

'the prescription' Prizes in Creative Writing 2023

The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow

PROSE CATEGORY

Winner: Lorna Fraser

Item from the collection: [Statistics of Glasgow Lock Hospital since 1805 : with remarks on the contagious diseases acts, and on syphilis, c.1882. Ref: Pamphlets: medical, v. 22](#)

Testimonies of the Lock

Testimonies pertaining to the Glasgow Lock Hospital from the papers of Alexander Patterson MD.

(i) Extract of Interview with Mrs Isobel Farquhar – 20 March 1882

I have reached an age of years and respectability which, if you will permit Dr Patterson, allows me to speak frankly of the matters which I know will be considered by others to be indelicate and indeed, perhaps verging upon the obscene for a lady to discuss with a gentleman such as yourself. It is not my intention to shock with my frankness. Indeed, my husband will no doubt have advised you on what to expect of me when he recommended that for you to meet with me could be of benefit to your current endeavours in recording the statistics of the Lock Hospital. He has had near forty years of marriage to get used to my eccentricities and he knows that I am driven always by a Christian fervour to try and make a better society for those who are lost beyond the margins of respectability or worse. I am content to offer my assistance, so long as it may be of use to further societal change.

I have been a Visitor on a regular basis for over twelve years now and, I admit freely and without shame, that the first time of crossing that terrible threshold was almost enough to be my last.

We were a group of four Christian ladies determined to offer aid and succour to those unfortunate and fallen examples of our sex. Did Mary Magdalene not wash the feet of our Lord? Did he not graciously accept her for what she was? It was a sermon on this note by a visiting Minister to our Parish Kirk which inspired and precipitated our visit. The Reverend Stanley was a younger fellow, quite handsome dare I say for his profession, standing in for our Reverend Mitchell, who had been quite severely debilitated by the gout. Oh, but you have no wish to hear of our church's business.

We had a carriage deliver us to the entrance of the hospital. The driver could not be off quick enough, leaving us ladies standing in nervous contemplation of our proposed charitable actions. The building loomed tall and bleak with little to identify that we had come to the correct place for the hospital. The air was foul with the stench of waste which seemed to rise up from the roadway like steam after a summer rainstorm. I remember thinking how the hems of our frocks would surely become saturated with the clinging odour of poverty.

We had brought baskets with breads, cheese, ham and other victuals. Do you know the diet of these women who find themselves housed within the hospital? Porridge and milk, broth or pea soup, rarely offered tea, though that is plentiful for those in charge of the place. A nurse relieved us of our offerings. I doubt now whether a single patient benefitted from the nourishment we had brought.

That first visit was conducted by the Physician in charge. He was portly and ruddy-faced, his pocket-watch chain stretched across his waistcoat, as if the time piece itself was trying to escape the binds of its surroundings. His Matron accompanied us for propriety's sake. We were shown two wards. I know these to be the ones where they placed the better of the patients and I suspect that they had been in part emptied to hide the clamour of overcrowding of these unfortunate women.

Great effort was made to communicate to us how these patients came voluntarily and could be free to leave at any time. Though efforts to curtail premature medical departures were always made if such desires to bid farewell were expressed. If I may say sir, in general, I do not believe the hospital could have achieved the care it did without this voluntary aspect. For no woman, of any or indeed little

means, could bear to be held against her will. To do so would surely have turned them against receiving any opportunity of aid to restore their fragile health.

I suppose one would think that we four ladies of good background and standing were full of pity or despisement for these members of our sex who had fallen into the evils of prostitution. We walked through the wards while the patients lay in their beds or sat upon hard chairs. Their gaze bore into us, as if we were watched by the beady eyes of a murder of crows. It was not pleasant. My companions muttered how this had been a mistake and vowed we should not return. Indeed, I would have been in full accord with this resolution but for one moment, one tug upon my sleeve which brought me to pause. I found myself face to face with Emelda Sneddon, though of course I knew not her name at that fateful moment. The light was dull in that ward, but her eyes were as blue as Ceylon sapphires and she looked to be no more than ten years old.

I am well aware now of the sins of men and, how may I put this delicately, the old propensity of their belief that lying with a virgin child would cure them. At that time, when she first grabbed my attention I was naive. Sir, I could not have imagined that children could be afflicted with the scourge of such disease. Yet, she was not pitiful. She was feisty and something about the look of her made me grieve again for my own empty womb. It is why I returned two days later, alone this time and keeping my basket firmly in my grasp, to speak with Emelda Sneddon.

(ii) Testimony of Emelda Sneddon given to Mrs Farquhar February 1870 and passed to Alexander Patterson in March 1882.

