

## THE RELATION OF IMBECILITY TO PAUPERISM AND CRIME.

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**S**IDE by side with colleges and universities stand insane asylums and schools for the feeble-minded. Each year brings the request for added accommodations for the waifs of humanity, the little ones born to the street and the gutter whose only birthright is misery, whose only heritage is shame. And keeping pace with and even outstripping the charitable come the penal institutions—the jails and reform farms.

That we give so liberally to our homes for defectives, that we strive so philanthropically to educate and reform our lowest classes, is forever to our credit. That we are obliged, however, to give each year more and more, until the amount has come to be out of proportion to the increase in the population, is not so indicative of national progress.

The question what to do to decrease the defective and criminal classes is coming to be a serious one, which we shall be obliged to face at no very distant period. Restriction of immigration will not solve it, while we have already among us such an enormous population of criminals and paupers, imbeciles and insane. We may shut our gates to every European immigrant who wishes to slip in, and still the undesirable element in our midst will grow, demanding our money for support and menacing our society.

I wonder how many of us ever stop to think of the ninety thousand insane in the United States, of the seventy-five thousand imbeciles, of the countless army of tramps and beggars, and the vast body of convicts? Or, if we do stop to think of them, do we ever associate the different classes with one another or seriously ask the question why are they here? Does it ever occur to us that their increase might, to a certain extent, be averted; that

crime, imbecility and insanity are hereditary diseases of the mind, and that so long as we allow them to go on breeding their kind we can expect nothing but constant additions to the burden which we must bear as a nation?

That we can entirely eliminate bad blood from the race is, of course, not at all probable; but that we can greatly lessen the sum total of viciousness and brutality is both possible and probable, and the importance of so doing is something which those of us who work with humanity's castaways feel more earnestly every year of our lives.

Of all the streams of evil which flow into the national blood no one is more productive of mischief than that of imbecility. The meaning of the word is rarely understood, even by intelligent people. To the general public it is synonymous with idiocy. A school for feeble-minded children is simply an idiot asylum, and a not infrequent question asked of us by outsiders is, "What do you do with those idiots?" In reality the genuinely idiotic child is the exception and not the rule. The large majority of those whom we train are simply what the name implies—feeble-minded; children who can learn, but are slow, who are blunted morally and intellectually, but who show no specific defect.

Such children are found in every town and city in the United States. Totally unfitted to battle with the world, the legitimate offspring, in numerous instances, of the jail, the infirmary and the insane asylum, they grow up following in the parental footsteps, and leaving to their own progeny the same inheritance of vice, disease and laziness, always either actively evil agencies or passive burdens. And all this happens because

there are not adequate accommodations provided in any State for caring for them; even those States which do support a few of them in childhood turn them out when they reach adult age, to rely for existence upon their own utter incapacity and the mercy of a world which has no place for the sufferers from hereditary evil.

The perfectly healthy character in the midst of pernicious environments has often a fight for its life, and must depend upon its ability to judge rightly and execute well for its survival. The tendency, too, of the healthy character is toward good. It has had morally healthy ancestry; at least, the balance has been on the side of morals. The imbecile is the result of corrupt living, frequently of guilt, sometimes of a line of ancestry unbrightened for generations by a single responsible moral individual. In every case where a child has not been made imbecile through some prenatal shock, accident or sickness, somewhere in the family annals there has been opium eating, immoral living, drunkenness, insanity, imbecility or actual crime—perhaps all of these.

The large majority of feeble-minded children come from the lowest class. They are the result of gradual race degeneration, brought about by the causes mentioned. The sins of the fathers have been visited upon the children until the result has come in a wornout vitality, an enfeebled will, and a low intellectual and moral status. There is no material left out of which responsible human beings can be evolved. The soul, conscience and mind are alike diseased. There is no capacity for correct judgment. There may be ability to learn, slowly; there often *is* acute cunning, but the human being has become, to a certain extent, a brute. He may know what things, in his limited sphere in life, he ought and ought not to do, but if he can do wrong without being discovered his conscience does not trouble him. Kept where opportunity and incentive to

wrong-doing are lacking, he becomes fairly peaceable and docile; thrown out upon society, with neither the desire nor the capacity to earn a living honestly, he becomes either a human parasite or a beast of prey.

Since my experience as a teacher of imbeciles began, perhaps twenty of my boys have gone out to work for themselves. Fitted by their education to do some work well, under patient direction, they are still, so far as I can learn, for the greater part of the time inmates of the infirmaries, working for a while, and then, as one of them told me, "resting." Of course an occasional child makes a moderate success of life, but only an occasional one. The great majority are certain, sooner or later, to become public burdens, usually after they have married an equal or inferior in intellect, and bought into the world children who are a shade less desirable members of the community than the parents.

Even though the feeble-minded child has been rendered so through other than vicious causes, he is excellent material out of which to make the criminal. He has no resisting force, and temptation subdues any weak disposition to do right which he may possess. If with no innate perverse tendencies, he is still more than liable to fall. How much harder must it be for him, born with vicious inclinations, to overcome them. One poor little fellow whose soul was a constant battleground struck the keynote all unwittingly once when he said to me: "It's easy for you to be good; your father was. But mine was bad, and drank and swore and gambled, and sometimes I feel as if I *must* do just as he did."

