THE PROBLEM OF THE MORALLY DEFECTIVE.¹


This problem is inseparably connected with that of the feebleminded. When I say that feebleness of mind, weakness of morals, and a poor standard of physical health, go hand-in-hand, I am but expressing a truism. There are some—not in such an audience as this—but there are some who have not yet realised either the truth of what I have said, or its logical application. I only wish that those, who have failed to do so, had been with me, when I recently paid a series of visits to a girls' night shelter. I would just like to tell you of the first twelve cases as I found them. The first woman was evidently suffering from consumption—both parents and one brother had died of that disease. The second, who was a drunkard, and had deserted her husband and her children, was markedly neurotic, and had suffered from St. Vitus' dance at ten years of age. The third was in all respects normal. The fourth was a deaf microcephalic—a well-known type of mental defect. The fifth was a blend of the neurotic and microcephalic types, and had at one time spent two years in a lunatic asylum. The sixth showed no congenital defect, but now—at forty years of age—her health was ruined by drink. The seventh and eighth were poor feeble creatures, though without obvious physical stigmata. The ninth suffered from persistent bad memory, a defect

¹ Paper read at the National Conference on the Care of the Feebleminded, held at the Guildhall on October 13th and 14th.
probably due to a severe injury to the head with a spade at two years of age. The tenth was well developed physically and intellectually, but had twice been in prison for theft; she was the daughter of a drunken loafer. The eleventh was normal; but the twelfth, a young girl who had been wandering away from home for a week, was a Mongolian, another well-recognised type of mental defect, and in addition was suffering from heart disease. In short, among these twelve who had found their way into a shelter for destitute girls there were only two normal individuals. Well, I give you the cases as I found them; they speak for themselves.

The feeble-minded are from their very nature feeble in all respects; they show their weakness in their moral qualities; they are therefore specially susceptible to bad influences. For this reason the Birmingham After-care Committee has been so urgent in demanding either boarding-school or colony accommodation for such of the feeble-minded as come from bad homes. Miss Dendy has demonstrated that far better results are obtained by removing the feeble-minded from bad homes and from the streets, where they learn nothing that is good and all that is bad.

In certain cases we find that while there is apparently little or no intellectual or physical weakness, yet there is marked moral defect. Take as an example the girl I have already mentioned, as having twice been in prison for theft—one for stealing a bicycle, and once for stealing a cheque—a good-looking, healthy, well-developed girl, ready to answer all questions intelligently. Judging from appearances only, I think many mistresses would be ready to engage her. She has, however, stayed in one situation two days, in another ten minutes, leaving because some trifling matter displeased her. When she stole the cheque from her mistress she was sharp enough to think it might not be cashed to a young girl, so she altered the Mrs. to Miss, a change which was at once detected by the cashier at the bank. In case there is any particularly charitable lady present I may say that this girl is now anxious to obtain another situation. In degenerates such as this the congenital tendency has spent its chief force on the moral centres, so that they are often spoken of as cases of moral insanity. They are without sense of honour.
or shame, obstinate, lazy, and selfish. Their tendency to go wrong is out of all proportion to the temptations to which they are exposed. Some—possibly many—ought to be classed among the feeble-minded. Take as an example the case of a girl, aged sixteen, brought to see me by her father two days ago. The mother and two other children died of consumption: a sister of the mother is now in a lunatic asylum. The girl showed no physical defect, but is dull and stupid, with a significantly vacant smile. The most marked characteristic is a regular kleptomania. She steals anything and everything; she stole a penknife and ripped open her brothers' and sisters' money-boxes, spent some of the money on sweets, and gave the rest away to the first children she met in the road. She is such a mixture of cunning and stupidity that when her father gave her a penny to buy a penny bun she turned back at the shop door to ask him what change she ought to get. Such cases require care and training, and are amenable to such influences, though I am ready to admit that good results are obtained but slowly. We generally find on investigation that there is deficient nerve energy. The habitual criminal is sometimes capable of great exertion for a time, but not of regular systematic work. Such cases should be treated in an industrial home, separated, however, from the ordinary feeble-minded. The home should be under medical supervision; the medical treatment should be hygienic—unstimulating food, fresh air, baths, exercise.

Now you must not think that I am going to excuse and explain away all wrong-doing. We live in an age far too ready to do that. I at least am not one of those who think that because a man is in a lunatic asylum he should be at liberty to kick an attendant, and then go scot-free. I would punish all such cases, but I would make the punishment proportionate to the mental capacity of the individual. We should not judge such cases by ordinary standards, nor punish them by ordinary punishments. We must recognise that there now exists a class not adapted to their environment—individuals who have been well-described as of 'attenuated responsibility.' These ought not to be exposed to temptations greater than we know they can bear. Considerations such as these apply particularly in the case of feeble-minded girls.
I need hardly remind you that in girls who are lacking in mental and intellectual qualities, the lower passions are often strong, and always uncontrolled. For this reason a large number of the inmates of penitentiary homes are found to be feeble-minded.

