

Medical Matters.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF HABITUAL DRUNKARDS.



The Report of Dr. Branthwaite, the Inspector under the Inebriates Act, in regard to the characteristics of "habitual drunkards," deserves careful study by all interested in inebriety, as the passage of the Act has made the classification of inebriates possible in a way impossible before.

The cases are classified by

Dr. Branthwaite as follows:—

1. Insane—certified and sent to asylums	48
2. Very defective—imbeciles, degenerates, epileptics	271
3. Defective—as above, but less marked, eccentric, silly, dull, senile, or subject to periodical paroxysms of ungovernable temper	857
4. Of average mental capacity—on admission, or after six months' detention	697

Total admissions 1,873

The Report states that:—"Refractory and violent defectives cause considerable difficulty, and require constant supervision to prevent injury to themselves or others. They are always restless, uncertain, excitable, and ready to take umbrage on the least provocation, or on flimsy pretexts which would not be considered provocation by reasonable beings. A glance, a word, an innocent action, not intended to give offence, is construed as contempt, vituperation, or meditated attack, and is resented accordingly. Such persons do not care in the very least for the opinion of others in matters relating to conduct, nor can they be made to see any reason why dictation from others should be obeyed. According to them the law makers are tyrants, and the servants of the law but instruments of organised persecution.

"There is usually no sign of sorrow for the disorderly results of their inebriate habits, both the drunkenness and disorder being denied, or justified. In their opinion if they want to get drunk they have a right to do so; they are merely 'spending their own money,' and any effort at prevention by others is rank injustice. If they become violent during a drunken outbreak, or indeed at any time, and cause injury to another, the person injured is himself responsible for falling foul of them, when they happen to be angry or 'a bit on.'

Drunkenness is justifiable, prostitution is justifiable, crime is justifiable. Any course they choose to adopt is justifiable, so long as they can show (to their own satisfaction) some 'reason' for such conduct. It is useless to point out defects in their arguments, for they are incapable of reasoning any question to a conclusion; deficient in moral sense, they cannot be made to understand the ethics of social life, and an unfriendly attitude is manifested towards all who endeavour to exercise refining influences.

"This brief sketch roughly indicates the mental attitude of these refractory defectives during their quieter moments; but some reference to the recurrent outburst of uncontrollable anger is necessary to complete the picture. The mad fit while it lasts is not pleasant to witness—utter abandonment to passion, wanton destruction of anything handy, unmeasured violence against all who happen to be near (especially if they attempt to restrain), absence of all sense of decency, and use of the vilest possible language, are some of its chief characteristics. A large number of persons, now under control in reformatories, subject to these passionate impulsive attacks, only need the possession of a lethal weapon at such times to cause injury, even death, to any person against whom their anger is directed."

The fact that these persons have sunk into the slavery of drink is, Dr. Branthwaite points out, in itself evidence of the existence of some defect in power of judgment and control over impulses. "Whatever defect may exist is capable of modification or removal, and in the majority of cases a normal state can be produced if sufficient time is allowed for its development."

The medical standpoint is summarised by the *British Medical Journal* as follows:—"The only possibility of an orderly life for such persons lies in total abstinence from alcohol, for, as time passes, further mental deterioration results from continued indulgence. Structural tissue change, and constantly disordered function both aid in completing the wreck, passions run riot, moral degradation, restlessness, and excitement prevail, and 'we have the finished article, the insane or defective police-court inebriate.' It is needless to emphasise the uselessness of any determinate sentence in such cases."

More and more the belief is gaining ground that inebriety is a disease requiring medical treatment. Modern knowledge also proves that those temperance reformers who preached total abstinence as the only safety for the drunkard, were right in their methods.

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