

The Alleged Deterioration of Physique.*

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We return to the discussion of the national physique with a certain sense of relief, in the light of the very important conclusions recently put forward by the Physical Deterioration Committee of the Privy Council in their report.

It is not twelve months ago that the country was shaken with doubt and insecurity as to our national well-being, arising from the dissemination of certain facts, now well-known, tending to indicate that we as a people were physically on the down grade.

With every opportunity for hearing all that could be said on both sides, the Committee has concluded that the evidence before them did not support the belief that there was progressive physical deterioration. We are in fact no worse off than the generation that preceded us, and there is much to show that we are in many respects better. The encouragement in all this is that we may once more take our places in the fighting-line with a firmer hope of meeting successfully the forces which man sets up for his own destruction.

While it appears to be fairly clear that each generation leaves off at least a little better physically than its predecessor, we must not allow any such circumstance to lull us into the security of a fool's paradise; the rate of improvement, in so far as it exists, is too slow to conquer the vast field of degeneracy which yet remains.

If the Committee have brought in a verdict of "not proven" in answer to those who charged us with signs of rapid decay, they have left behind them in their investigation a record of human suffering, of human ignorance and brutality, which suffice to make the stoutest of hearts pause for courage.

With the long story of irresponsible motherhood, of fathers aimless in their work, unemployed and unemployable, of children starved, badly fed, dying in their infancy in such numbers as to neutralise the advantages of an ample birth rate, with inhuman conditions of labour robbing the mother of her right to care for her child unborn as well as her tender baby—with such a blemished record in our civic life, it is difficult to believe that some process does not exist which leaves its mark on each generation more pronounced than on the previous. In fact, if deterioration could exist, the conditions of our social life must surely establish it.

That it cannot be proved to exist must mean only one thing—that Nature does not go to work for our own undoing in the way our theories would suggest. In looking for signs of progressive

deterioration, it is possible that we have overlooked the real significance of the sorrowful facts so familiar to us.

It is possible that Nature accomplishes her end much more swiftly and mercifully than by any gradual process of deterioration; that disobedience of the natural laws of healthy living leads not, as we supposed, to gradual decay, resulting in a race of low type, but rather that retribution comes rapidly and fiercely in the shape of total extirpation in very few generations of those who offend.

The position would seem to be somewhat of this kind:—Nature allows practically an equal chance to all who enter the world of living a normal, healthy, physical existence. Each generation is, in fact, born anew, fit to live a full and normal physical life. Whether the promise of birth is fulfilled depends on the use or misuse of the birthright. Misuse through ignorance, poverty, or wilful neglect yields the social morass, of our slum life, which in its turn is on its way to rapid extinction.

The mercy of Nature lies in the fact that each generation receives its chance anew, and this mercy is not withheld even from our worst population. If they will but obey, they or their children may still be rescued for a happier lot; but in so far as they disobey, they die.

Though there is no progressive or inherited degeneracy, there exists a constant drain and waste at the lower end of our population, and this, even though generation by generation the race as a whole shows some improvement.

The problem for those of us who work in this field now becomes something of this kind:—Primarily, to accelerate the general visible improvement which every observer is able to detect; and, secondly, each to perform his share in preventing this lavish waste of human material at the lower end of the scale.

There is much to encourage us on our way in the knowledge that degeneracy is not likely to become stereotyped, and as we inquire further we shall find that, even without our help, Nature will fight our battle; and if we consent to help, she will redouble our effort and earn for us a success which is nothing less than amazing to those of us who are accustomed to consider the processes of amelioration as belonging to the slower movements of time.

The position which seems to me worth supporting is that Nature endows the vast majority of mankind with a birthright of normal physical efficiency; that it is the duty of those who aspire to be known as social workers each to do his share in confirming his fellow-beings in this possession. Meanwhile, it is for us all to remember that Nature, in justice to mankind, allows no half-measures of the kind suggested by progressive physical deterioration leading to a permanently puny race.

I have dwelt somewhat on this point in order to clear up a common error of phraseology due largely

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