LES MISERABLES: The Unfortunates in the State School for the Feeble Minded. It is Located At Faribault.
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Pg. 7

LES MISERABLES

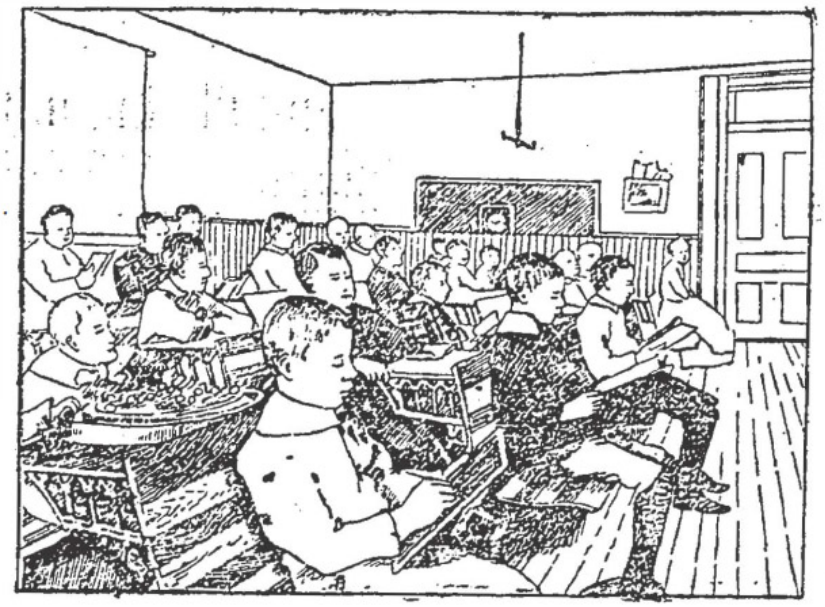
The Unfortunates in the State School for the Feeble Minded.

It is Located at Faribault and Is the Home of About Two Hundred Children Whose Heads Are Wrong.

A Look Within at the Human Beings to Whom This Bright World Is Nearly a Blank.

Wonderful Progress Has Been Made in That Class Which Can Be Taught in School.

FARIBAULT, Dec 15 – Special Correspondence. It is a slow and hard task which presents itself to the teachers who are trying to brush away the cobwebs that cloud the intellect of a hundred or more children in the schools for the feeble minded and idiots located in this charming little city. All the difficulties that come to the teachers of the ordinary boy or girl are here, and more than this comes the fact that instead of a mind that is eager to find out something, and which is elastic and easily impressed, these children's minds are stunted, compressed and almost incapable of being expanded and bent as the teachers wills.



IN THE SCHOOL-ROOM.

If expanded and bent as the teacher wills. If the average youngster's mind is clay, the mind of those in this school are brick, hard baked at that, and about as capable of being worked over into other than their present forms. It is enough to move the hardest heart with pity to look at these children. They are destined to find this world little better than a blank, at best, the hard work of their teachers it is made as pleasant a place for them as is possible. The institution where this work is done is to the south of the city on an eminence, that is slightly commanding. The side of the bluff on which it stands is covered with trees, and a small stream runs along its base. It is away from the business of the city and in summer, as well as winter, commands whatever fresh air and cool breezes come to a place that lies some hundred feet above the adjacent valley. The building is of stone, three stories and of ample proportions, though even with an addition

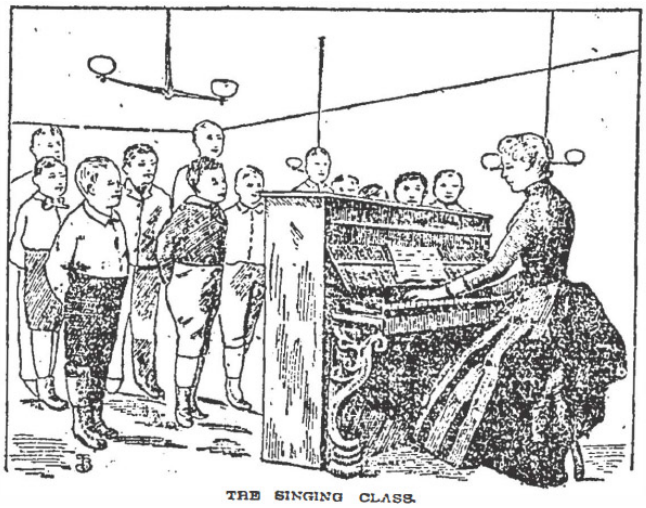
which is now nearly completed there will be scanty room for the state's unfortunate family if the increase continues as it has in the past few years. Dr. A.C. Rogers, who is an enthusiast in his work, is the superintendent of the school.

