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EDITORIAL.

THE MENTAL DEFICIENCY BILL.

When Parliament reassembles on May 27th, one of the first Bills of which the second reading will be taken, will be the Mental Deficiency Bill "to make further and better provision for the care of Feeble-minded and other Mentally Defective Persons and to amend the Lunacy Acts."

No one can consider the large amount of feeble-mindedness in this country, and the rate at which it is increasing, without realizing that it is one of the most pressing problems with which the nation is confronted. The deficiency is by no means limited to the individual, indeed the mentally-deficient seem to multiply at a greater rate than ordinary individuals, and their mental characteristics are most persistent.

Thus a speaker at the recent Nursing Conference told of a family in which the great grandmother was "not exactly a thief, but light-handed." Of four children, two sons were in asylums, the third was an incorrigible vagabond, the fourth—a daughter—never married.

The incorrigible vagabond married a normal woman as his first wife, and had two boys; the second time he married an imbecile, and had eight children in whom the family history repeated itself.

Thus, not only for the sake of the family into which such misery is introduced, but for that of the nation, which has to provide institutional treatment, at great expense, in asylums, prisons, and probably inebriate homes and reformatories for its members, it is essential that steps should be taken to deal with the mentally unfit.

The classes of persons dealt with in the Bill are idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons, and moral imbeciles, the last men-

tioned being defined as "persons who, from an early age, display some permanent mental defect coupled with strong vicious or criminal propensities on which punishment has little or no deterrent effect."

It is provided in the Bill that all these defective persons may be dealt with under the Act by being sent to, or placed in, an institution for defectives, or placed under guardianship, under certain definite conditions up to the age of twenty-one.

Over twenty-one, moral imbeciles and feeble minded persons can only be dealt with compulsorily if, in addition to being defective they are (1) found to be neglected, abandoned, or cruelly treated, (2) found guilty of any offence, (3) are undergoing imprisonment, detention in a reformatory or inebriate reformatory, or are detained in an institution for lunatics, criminal or otherwise, (4) who are habitual drunkards, (5) in whose case notice has been given by the local education authority, or (6) who are in receipt of poor law relief at the time of giving birth to an illegitimate child, or when pregnant of such a child.

In these respects we appear still to be following the bad old system of allowing disease to develop before we attempt to cure it. Thus at present we make people prove destitution before the State will assist them, when a little timely help or loan in time of difficulty might have prevented the destitution.

In the same way a person must be a certified lunatic before being eligible for asylum treatment, and the disease is then so established that it is difficult to cure. Again, treatment in the early stages might prevent many people from coming on the rates at all as certified lunatics.

To be satisfactory the Bill must aim at prevention as well as cure, and we hope this will be emphasized during the discussion on the second reading.

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