Another child, who will steal under my very eyes, and conceal it so deftly that it is almost impossible to prove it, is the son and grandson of men who have been county burdens all their lives, either in the jail or infirmary. Yet in time the child will go out to the same career, landing

ultimately in the penitentiary. Two more of my boys are embryo murderers, utterly vicious, almost entirely destitute of any good trait; one has a certain pride in keeping pace with others, but once outside, where it will be utterly impossible for him to do so, his only saving grace will disappear and his innate viciousness assert itself. Some day he will commit murder, as inevitably as the freed tiger will do so. Being a human beast of prey, the safety of society will demand his death, though he is no more responsible than is the dog who knows that it is wrong to bite but does it.

It is absolutely imperative that dangerous elements be removed where they can do no harm; and since we are so unpardonably foolish as to turn loose upon society men and women who show from babyhood the characteristics of the criminal, a wrong becomes a necessity. Allowing the brute to run wild, instead of taming him, as we might have done, we can only appeal to his brute instincts, and must dispose of the results of our own inadequate legislation. A child who in early life betrays decided viciousness, and is even slightly below par intellectually, should be kept from society as we would keep poison from food. He is poison—poison to the blood of the nation; and sanitary laws are quite as necessary for the blood as for the homes of the people.

My boys show in almost every instance a natural cunning, an aptitude for stealing and great dexterity in concealment. They can pick a lock as cleverly as a professional burglar, often with no other implement than a bent wire. Though I am able sometimes to teach them temporary honesty, I can in no instance feel certain that it will endure under temptation, because of their weakness. Education helps them for the time being, but its benefits are practically annulled by the after life of strife and exposure into which they must go.

Belonging to the brighter class, most of them are moral more than mental imbeciles, and the moral imbecile is as incapable of being thoroughly reformed as the mental imbecile is of learning Greek. Thirty-four per cent. of the imbecile children are the result of the intemperance of parents, and with their own inherent weakness and inclinations are sure to become drunkards themselves. I have wondered sometimes if the morphine or opium habit in parents was not often the cause of the cunning, mischievous, dishonest children with whom we are constantly coming in contact. In general characteristics they greatly resemble many of the Chinese opium eaters.

Imbeciles belong usually to one of four classes—the harmless, passive sort, who have no energy, no strong desires of any kind, who are simply congenital paupers; the brutal, stubborn, evil-minded, dull ones, governed almost entirely by passion; a brighter class who are cunning and dishonest, addicted to petty thieving and little sneaking villainies, seldom guilty of great crimes; and the fourth and smallest division, a class who have some good inclinations, and can with help and sympathy do fairly well in the struggle for existence.

Working with feeble-minded children, one falls naturally into the habit of studying faces for traces of imbecility. Tramps in thousands of cases betray the characteristic features and expressions of the imbecile. There are hundreds of faces in the penitentiaries which are but the fulfillment of the promise of those in our schoolrooms. With rare exceptions the imbecile boy goes out into the world, ultimately to become a pauper or criminal, the girl to be the natural prey of those human hyenas who lie in wait for everything that is weak and unprotected. She is the victim of the law which should cry shame unto itself that it fails to defend her, poor drifting wreck upon the great sea of life.

Because we cannot entirely abate the evil of moral and mental imbecility is no reason why we should not do what we can. In this institution alone are four hundred children, who will in time probably go out to enter into the battle for bread. Though they form but a small per cent. of the total number of imbeciles in the State, yet if they could be saved from themselves, kept under kind protection, developed by wholesome industry, and, above all, prevented from propagating their kind, fifty years from now would show a great saving to the State. As the laws stand, if the subsequent careers of these four hundred imbeciles and of their descendants could be traced, what a terrible chapter of misery, wretchedness and crime it would be, what an awful comment on the inefficiency of government.

There is a false sentiment widely prevalent among unthinking people, which demands that a person who has not actually committed crime, no matter what are his tendencies, who can earn a living, if he will, shall be given liberty. Many an imbecile can and does work intelligently under direction; but liberty means to him license—license to live by hook or by crook, a parasite upon society or a menace to it. Anarchy is born in him. Not being able to reason, he is the tool of every agitator, no matter how unprincipled, who comes along. His sympathies are always on the wrong side, and if he is of the brutal class, he is more dangerous than the intelligent malefactor, for with him there is no stopping place.

Self-preservation is the first law of nature, but the saving of others is the first law of God. If we could only realize how utterly mistaken is a

kindness which, in the guise of liberty, gives license to the imbecile criminal to work out his own corrupt destiny, we should have taken a long step in the direction of the millennium. Paganism murdered its defective children. Christianity should shelter them, save them—by regular, well-ordered lives under efficient supervision—from themselves, and from bringing more of their kind into the world. We pray with the murderer after the murder is committed, but we might have gone back to first causes, and kept that murderer from coming into the world. We forget that, as he is his own greatest curse, the truest kindness to the imbecile, moral or mental, is to prevent him.

Wise laws, which will cleanse the race from its stream of impure blood, will do quite as much toward converting the world to the love of Christ as the sermon from the pulpit. Hand in hand with the church should go scientific investigation of the causes of crime and the means of its prevention. We are too much afraid of spending a little money now, forgetting that a present outlay often means a future saving.

The civilization of a hundred years from now, a broader, nobler, better civilization than ours, will have learned the lesson that prevention is better than cure; that to keep, where it is possible, the murderer from coming into existence is more in accordance with the law of Christ than to allow him, through the inefficiency of the law, to come into being, and after he has fulfilled his evil destiny, likewise through the inefficiency of the law, to smooth with gentle offices his pathway to the gallows.—*The Arena*.

