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GHEEL

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No objects of contrast, no extremes or opposites are much more dissimilar than the different sections of country traversed by the Rhine, between Johannesberg and the sea. From the upper extremity of the Rhinegan to "The Castled Crag of Drachenfels," the river is almost uninterruptedly hemmed in by precipitous mountains, while the largest portion of the district farther down, extending through the Netherlands, is an undiversified, monotonous level. The former of these divisions is the region, *par excellence*, of legendary tales. But, although these compositions of mingled fact and fable are mostly concentrated among the mountains, a country best adapted to their romantic spirit, yet even the low lands of Flanders are not wholly destitute of them. The outlines of one of these are as follows.

Sometime in the seventh century there lived, in Ireland, a girl named Dympna, who was no less remarkable for beauty than for piety and chastity. But here loveliness excited the most unholy passions and desires of her father, who, instigated by the devil, determined to gratify them, even though he should accomplish the ruin of his own daughter. Maintaining her virtue, but shocked at the unnatural conduct of her parent, she resolved to fly beyond possible reach of his power. Accordingly, having obtained the companionship of a priest, named Geburnus, she escaped from her native country, and found a place of supposed security in a secluded district of the Netherlands.

The father was greatly angered when he received intelligence of the departure of his lovely daughter. Still incited by the devil, who constantly followed him, whispering evil in his ears, he determined to find her place of refuge, though at the uttermost ends of the earth. He prosecuted enquiries until he discovered the course she had taken, and followed her, the evil one still at his ear. The winds did not dismay his vessel, the waters did not overwhelm it. He landed upon the continent, found his daughter, and immediately caused her to be beheaded. She died and became a Saint. She was buried, and her bones—the bones of Saint Dympna were worshipped.—But, even after her death, the good and benevolent Saint devoted herself to the afflicted of the human race; to the restoration of those whose reason had become alienated.

Geburnus also died, and was buried beside the martyred girl whom, in her flight from an incestuous father, he had

protected. A chapel was erected near the graves, and hither came the insane from all quarters of the land, to intercede with the blessed Saint, and to be healed by her health-restoring power. In process of time, as the fame and influence of the Saint became more and more extended, the people erected a new church, some half-mile distant from the graves of Dympna and Geburnus. It is a massive structure, about two hundred and fifty feet in length, and otherwise correspondingly proportioned.—Nor is it an unimportant testimony to the zeal and devotion of its builders, that the stone of which this large edifice is composed, was drawn more than thirty miles, over a heavy sandy road. They were prodigal of toil until this, the principal church of the comune of Gheel¹ was completed.

At length some Germans came to Gheel, for the purpose of exhuming the remains of Saint Dympna, and removing them to their own country. They excavated the wrong grave and obtained the bones of the priest Geburnus. The Gheelans, excited at the intended outrage, attacked the Germans, but were repulsed. The latter, discovering their mistake in regard to the remains, again went to work, and dug to the coffin of Saint Dympna. But, with all the power which could be applied, they could not remove it—could not stir it a hair-breadth. The Gheelans, reinforced, returned, re-attacked the Germans, conquered and drove them from the country.—Thus rid of their enemy, they attempted to remove the coffin of the Saint, but, for a long time, were equally unsuccessful with the Germans. It appeared as if no human power were able to stir the bones of Dympna. When all imaginable devices had failed, and the attempt was about to be relinquished, a deaf and dumb boy, as if by chance, came by. "If you would succeed," said he, "you must take yonder horse." The people gazed with astonishment. The boy had never spoken before. He never spoke again. These were the only words he ever uttered. The particular horse which he had designated was attached to the coffin, and the remains of the Saint were thus removed, without farther difficulty, to the new church, where they are still preserved in a shrine of silver. The stones of the coffin were deposited in an elegant case, which was placed in the chancel, elevated upon pillars, at a height sufficient for a person to kneel beneath it.