The objection may at once be raised, that if the feeble-minded and the morally insane are to be put in industrial homes, the expense to the community will be great. Certainly it means expense, and in the first instance an increased outlay; ultimately the expenditure will be small compared with that already sustained by the healthy members of the community in the form of rates and private charity. At present, though many people do not realise it, we are paying for the support of the feeble-minded, and not only paying, but paying at a ridiculously high rate. For I am not contending that it is necessary to suddenly start shutting up a large group who have never been shut up before. I propose nothing really new. I only ask for a modification—a rational modification—of our present system of prisons, workhouse maternity wards, penitentiaries, reformatories, &c. I only ask for a great extension of the methods adopted at Borstal Prison with such gratifying results. We do shut these cases up, but we shut them up at the wrong time, and in the wrong place. Just to illustrate this point think of the career of a feeble-minded boy who came under my notice. He absconded from a working boys' home, and went to work on a farm; he left that to enlist in the Army, but was turned out as useless; afterwards he was convicted of bicycle stealing and sent to prison; since 1901 he has not been heard of, but I am sure, if he is alive, he is not living at his own expense. With feeble-minded girls the folly of the present system of ignoring them till a crisis is reached is even more apparent. What actually happens with many of that class? Well, you know the usual programme as well as I do. Maternity ward of the workhouse, penitentiary, prison, workhouse again. This is no fancied picture; I can give you many instances of such a career. There is a feeble-minded woman in Birmingham, who has been admitted to the maternity wards of the workhouse nine times, and who is now on the streets, selling matches, a disgrace to the city, and to our present legislation.
Putting other considerations on one side, it would surely be more economical to take charge of such a one from the first and place her in a home where she could be trained and protected. Think of all the costly institutions that have to be maintained for such cases under the present system. Think of all the elaborate machinery that must be kept in good working order. I am sure our magistrates would be glad if they could commit such people to the proper institution from the first. A few weeks ago there was a notorious case in Birmingham of attempted suicide by a girl of seventeen who had several times run away from home, and who had nearly taken her own life before. She was allowed by the Bench to be taken home, but immediately went off again. When I saw her shortly afterwards in a night shelter I found that it was a case of hystero-epilepsy.

The Birmingham After-care Committee have long realised the truth of what I have just said; feeling, however, that fact was better than theory they decided to conduct an inquiry into the number of the feeble-minded in the various charitable institutions for young people in and around Birmingham. We did not concern ourselves—you must observe—with institutions intended primarily for the feeble-minded, such as Miss Stacey's, but with ordinary institutions intended for ordinary people. I visited sixteen such institutions. I will first give you somewhat full details with regard to a Magdalen Home, of which I have been the honorary medical officer for some years. This home, like most penitentiaries, is filled with young girls—girls in their teens, some of them very young. Of ninety-seven consecutive cases, twenty-six were feeble-minded, seven were cases of moral insanity, one was epileptic, one lunatic, and one deaf and dumb. In fact, over 37 per cent. were mentally deficient. I have here classified as morally insane girls who were sharp and intelligent, but without sense of honour or modesty, and who were insusceptible to moral and religious training, thereby differing markedly from the majority; nothing could stop them from lying and from stealing from their companions. The subsequent careers amply justify our contention that such cases come ultimately on private charity or the rates. Thus the lunatic is in an asylum, the epileptic in the workhouse; of
the twenty-six feeble-minded twelve are in the workhouse, one in an idiot asylum, one in a lunatic asylum, one in prison, and four in special homes; altogether nineteen out of the twenty-six feeble-minded are known in the space of four years to have again become a burden on the public. High as is the percentage of feeble-minded in this home it is confirmed by the numbers in other homes for girls. Even in a home where special precautions are taken to exclude the feeble-minded by means of preliminary inquiries and a medical examination, I found among four girls one mentally defective. She was a typical microcephalic; on inquiry I found she was peculiar and difficult to manage; she had threatened to commit suicide; her father was known to have been a drunkard, and a sister had been in a Magdalen Home. Without further details I may say that of the 862 young people who came under observation ninety-four, or nearly 11 per cent., were defective to such a degree as to require permanent care. In two girls' night shelters I have recently visited the number of weaklings is distressing; among twenty-nine I only found eight normal individuals.

The principal causes of feeble-mindedness are:—

(1) Deficient nutrition in the early years of life.
(2) Hereditary tendency to consumption.
(3) Descent from an insane or criminal stock.
(4) Chronic alcoholism of one or both parents.

In the moral, or rather the immoral, cases one of the latter factors is generally to be detected—that is to say a criminal, insane or alcoholic inheritance.

Now, in attempting to solve the problem we must take a broad view; while thinking of the exigencies of the moment we must look to the future. In the first place, we must provide industrial homes for the feeble-minded already existing; we must do this partly for their own sake, and even more with the object of preventing the nation being saddled with their offspring—other degenerates. We must decide to keep them, not for two years—not till they are sixteen or eighteen or twenty-one—but till they are fit to mingle with the rest of the community. When we send a lunatic to an asylum we do not send him for some arbitrary period, but till he is
better. So should we act with these unfortunates. The work in the homes should be manual, not intellectual.

Then we must educate the people in matters of hygiene. We must impress upon them, that as with many other forms of disease, these mental and moral defects do not come by chance, but are the natural and inevitable result of breaking natural laws. Take the alcohol question alone. Does any one who has thought about social reform at all, and inquired into the family history of the inmates of our prisons and reformatories, think that so long as the expenditure on drink in this country shows the appalling total of £180,000,000 a year we shall shake ourselves free from this terrible incubus of degenerates, criminals, epileptics, lunatics, and feeble-minded? Why, the figure I have mentioned has been calculated to represent an average annual outlay of £18 per family for the non-abstaining working classes, and of £46 per family for the other non-abstaining classes. Let me just repeat—£18 per family for the non-abstaining working classes every year. We must do all we can to preach the gospel of simple food, of temperance, of fresh air, and of hard work. By these means we shall at last solve the problem.