

## ELIZA'S ESCAPE

*In dungeons dark I cannot sing,  
In sorrow's thrall 'tis hard to smile.*

(Emily Brontë)

*All the best stories are but one story in reality - the story of escape. It is the only thing which interests us all and at all times, how to escape.*

(A. C. Benson)

### **1. The Abergavenny Races. 13th April 1860.**

You really had to be there; the smell on race days was impossible to describe. It wasn't just the over-loaded drains, the streets were full of great steaming piles of horse manure, each with its own halo of disease-spreading flies. The poor and unfortunate occasionally trod in it or slipped on it while others laughed; the rich sneered down from their once-pristine carriages. The sun began to penetrate the low cloud and the smell became utterly intolerable - at least, to those outsiders unaccustomed to the stench. One well-dressed older man leant against a gate post, seemingly overcome. Others took advantage of the opportunity. A couple of farmers gathered manure in carts to use as fertiliser on their fields. Street-sweepers did their best to keep the roads clear, but fresh manure was being deposited faster than they could remove it.

The carriages - pulled by those graceful manure-machines - seemed to just keep coming, more and more of them every few minutes, bringing the supposedly brightest and best of society to this annual parade of hats and horses. Various lords and ladies would descend from their carriages and try in vain to avoid getting mud and assorted filth on their immaculate suits and posh frocks. Many of those without the means to travel by carriage had come north from Newport or south from Hereford on one of the special reduced-rate trains. Upon disembarking, they were welcomed by banners and flags, the usual bunting strung up between houses and locals already drunk and singing. A brass band played and, as the day wore on and the beer flowed, the tunes would become harder to recognise. A local man with a concertina also made his way among the crowds, hoping for pennies to be thrown in his direction. Landlords did their best to entice visitors into their establishments, as did the prostitutes, who always looked forward to the influx of visitors on race days.

It was one of those occasions at which, for many, the main event was incidental. But still, the crowds for the racing itself were vast. It was the second day of the races, Friday the 13th, and an unlucky day for those proud to display their wealth. In the town, legitimate businessmen rubbed shoulders with pickpockets and opportunist thieves. The races were always a highlight of the year for both the rich and the criminal fraternity. Some of the wealthy women had taken to wearing fake jewellery

for just this reason.

James Gosden was just returning to his chemist's shop on Nevill Street and had to squeeze past the numerous visitors. A long-time resident, he was familiar with race days, but hated the invasion of people. He was glad to get inside and away from them all. The shop had been left in the care of his assistant. He hung up his coat and took a small slip of paper from an inside pocket. He glanced at it and then put it inside a log book on the counter like a bookmark.

Amongst the crowds at the racecourse were buyers and sellers, gamblers and bookies, riders and owners, trainers and stable-boys, noble gentry and humble folk, horsemen and pedestrians, all waiting for the drama to unfold in this natural amphitheatre. There was laughter, excited chatter, and the constant shouting of competing tradesmen. In the main grandstand, a confectioner was walking between the rows of seats selling his wares. William Strong from Newport was a man in desperate need of a good day of sales. Profits had been down recently and he was struggling. The stress showed in his face.

The view from the top of the main grandstand was spectacular. Not just the crowds, the carriages and the stalls, but the horses, the mile-long course, the river Usk, swollen by recent storms to quite a torrent, and the famous Sugar Loaf mountain rising behind. William felt slightly dizzy and steadied himself on a rail.

They were preparing for the next race, the Club Stakes Steeplechase. The smells of various hot foods wafted through the crowds. A local man, Josiah Morgan, had been unable to get a ticket for the races but was standing near the riverbank taking in the atmosphere.

A small crowd of women stood on the opposite bank, observing the scene. They were all dressed similarly in dull colours. Some wore off-white caps and most were well wrapped up against the cold. They were shepherded on all sides by uniformed attendants and nurses. These were the patients from the asylum on the hill.

One of the women seemed more agitated than the others. She began pointing and shouting, but her words were drowned out by the other race day sounds. Before any of the attendants could stop her, she broke away from the group and ran down the bank screaming. "Billy, Billy! I'm free, I escaped!" In the stands, William remained oblivious. She plunged into the water and for a moment seemed stunned by the cold, then began thrashing her limbs in an attempt to stay afloat, though she couldn't swim. The other patients shouted at the sight and the attendants and nurses looked on helplessly, unsure whether to stay or run for help.

The strong current was pulling her down and away from where she entered the water. Josiah Morgan had been focused on the preparations for the race - he'd put money on the favourite: Chatterbox. He'd liked the look of the horse and that had been enough. He turned upon hearing the commotion and in an instant, almost without having to think about it, he removed his outer clothing and dived into the water. The river was cold and fast-flowing. Although he was a good swimmer, he had to fight hard against the current. For a moment, he seemed to be losing the battle, but then he managed to reach the opposite bank and hold on to some overhanging branches.

The woman had now stopped struggling to stay afloat. She began to drift in Josiah's

direction, but the weight of her thick woollen clothes was dragging her down. More and more people were now turning to observe this dramatic turn of events. Josiah tried, but failed, to grab the woman, who by now was certainly dead. People were shouting encouragement. She disappeared from view.