Meanwhile, a knowledge of the miraculously curative power of Saint Dympna circulated more widely, and the

¹ Pronounced *Hkale*.

insane from all the surrounding provinces were brought to Gheel for the purpose of obtaining her assistance.—Arrived there, the ceremonies performed, were as follows:—

“The relatives of the patient cause a nine days’ offering (*une neuvaine*) to be made in the church of St. Amans.² During the nine days the patient is placed in a house attached to the church. He is shut up alone, or with other companions of misfortunes, under the *surveillance* of two old women. A priest comes every day to say mass, and to read prayers. The patients who are tranquil, accompanied by some children of the country, by some devotees, make, during the nine days, the circuit of the church, three times on the outside, and three times within. When the patients are in the chancel, where stands the case enclosing the stones of the Saint’s coffin, they kneel and pass under this case three times, that is, at each circuit which they make of the interior. If the patient be furious, a person of the country and some children are paid for making the processions for him.

“While the patient makes the three circuits, his relatives are in the interior, praying to the Saint to effect a restoration. Mass is said on the ninth day, the patient is exorcised, and sometimes a second offering (*neuvaine*) is commenced.”³

Such is the legend of Gheel. It commences, perhaps, in fable, but terminates in the authentic history of recent years. The place has been, for centuries, known as a resort for persons suffering under mental disorders, and the ceremonies for securing the favor of Saint Dymrna, are accurately described.

The principal information in regard to this unique Commune, which has hitherto been received upon this side of the Atlantic, is contained in the description by Esquirol, who visited it in 1821, and published an account of it in 1822, which was afterwards embodied in his large work upon mental diseases. No American has described it, and probably, previous to 1849, no one had visited it. Being in Belgium, in the summer of that year, I determined to obtain a knowledge of it by personal observation.

A diligence runs daily between Antwerp and Gheel, the distance being about twenty-five miles. Upon a beautiful afternoon in July, I took a seat in this conveyance. For several miles we passed through a fertile and highly cultivated district, teeming with a luxuriant vegetation; the road bordered upon both sides with almost uninterrupted rows of trees. Soon after leaving the old town of Sierre, the soil became light and sandy, and vegetation less abundant. Trees no longer bordered the road, but small pines were scattered over the country, and, at length, we traversed an almost sterile plain. As the horses slowly dragged the burdened wheels through the sand, the idea was suggested that this desolation of nature comported well with the mental desolation which I was about to witness; that the change in the face of the earth, during this short journey, was typical of the alteration in a vigorous mind when, by disease, it is transformed into a dreary intellectual waste. As we approached Gheel, however, the landscape again assumed a more cheerful aspect, and rich fields, laden with grass and grain, stretched far and wide around us. Nature resumed her smiles, and the strong mind which had been made a desert

was again restored to reason. We entered the town or city, and stopped at the *Hotel de la Campine*.

The Commune of Gheel is about twelve miles square, and contains a population of ten thousand persons, exclusive of the insane. The city of Gheel has but about three thousand, the remainder being distributed upon farms, and in eighteen small villages, or hamlets, in different sections of the commune. The country is level, the soil in some parts good, and highly cultivated and productive; in others, light and sandy. Agriculture, the care of the insane, and the manufacture of lace, are the principal occupations and sources of revenue of the inhabitants.

The city of Gheel, like most other small towns upon the continent, is as completely built as if it were a portion of one of the larger capitals. The houses are constructed of stone or brick, and but few of them are more than two stories in height. The principal church, the public offices, and the houses for the entertainment of travelers, are upon the limits of a large, open square, near the centre of the city. The accommodations of the *Hotel de la Campine* are quite as comfortable as could be expected in a place so secluded, and of so little trade. Within the square is a public well, with a large pump, the creaking of whose heavy iron handle, as it is moved by the village maids,—city maids they must be called, since they are under the government of a Burgomaster—coming, one after another, from various directions, to procure water for domestic use, is almost the only sound which, of a summer afternoon, disturbs the silence of the place.

