

## A Journal in a Federal Capital.

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**T**HE other day at the central leprosy settlement of the Federated Malay States, there was a sight which was so gay and so brave and so sad that for one uncontrollable moment it tore at the heart-strings of those visitors from the outside world who were there.

It was the afternoon of the annual sports of the settlement. An open space was bright with bunting and marked out for races and games. The adult patients, some hundreds of them, surrounded the arena. A little group of spectators from Kuala Lumpur sat in an enclosure by themselves. The sky was overcast, with storm-clouds massing dangerously, and the Sungei Buloh valley, usually so sunny and peaceful, was seen in a sombre light. Everyone waited for the sports to begin.

Suddenly there sounded the beat of a drum and the cheery tootling of fifes. The crowd opened, and through the gap came a procession which Charles Dickens, who saw the human side of everything, would have loved to describe. First came the band. True, there were only four or five players and their music sounded distinctly thin, but they all played away for all they were worth and the drummer, a boy who belongs to a family known throughout Malaya, swung his drumsticks with a truly professional flourish. After the band came the children, a hundred of them, dressed in the neat khaki uniforms of Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, and stepping out proudly beneath the admiring gaze of their elders.

Child victims, girls and boys, into whose delicate bodies the dread disease had bitten—and sometimes leprosy gets a deeper hold of children than of adults and is correspondingly more difficult to cure. What a demonstration of the blind, senseless cruelty of Nature! Yet the children of Sungei Buloh are children still. Cut off from the outside world, they make the best of their own little world. One has thrilled to the sight of a disciplined regiment marching to the strains of its band, but it was a finer kind of gallantry which these little marchers and their makeshift band displayed.

The moment passed and the sports began. Other and more practical thoughts arose. The children looked healthy enough and ran races as vigorously as though they were competing in any school sports anywhere. Their isolation,

one remembered, was actually less than that of the youngsters playing happily about in the one and only street of Gua Musang in Ulu Kelantan. The days when the grim legend, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here," might have been written over the gate of any leprosy settlement have gone for ever, thanks to the many individuals and agencies now concentrating on the conquest of leprosy.

Nevertheless, leprosy remains one of the worst diseases that can attack mankind, not so much because of its physical characteristics as because it involves segregation and separation from the rest of mankind.

To most people leprosy is still only a terrible name. How many people in Malaya have visited one of the three large settlements in this country? Yet such a visit involves no risk and it upsets like a house of cards Biblical and traditional notions of leprosy, creates a sane attitude towards the disease as a purely medical problem, and reveals the vast difference between mediæval and modern methods of treatment.

It is no longer necessary for the sufferer from leprosy to sever his social, occupational and cultural interests or to resign himself to an empty and inactive life. Not only has he real hopes of a cure, but he is encouraged to live and work as a citizen of a self-contained community and not as a patient in a hospital. The psychological difference is tremendous.

The Federal leprosy settlement is one of the best in the world. That sounds an exaggerated claim, considering the small size and population of the Federated Malay States, but many distinguished visitors, including the President of the International Leprosy Conference which met in Bangkok last year, have testified to its truth.

Finished about 18 months ago, and constructed at a cost of more than three quarters of a million dollars, it embodies the modern theory of the treatment of leprosy, which is to create an "isolation village" rather than a hospital and to assist the patients to live normal and happy lives in every possible way.

Nothing brings home to the visitor the up-to-date character of the settlement more than his first sight of it. After motoring 15 miles from Kuala Lumpur, through the mining lands of the Kepong district and the rubber estates beyond it, he reaches the little village of Sungei Buloh and follows a narrow road running through a valley taken up with Chinese market gardens.

At a turn of the road he stops and stares in astonishment. Whereas he has been expecting some grim, hospital-like building, he sees ahead of him, spread out on a gentle slope leading up to an overshadowing hill of virgin forest, a collection of white-walled and red-roofed houses that instantly brings to mind the garden suburbs of English towns. Here, indeed, is something startlingly different from the old leprosy wards of Singapore and Kuala Lumpur!

A short distance farther on the visitor reaches a gate-house and a wire fence. That fence is the only evidence in sight that compulsory segregation is the policy of the Federal Government for the treatment of leprosy. The fence is scarcely stronger than a farmer might put round his field, and certainly it would be easy for a patient to slip through it at night. But they very rarely do. Of a population of 1,000 only about 30 absconded last year. The patients themselves look upon the settlement as a haven of refuge.

The compulsory segregation does not necessarily mean segregation in a settlement. The health authorities of the Federated Malay States are permitted by law to allow a sufferer from leprosy to make his own arrangements for segregation, provided he can do so satisfactorily, but a number of middle-class persons to whom this permission has been given have eventually preferred to enter the settlement, where they can receive more specialised treatment and live useful and active lives as servants of the little commonwealth.

"A little commonwealth." That fact is impressed upon the visitor at every turn. Once he is within the boundary fence every person he meets except the two medical officers is a sufferer from leprosy. The steward and assistant steward, the clerk, the dispenser, and dressers, the laboratory and dental assistants, the schoolmaster, the internal police, the carpenter, the fitters, barbers, cooks, dhobies, gardeners and attendants of various kinds are all recruited from the patients and are Government employees drawing wages.

Thus, in a community of a thousand people, we have only two who are not suffering from leprosy. This being a deforming rather than a disabling disease its victims are usually able to work, and nothing is better calculated to keep up their morale than the opportunities which have been created in this way for regular and useful employment.