Its walls might easily be mistaken for that of a prison, and the occasional cries that are heard from within might be guessed to be the plaints of hardened men locked in their dungeons, but no greater mistake could be made. Its inmates are innocent as babies and as harmless, and the cries come from those who cry not knowing why they do so. It is rather a museum wherein are stored a collection of human beings that fit this every-day world as a square peg fits a round hole. An effort is made to remodel some of them, while others that are too far out of line are simply given a new world, which is [inclosed] by the narrow limits of the building and which will be their abiding place until death kindly comes and gets them.

A day was devoted to a visit to this institution by a TRIBUNE man, and the school rooms, the workshops, the living rooms and the hospital were inspected, as well as the big hall where they meet for recreation, and many things of interest were seen.

When one of those unfortunates is sent to the institution he or she is examined, and is put into one of three classes. There are the weak minded—those whose minds are about where they were when they were born, who are apparently healthy, and only need a sort of mental gymnastics to get some mental muscle—and these are classed as the school grade. They can be taught to think and reason and remember, and most of them will be able to take care of themselves in the world at large when they leave the institution. These attend the schools and learn to read and spell, and in some cases to use arithmetic. A second class are too weak to be put even in this grade—the idiots—so low in the scale of intelligence that there is no ground on which to start even the foundation for anything like mental work. They are classed as the "custodials." They squeak and gibber and laugh. Their heads are out of proportion to their bodies, and the difference cannot be accounted for. These go into rooms from which the eye of an attendant is never taken except when the unfortunates are asleep. The third grade [are] epileptics, the hospital class. Once they may have been bright and with ordinary intelligence, but fits have torn their mental fabric in twain and it cannot be mended permanently. These have memories and some of them realize their condition. They are put by themselves, and for them there is no future except to be torn by the demons that possess them, until they tear themselves, and cry out in helpless, hopeless agony. The institution is their permanent abiding place, and when they die there is a little less misery in the world than while they live. It makes one's blood run cold to see them and common charity and common pity would draw a curtain behind which it were not wise to look. A dissecting room is a necessary part of a medical college, but a photograph of one is out of place in a drawing room.

Four rooms are used for the school pupils and nearly 100 of the 183 inmates of the school are in this class. Each room is in charge of a young lade, whose whole energy is needed to carry on the work. The system starts with the kindergarten. Little tots with eyes that stare as vacantly as the eyes of a fish are there, and others whose eyes are too bright to be natural, and snap and twist incessantly. They are perhaps from 6 to 12 years old. Some cannot talk and some can talk all the time. It is the teacher's work to amuse them, to teach them the names of common articles, such as boxes, carts, dogs, blocks, etc., and to teach them to draw lines on a blackboard, to give them definite though very simple ideas and start memory in action. They have many of the ordinary playthings of a kindergarten. Hardly two are alike in their prominent characteristics, but one thing that is noticeable in all is they are wonderfully affectionate. Unfortunate though they are, the sight of the kindergarten pupils does not strike the average visitor to any deep sense of pity. They are apparently enjoying themselves and their laughter is intelligent rather than idiotic. Two of them sat in the teacher's lap, their arms around her neck apparently supremely happy. A little boy whose misfortune it is to be not only weak-minded, but deaf and dumb, was the life of the school room. "We couldn't get along without him," the teacher said. He has big, bright black eyes, and when he laughed they shone like those of any child who is pleased with a new toy. He stood at the blackboard, spelled out "boy" and then danced with joy, while he gave a shriek, which is the only sound he can make. He is a rogue, and once stole down behind the teacher and kissed her on her neck and then danced in glee when he saw how she was startled. He makes signs to indicate that he knows a hat or a ball when he sees them. He was at the institution for the deaf for a while, but could not be taught there, and was transferred to this school, where he has improved. Once he gave indications that he could hear, for when someone gave a cry behind him, he turned suddenly, and, pointing to his ear, laughed immoderately. It was a new sensation. One little boy, who seldom speaks, has a way of shaking hands with everybody. He went to ever visitor in the room while the TRIBUNE man was there, and held out his little hand, and when the visitors took it a pleased look came across his otherwise sober face and he bent down and kissed the hand. Then he went back to his seat and sat with his eyes fixed, as expressionless as a statue. He never allows a visor to escape him, and if one refuses to shake hands with him, the poor little fellow's heart is broken and tears roll down his cheeks and he moans plaintively. Another little boy always insists on a kiss from his teacher every time she passes him. Not a day last year did he pass by her without demanding it, and if she neglected him – it was a signal for tears on his part. He always gets the kiss now, and it leaves him smiling.