Now, William did notice the disturbance, but was unaware that this was his wife at the centre of the scene. He could see a man struggling in the water and assumed that he'd fallen in, but then another person's head appeared above the surface and it was clear that he was attempting a rescue. The racing had been put on hold as everyone ran to the riverbank to watch.

Josiah was starting to suffer. Swimming in the river was second nature to him, but only in the summer. The river was never usually this cold or deep or the current so strong. He dived below the water and seemed to be under for a long time. The crowd was becoming concerned that they might witness the retrieval of two bodies from the river. He broke the surface and there was a loud cheer. He had got hold of the woman by her long, dark hair and was guiding her towards the bank. As he reached the steep slope, he collapsed and several spectators leapt down to provide assistance. Both were dragged and carried up the bank. The woman from the asylum coughed and spluttered and people cheered, having assumed she was dead. Blankets were provided for both of them and a bottle of brandy was produced from somewhere. They were both encouraged to take a good swig.

William caught a glimpse of the woman's face, now very pale. "Eliza?? Dear God!" He swiftly descended the steps and tried to get close to where she sat shivering on the riverbank. "Eliza!" He was unable to get anywhere near her due to all the people crowding around. She didn't appear to hear him, or if she did, she was ignoring him.

The racing resumed and the outsider General Bosquet came in first, the favourite, Chatterbox, having fallen at the brook. A lot of people had lost a lot of money. Josiah Morgan's loss was offset by the money collected in recognition of his heroic act. £10 was gathered from those in the stands and a further £10 from the gentry, after some gentle encouragement from Lord Tredegar. £20 was later presented to Mr. Morgan, who was recovering at home, surrounded by his children.

Behind the counter at the chemist's, James Gosden smiled as he counted and re-counted his winnings.

## **2. Awake. 22nd August 1859.**

Moments before dawn, Eliza reluctantly conceded that she was indeed awake and would have to get up. Unconsciousness would not return, despite her willing it to, as she tossed and turned on an uncomfortably hard mattress. Sleep was an escape, a temporary death. But as the last of the vivid and disturbing dream-images faded, she slowly opened her eyes and heart-pounding reality flooded back in. Her whole body ached.

Squinting in the semi-darkness, she anxiously scanned the locked room. It was empty except for the bed and a chamber pot, but she seemed to see something more.

She half-rolled and half-swung herself upright and then rose to her feet unsteadily.

Panic swept over her as she made her way to the locked door. Her eyes fearfully darted around the room as if following multiple unseen creatures. "Billy! Billy! Stop them!" She shouted and screamed to be let out, increasingly desperate. "Give me my baby!" She pounded on the door with her fists until they were red and sore. Then she began to beat her fists on the walls of the room while gabbling incoherently. Even the cheerful birdsong seemed to mock her.

Newport Workhouse was not a good place to find yourself. It was the last resort of the poorest of the poor. No-one wanted to be there. In Eliza's case, she'd had no say in the matter, having being diagnosed as insane and taken there by force. She'd been admitted on Saturday with her infant daughter Clara, her symptoms having become worse over the last month.

Clara was her fifth child. They'd really wanted a boy this time, William especially, but it wasn't to be. Elizabeth Jane, named after her two grandmothers, had been born in 1850, Eliza followed in 1854, Emily in 1856, and then Agnes in 1857.

It was thought best for the small, weak Clara to remain with her mother, even though it would only be for the two days until Eliza could be admitted to the asylum. No-one knew when or if she'd see her mother again. But they didn't risk leaving the baby with a manic patient. Eliza was allowed supervised visits; they would bring the child to her in the 'lunatics' wing of the workhouse. She wasn't allowed to breastfeed her daughter due to the strong opiate medication they'd been using to sedate her. A woman who'd recently given birth acted as a wet nurse for Clara and one other baby, her own child having died.

There was the sound of keys and Eliza became frantic. "Clara!! I want my baby!! Don't take my baby!!" The door was unlocked and two heavy-set nurses entered the room. Eliza was swiftly pushed back onto the bed. They had her clothes and some belongings in a large box. One of the nurses, with short dark hair, seemingly less experienced, turned to the other. "Shouldn't we give her a bath?"

"No, they'll give her a bath when she gets there. They like to give them a look over."

The younger nurse laughed and they proceeded to get the long night-gown off and Eliza dressed. It was always a bit of a struggle to dress an unco-operative patient anyway, but a manic one was the worst. They eventually managed it, but not without incurring some scratches and leaving Eliza with bruised arms.

There was one last item to put on: the 'strait-waistcoat'. The name implied something more fashionable. They couldn't risk a patient escaping on the way to the asylum. They forced her into it and the straps were pulled tight and buckled. Eliza continued to complain noisily, writhing from side to side.

The older, greying nurse exhaled loudly. "I'll be glad to see the back of her." She made no attempt to whisper it and the young nurse frowned slightly, though it was true, she'd been a troublesome patient.

"Yes, not our problem for much longer."

