

Sane—But Locked Up for Months With Lunatics

The Poet John Boyle O'Reilly's Daughter, Authoress and Traveler, Tells of the Sights and Scenes in the Mad House and How She Escaped



"I AM convinced that this woman is perfectly sane and I therefore direct that she be discharged from custody and allowed her freedom."

Judge Robert F. Wagner, sitting in the Supreme Court of New York City, delivered this decision the other day, and Miss Elizabeth Boyle O'Reilly, daughter of the famous Irish poet and patriot of Boston, the late John Boyle O'Reilly, stepped forth a free woman.

Miss O'Reilly had endured a year and a half of confinement in a private madhouse in Massachusetts. Finally she was able to make her escape and made her way to New York City. She was pursued, arrested and an effort made to lock her up again in an asylum. After due consideration Judge Wagner decided that Miss O'Reilly was sane and should not be restrained of her liberty.

Elizabeth Boyle O'Reilly is a woman of intellectual achievement, a graduate of Radcliffe College and an authoress of established standing. She wrote "Heroic Spain" and is now engaged in writing a book on "The Cathedrals of Europe" soon to be published. Miss O'Reilly is a sister-in-law of Professor Ernest Hocking, who holds a chair of philosophy in Harvard University, and she also has a sister, Mary Boyle O'Reilly, who lives in New York.

Anybody who has ever visited an insane asylum or has seen the faces at the window of a madhouse or has read Charles Read's powerful novel "Hard Cash," dealing with the insane, will wonder how a sane person can be locked up for a year and a half with lunatics and still retain her balance of mind. But Elizabeth Boyle O'Reilly has endured the ordeal and is still sane. Miss O'Reilly narrated her distressing experiences in an interview as follows:

"I had done war work abroad, and some of my experiences seemed beyond belief as I told them to my friends in Boston, who had never heard the sound of shot and shell nor seen the miseries of a field hospital. Particularly, I think, some of my experiences with German spies aroused their incredulity—and the first thing I knew I was in an automobile and on my way to a private asylum in a Massachusetts town near Boston.

"For eighteen long, miserable months I was confined in that private madhouse. Fortunately, I had read Charles Read's stirring novel of madhouse life, and as I drove up to the square gray house I recalled his words, 'Chained sane among the insane! Who can paint the agonized soul in a mental situation so ghastly? Think of it, men and women. It may be your turn to-morrow.'

"I knew that I was sane, but that nobody would believe it. The very fact that I was entering an asylum for diseased minds was proof enough to doctors, nurses, attendants, patients, visitors, to everybody, of course, my mind was diseased. I realized that the slightest unusual gesture, peculiarity of voice, inclination of the head, glance of the eye, eccentricity of word or action would be hailed as the stigma of insanity.

"I determined that whatever befell me I would never lose my self-control. I knew that if I did I would give my jailers the opportunity to register me as violently crazy. I made a vow as I entered that awful building that I would be cool, controlled, watchful. By keeping this vow I saved my sanity and perhaps saved my life.

"I was led into a large hall where a big, ferocious-looking woman met me, not as a gentlewoman should be met, but as a keeper of a dog kennel would meet a new dog. Glancing at the memorandum concerning my supposed delusion she looked at me sharply and said, 'You thought you were being shadowed in Paris,' and then, with a sneer, added, 'I am as crazy against Boche spies as you are.'

"A loud guffaw greeted this cruel joke from a group of coarse-looking, ill-mannered men and women. They were the attendants.

"But while I realized what a contemptible thing it was for the matron to take advantage of a helpless and supposedly feeble-minded new arrival to make a joke on the patient's supposed delusion, yet I realized that here was my first test of my

own sanity and self-control. I did not stare at her. I did not resent the brutal jest. I made no comment. I smiled very faintly and bowed slightly with dignity, realizing the wicked irony of the situation.

"For the first two months I lived in a small room almost like the life of one of the Siamese twins. Not for a moment was I permitted to be alone. I am a small woman, weighing scarcely 120 pounds, and they picked out, for me as my keeper a huge nurse who weighed more than 200. If I ventured to move an inch from her side she roared at me with the voice of a bull. She made my days miserable by this close and coarse association.