THE SINGING CLASS.

In the second room are boards by which the little fellows are taught colors. Rings of all colors are painted on the plane surface and holes are bored for pegs in colors to match. The little fellows study these until they can distinguish the difference and then they are given the pegs and told to put the red one in the red strip, the black one in the black, and so on. It is difficult for some of them and requires weeks or months for them to do this simple work. In the second room is a little girl whose features are regular, her head shapely, and eyes bright, but her face is a picture of sadness. Sometimes the tears run down her cheeks and she sits as dumb as marble and paying no attention to went over to the child, and putting her arms about her neck, began to kiss her forehead and then anything that the teacher says. She looks as bright

as any little girl of 10 years, but nature or accident has hung a dull gray cloud, from which raindrops sometimes fall over her whole being. But the ingenuity of the teacher brings occasionally a ray of sunshine through it.

When the TRIBUNE man was in the room the teacher spoke to the sad-faced little girl, and asked her some simple question. No answer came, but the tears gathered in her eyes. The teacher sent to the kindergarten room for a little girl who was called "Pettie," and she came in laughing and ran to the teacher for a kiss. "Now go love Lottie," she said, pointing to the little thing whose face was so sober, and "Pettie" went over to the child, and putting her arms about her neck, began to kiss her forehead and laid her cheek upon the one on which the tears were about to run. It worked like a charm, and the sober look dissolved and a smile of perfect happiness came on the face while she responded to her companion's caresses by twining her own arms about the bit of sunshine who had been brought in from the kindergarten. It lasted but a few moments, however, and then the face settled back into its usual mournful lines, just as it had been before.

"Pettie" is a bright looking child, but she has a peculiarity of never answering the question the teacher asks. She has been two years in the schools and this rule has never been broken. If the teacher points to an apple and asks, "what is this?" "Pettie" picks up a pencil and asks what it is. Pettie points in the opposite direction and answers, "I see a hat." Never once has she varied by answering the question properly. She is a bright little thing apparently, and is always affectionate and smiling and makes no trouble for anybody.

In this room some of the little folks learn a little arithmetic. They are taught to count up to 10 or 20 with buttons strung on wire, and they are taught to read pictures to the extent that they can name it a cat or a cow when the teacher points it out on the chart. What is called a "form board" is used in this room. It consists of a board with holes of different shape mortised into it, with pieces of wood that just fit these holes. To put these pieces of wood into the holes is the first lesson in manual training. It comes hard at first to some of the pupils who have intellect enough to be graded in the school class. And it is pitiful to see a boy of 12, apparently bright, work away, trying to make a triangular piece of wood fit a square hole, as hard as [ever] boy worked over any other form of solid geometry. Sometimes it requires weeks of study by these boys and girls before they have mastered this exercise, which a baby might almost do with its eyes shut. It reminds one how utterly and absolutely helpless these people would be without some special training, which they could get nowhere else.

The third room was bright and warm, for its windows are to the west, and the sun shone in all the afternoon. But the sunshine and the teachers' smiles are all that were attractive, for the pupils are larger here and their unfortunate condition is more painfully apparent. At the desks were big boys and girls whose eyes stared vacantly and whose under jaws would not stay up. They were restless and got themselves into all sorts of awkward positions. All through the room were sounds of moving about, hollow laughing, and [and] once in a while a few words spoken out loud. The boys and girls are unattractive – much more so than the little folks – and if one stops to think of it, they arouse more pity. Cold, staring eyes, cross-eyes, small fishy eyes and eyes that were cunning and looked treacherous without being so, all in this room. They learn to read easy sentences here and to write a few short words. They have slips of pasteboard with words on them with which they study out sentences, and they have blocks with letters on them to amuse themselves.

One boy in this room, apparently 15 years old, never talks except to answer questions. In the play room, at the table, or at work in the shop his mouth is as silent as that of any dumb man. But he can talk as distinctly as any person if he wants to.

"What have you in your hands?" the teacher asked him as she was telling the TRIBUNE man of his characteristics.

"I have some blocks" he said quietly and politely, without a movement to continue the conversation.

Occasionally he looked up and winked one eye, in a roguish sort of way, and smiled, but never spoke. Another boy was so full of pranks that he had to sit by himself up near the desk. He was smiling all the time. Some never smile.

