

A Humanitarian Experiment

By H. H. STEVENS

THIS article is intended as a tribute to the fine piece of work done by Mr. E. E. Winch, M.L.A., in establishing the New Vista Home for the care of patients released from the Provincial Mental Hospital on probation.

For many years past, Mr. Winch has taken a great interest in the welfare of the unfortunate inmates of the hospital. He has repeatedly brought the subject up in the Legislature, and, while he is always listened to with respect, little or nothing has been done of a practical character. So Mr. Winch tackled the problem on his own, and almost single-handed has succeeded in demonstrating the value of "probation" treatment as a part of the method of dealing with these unfortunate folk.

In undertaking his crusade, now many years ago, he discovered certain disturbing facts—some of the inmates had virtually recovered from their mental illness, but being without interested friends, were allowed to stay on in the hospital. Others, after years of confinement but sufficiently recovered to merit discharge, were so out of touch with the outside world that they were in terror at the thought of release—Where could they go? What could they do? To these poor creatures it was an insoluble problem.

However, Mr. Winch found the answer. At first he took them—one or two at a time—to his own home and there cared for them until they got "the feel" of the outside world. Slowly they became accustomed to street crowds rushing about, streetcars, motors and trucks, and gradually recovered confidence in themselves. Then Mr. Winch would find them a job, and, strange as it may seem, in most cases they made good.

The factual stories of these reclaimed lives is almost beyond one's imagination. It is necessary to study the cases to really appreciate the magnitude and the wonder of the work that Mr. Winch was able to do, alone and unaided.

So successful was the work in its original experimental stage that Mr. Winch decided to win the interest of others and strive to establish a home, and the result is the "New Vista Society" and its comfortable, well-managed home.

The home has been operating now for a couple of years and has proven the theory to be well-founded, and that is, that many of the inmates of the Provincial Mental Hospital have recovered sufficiently to allow them to leave, providing there is opportunity given for a period of probation before casting them loose in a cold, unfriendly world. Under the existing system they remain where they are at considerable cost to the taxpayer.

Mr. Winch has endeavored to sell his ideas or experiment to the Legislature, but without success. He did, however, secure the interest and support of a number of public citizens who recognized the merit of the humanitarian experiment, and who were so impressed by the utterly unselfish work that he had been doing for so many years that they became interested. These fellow-citizens realized that it was both unreasonable, and unfair to expect anyone to continue indefinitely doing what Mr. Winch has done through his own home and without financial aid.

There is before me as I write a copy of the annual report of the society and it tells a fascinating story of the results of its work.

The following is quoted from this report:

"Of the 37 released from the Provincial Mental Hospital, 19 are out on probation, and four are still on probation. All have adjusted satisfactorily and are working. Eight others are living with or are under supervision of interested friends or relatives; six had been taken out for short visits; and three only were returned to the hospital as being unable to adjust satisfactorily."

Here are two sample cases:

"Case one: An elderly woman had been in the hospitals for 22 years. She had no friends or relatives able to take her out. Her record showed that she was an exceptionally good worker, and she was very much loved by the patients in her ward. She was taken out, within the week she found a temporary housekeeping position, and later a permanent position where she has been employed since. Her employer terms her a jewel, and she is now adopted into the family and called Ma. Also, since leaving the hospital in July, 1944, she has accumulated a savings account of over \$400.

"Case two: A woman, 60 years, had been in hospital for 15 years, without receiving a visit from any person. Contact was made with relatives in Eastern Canada, and her discharge was arranged. She has now been living with these relatives for the past five months and letters received indicate that she had readjusted very successfully."

This is a grand piece of unselfish service to humanity. These people are helpless once they are condemned to a mental hospital. It is not right or just, but it is so. Mr. Winch contends that "mental sickness" can be treated in the same way as physical illness and that no stigma should remain. He merits recognition and commendation for his thankless and untiring devotion to this worthwhile cause. "I was sick and ye visited me."