicated she met another girl who tried to induce her to go to some place. She replied that she was bad enough and she would not get any worse. The other girl then, who had been persuading her to go to this place, said ‘The Florence Mission is the place for you,’ and took her there. Just think of a bad girl taking any one to a mission! Well, the girl got converted, and tonight she is marrying a very good man. I will see if I can get you a room for tonight, and by morning you will know whether you want to stay or not.”

She went into the hall, and I could hear her talking with the little jailer who admitted me. I think the jailer had taken a dislike to me, and was urging that I be sent elsewhere. At any rate, they talked a long while, and I began to feel weary. Again the bell rang, and I heard them say:

“What did you come back for?”

“I didn’t like the place,” said the newcomer. “It was in the country, so I wouldn’t stay,” and then they told her what had to take, and I heard her go heavily up the uncarpeted stairs. Once more the bell resounded, and this time warm greetings were exchanged. Then the door opened and a very pleasant, kindly faced woman came in. she looked at me with a smile as she said “Good evening,” and then sat down on the sofa beside me. It was the matron. She rather urged

me to tell her why I wanted to come in the home, but I replied that I would rather not speak on that subject just yet.

“What you tell me, my dear, no one else ever hears, but we must know your history before we can say you are a fit subject for the home; otherwise one might come here and learn more wickedness than they would ever forget.”

“Is it unpleasant to meet all those girls?” I asked, to avoid discussing the first person singular.

“Well, they will pounce on you and want to know all your history, and tell you all theirs the first thing. But if a girl really wishes to reform we give her every opportunity. You can think it over and I will talk with you in the morning. We have seventy girls at present, and I will have to put you in with another girl. She is a very good girl. She has done wrong, but I believe she is truly converted.”

I was again at the mercy of the little jailer. She walked in advance, carrying a lamp, along some narrow hallways. Fire may be my weak point. I know, anyway, the thought came that if the house caught fire I should never be able to find my out those narrow passages. Entering a room she set the lamp down on a wash-stand as she called out: “Johann, I have brought you a bed-fellow.”

The girl turned her face around and, opening her large black eyes, looked at me.

“You get ready for bed,” she said to me, as she started to leave the room, “and I’ll come back for the lamp.”

HOW THE NIGHT WAS SPENT

This was not much like a prison or any asylum. There were no cold baths. What a difference in the treatment of women who have erred and of the poor creatures who are addicted through no fault of their own! The room in which I was to spend the night was of good size. A worn Brussels carpet covered the floor. The walls were nicely whitened, and along one side were bookshelves for clothing. Beside the bed there were two cheap bureaus, a wash-stand and two chairs.

“Were you sent in?” was Johann’s first question as I began to undress.

“No; I came myself,” I answered.

“Ah!” with satisfaction and relief. “Then there are hope for you.”

“Six months is rather a long time to stay here,” I suggested as I unbuttoned my boot.

“What is six months here to an eternity in hell?”

I dropped my boot in astonishment and looked at her. She raised herself to a sitting position in the bed. Her black hair was tossed, and her eyes gleaned unnaturally.

“I really couldn’t say, you know,” I stammered. “I never spent any time in either place.”

At this moment my jailer came for the lamp. As she went out the door she gave this parting salutation:

“Johann, don’t throw her out the window before morning.”

“Oh, no,” replied Johann; “she is a very nice little girl.” The door closed and we were left in the dark. She asked me all about myself, and I in turn questioned her.

“I make artificial flowers. I learned the business when I was a child. I need to make \$2 per day; now I can only earn \$7 a week. We are paid by the amount of work we do.”

“Where do you live?” I asked.

“I rent a small room on a top floor in the locality of Hester street for \$1.50 a week. It has a single bed in it, and I buy an oil-stove, on which I do my cooking. No, I cannot save any

money. By the time I pay rent and for fuel and buy my food I have but little left for clothing myself.”

“Why do you not board in some of these charitable homes? I would imagine it pleasanter than to live as you do.”

