

A FRIENDSHIP CHRISTMAS

by

Grace E. Barneberg, Chairman
Division of Institutional Relations

"But when Youth, the Dream, departs,
It takes something from our hearts
Which can never come again".

Imagine, if you can, a community of five thousand souls from whom the "dream" has departed, leaving only memories on which to feed through lonely hours and days and weeks; a community of five thousand old people bravely facing the coming years without the comforts of home and home circle, dependent upon the ministrations of comparative strangers. Such a community exists in the State, housed in the sixty county hospitals and homes of California. "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here", may well be written over their portals. Seldom, except in picture or the imagination do those who pass through return to the world they were forced to leave. No greater tragedy exists in modern civilization than the aged worn out worker who must look forward for his declining years to a "poor house". A superintendent of a Home in the San Joaquin Valley said that eighty-five per cent of the inmates of that institution were absolutely friendless; did not know a person on the outside and have no one interested in their behalf. When one of that large percentage dies that superintendent has no one he can notify.

The aged are not all sorrowful, however. Many are cheerful philosophers whose sense of humor has carried them through many hardships and still renders them a source of comfort to those around them. "I don't know what I would do without Mother J- ", said a superintendent to a visitor, "she keeps the whole place cheered up with her stories and

her funny way of looking at things. The other day the doctor was asking her how she managed to eat when she had only two teeth left and advised her to have them out and have a set of new teeth. She said, 'No, I have two solid teeth left and, praise God, they meet!''.

In a county hospital in the Sacramento valley, last Christmas, there was a little Christmas tree set up in the old men's ward. On it, among the gay trimmings and little gifts which had been provided for the inmates of the ward, was a big soup bone tied to the bough by a bow of red ribbon. A State worker, who happened in, was much interested in the unusual ornament and asked the nurse what it meant. Thereby hung a pathetic little tale but with a happy ending. A few weeks earlier an old man had been brought into the hospital unconscious; when he recovered consciousness he began to worry about "Pete" and asked repeatedly what had become of him. No one knew what he meant. He was a peddler who came and went through the valley and it was known that he had no home and no family. Finally some one remembered that the old man always had a dog with him. Perhaps the dog was "Pete". The county physician, a kindly soul, made inquiries but no one knew what had become of the dog. As the doctor was passing the courthouse, he saw the janitor chasing a bedraggled little dog away from the door. He stopped and asked the cause. "Oh, he has been hanging around here for several days", said the janitor, "I drive him away but he comes back and sits by the door as if waiting for some one, but nobody claims him." It had been raining and the dog looked wet and miserable but he crept up the steps again and seated himself by the door. Then the doctor remembered that it had been from the back door of the courthouse that the old peddler had been taken to the hospital after a sudden seizure in the clerk's office. Could this unhappy little dog be the "Pete" for whom his patient had been asking? He called "Pete". The dog started up and wagged his tail expectantly but he would not leave his post. The doctor drove back to the hospital

and reported. "That's Pete, all right", said the old man happily, "better take my coat, then he will come". So the good doctor took the coat, wrapped the shivering little dog in it and brought him out to the hospital. The reunion of the dog and the man was so touching in its joy that the nurse said they all cried together. He was permitted to remain at the hospital and his old master was fast recovering health. The dog had become such a pet that they had put the soup bone on the Christmas tree for him. "I don't know what the other old men will do without him", said the nurse, "it is very lonesome for them; not many people think to visit a county hospital, you know."

On the verandah of a county hospital in one of the southern counties, sits an old vaquero looking out over the sun-baked valley. He tells of the days when he drove a herd of cattle through the straggling little village which is now Santa Barbara and through a dusty town farther south which was known as Los Angeles. "I didn't think much of that place but it sure has grown!" That old vaquero and many other old Spanish pioneers found in Santa Barbara and San Diego county hospitals have a place in our early history.

Two old ladies, one of whom must spend much of her time in bed, were occupied in a knitting problem. One was teaching the other how to manage three needles and they were having such an interesting time that the visitor had to speak before she was seen. "My fingers are so bad that I can't knit very well", said the teacher, "but she (indicating the invalid) can do it fine once she learns how, her hands are all right." "It's hard to lie here and do nothing", said the other, "seems like the days are so long." When asked if she had any relatives or friends to visit her, she said they used to come every week but she had been there so long that they got tired coming and now she never had anyone come to see her.

In one corner of a small building used as a work shop, adjacent to

an old people's home in central California, sits an old Swedish man. There you will find him day in and day out making reed furniture. He is a cripple, far away from home and friends. He is a conscientious worker and tries to make each basket a little better than the last. His work is his life and his work-shop his world.

In the opposite corner of that shop sits a tiny little old lady who apparently feels the cold badly for she wears everything she possesses all the time. She is wrapped in a sweater, a shawl, a coat and over all is a huge bath-robe. On her head she wears a knitted shawl and on top of that a queer little hat. She laughs and chats freely when anyone is near. She looks almost round as she sits in her chair making hook rugs. She proudly shows one that was on display at the State Fair. There are strips of rags all about her and when asked if there is anything she wants, she grows very serious and says she doesn't know what she'll do when her supply of rags runs out. That is her chief worry and it is a big one, for rags mean happiness to her.

Many of the County Homes compare very favorably with private homes for the aged. In what private home could an inmate, receiving free care, go away for the summer months and have his room reserved until his return? This is done in some of the rural county hospitals in the mountains of California, in that section known as the "Mother Lode" country that was settled in early days by miners who came there during the gold rush. The high tide of that industry has passed long since but it left in its wake many old miners, helpless and alone. These old prospectors are restless in the spring and the doors of the County institution housing them swing both ways. A weatherbeaten burro is driven up, the pick and pan loaded on his patient back, with many wavings of farewell to the old men left behind, the old mountaineer goes off to "earn his keep" till the autumn rains drive him back to the shelter of the "winter boarding house"-the County hospital. There are vacant beds in some institutions of the

mountain counties. The population of these counties is not increasing and the old men are passing.

Let us, the Club women of California, turn our thoughts toward the needy aged this Christmas. We will be given the name of some needy aged person in our community. Let us write that person a Christmas letter or send a Christmas card and then during Christmas week let us make a personal call.

This will not mean an expenditure of money but it will give to some forgotten aged person a priceless gift--a friend.