American Red Cross base hospital no. 38 in the world war. United States army base hospital no. 38, organized under the auspices of the Jefferson Medical College and Hospital, stationed at Nantes, France, 1918-1919, by W. M. L. Coplin.

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XII

NEUROPSYCHIATRIC SERVICE

MENTAL CASES

"Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain
And with some sweet oblivious antidote,
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?"  (Macbeth.)

TAKEN from the primrose paths of piping peace,
from school and shop, from humming hives of industry and the mart of busy trade, men came to the severance of ties that bound heart and soul, to farewells that many felt or feared might be prolonged into the Beyond, to the trials of camp and of training, to perilous voyage on crowded troopship over storm-swept seas laden with mines and beset by vicious, treacherous submarines that, in the silent night, at morn’s awakening, or in twilight’s fading hour, with torpedo, cruelly stabbed like the lurking assassin and sent men unshriven to watery graves; beyond all this they disembarked in a strange land, a land of war’s sorrow, hastily “rested,” retrained, were brought into so-called “quiet sectors” of the battle line and finally were thrown into the cataclysm
of combat, to see war in all its ferocious grimness, to live under the scream of shrieking shell, amid the deafening roar of exploding bomb, and the rattle of machine gun and of rifle fire, to know the agony of flaming death, of suffocating gas that gripped the breath with its vitriolic, throttling strangle, to be transported on lurching stretcher, careening ambulance and jolting train, to live with death all about—is it any wonder that reason sometimes tottered and fell; that “shell-shock” claimed its thousands and that the strong and valiant often came in staggering like drunken men, oblivious to all about them, memory dethroned, and chaos ranting through the chambers of once orderly minds?

Midst such “glory” of war reason crumpled like a burning balloon, and bodies, sometimes wound-free and physically whole, wandered back to commands, to towns and cities and into the S. O. S., like unpiloted, rudderless hulks on some surging desolate sea of oblivion. It was all unbelievable but nevertheless tragically true; Sherman did but jest and Dante’s dreams were of a midsummer night compared with the winters of a world’s strife and discontent.

If under the stress of business reverses, domestic infelicity, and such mild mannered petty things of quiet times “nervous breakdowns” visit men, what should be expected when the breath of Mars sears civilization, when war picks up the state, shakes it like a terrier does a rat, and throws the doddering confused thing into the
“wastage”. Our war apologists tell us that a “few thousand” minds suffered from various types of “psychic disturbance,” that some, possibly all, were abnormal, defective from birth, and all that; and furthermore, what is the good of bringing up such trifling matters when this “war to end war” was so valiantly won, such glories, wonderful achievement, why recall such conditions as shell-shock, mental wrecks, intellectual oblivion? Why?

It was known that needs for highly trained neurologists, alienists, psychiatrists were urgent. It was no time to choose the inexperienced; the wisest in civilian practice knew all too little of the mental disturbances accompanying this most ferocious of all wars. Sailing before “38” Captain Price, one of the original members of the staff of “38,” had been on duty in France for months and obviously was not to return to the organization. Another officer of mature knowledge must be selected; fortunately Captain M. A. Burns was seeking an opportunity to serve in the cause and all recall how heartily he was welcomed and how all felt that good luck had brought him to us. With the other officers Captain Burns went over on the U. S. Transport “Grant,” did duty en voyage and, on arrival at Nantes, began work at once. At first he had general ward duty; soon, however, the ward for nervous patients was completed and he assumed charge. In the A. E. F. the distinguished gentlemen having jurisdiction over these puzzling, often
serious cases, and ruling on the sanity of all soldiers requiring investigation, were currently known as "nut-pickers"; the enlisted man liked the appellation, the dignified officer saw the grim humor, smiled as best his duties permitted and let it pass; it carried no implied disrespect and even at G. H. Q. the chief consulting neurologist was often so designated by his colleagues.

So our experienced officer saw his little group of patients increase from day to day until the department assumed important proportions; at this time it ceased to be restricted to patients from “38” but became the neurologic center for all hospitals located at Nantes, receiving and administering to patients coming from base hospitals Nos. 11, 34, 38 and 216, and from our own and contiguous convalescent camps.

An occasional case developed in the Center, many came from elsewhere and the separated ward constituted one of the busiest and most interesting. Fortunately most patients were cured or greatly improved; with others, not doing so well all were returned to the U. S. or detained until later and transferred to our successors.

Just as things were in good shape and running smoothly, Captain Burns was ordered to Paris, becoming consultant in neuropsychiatry for that important Center; he left “38” December 1, 1918, was promoted to Major and served in Paris until relieved in April, 1919, when he returned to the States. It was an important detail well done at both stations and many recov-
ered soldiers may thank "38" for the care received and for their return sound in mind and body when, at one time, prognoses would have been uncertain, at best, gloomy.

In Paris the work was important, interesting and productive. Hundreds of soldiers entered the Capital City A. W. O. L.; some were merely on a "lark," others were deserters, a considerable number were mentally irresponsible and, that justice be meted out to all, the clean, conscientious discrimination of a wise neurologic diagnostician was absolutely essential. Major Burns’ training in Jefferson and in the wards of the Philadelphia General Hospital, and his preliminary military experience in Nantes, had eminently fitted him for the rather trying duties of his new post. In Paris he was also consultant to American Red Cross Hospital No. 1 at Neuilly and other American hospitals and relief stations in the City and its environs.

One sees in the daily press that now, after four years, more than 10,000 "mental cases" are known among ex-soldiers still living; the number who have committed suicide will never be determined; many of these poor devils (they went proudly forth as "our heroic soldiers"!) will never return to normal; their minds will ever be sweet bells out of tune, and when statesmen talk of war, when diplomats make war possible or inevitable, when the councillors of nations plot, when politicians scheme, when blatant militarism struts on its tinselled
stage, when governments or rulers drive their herds into the conflict, when journalism prates of heroism and martial glory, none will see and all may forget these soul-wounded victims from whose intellectual windows there shines no light. They sit alone in darkness; though others weep with them, alas, they know it not. They are part of the “wastage” that accompanies the “glory” of war.