"And the nights were worse. The enormous nurse slept in a small bed that touched mine. And she snored horribly. The rasping sound from her open mouth kept me awake. Twenty times a night I would waken her. But she would shake off my hand, fall off to sleep again and the raucous sounds continued.

"Imagine a woman accustomed to the refinements of a good American home and of a quiet scholar's life in Paris doomed to this constant companionship of a coarse creature who could not be shaken off. With her I must share my meals, my room and even my scant allotment of oxygen to breathe, for the windows were never allowed to be widely opened. If, wearied of her perspiring bulk, I moved further away from her on the veranda or on the narrow path where we walked, she would scream at me, 'Come back here beside me or I'll make you sorry for it.'

"The arrival of a new patient was always attended by silent mystery or some dreadful outbreak. For instance, there was the impressive-looking elderly man who stepped majestically from the automobile and walked beside a keeper up the steps to the veranda. He even paused to admire the view.

"Is the gentleman in the gray suit a physician?" I asked the nurse who brought my dinner.

"No," she answered. "He is a New York millionaire who has come up here for a little rest."

"Yet the second night after his arrival frightful sounds issued from his room. He had a back room across the hall from mine. The sounds were as of a struggle of two powerful persons. There were several hoarse shouts. A sound as though someone had been felled to the floor. Then silence. I covered my head with the bed clothes and lay there trembling.

"She sprang up in the car and flung her thin arms above her head. 'Uncle,' she shrieked. 'I must have my uncle! O my God! Call my uncle!'

"The car spun swiftly around the drive and back again to the entrance. Still the girl stood up in the car and screamed.

"Those people!" she cried. 'Those faces at the windows! O uncle! Uncle! Uncle!'

"Twelve times the car drove around the buildings before the girl's fear subsided enough to permit her to be taken into the villa at the back of the house in which I stayed."

"Toward dawn the sounds were repeated, but this time a man's voice was raised in fear and entreaty. And again there was the impact of a falling body. And again an awesome silence. There was a week of this. These sounds recurred by day and by night from the room in which the New York millionaire slept. Then I heard it no more.

"I don't hear the millionaire any more," I said to the nurse who carried in my tray one morning.

"No," she answered with a grin, "he's gone to a quieter place."

"You don't mean he is dead?" I asked.

"She shook her head. The Worcester Insane Asylum, I thought, and shuddered.

"During my confinement the automobile that brought patients from the Newtown station swung down the drive one afternoon. A slight young girl, fair-haired and with exquisitely regular features, sat wedged between a doctor and a nurse. I shall never forget the look in her great brown eyes as she lifted them to the windows. I was staring from the window. Every other patient must have been looking from his or her window at sound of the approaching car. It was our habit. The girl must have had a flash of understanding. She sprang up in the car and flung her thin arms above her head.

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"The Crazy Girl," by Jeannot.

vanished after a week or two. Some of those who remained had nothing to recommend them save the fact that they were willing to work in that purgatorial place for \$8 a week. I am describing these jailers of ours that you may understand it was an unusual case that caused one of them to turn pale. Yet one of them did when she told me whose sobbing it was that came to me from the room that was separated from mine by a bathroom.

"Poor little thing," said this tender-hearted nurse. 'She is a little, old, white-haired mother. Her son brought her down here from New Hampshire in his car. She was heavily drugged, and the effect of the drug is beginning to wear off.'

"That neighbor, invisible, was like a lost soul protesting against her Luciferian fate. Though little and weak her voice seemed abnormal, and it had marvelous endurance. She screamed almost continuously.

"What can I do? Help me out of here! Help me out of here! Help me out of here!'

"When she had exhausted herself and everyone else within hearing her voice would trail away into a pitiful series of moans. Then would come a brief quiet.

"For five months I had to endure this screaming neighbor. Her voice grew fainter at the last. One night after she had sobbed herself into quiet and I sat quivering with terror and sympathy I heard heavy footsteps in the hall. Voices of several men, muffled though they were,

reached my ears. I heard doors open and close and feet descending the stairs. I heard a door downstairs slam and heard feet moving slowly across the veranda. I stared from my window. The night was inky-black, but through the darkness I saw something moving slowly and heard the faint crunching of gravel as by wheels.