“I am tired seeing misery, and the only people who go to charitable homes are miserable. I want to get it out of my sight and hearing for a while, so I have a room. Cheap boarding-houses are generally bests of vice, so I would not patronize them.”

“Have you been here long?”

“I have been here a year now. I had gone to every extent in sinfulness and, as a last remedy, I came here. I am so glad, for I have seen the folly of my former life and am just as anxious to live rightly as I was once to live wrongly. I wish I never had to go out in the world again, but then I am six of seeing the misery in Homes.”

A DAY IN THE MAGDALEN

I was about ready to go to sleep when the rising bell rang. I had passed the night in a restless manner and was glad to find it ended. Johann got up and sat on the edge of the bed, while I put on my gown. We soon were ready to go downstairs. I followed her along the narrow hall and into the sitting-room. It was a good-sized room with white walls, benches and a desk. It looked similar to a country school-room. A large stove occupied the center of the room, and clustered around it were some twenty girls. They wore plain calico dresses and some wore aprons. They looked at me as curiously as I looked at them. One of the number made room for us and we joined the circle.

“How many new ones came last night?” asked a girl.

“Three,” responded several.

“Did she,” indicating me, “come herself?” asked another of Johann, who replied in the affirmative.

“What other Homes have you been in?” some one asked me.

“None; this is my first,” I replied.

“Hello, Minna!” they called out in chorus to a newcomer with a youthful face and short gray hair. “Why didn’t you sleep all day?”

“Sleep! I haven’t closed my eyes all the night; I haven’t slept for a week, and if they don’t soon give me something they’ll have to send me to the crazy-house on Blackwell’s Island,” said Minna, complainingly.

Gradually the circle increased around the stove until the breakfast-bell rang, when all made a rush for the hall. There were no rules or regulations to be obeyed, and every one rushed at will. I followed in the train down to the dining room, which is in the basement. The matron, Mrs. Burr, was there, and she gave me a place at an end table. When the room was filled the girls began to chant a hymn of thanks, after which they repeated a prayer, and then began on the simple meal before them. It consisted of bread, butter, molasses and a bowl of coffee. One woman who sat at our table would not eat her bread, which she broke in bits and pushed to someone else’s plate. This raised a disturbance, and Mrs. Burr sent her from the table as one would dismiss a naughty child. Otherwise the breakfast passed very quietly. Mrs. Burr always spoke in the most gentle and quiet manner to the unruly ones.

HOW THE PLACE LOOKS

I made a survey of the place. The ceiling was low but nicely whitened. On the walls were mottoes that would not harm people to obey. The women interested me most. There were probably fifty in the room—the youngest a pretty peach-and-cream-complexioned miss of not more than sixteen years, and the eldest a feeble woman who looked not less than seventy.

As they finished eating they left the table without asking to be excused. They were all expected to go to the sitting-room, but I do not think they did. However, the majority went there. Mrs. Burr. Mrs. Hartley and Miss Henscher took their places behind the desk. Mrs. Bartley read a chapter from the Bible and then prayed, after which the girls repeated a prayer in unison. The matrons then went to their breakfast and we were left alone.

“How do you spend the day?” I asked a girl.

“Just as we please,” she said. “We read or we can work on mosquito-netting or in the laundry. Some knit or crochet. We generally please ourselves.”

“Girls must have it very nice here?” I remarked.

“My aunt says it is an encouragement to laziness and crime,” interposed a girl who had been listening to us.

“Well, I would think some are reformed by being here,” I said.

“Oh, yes,” answered another; “there is one here now who has been here four times, and she says it has done her good every time.”

“What makes her come back if it does her good?” I asked.

“Well, when she gets out she falls in bad company and goes back to her old ways; then she gets into trouble and comes back here.”

I could not see how the Home benefited her if it did not last after she got out. From the conversation of some of the girls I learned that they had been making the rounds of the charitable homes since childhood, and I don't doubt that their mothers did the same before them. Two of them even spoke of being in Homes in other cities. Johann was the only one I found who had the least remorse for what she had done. The others were as indifferent about it as if it were an honor to them.