The more experienced nurse smiled and then frowned. "The Union will still be paying for her though. And then there's the baby. The father or aunt or someone will probably collect her. Poor child."

At the mention of the word 'baby' Eliza began to scream for Clara again.

A doctor stepped into the room holding a cup. "All ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, good. Let's give her this and get her on her way."

It took the three of them to force the warm liquid down Eliza's throat, despite the fact that she was restrained. It would start to take effect before she was on the train, and would make the journey easier.

"Ensure that the discharge book records that she was given breakfast. Of a kind."

The doctor smiled and the nurses smiled back. They were aware that it was too much of a risk to give her any food. It would give her too much energy and she might choke on it if they attempted to force it down.

The older nurse nodded. "They'll feed her when she arrives."

"Indeed. Thank you Nurse Stiles. And Nurse... ah... "

"Tomlinson. Mary."

She held out a hand and the doctor shook it and held it for a moment too long as he looked her over.

"Of course... a pleasure. I'll remember your name next time."

Nurse Stiles looked away and grimaced at this. She'd witnessed it too often before and she knew how the story went. She'd lived it. But Nurse Tomlinson seemed flattered and blushed.

Eliza glanced around the room as if she could see something that wasn't there and talked to herself in a low voice in a language none of them could decipher.

### **3. On the train. 22nd August 1859.**

They'd left early to beat the expected heat - 121 degrees the day before and 85 even in the shade; unusually hot, even for August.

In a third class carriage, a half-asleep Eliza sat wedged between a large, stern-faced nurse and a tall bearded man, the relieving officer of Newport Union, the man who kept a close eye on all the paupers under his care. He checked his inside pocket for the medical certificate. Other passengers eyed Eliza warily. They knew that even a restrained patient could be troublesome. One older man in a suit caught the relieving officer's eye.

"Off to Abergavenny?"

"No, no, we thought we'd just have a day out."

"Oh."

"Yes, of course we're taking her to the asylum."

"Oh, I see, haha. My son was admitted there. He was there for almost a year."

"Yes? Recovered did he?"

"Died."

"Ah. Sorry."

"No, best thing to happen in the circumstances. He suffered so much."

Through the opiate haze, Eliza was vaguely aware of someone mentioning Abergavenny and in a lucid moment realised what that meant. She was too weak to do anything about it.

She'd heard all the rumours, of course; everyone had: vagrants who were snatched off the streets and never seen again, children who stayed out too late and got taken to be experimented on, the ghost of a former patient who haunted the grounds. It was a part of the folklore, a place with which to threaten children and 'difficult' wives.

Eighteen miles felt like a hundred, especially with the frequent stops. She was only vaguely aware of passing through several small stations, but her escorts were all too alert to the possibility of escape, despite the restraint and the opiates, and held on to her more tightly at each stop.

Eventually, just over an hour after leaving Newport, the mountains of Abergavenny came into view and they pulled in to the station.

The mountains seemed to loom over the town, threatening and ominous. What others considered beautiful inspired only fear in Eliza, presaging something awful.

#### **4. The horse-drawn carriage. 22nd August 1859.**

They were nearly there.

Just the final three-quarters of a mile in a carriage. The driver, Mr Morgan, was used to this journey, taking the 'loonies' from the station to the hospital on the Old Monmouth road. They were usually noisy, sometimes violent, and had nearly caused the carriage to overturn on one occasion, in a failed escape attempt.

It was the eighth summer in the asylum's history, and certainly one of the hottest. Despite the early hour, it was already getting warm. Most of the women they passed were dressed in white cotton and many of the men were wearing light seersucker suits.

Mr. Morgan gave the order, pulled on the reins and the two horses came to a halt at the gates. He climbed down and rang a bell. A man appeared from the Lodge House on the left and, having ensured they had the right credentials, opened the gates. Mr. Morgan drove the horses onward and they pulled the carriage onto the driveway. Eliza glanced out at the tall conifers which seemed to offer some kind of ominous welcome. And then, suddenly, there it was; huge and imposing, looming and dreadful. Dante's phrase immediately sprang to mind: "Abandon hope, all ye who

enter here". A vast stone monstrosity, like some kind of terrible cathedral of the damned; blank, staring, windows; two enormous, threatening chimneys that seemed to rise up to the heavens; untamed, malevolent ivy creeping across the stonework.

Three people appeared in the doorway.

#### **5. Welcome. 22nd August 1859.**

The Medical Superintendent stood there with a military bearing, hat in hand, a warm, avuncular Irishman with a welcoming smile and large beard. Though only 30, he had the appearance of a sea captain. Two young nurses stood just behind him. He greeted the three visitors and introduced himself to Eliza as Dr. McCullough. Frowning, he ordered the removal of the 'strait-waistcoat'.

"Come on now, get her out of that thing."

Her two escorts struggled with the straps for a moment under the gaze of the doctor, and then she was free. Eliza was in no state to escape as it was.

"Welcome, Mrs. Strong, the nurses will look after you - Miss Davies and Miss Jones."