"The little mother was quiet last night," I remarked to the woman who brought my breakfast next morning.

"She is gone," she answered.

"Where has she gone?" I inquired.

"Never you mind. See that you don't go where she has, that's all." I never got any further information about my unhappy neighbor.

"At the back on the same floor with me they placed a woman who literally howled all night. She wore out a nurse a week. No nurse could stand more than seven days of her, but we, who were so unfortunate as to be imprisoned on the same floor had to endure the sleep-breaking howls for five months.

"She would howl for a time and then there would be a short pause. From a man across the hall would come oaths that seemed to be flung at heaven. From the larger house at the rear came a shrill, air-piercing treble. Then the voices were joined in a fearful symphony. I have heard three voices, four, five united in the fearful all-night din. I have never heard anything that could be compared with it. The sounds were unnatural, animal sounds, but pervading them was something like devilish intent.

"Another of the patients, a younger one, used to delight in mimicking me. Being of light figure and nervous temperament I walk lightly and briskly. When I started on my walks I would hear shrieks of laughter from the attendants on the veranda and the patients on the grounds. Looking behind me I would see this woman tormentor hurrying up the path after me, walking with my gait, lifting her head as I lift mine.

"Trivial means were resorted to apparently to exasperate me. I was only permitted one napkin a week. If this were soiled the first day of the week I had to use it the remaining six days. To one in whom neatness is inbred this is an offense. The nurses discovered this. One of the coarser kind contrived to spill cocoa on it the first morning of the week. I asked her to be careful. After that she would fling the door open, swagger into my room, drop the tray on the table with a bang that jostled the dishes and spilled more cocoa and slam the door as she went out.

"I realized there was no hope for me from my friends nor relatives. The letters I wrote were never answered. How could I escape? I planned a long time. I buried a cloak under the Autumn leaves and weighted it down by branches. I hid a muff in the same way, and a pair of overshoes and a hat. Then one afternoon I wandered out, gathered them all up, and slipped into them in the gathering dusk. I made my way, not to the nearest station, but the farthest one, knowing that was the last at which they would look for me. Five minutes after I reached the station I boarded a train to Boston. At the station I passed the superintendent. He was doing police duty there as a volunteer while the police were on strike. Wrapped in my two cloaks and wearing a heavy veil I passed him unrecognized. I took a train to Providence and thence to New York.

"I had been in New York but a short while and was putting the finishing touches on my book, 'The Cathedrals of Europe,' which Harpers have accepted, when my sister, Mary Boyle O'Reilly, had me arrested as a lost person. My relatives assembled in court and asked my commitment to the psychopathic ward of Bellevue. My attorney, Mr. Foster, senior member of the firm of Foster & Cutler, put his foot on the rail and said: 'I protest, Your Honor. If you will release her into our custody we will take her to our own home.'

"Judge Robert F. Wagner permitted me to go on parole in my lawyer's custody. Two months later he released me finally, convinced that I was sane. I am finishing my book which I wrote while in durance as a mad woman and am preparing for other literary work.

"Before closing this awful chapter of my life, let me say that I have related the chief incidents of my relatives' horrible mistake for the benefit of others who may be threatened by a similar fate.

"The greatest peril is the reiterated statement, 'You are insane.' The brain may reel before this suggestion. The reason may fall at last before it. I believe there should be legislation which would require a public hearing of every person charged with insanity."



Miss Elizabeth Boyle O'Reilly, Who Was Shut Up in a Private Insane Asylum.



Miss O'Reilly's Sister, Miss Mary Boyle O'Reilly.

girl stood up in the car and screamed.

"Those people!" she cried. 'Those

faces at the windows! Oh, uncle, uncle!'

"Twelve times the car drove around the buildings before the girl's fear subsided enough to permit her to be taken into the villa at the back of the house in which I stayed. I never knew what became of her, but I heard that she had died in a torturing paroxysm.

"The nurses were, for the most part, coarse, unimpressible creatures. If one came to us who was not insensible to the horrors about her she was soon eliminated. Steel-nerved, hard-hearted, cold-eyed women were the type that chiefly survived the frequent changes in the institution. In the year and a half that I was there 148 nurses passed through the funnel-like institution. The gentler, kinder ones, who listened to our stories