A stroll round the village teaches one a great deal about the ideas which the settlement embodies. There are more than 140 houses, and the streets are gay with flower gardens kept up by the inhabitants. These dwellings house two, four or six people. The smallest type are usually allotted to

married couples, of whom there are quite a number. No one who has not the disease is admitted to the settlement, whether husband, wife or child, but it not infrequently happens that marriages take place within the settlement.

Children born there are removed at birth to a special ward in Kuala Lumpur and have every prospect of growing up free from the disease which afflicts their parents. Other inhabitants have adopted children admitted to the settlement with happy results.

The larger dwellings are occupied by groups of friends or persons of the same race who elect to live together. Each dwelling has its own kitchen, where the food obtained from the central distribution centre is cooked. One cannot fail to notice the neatness and cleanliness with which these dwellings are kept up, and their homely appearance.

There is sufficient space for a small garden around each dwelling. Poultry are everywhere, the fowls and eggs being sold to the contractor who supplies foodstuffs to the settlement and re-sold by him to the superintendent, and many of the inhabitants keep rabbits, pigeons and guinea-pigs.

All this domestic life is not forced or artificial. As one strolls through the streets one feels unmistakably that one is in a village, an unusual kind of village admittedly, but still a centre of normal life and activity—and not a hospital!

Cats are sunning themselves on cottage doorsteps, women doing needlework within, fowls clucking to their chickens, people cooking or working or sleeping. Outside the houses is a fringe of gardens, some 12 acres, running up to the jungle, and in these gardens vegetables are grown by the inhabitants for sale but again only for consumption within the settlement. In one corner are the piggeries, where 250 pigs are a source of wealth to their owners.

One passes several shops and inquires what internal trade goes on in a community in which food and clothing are free. The answer is that, although tobacco is provided for the patients, the other luxuries and oddments which they require are bought at these shops, and a surprising amount of money circulates in the settlement, thanks to the system of employing its inhabitants to do its administrative and minor medical work.

The visitor is taken to the Green Club, which caters for the educated members of the community, and to the Chinese Club, and he is shown a copy of the settlement's quarterly journal, *The Dawn*, edited by Mr. S. Y. Yuen, and printed within the settlement. There is also a wireless

set and a cinema, and Malay, Chinese and Indian amateur dramatic entertainments are given frequently.

These activities are financed in part from the Lepers' Aid Fund, a fund maintained mainly by charitable Chinese residents of the Federated States. No better way of making a little money go a long way, and of creating happiness where it is most needed, can be found than through this fund.

The curative side of the settlement is hopeful. Knowledge of leprosy is not yet advanced enough to justify the use of the word "cure"; leprologists prefer to say "arrested"; but the practical result is the same, for a patient who can show a clean bill of health over a quarantine period of two years is discharged, free to enter the outside world and mix with his fellows again, subject only to periodic examinations.

Eighteen were discharged from the Sungei Buloh settlement last year, and their departure had a marked moral effect on those left behind. The old feeling of hopelessness was replaced by hope, and in future years it is hoped that the curative possibilities of the settlement will be impressed even more strongly upon the patients and the general public, for the number of patients now in the "quiescent" stage indicates that as many as 50 may be discharged annually in the future.

Of the methods of specific treatment it may be said that various theories and preparations are being tried, chaulmoogra oil in one form or another being the base of them all, but the main object of the treatment given, and of the whole organisation of the settlement, is to help the patient himself to combat the disease. Immediately he is admitted he is thoroughly examined, so as to eliminate all other diseases or ailments from which he may be suffering, and every effort is made to build up his general constitution.

One does not wish to hide the realities of the settlement, to paint in bright colours what is in truth a sombre scene lit up by gleams of sunlight and by breaks in an overcast sky. Pippa would not have sung "God's in His Heaven, all's right with the world," had she passed through Sungei Buloh.

"We make the best of a bad job," said one of the leading inhabitants, a man well qualified to figure in business or professional life, to the present writer. The settlement has a lovely setting. . . but it is 15 miles from men and towns. For a man accustomed to a full life, whose spirit has not been dulled by the endless toil and poverty of working-class existences it needs courage and philosophy to be an active



VIEW OF LEPROSY SETTLEMENT, SUNGEI BULOH, NEAR KUALA LUMPUR, FEDERATED MALAY STATES,  
Treatment Block is seen in the foreground.



“ BETHESDA ” LEPROSY ASYLUM. BRIDGE BETWEEN ASYLUM AND NURSES' QUARTERS.

and helpful citizen of this bright village nestling beneath the forest wall. Even to a visitor, who knows that he will shortly get into his car and speed away to Kuala Lumpur, a tour of the settlement is a saddening experience.

Although that is so, especially in the dormitory wards where old men and invalids unable to take care of themselves are placed, one sees happy sights as well. One is introduced to a bright-eyed boy in his teens, speaking excellent English, with the light of hope in his face. He has shown no symptoms for some time and will soon be discharged if all goes well. And there are other cases of a like nature.

If sufferers will only seek treatment as soon as the disease is discovered, before it has taken a strong grip of them, they have a real chance of recovery. And at the Sungei Buloh settlement they will be helped to fight their enemy with every possible weapon, physical, mental and moral. One can only conclude this article by saying that one has never seen the science of medicine in a more generous, humane and enlightened aspect than it presents in the new leprosy settlement of the Federated Malay States.