Some are bashful and will not look at a visitor. Some keep their faces buried in their hands. Some play pranks, and others are sober as deacons. Some cannot be taught to read, but become skillful at making brushes in the shop. No two are alike and that makes it hard for the teachers. It is a long study to find out what will fit the boy or girl. Their minds are like a collection of watches left for repairs. Something has stopped the movement, and the teacher tries to find out how to start it. One may need a new main spring, or another a cogwheel, or another a lever. All need a balance wheel. Long and patient work is needed to find them out.

In the two school rooms where the second and third grade pupils are, they are taught to tell the time of day. A dial made of paste board is part of the furniture of these rooms and one of the regular exercises of the day is a fifteen minute period devoted to moving the hands to indicate such hours as the teacher calls for. They are also taught to count money. A box of paste board wafers, stamped to represent pennies, nickels, dime and quarters, furnishes work or play, which ever it may be called to them. They enjoy this work, the teacher said, more than any exercise of the school room, for they have ideas on the value of money and think the paste board is the genuine article.

In the advanced class room there are pupils of all sizes. Some are men and women grown, some are not more than 14 years old, and some are even less than that. How they stare, and twist and grin. They are not idiots by any means, but you could almost wish they were. They know that something is wrong with them. Some have tried to go to common schools, and found that they could not get along. They know that something ails them, and they don't know what. Over in one corner sits a boy with a shapely head, but much too large. He walks with a cane and rolls his eyes, and yet he answered correctly some hard questions in geography. In one of the front seats is a little girl, [crosseyed], but with a pretty baby face. She talks plainly and the cloud on her brain is this; possibly she will be able to get along by herself after a few years more. In another front seat is a little fellow who cries quietly much of the time. His eyes are bloodshot, and his face is old. When the teacher sat down beside him he put his arm about her waist and talked contented. Just at the close of recess a poor girl of 15 or 16 was taken with any epileptic fit. She twisted and bent herself in her seat and a look of agony was on her face. One of the girls who sat near brought some water and bathed her head. She twisted to get away from her seat but could not. The teacher went to her side and stroked her hair and forehead until she was better and a smile settled on her face. Then school went on.

Some pretty fair specimens of writing are shown from this room, and one or two write letters to their teachers. They have gymnastic exercises every day, and by this training some of them lose a part of the awkwardness they have when they come to the institution. The girls learn to sew and the boys work in the brush factory and at hammering brass. Every Tuesday evening they have a dance in the main hall of the building, and some of them have learned to waltz in almost perfect time.

The room for manual training is at the top of the building. When a TRIBUNE man went up there a dozen boys were there. Five sat at little benches hammering brass—doing repousse work from drawings. These people with unshapely heads have turned out some wonderfully fine specimens of this sort of work. It is slow work teaching some of them, while others take to it almost by instinct. They also make brushes of many kinds in this room, and the sale of the products is quite an item. In this room they not only acquire a means of supporting themselves but they get muscle and brawn. Some of the boys who cannot talk except in the jabbering fashion, are experts at the repousse work and have made pieces that may very properly be classed as works of art. They have regular periods of work in the manual room, and all who are able to do work of this sort are given a chance. The boys also work on the farm or garden patch which goes with the institution. When they are not at work or in the school room, they are in their "living room," as it is called. An attendant is always with them, and they either sit quietly in chairs about the room or play with some simple toys. They are easily amused, although they soon tire of any one thing. Wonderful patience is needed to manage them, but wonderfully enthusiastic these men and women are who have the care of this family of unfortunates. They say they do not tire of their work and they come to love the ones they have to care for—les miserable.

The products of the workshop, in the shape of hammered brass and brushes, is on display at the school. All sorts of brushes are made, and the entire work, starting with raw timber and the grasses and bristles, is done by the boys. Medallions, fancy scrolls, useful and ornamental pieces of furniture in the repousse work, are on exhibition. The product of the workshop sells readily and nets the institution a good sum.

The finished product of the school room is placed on exhibition once in a while, and among other things an operetta, “Jack the Giant Killer,” has been produced. Elaborate costumes were secured for the occasion and a large picture of the group, which is one of the souvenirs of the occasion, indicates that it was a much more elaborate affair than one might expect.

JACK, THE GIANT-KILLER.

The new addition to the building which is nearly completed will be an improvement in many respects over the old part. The rooms will be arranged better and better ventilation will be had. The plan of the building is to divide the space into suites of rooms so that the groups of children may be kept in their own places without unnecessary movements up and down stairs and through halls as is the fact in parts of the building now.