

to the misuse in the literature of our time of the theory of heredity. The great continental decadents, whose writings are so much in vogue in this country, are to no small extent responsible for the frame of mind which tells us that the weakness of each generation follows as certainly from that of the preceding as night follows day; that the law of inheritance implies a degenerate progeny from a degenerate parentage. It is as true as it is painful that overcrowded towns, and for that matter overcrowded villages, produce puny, undersized populations, weak in endurance and in power, and unable by their thousands to reach the minimal standard of decent comfort in living. These victims of poverty, ignorance, and of shameful neglect, are certain to become the parents of the next generation; but here comes an assumption which has been unhesitatingly proclaimed as a matter of fact, yet which requires much proof before it can be accepted as true, and that is that the children of those puny parents will themselves of necessity be puny by inheritance. The law of heredity is dragged in to explain something which in reality does not happen at all. It is asked to explain degeneracy as arising from transmission of a weak general physique from the ill-conditioned parent to the child. For it is a matter which can easily be verified that children of even the poorest and weakest of mothers are themselves as likely to be strong in as many cases as if the parent came from the healthiest environment.

I venture to lay this point before you with the intention of shedding light on what I believe to be a popular fallacy, and to make it clear that by heredity, Nature, with the poor mother as with the rich mother, makes not for degeneration but for exactly the opposite condition, for amelioration; that she gives each individual who arrives in this world a new chance of a full and normal physical existence.

This is not to be interpreted in any sense as an excuse for *laissez faire*, for as certainly as Nature gives the poor child its chance of a good life, so certainly do the circumstances of slum environment rob it forthwith of its birthright. The child is born well, but from the moment of birth begins the down-grade, and a repetition of an existence under conditions which are barely human, supposing the child survives its infancy at all.

My point is this: that Nature will help us to preserve the race by allowing practically nothing but healthy material to enter the world, and it is for those of us who work in the social field to secure for our infant population such conditions in the home or elsewhere as may preserve and fulfil the early promise.

Of course, in all this I admit the hereditary influence of taints, and of certain diseases. But these affect rich and poor alike, and in any case do not touch any large proportion of the individuals who are classed as degenerate.

For the moment, all the optimism which surrounds the circumstances of healthy birth must pale before the subsequent history of early childhood, with its ugly contribution of mortality, and of life which is too often worse than death.

Without recounting the harrowing tales of infant slum life, with their carnage of peace surpassing the carnage of war, it is sufficient to say that of those who survive it is not uncommon to find more than half of the children of three years of age hanging on to life with marks of disease and undergrowth firmly implanted on their tender frames. Yet, practically, none of this is inherited in the true sense; it is the victory of evil human devices in their endeavour to cheat Nature of her own. If ever there was a mission in the world worthy of the most strenuous service it is to wrest back this victory, be it out of pity for suffering children, or for the very welfare and existence of the nation.

Let us for a moment see how circumstances will help us, if we but help ourselves. The mere fact of coming to school brings in its train a set of conditions which immediately tells most favourably on the physique of the children. At ten years of age, the majority of the children who at three were unhealthy are now healthy, and at thirteen years of age quite a small proportion are unhealthy. It is only in the blackest areas where this improvement in health with growth in years is not to be found; and such areas are fortunately rare. It has been asserted that school life tends, by keeping children in confinement, to encourage degeneration of powers. There is not only no proof that this is the case, but, on the contrary, every observation tends to confirm the opposite view; and it could not well be otherwise, for the domestic neglect of infancy must in every case succeed in the home itself to something of law and order, if merely to meet the demands of regularity, punctuality, cleanliness, exercise, and even nutrition, which school-life enjoins.

It is no argument to suggest that betterment has been achieved during the lapse of school years by the scythe of Death. The death-rate is insignificant in comparison with the magnitude of the improvement. The improving influence of school life is progressive from generation to generation. Thirty years of school life in England have got rid of the savage, wild type of child to whom school was no more nor less than a cage. The child is now on the side of the school; and the parent, if still often apathetic and opposed to school, is less so than formerly. More especially the mothers are, for various reasons, perhaps, oftener reasons of expediency than of zeal, on the side of education. In any case, the output is, slum for slum, many grades higher nowadays than it was thirty years ago—physically as much as in any other respect.

If to the excellent influence of school we can add the influence of good environment, pure air, pure

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