Dazed and apprehensive, she was encouraged through the doorway and into a long echoing corridor that stretched away in both directions. The smell of wood and some kind of strong chemical odour were the first things she noticed. There were flowers in vases. And then there were the pictures on the walls, paintings of the surrounding mountains: Skirrid, Sugar Loaf and Blorenge.

The nurses smiled and one covered her mouth and whispered to the other, "Six months, kill or cure!" which made them both smirk, but neither would dare laugh in the presence of the doctor. They imagined (hoped!) that the omniscient McCullough was unaware of their game (or their drunken attempts at imitating his accent).

The nurses led her to the left as the relieving officer and workhouse nurse followed Dr. McCullough to the right.

#### **6. Admissions book. 22nd August 1859.**

Dr. McCullough took the relieving officer and the workhouse nurse into an office where a clerk sat behind a desk with a large book open in front of him. The doctor raised his eyebrows: "Uneventful journey?"

The two visitors looked at each other and the relieving officer spoke: "Yes, sir, but we had some trouble earlier this morning."

The bespectacled clerk gave a little laugh at that. McCullough smiled. "Yes, I couldn't help noticing Miss Graham's scratches. Ah well, let's get on with it."

The relieving officer took a document from his pocket: the medical certificate. Dr. McCullough excused himself and closed the door. The clerk took the certificate and

studied it closely, then began to write in the book:

Date of admission: *22nd August 1859.*

Name: *Ann Eliza Strong.*

Age: *33.*

Condition as to Marriage: *Married.*

Condition of Life and previous Occupation: *Wife of a Baker.*

Previous Place of Abode: *Newport.*

County, Union or Parish to which Chargeable: *Newport Union.*

By whose Authority sent: *Octavius Morgan J.P.*

Dates of Medical Certificate/s, and by whom Signed: *22nd August 1859.*  
*Jehoiada Brewer.*

Form of Mental Disorder: *Mania.*

Supposed Cause of Insanity: *Unknown.*

Bodily Condition and Name of Disease if any: *In moderate Bodily Condition.*

Epileptic: *No.*

Congenital Idiot: *No.*

Duration of Existing Attacks: *1 month.*

Number of previous Attacks: *0.*

Age on First Attack: *33.*

The clerk looked up: "Unremarkable case, she won't be here long."

The relieving officer nodded, took the certificate and returned it to his pocket.

#### **7. The ward. 22nd August 1859.**

She'd expected a grim dormitory, but in fact she had her own single room, one of eight on ward F3. Her room was situated close to the w.c. and the bathroom at the end of the passage.



A strong chemical smell pervaded the entire ward. Eliza involuntarily screwed up her nose. She was taken to the bathroom and ordered to undress. She fiercely resisted, but was overpowered by the two nurses and forcibly stripped. They observed several bruises and scratches on her body, but nothing out of the ordinary.

As part of the unofficial initiation ritual, they filled the bath with cold water and, smirking, placed her in it. She shivered as she sat there hugging herself, rubbing her arms to get some warmth back into them.

They scrubbed and scraped and rubbed her clean.

They both knew that the matron was occupied with a serious case in the infirmary ward, so they were unlikely to be caught mistreating a patient. Not that they considered this treatment unnecessarily harsh; you had to be firm with them. The matron was too soft, in their opinion.

Eventually they allowed her to get out and dried her off on a rough towel. She was provided with new clothes, regular asylum issue, plain, grey and dull, and hard to tear. They were itchy and quite uncomfortable, but reassuringly warm after the cold bath.

One of the nurses took her to the day room. She accepted the offer of tea and, as she drank it, noticing a bitter after-taste, glanced anxiously around the room, up at the ceiling, over the walls and at the three other patients lost in their own worlds. They were all elderly women. She wondered whether she'd ever leave this place. Or maybe she'd just become one of them.

## **8. Interview. 22nd August 1859.**

Eliza knew what she wanted to say but felt incapable of speaking. It was a struggle to find the right words and express them coherently. She felt trapped inside her own head, unable to give voice to her thoughts. She tried, but the words would come out wrong, garbled, she would stutter, mumble, get angry, then stop. It made her want to scream and break things. Maybe it was something in the tea, the hunger or just the shock of it all.

The man behind the desk was making notes on her responses and appeared to analyse every small movement she made. One leg was jumping up and down as she sat there, as if she had an overabundance of energy. And her hands were constantly in motion, brushing away invisible things from in front of her face or smoothing down her long dark hair or scratching her arms.

The medical assistant noted that she wouldn't meet his gaze and sometimes didn't give any response to his questions. The answers she did give were often nonsensical. Her eyes would occasionally register shock and she'd gasp and sit back in the chair. There seemed to be no particular reason for these responses. She seemed to be in fear of something that wasn't there.

The nurse had informed him that Eliza had no bodily deformities or injuries, beyond some bruises and scratches.

"Mrs Strong, how are you feeling now?"

Eliza seemed not to hear the question and continued to look around the room. Then she turned her attention to the book on the desk. "Feeling now. Feeling... Clara... Billy... Clara... Billy... Feeling hmmm." She laughed, but it was a humourless laugh. She screwed up her face, seemingly in frustration or annoyance. Her leg was still moving, perhaps slightly faster.