They were all very nice to me, and when they saw that I was not inclined to be communicative they did not bother me with questions. They used snuff liberally and offered to share with me. I declined their kindness. During the day several letters arrived and, after being read by the matron, they were given to those for whom they were intended.

At noon we were given fish, bread and tea, and in the evening bread, butter and tea. The food was plain, but there was plenty of it. Several times during the day the girls came into the sitting room with slices of bread, so that I knew they never suffered from hunger. A large space of ground surrounds the Home, inclosed, of course, by the high wall, where the girls can go as much as they wish. The laundry work is done for the neighbors by such girls as are willing to work. It is done at reduced prices in order that the inmates may have something to employ their time. Each girl does her own washing. They have perfect liberty in everything except to go out the gate. The Home is non-sectarian, although Protestant services are held every Sunday. The girls are offered every chance of reforming, but they seldom accept. This life is like a toboggan slide. Once they start, it is impossible to stop until they reach the end, which is death. They keep up the rounds—from the streets to the courts, to the island, to the Home and to the streets again—year after year.

In the afternoon of my day there the ambulance came to take a sick girl to the hospital. The girls rushed to the front of the house to get a “peep uv de dop on' his brass buttons,” they

said, and many were the remarks passed about him. One girl won the admiration of the crowd by asserting that she winked at him.

There are many peculiar characters at the Home. The most interesting one is probably a little homely creature whom the girls call Vanderbilt, because she imagines she runs the house. Vanderbilt gets herself up in a comical style, but she is withal good-humored. When she first came to the Home some painters who had been there had painted a white cat green. The poor cat seemed likely to die. It became Vanderbilt's charge. She nursed it and touched it until the paint wore off—and took the hair with it. Vanderbilt would often go to Mrs. Burr and ask for some Vaseline to rub on her sore face, when instead she would rub it on Tom Vanderbilt's (as the cat is known) back. Tom knows who is kind to him, and follows Vanderbilt from one end of the house to the other. When she sits down he jumps on her lap and displays more affection than I ever saw a cat manifest before. Tom looks pretty well now, and his tail gives bright promise of once again wearing fur.

I was rather amused to hear the superstitious girls tell what "sign" the most common occurrence conveyed to them. When spoke to about the absurdity of such beliefs, one said:

"Well, I know they are true. One day I spat on the door, and I said 'That for change of residence,' and the next morning I was in the Police Court." This was convincing.

THE MOTHERLY MATRON

Towards evening Mrs. Burr took me into the reception room. She asked if I had yet concluded that I would like to stay six months. I did not feel inclined to forfeit my liberty, especially as I had gotten all the information I could, even if remained a month. I had but little sympathy for those women who do wrong and have no inclination to do otherwise. I determined to get out as soon as possible. I said the time was too long, and that instead of being benefited by returning there, I should learn more wickedness. She told me of other Homes I could go to and stay a shorter time.

"I told you the women here are bad," she said. "We get the very worst. A great number of them have served their terms in the penitentiary and workhouse. We offer shelter to any woman who wants to reform and we teach her all we can, but it is not encouraging work."

"Do they ever reform?" I asked.

"Well, even if they wish to reform they find it almost impossible. We had a woman here who was once of a very wealthy family. She was well educated, but she fell in love and it ruined her. She got to be of the very worst before we got her. She repented and wanted to do right, but she could get no chance. She had no recommendations, and at every place she applied for work we were compelled to tell her history. No one would have her after that. One charitable woman said she would have taken her for a nurse, but she had two sons coming home from college and she could not have the girl in the house. Girls often leave here with a desire to do better, but they have no money, no trade, no character, and in a while they get discouraged and go back to their old haunts. The majority of them do not care to reform. They come here because it offers them refuge when they have nowhere else to go. We endeavor to do all we can for them."

Promising to go to see the receiving committee of the Home or to some other mission I left the Magdalen. I tell you the path of sin is like a toboggan slide; once we start down there is no stopping until we reach the end.