

Care and Control of the Feeble-minded.

The present issue of the *Nineteenth Century and After* contains an interesting article on the "Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded," by Mrs. Hume Pinsent, one of the members of the Royal Commission on this most important question.

Mrs. Pinsent states that the Report of that Commission shows that "the number of mentally defective persons in England and Wales, apart from certified lunatics, is estimated at 149,628, or .46 per cent. of the population. Of these 66,509 are at the present time urgently in need of provision, either in their own interest or the public safety. In the latter figure we are told only such cases are included as are, in the opinion of a competent investigator, 'improperly, unsuitably, or unkindly cared for, or who, by reason of particular habits and characteristics, are a source of danger to the community in which they live.' If we add to the former figure the number of certified lunatics, the total number of the mentally defective may be estimated to be 271,607, or 0.83 per cent. of the population.

"The great majority of these two hundred and seventy thousand people need support, care, and control, and can never pay back to the community, in any way, the equivalent for the time, energy, and money which must be spent upon them. Not only are they a burden upon the resources of this generation, but they are producing children who in turn will have to be supported and cared for by the labour and at the expense of the next generation." This condition of affairs is sufficiently serious, and though, as the writer points out, "the certified lunatics are already provided for, much of this provision is unnecessarily expensive, and in some cases of an unsuitable nature." Added to this do we really realise our barbarous treatment of many mentally defective persons?

The Report of the Royal Commission states:

"We find large numbers of persons who are committed to prisons for repeated offences, which, being the manifestations of a permanent defect of mind, there is no hope of repressing, much less of stopping, by short punitive sentences. We find lunatic asylums crowded with patients who do not require the careful hospital treatment that well equipped asylums now afford, and who might be treated in many other ways more economically and as efficiently. We find also at large in the population many defective persons, adults, young persons, and children, who are, some in one way, some in another, incapable of self-control, and who are, therefore, exposed to constant moral danger themselves, and become the source of lasting injury to the community."

We revolt at the implements of torture used by bygone generations in the treatment of the insane, and now consigned to the museums of asylums. What will future generations say to the standard of civilisation and humanity in the 20th century when we punish the mentally defective by imprisonment for offences which being the manifestations of a permanent defect of mind there is no hope of repressing by punitive sentences? While this crime against humanity is perpetrated could there be a stronger plea for the employment of trained nurses in prisons?

The Commissioners have recommended to remedy this state of affairs, a new "Act for the Care and Control of the Mentally Defective," the scope of which Mrs. Pinsent explains in the article under consideration. In the course of the article she describes the difficulties which beset parents who endeavour, through the Poor Law, to obtain assistance for their mentally defective children. "It is not too much to say that, as things are at the present time, everything is done to discourage a respectable working man in his attempt to obtain care and training for a mentally defective child." Yet consider the result of letting these children grow up untrained and uncontrolled. We read:—

"The imbecile, however unfit to do so, must associate with the rest of the family. I have seen them tied into a chair or under the kitchen table. I have seen them kept almost naked in the back room. I have seen sane children neglected because the imbecile monopolises the mother's time. It cannot safely be left for one minute. I have known the mother unavoidably called away, to find on her return that the imbecile had burnt himself, another had put the cat on the fire, another had locked the baby up in the cellar, another had undressed herself and rolled under a horse's feet in the street. Many escape from home, causing hours of anxiety to their parents before they are brought back by the police. To complete this description, we must bear in mind the fact that the parents of such children are frequently themselves mentally defective, or highly excitable, unstable, neurotic individuals. I have hardly ever seen a mother that I should consider a suitable person, either by capacity, temperament, or education, for the training of her own mentally defective child."

The two important new powers suggested under the proposed Act are (1) to compel the parent to allow a defective child to go into a residential institution if suitable training cannot be provided at home. (2) The power to detain such a defective in an institution after school age if he or she is unfit for liberty.

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