The man sighed and made another note in the book.

### **9. Margery. 22nd August 1859.**

Many of the patients, like the building, were products of the local landscape. In the same way as the building was largely constructed from the old red sandstone of the surrounding hills and wood from the local trees, the people had been fed on the produce of nearby farms their whole lives. The water, too, was from the mountains. In a sense, the location, the building and the patients were all one.

Like anywhere else people gather, the talk at the asylum was generally of the weather and recent scandalous or amusing incidents in the papers. And gossip about fellow patients and members of staff was always popular. Letters were a good source of information about the outside world.

Back on the ward, the other patients showed some interest in Eliza, but the long-term inmates knew there was no point getting too attached to this newcomer. She was just another one passing through, and then gone. They'd seen the like of her before. Some recovered, some died, some were farmed out around the country. She was nothing special to them. But then there was Margery, an older lady, universally liked by patients and staff. Her manner was somewhat grandmotherly, although she was more youthful and mobile than that description would imply. She was allowed the rare privilege of unaccompanied visits into the town on Friday afternoons. It wasn't far into the centre of Abergavenny, but it was a whole world away from asylum life.

She greeted Eliza warmly, then seemed to think for a moment, trying to recall something.

"Eliza? There was a girl called Eliza who died, they brought her here, but she was dead, from poison! Eliza Davies. She took something on the way. Lucky escape, haha!"

Eliza looked out of the window. "Lucky escape, yes."

### **10. Reflections. 22nd August 1859.**

Was it really only Monday still? As Eliza lay on her bed, the events of the day seemed confused in her mind. She'd met so many patients and staff, so many names, she couldn't remember who was who. And it was such a huge place, she felt sure that she'd get lost in it. There were endless corridors and staircases and locked doors. And yet it wasn't the dark dungeon that she'd assumed it would be. The ward

was brightened up with fresh flowers and pictures on the walls. Some of the nurses seemed to actually care - perhaps they were recent employees who hadn't been numbed into careless indifference yet.

After meeting Margery, the day had seemed to speed by. They talked animatedly to each other whenever they got the chance. Eliza told her all about her five daughters and her husband and Margery told her that she'd never been married. They ate together, sewed together, took walks outside together. The gloom seemed to lift for both of them during those moments.

They'd given her something with her supper, some kind of medication, and it was starting to have an effect. It felt like she was sinking into the mattress. She closed her eyes.

## **11. Routines.**

As the days, weeks and months passed, the routines of the asylum became almost comforting in their monotony and even the awful clothes started to feel comfortable. All of the long-term patients had been through the gradual process of the nervous outsider becoming a familiar face, even a fixture. Eliza wasn't there yet.

Apart from the occasional outings, each day followed a similar course. It would officially begin with the tolling of the asylum bell at precisely 7 am. The sound of keys, doors being unlocked, night staff handing over to the day-shift, hot-water boilers being turned on, baths being run, patients talking and shouting, staff trying to keep order. The windows would always be opened to get some fresh air into the ward, no matter how cold it was outside.

Breakfast began at 8. Usually, it was little more than bread and butter and tea or coffee. Sometimes, for variety, they were treated to a thin milky porridge. Some patients had to be given medication with their breakfast, which was harder than it sounded when they were unwilling. It would often take two nurses to get it down their throat. It was easier to just add it to their tea, although McCullough didn't approve of that method. There was some talk amongst the staff of the new 'hypodermic syringes' and how much easier it would be, but it seemed they'd have to wait for those.

The daily service began at about 9 am in the chapel, which was, in reality, just a sparsely-decorated room one floor above the entrance of the building. The patients would file in and fill up the rows of chairs, some needing guidance from attendants. Every morning, the Reverend stood at an ornate lectern and recited from the same heavy volume in that typical foreboding monotone. He would offer prayers for the recovery of the sick in the infirmary and for the continued good health of the senior staff. Sometimes they were even allowed to sing, although it could easily get out of hand.

Dr. McCullough, accompanied by the matron, made his rounds of the female side of the asylum from about 9:30. There was never enough time, but he did his best to deal with the most urgent medical issues. One patient with an abraded sore on her leg that was refusing to heal, another patient who wouldn't eat, a patient who had a bad reaction to the morphine and a suicidal patient who'd attempted to hang herself

three days ago. He knew them all by name and always had a solution. Some patients would remain in their beds, too feeble, sedated or obstinate to get up.

Notes were taken by a female attendant, recording any major changes or significant progress, in order to write it up in the case books later.

During this time, the more lucid patients sat and drank tea, chatted and gossiped, and some would read the paper. A few patients would read novels, if they were alert enough to concentrate. Letters would be handed out to those patients lucky enough to receive them. Some were unable to read and required a female attendant to read to them.

Some of the more trusted patients would be assigned the task of ensuring the ward was clean and tidy. Mops and cloths were brought out and strong-smelling chemicals were mixed with water. The manic patients were often good at cleaning because they had boundless energy.

By 11 am, everyone had to be dressed to go out to the airing court. Fresh air was an important aspect of the treatment. In theory, they would also get some exercise, though in practice, many of the women tended to sit in the green-roofed pavillion and chat. Only if it were particularly cold would they take the opportunity to walk up and down, hoping to get some warmth into their extremities.