It were Rose that brought me here, said it were best fur me tae sort out ma terrible ailments. We came tae the place twa months past, just efter the mornin' church bells rang oot six times. It were awfu' scary standin' at that big door. The street were black an' wet, fur there'd been awfu' rain the nicht afore, wi' claps o' righteous thunder an' flashes o' angry light. A'd never slept a wink fur fear it were God's way of tellin' me I'd sinned. I swear on the heid o' the baby Jesus, it were never ma fault. What wis done tae me wis done with nae hope o' refusal, nor expectation o' reprisal.

Rose telt me dinnae worry. She'd been here afore, mair than once. But the day she left me at the Lock she wisnae stayin', 'cause she were deep in her efforts to be better and no' be dragged back doon intae the vices again. It were 'cause o' him, that man who's took her in to cook and clean and keep his bed warm and ready. She'd brung me with her tae his hoose so ah cuid help her and when she wisnae lookin' he started pushin' his thing intae me.

She handed me o'er tae the doctor. Ah didnae care fur the look o' him or the wifey that were helpin' him. It were the last time I saw Rose. She wis greetin' but I'd nae mare tears left in me, just burnin' and pain and hungry emptiness.

That man o' hers wis a bad man but she chose him o'er me, even though he's poxed me up, even though he'd be sure to pox her an' all. Reckon she's back on her auld corner noo, standing there with her bosoms all pushed up and her ankles flashin'. Doing anything fur a ha'pennie or twa.

The lassies an' wivies in here are young an' auld but they've awe got that same look in their een, like they cannae mind where they left their hearts an' souls. Some o' them get angry aboot it, others jist wait it oot, till the doctor tells them they can go back to where they came from. Am bedded next to a lassie who says she works at the Mills doon the river. Lots o' them say they work in the mills or as servants in braw hooses. It's maybe true fur some but ah reckon a few of them stood on the same corners as ma sister Rose.

Ah dinnae like being prodded and poked up ma insides an ah dinnae like the medicines that taste of metal and bitterness. Sometimes ah wonder how all the things they doctors dae tae me is any better than whit that man o' Rose's did.

They've telt me ah can soon be cured but what am ah gonnae dae wi' mase'? Ah dinnae want tae stand on the corner in the dreich waitin' for some man tae tak me.

(iii) Extract of Interview with Mrs Farquhar – 24 March 1882

It is an impossibility to help every unfortunate who comes across one's path. To try to do so only induces helplessness and inertia within one's mind. My church lady friends turned their faces towards more palatable endeavours. After all, overseeing the Kirk garden fete in one's best hat, it is much easier to smile and encourage charitable giving. Such events have always bored me. Emelda didn't wish to speak at first and why should she? I was not important to her, a mere fanciful being from another world. But, as you must have surmised, I am nothing if not tenacious. My perseverance brought the dividend of

communication. I took notes trying to capture all she said. God be thanked, her health did improve and the final time that I saw her in that place, the Doctors had already made clear she was fit to quit the Lock.

(iv) Extract of Testimony of Emelda Sneddon given to Alexander Patterson 31 March 1882

Efter twa months they telt me ah had tae leave the Lock. An ah did feel better in maesel but ah didnae ken whit wuid happen next.

Mrs Farquhar, she wis a strange but guid-hearted woman. She'd kept me fed well enough wi' a' the messages she'd brought, though ah never telt her how ah wid share them oot efter she'd gone back tae her ain world. To me, the food and drink she brung wis ma payment fur telling her stories o' ma life and stories o' all the girls and wifies that were wi' me in the Lock. Ah always telt the truth mind.

Am honest and I've done aright fur maesel, found work and nae standin' on street corners fur ha'pennies. Though ave nae husband and nae weans. Didnae want a man, couldnae risk bearin' ony bairns. The disease ye ken. Anyway, they telt me I could leave so there was only wan place ah could think o' tae go.

(v) Extract of Interview with Mrs Farquhar – 7 April 1882

It was quite an impudence of the girl. No one could have expected any more of me. My husband, though a man predisposed to an easy home life, would not have tolerated the matter being brought to his very doorstep.

Yet sir, she was without shame. She actually rang the bell, stood waiting in the crescent for all to see. My housekeeper opened the door. It was some kind of devil's coincidence that I myself was in the hallway awaiting a carriage to take me to a lunch meeting with the ladies of the Kirk. The girl saw me and produced a rather shaky curtsey. She said her request and repeated it with affirmations of how she would be a hard-working addition to my household.

Sir, you will agree how impossible that was. I do my duty where I can. My fascination with that bleak hospital continues but there must be separation for one's sanity. It is not helpful nor desirable to encroach one strata of society upon the other.

I sometimes do wonder though, what became of Emelda Sneddon.