The house in which patients were formerly kept, while performing the *neuvaine*, is so connected with the church as apparently to form a part of it. Upon either side of its immense fire-place an iron ring is fixed to the wall, and a chair attached. These were used for the confinement of the excited and violent. At the opposite extremity of the church is the case containing the stones of the coffin of Saint Dymrna. The floor beneath it, although of stone, is very perceptibly worn away by the persons who have knelt there, in their intercessions to the Saint. In near proximity to the case, there is a small side-chapel. Suspended upon its walls there still exists a well-preserved series of ancient oaken tablets, representing, by figures carved in *alto relievo*, nine scenes in the history of the Saint. The subjects of these may be understood by the following translation of the Latin inscriptions upon the several tablets:—

1. Here Dymrna⁴ is born of Christ.
2. She is given to an angel to be guarded.
3. She refuses incest with her father.
4. Being virtuous, she leaves her ancient country.
5. Being found, she is given up to her father.
6. She is slain, a victim to chastity.
7. They collect the remains of the angel.
8. They worship the bones of the martyr.
9. She ministers unto many sick people.

The carving is pretty well executed. Wherever the wicked father of the Saint is introduced, the image of the

² This was called the Church of St. Dymrna, by the gentleman who conducted me through it.—P. E.

³ Des Maladies Mentales, Par E. Esquirol. Vol. 2d, p. 713-14.

⁴ Esquirol invariably writes this “Nymphna,” but I only heard it spoken, at Gheel, as Dymrna. Upon the tablet it is Dimpna.

"unwearied adversary," with an infernal grin, is at his ear. In the last tablet the Saint is represented curing the insane, from the top of the head of one of whom a "devil" is making his egress.

The number of insane of the Commune of Gheel, in the latter part of the last century, was about four hundred. In 1803 it had increased to six hundred. In 1812 there were but five hundred, and, in 1821, four hundred. In 1849, according to Mons. Vygen, the *Commissaire de Police*, there were about one thousand, making the whole population of the Commune eleven thousand, of which the proportion of the insane to the sane, was, of course, as *one to ten*.

There are but three hundred patients in the city of Gheel. The remainder are distributed among the farmers, and in sixteen of the eighteen hamlets. The number of patients in the houses where they are taken is variable, but no person is permitted to have more than five. M. Vygen thinks that, in the city, there are not more than one hundred families which do not receive them.

The accommodations are of various grades. At some houses which I visited, the apartments were very agreeable and commodious, but in none were they furnished in a style nearly so elegant, as that of many of the private institutions for the insane in Belgium, France, England and America. But, at Gheel, much the greater proportion of the patients are supported at the expense of the public, and but about fifty cents a week is paid for the board and care of each of these.

No very great extent of luxury, either in furniture or food, can be supplied at the rate of seven cents a day.—Consequently many of these are placed in garrets, lofts, out-houses and other out-of-the-way nooks and corners where their accommodations can hardly be accurately described by that expressive word—"comfortable."—They appear, however, to be decently clothed and sufficiently well fed, and of all that I saw, in the numerous houses which I visited in Gheel and the surrounding country, I have no recollection of hearing a word of complaint in these respects. On the contrary, one woman, at a large farm-house a mile or two out of the town, was sorely troubled because there was too much food, too much clothing, in short, too much of everything in the world.

A considerable number, though not a large proportion of the patients are permitted to go at large, unaccompanied. A stranger in Gheel, without a knowledge of the fact that he is surrounded by a large number of insane, might, perhaps, pass a day or two before he would suspect it, as those who are abroad are mostly such as betray no very prominent eccentricities of conduct.—Several with whom I conversed in the streets said they were brought to the place because they were thought to be insane. One of them declared himself to be the Emperor of Austria, and another, a woman, claimed to be the daughter of the same sovereign. Within the town, I saw but one patient in the streets upon whom there was any restraining apparatus. His waist was encircled with an iron belt to which his hands were secured by wristlets. In the suburbs and around the farm-houses, however, there were several who were fettered with iron, the chain between the ancles being about eight inches in length. In some cases the rings around the ancles had abraded the skin and occasioned bad ulcers.

The climate of Gheel is said to be favorable to longevity. Mons. Vygen said that many of the patients were over eighty years of age, that a considerable number have died at nearly one hundred, and one, about the year 1845, at one hundred and four. The Asiatic cholera has never visited the place, although it has ravaged some of the surrounding communes.