The women would all be back inside for dinner at 12, always a hot meal, often incorporating ingredients from the asylum farm. For many of the patients, it was better than the meals they had had at home. Some would require their second dose of medication.

The afternoon was the time for everyone to get to work. Repairing clothes and bedding, making clothes, embroidery and doing the washing. Sometimes, some light gardening, depending on the weather. Everyone would be assigned a task depending on their level of ability, trustworthiness and strength. Some women had regular jobs in the kitchen. Many of them liked to sing as they worked, so it was never quiet.

From 2 pm, visitors were admitted and always proved to be a source of excitement and fascination.

Those who didn't have visitors would just get on with their work, perhaps chat to the women next to them or gossip about the visitors. They'd be allowed out to the airing court if they'd finished their work.

Soon enough it would be time for tea - 4 pm - often bread and cheese with a cup of tea, or a thick soup on colder days.

Then it would be time for more chores. When they were completed, the patients were allowed out to the airing court until sunset, weather permitting.

As they trooped back in, there would always be a feeling of gloom at the thought of the long evening and night ahead, despite the available distractions. There were various amusements to make the time pass faster - card games, dominoes, even music: often someone would play the piano in the day room or take out the concertina and they'd all sing or hum along. There was always more sewing to do, cups of tea to drink and letters to write. Sometimes, patients would just gaze out of

the windows, up at the sky, transfixed by the stars and the moon, until a nurse encouraged them to occupy themselves with something. Some patients liked to draw and paint and would be allowed a limited amount of materials. The best efforts might end up framed and hung on the wall with the others.

There was a small library of books stacked on a couple of shelves. There were classics and newer works. The complete works of Shakespeare, a few Dickens' novels, romances, Bibles, prayer books and assorted other volumes. Occasionally, a few new ones would appear to replace older dog-eared books that had fallen apart.

Sometimes it even felt like home. With the gas lamps lit, the fire burning in the grate, an attendant playing Beethoven on the piano, patients drinking tea and laughing and singing, it could almost be described as pleasant. But something would always puncture the cosy atmosphere and remind them that they were in a lunatic asylum, a place that was equal parts hospital, prison and country house. Perhaps it would be a nurse remonstrating with a difficult patient, one of the women getting overexcited as a result of an attack of mania or a patient suffering a fit.

At 9 pm, the entertainments were put away and supper was brought in. It was usually tea and something light to eat, such as a small piece of bread or a couple of biscuits. The primary purpose was to deliver the final dose of medication for the day - which would hopefully last them through the night.

Soon it would be time to head to their dormitories and rooms. Baths, nightclothes, prayers and bed. The night attendants would come on duty and be briefed by the day staff.

The end of another day, but for many patients, it didn't mean sleep. Manic patients could go for days without sleeping, unless they were medicated.

Eliza dreaded those long nights. Sometimes she'd be knocked out, but not always. They seemed to think it would do her good to have some unmedicated nights. She hated them because there was nothing to do and no-one to talk to except the night staff and they weren't especially talkative or receptive to her outbursts. The only one she got on with was Charlotte, Miss Watkins. Occasionally, she'd think of William and the girls and it would spark off an attack of wailing and shouting. She'd thump her fists against the walls. She wanted to break through the thick plaster and stone and get away.

## **12. The Outing. 13th April 1860.**

The excitement among the patients had been noticeable all morning. A trip out, even just to the riverbank to watch the racing and absorb some of the atmosphere, was a break from the usual dull routine. Some were to be disappointed, left behind as too much of a risk. For the very elderly and more-immobile of the refractory patients, it was just another day.

At lunch, the attendants had to tell the women to slow down, they wouldn't be let out any sooner and they'd give themselves stomach ache.

Once the plates and cutlery had been cleared away, it was time for the patients to

visit the WC and get their coats and caps on. The sun was out, but it was still quite cloudy, suggesting rain wasn't far away.

The patients were paired up and stood in lines outside the building, many chatting to each other. Several nurses, attendants and servants stood around, one with a list of who was present and who they were paired-up with. Two of the servants were standing next to large wicker baskets containing tea-making equipment and cups.

Eliza was standing next to Margery, had insisted on it. The nurses had agreed, thinking it wise to accede to her request. Perhaps she'd be easier to handle as a result.

Nearly 1:00, time to get going.

### **13. After the rescue. 13th April 1860.**

The nurses and attendants didn't know whether to feel glad that she was alive or angry at themselves for not preventing the incident. It would reflect badly on them and would probably lead to job losses. Of course it was good news that she'd been rescued, but how did they let it happen? They'd discussed the wisdom of taking Mrs. Strong, given her propensity for manic episodes, but thought the probable benefit to her was worth the potential risk. There would be calls for a fence to be built by the river and lunatics to be more carefully controlled. McCullough never seemed to get angry, but they still worried about his reaction.

Now Eliza was sitting on the riverbank, wrapped in blankets as an attendant made her sip from a bottle of brandy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back at the asylum, word spread fast among staff and patients. Dr. McCullough, typically, was sanguine about the incident, finding it unfortunate but somewhat inevitable. No-one had died, therefore no-one would lose their job. Just one of those things. But trips out would be suspended for the time being.

Eliza had been taken to the infirmary ward as a precaution. As she lay there, staring at the ceiling, a plan began to form in her mind.

It would be a quick death, better than any other method. She could try hanging herself, but they might cut her down and revive her. She could try using a knife, but it would be hard to get, and anyway, they might save her. But poison... they couldn't do much about. It acted too fast. They could make her sick, but the damage would already be done. Soon, it would all be over.

### **14. The Plan.**

It had been raining all week; no-one could remember a June like it. And although there was a certain feeling of pleasure to be had in watching the rain from inside the house, sitting beside the unlit fire, drinking tea, was tempered by melancholy. Something about the dark clouds and the constant pattering on the windows made

the daily monotony seem even worse.

If there was a break in the rain, or a lessening of intensity, the nurses got all the patients ready to go out to the airing court. They would sit in the pavillion and chat or knit. They were often enchanted by the sight of birds on the lawn pulling up worms or bathing themselves in puddles. Occasionally this inspired someone to start singing a half-remembered song that would tail off then get repeated. Others might take over with their own improvised songs. The nurses found this highly amusing and would relate the latest songs to their colleagues.

People had their regular seats in the pavilion and it caused great uproar if a newcomer unknowingly took someone else's place. It took the intervention of at least two nurses to calm the situation. On this particular day, though everything seemed calm.

Eliza was in her usual place, sitting next to Margery, excitedly chatting away as she worked at a piece of embroidery.

"I want to make confectionery, Marge, like Billy did. We could make it. But we need things to make it, chemicals. They won't like it, so let's keep it quiet."

Margery frowned and looked over at the nurses, deep in conversation themselves. "How? Where will we get chemicals?"

Eliza smiled. "Mr. Gosden. You know Watkins, on Nevill Street? Billy used to get chemicals from him. I have some money."

"Hmm. I know it."

"Next Friday, I'll give you the money and a list. But we must keep it quiet."

"I don't know, Eliza."

"We're friends aren't we? I'm just asking a favour. A small favour."

"All right."

Margery seemed troubled, but it was an interesting proposition. Would they ever be allowed to make confectionery? It seemed unlikely. Might they stop her Friday trips out if they discovered her role? But Eliza was a friend and she seemed determined. If it would please her, then she'd do it. And if they were allowed, it would be something else to busy themselves with. It might even make them more popular with the other patients and maybe the staff too. She'd never seen Eliza look so animated.

The nurses called for everyone to go back inside.

## **15. The Plan Put Into Action.**

Eliza hadn't slept at all for three nights in a row; she seemed to have a renewed vigour and was constantly chattering to herself and others.

In the dayroom, she was busy sewing but seemed to have something else on her

mind. On a scrap of paper in the pocket of her dress, was written '*1 pennyworth of carbonate of soda, ditto of tartaric acid and ditto of stone mercury*'.

The door opened.

"Margery!"

Margery sat down on a sofa next to her. Two nurses were over by the window talking, occasionally glancing at the patients.

"How are you, Eliza?"

Eliza took the paper from her pocket.

"Here's what I need."

Margery was illiterate, so Eliza read it to her.

"Stone mercury? That's poison!"

"No, it's just for making the confectionery."

"All right."

"But we must *must* keep this quiet Marge. And when Mr. Gosden asks you what it's for and who it's for, you must say it's for a friend in the country and that they know it's poison. Don't mention confectionery or the asylum or anything else."

"Eliza, how will we keep it a secret? They'll find it."

"They won't find it. I'll keep it safe until we can use it."

"I'll wear my best dress. These mad rags would give me away."

Eliza smiled.

Looking up at the clock, Margery mumbled, "1 hour. All right."

\* \* \* \* \*

James Gosden came through from a back room as the bell above the door rang and a well-dressed older woman entered his shop.

"Good morning, madam, how may I help you?"

"Good morning. I would like these." Margery handed him the scrap of paper.

Gosden frowned. "Who is this for?"

"A friend in the country asked me to bring it."

Gosden pointed to 'stone mercury' on the piece of paper. "This is poison."

"I know that, and so does the person I fetch it for."

Gosden hesitated for a moment, then measured out the powdered chemicals and



put each one in its own small twisted wrap of paper. He attached a printed label to the one containing stone mercury: POISON.

"Please be careful."

Margery handed over 3 pennies and took the chemicals.

"Thank you, sir."

James Gosden watched her walk away down the street, then returned to the back room where he had been catching up on paperwork.

\* \* \* \* \*

Upon returning to the asylum, Margery felt apprehensive, sure that they'd find the chemicals and sure that the stone mercury would mean something bad. She didn't see Eliza until later in the day, just before tea. The packages passed between them without a word and without anyone else noticing. Eliza smiled.

In her room, after tea, Eliza placed three small packages in a drawer.

The nurses noticed a remarkable change come over her that evening. If they didn't know differently, it was as if she had become sane. Even the matron noticed it.