On the second evening after my arrival in Gheel I attended a meeting of the *Societe d'Harmonie*, a musical association founded by one of the patients resident in the place. He remained a member for several years, and before his decease, saw it a flourishing society, composed of many members, playing upon nearly all kinds of musical instruments and furnished with a spacious hall for the accommodation of themselves and their audiences.

All the insane in the Commune are under the general supervision of a Board of Commissioners consisting of the Burgomaster, four physicians, two surgeons, and three citizens. Until recently the sick were all attended by the physicians of Gheel. The city of Brussels, however, having no less than three hundred and sixty patients here, has sent a physician, Dr. J. Parigot, formerly Professor in the University of Brussels, to have the special oversight of them. To him, as to M. Vygen, I am much indebted, not for verbal information alone, but for their company in visiting the houses in which patients are entertained.

The question whether the welfare of the insane is as much promoted in this Commune as it would be in Asylums or Hospitals has recently been much discussed in Belgium, particularly by medical men and the public authorities of the cities which now send their patients to Gheel. The Gheelans, citizens, medical men and public officers, espouse the opposite side of the question. They maintain that the patients under their care enjoy greater liberty and suffer less coercive restraints, that they breathe a purer air and take more exercise, are more constantly under supervision, and by being so widely distributed, a few in each family, are less subject to disturbance and annoyance from other patients than is possible in large institutions.

I saw nothing, farther than what is herein mentioned, tending to excite a doubt that the patients are kindly treated by their immediate protectors. The Physicians, the *Commissaire de Police* and the other officers whose duties involve a supervision of the insane, have an arduous task, but it is apparently faithfully performed. Notwithstanding all this I believe the system is liable to greater abuses than can possibly occur in well ordered institutions, and that the interests of the patients now at Gheel would be advanced if they could be placed in public Asylums, such as have recently been established in America, England, and several of the continental countries.

The work of Mons. Appert, a Frenchman, who recently traveled in Belgium, contains a notice of Gheel from which the following paragraph is translated.

"The greater part of the insane work in the fields with the persons who board them; they sometimes, also, take care of very young children, and, what is very remarkable, there is no instance of any injury (*exces*) committed by them upon these little creatures."⁵

M. Appert, according to the dates in his journal, re-

remained but part of a day in Gheel, and, consequently, had not an opportunity of collecting all the information upon the subject of the insane which the place affords.—I was told, by two or three persons, at different times, that, about two years previous to my visit, one of the patients became strongly attached to a child in the family with which he boarded. Another patient was subsequently received, and, as he also became interested in the child, the jealousy of the former was aroused to such an extent that he murdered the little object of his affection.

The modern annals of Gheel furnish another tragedy, no less melancholy in its termination. About four years before my visit, one of the insane men was in the practice of collecting herbs, making infusions of them in beer, and selling this liquid, as medicine, at a high price. He had acquired a somewhat extensive reputation among the people of the vicinity, for his skill as a Physician, and was consequently consulted by many who were suffering from disease. The Burgomaster of Gheel, at that time, was a chemist and druggist, and, as his business was thus interfered with, he be-

came perhaps imprudent in his opposition to the proceedings of the patient. The insane man frequented the beer-shops, where, as in similar places in other countries, political subjects were frequently discussed. He heard much said against the Burgomaster, and hence probably at length believed that officer to be a very general object of dislike. He obtained an old bayonet, sharpened it, met the Burgomaster upon a somewhat secluded cross-path, by which he was accustomed to pass between his house and store, and killed him by repeated stabs.

These occurrences are not related as arguments against the system at Gheel. Incidents equally unfortunate, equally melancholy and fatal have occurred, more than once, in Asylums. Assertions, however, so erroneous as that of M. Appert, although made, undoubtedly, under a conviction of their truth, ought not to be permitted to give a false impression to the public mind. It should be known that at Gheel, as at every other place where there is a large congregation of the insane, there is liability to serious accidents, and that these have not always been avoided.

⁵ Voyage en Belgique. Par B. Appert, 1849.