"How are you this evening, Mrs. Strong?"

"Good! Everything is good!"

The matron didn't know how to deal with such rare enthusiasm and positivity and left the room, assuming it was due to an approaching manic episode.

The chemicals remained untouched in the drawer, but what they represented was freedom, hence Eliza's improved state. It was the answer she'd been looking for.

## **16. Escape. 19th June 1860.**

Early the next morning, long before dawn, the positivity was entirely gone, and Eliza remembered just why it was that she wanted to escape from this world. It was still dark. Filled with a terrible undefinable dread, she opened the drawer and looked at the package marked 'POISON'. The night attendant would be doing her rounds soon. They were on first name terms, given that Eliza rarely slept much at night. She closed the drawer.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Char - Charlotte - may I have a cup of water?"

"Yes, but are you feeling ill, Eliza? Dry mouth?"

"Not ill. A little thirsty, yes."

"I'll be back in a short while."

"Thank you."

She was struggling to seem calm. It would be a swift, dignified, almost romantic death. A Shakespearean death. Just a short slide into oblivion. And if that minister was right, it would be a wonderful paradise.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Here you are, Eliza."

She took the cup and drank some water.

Charlotte smiled and left the room.

Eliza's hand was shaking as she opened the drawer and took out the small package. She knew enough about poisons to know that it wouldn't take much to do the job. She mixed some of the powdered mercury with the remaining water using her finger.

She looked around the room, then quickly drank the mixture.

Almost immediately, there was a burning pain. She began to vomit loudly and violently. Charlotte, alerted by the sound, rushed into the room. She immediately saw the paper with the POISON label on it and 'stone mercury' written in pencil.

"ELIZA! What have you done?"

She rushed out of the room and got a servant to fetch McCullough with the message that Mrs. Strong had consumed poison and was being violently ill.

\* \* \* \* \*

20 minutes later, McCullough arrived, having been awoken by a servant. He warned Charlotte not to touch anything.

"Mrs. Watkins, please fetch the stomach pump, 2 jugs of warm water, a bucket and two attendants."

Charlotte ran out of the room.

McCullough knew that consumption of such a corrosive substance would almost certainly lead to death, and that any attempts to save Eliza's life were ultimately doomed to fail, but he was also aware that they must try.

He reached into his medical bag for a pair of gloves and put them on. With the assistance of a nurse who'd come to investigate the noise, he positioned Eliza so that she was on her left side with her head hanging over the side of the bed. Her lips were swollen. He placed the chamber pot underneath her to catch the vomit.

What troubled him the most was how she'd obtained the poison. They didn't keep such chemicals in the asylum. The POISON label suggested that it had been purchased from a chemist. But how? Eliza had never been allowed out into the town unaccompanied... Margery Ellis! He knew they'd struck up a friendship. It all fell into place.

Two attendants entered the room, out of breath, carrying the stomach pump, a bucket and two jugs. Charlotte arrived a few moments later.

McCullough got the attendants to put on gloves and hold Eliza down, then slowly fed the tube down her throat and into her stomach. As he held Eliza's head up, he directed them to pour a small amount of water into the funnel slowly. If he could dilute the poison sufficiently, it may be possible to save her.

McCullough started to work the pump, syphoning out the contents of her stomach. The water that came back up was murky and contained a few small pieces of food. The doctor kept up the procedure, hoping that the water would gradually become clear.

After 20 minutes, they didn't seem to be making any progress. The water was just as cloudy as it had been. McCullough indicated that they should stop: "We're not getting anywhere" and then, in a quieter voice, "I fear it's too late. The damage has been done. It's been perhaps 50 minutes since she consumed the poison. Her organs will start to shut down. All we can do is attempt to relieve her pain and ease her passing."

He sighed and reached into his medical bag.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a whole day with no apparent change other than swollen lips and profuse sweating, Eliza started to show signs of significant decline. Though unconscious, it seemed like she was occasionally gasping for air, like a drowning man periodically rising to the surface. There was a gurgling in her throat.

McCullough was called for. He immediately recognised the sound commonly known as the 'death rattle': that characteristic rasp caused by a build-up of saliva, the patient now too weak to swallow. Nothing to be done but wait.

A last breath like a long sigh, then it was all over. She was gone. A prayer was recited for the deceased. The body was then covered with a sheet, placed on a stretcher to be taken to the 'dead house' by two attendants.

Everyone who they passed turned their heads away, partly out of respect and partly due to superstition. Only one patient refused to obey this custom and laughed at the scene: "Dead! Haha. Dead, she's dead." A nurse ushered her away.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **17. Life Continues.**

The rain lashed down hard. The routines of asylum life continued as normal. Death was dealt with as efficiently as any other regular occurrence: the body removed, her room thoroughly cleaned, the post mortem, the inquest, the burial in the grounds, the record books updated.

Margery Ellis was distraught and never quite the same again. She gave evidence at the inquest, as did James Gosden, but both were absolved from blame. The official verdict: "The deceased died from the effects of poison, taken by herself when in an unsound state of mind." Eliza had escaped.