

Eugenics and the Prevention of Destitution.

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THE term "Prevention of Destitution" involves the consideration as to whether and to what extent destitution is preventable, and these questions can only be answered after inquiry into the causes of destitution when found. Such an inquiry resolves itself into an examination as to the mental and physical condition of the destitute individual, his character or type, and the environmental condition in which he was reared and moves. In short, has the individual been endowed with a sufficient measure of energy, capacity, and intelligence, to enable him to make the best of his environment, and so attain that standard of efficiency which will be at all times self-supporting.

The "Eugenics Education Society" recently undertook an inquiry from that point of view, and as I was intimately concerned in that inquiry, I have been asked to put before you to-day the view of the Society with regard to Prevention of Destitution.

Any proposal for the Prevention of Destitution must command the sympathetic consideration of all interested in the welfare of the race, and it must be admitted at once that a fair proportion—perhaps not a very high proportion—of the destitution caused by temporary sickness might be prevented. It is agreed, too, that given a community "well born," the provision of a good environment should prevent destitution for all who wished to be independent.

But it is the view of the Society that destitution, so far as it is represented by pauperism (and there is no other standard) is to a large extent confined to a special and degenerate class.

Those acquainted with the Poor Law know that the steady decline in pauperism is the result of the consistent application of well established principles, and of improvement in administration, and that the whole process of administration and legislation since 1834 has been gradually to press the passably efficient out of the ranks of pauperism.

This process, together with other causes associated with treatment, has been to develop and confirm a defective and dependent class known and recognised as the pauper class. The proposition that there is a distinctive pauper class need not be laboured. All connected with either the Poor Law or private charity know that they deal with a class separate and distinct from the world of independent men and women, whose ramifications extend only into well defined channels.

The problem of destitution lies distinctly and for all time in the personal and human element which this consideration involves. Policy and administration directed merely and extensively to an elaboration of machinery, which in principle and in practice leaves the personality of the pauper untouched, will not only raise the cost of pauperism above the present high figure, but, inasmuch as it involves the increased dissipation of public funds on a class incapable of improvement thereby, will do no more than serve to perpetuate the defective class and to attract within the pauper class the enormous population living on its border.

More and more public policy is developing in the direction of higher expenditure on the unfit, and less, comparatively, on the fit. In the name of education,

special schools are now provided for cripples, the deaf and dumb, and other mentally and physically unfit. Under the Poor Law, workhouse accommodation in all classes is superior to the standard of living among labourers of independence, and it is admitted that the medical provision has now reached such a degree of excellence as to be above that obtainable, not merely by the independent labourer, but also by the working classes generally, and in some districts by the middle class. It may be noted here, too, that "the period of the greatest increase in the expenditure per pauper corresponds with the period of the greatest numbers" (Majority Report, page 31).

It is commonly asserted that these provisions are to be justified on the grounds that they are remedial in their character, and with regard to the pauper, that the restoration to independence is a sufficient excuse for the expenditure. Whilst there was reason to hope that restoration to independence was possible, or that those subject to special treatment as remedial were likely to improve to any appreciable extent under treatment, it was possible to view the expenditure with some degree of acquiescence, but it is now generally admitted by those who know the system, that the special treatment afforded to children in special schools, in institutions for the feeble-minded, and for adults in homes for inebriates, etc., that beyond an increased measure of comfort and happiness whilst in the institution (which could be secured at much less cost) the system has accomplished little of ultimate practical value.

With regard to the restoration to independence of the pauper, the claim rests on the example of an occasional case, here and there, of some person or family who received relief for a period, probably in special circumstances, and thereafter were not known to re-apply—at least for a time. Except in the case of orphan children "permanently" maintained, on the death of their parent or parents, it could not be shown in any considerable number of cases that the receipt of Poor Law Relief does more than tide the pauper over a period of exceptional distress.

Even in the case of infirmary treatment it could not be shown that a sufficient measure of restoration takes place to justify the expenditure made to that end. Not more than 40 per cent. of current chargeability in infirmaries could be shown to be cases of first chargeability, and that proportion would in part consist of sickness of a permanent kind. At least another 35 per cent. would be found to consist of chronic paupers—persons who spend their lives between the workhouse and the infirmary, or who habitually resort to the Poor Law in any difficulty. The other 25 per cent. are cases of repeated admission—chronic paupers in the making.

That conception of pauperism which is based upon the assumption that the pauper is the normal person made destitute by necessitous circumstances, fails to recognise that behind those circumstances there is the character and personality of the destitute person; that destitution in an adult is a sure and certain sign of inefficiency (not necessarily a fault), and that efficiency is pre-eminently a matter of hereditary quality.

Let us take the class most favourable to the point of view that the pauper is the normal person—the able-bodied—and try to ascertain the measure of efficiency in that class.

From the Local Government Board Report, 1909-1910, it appears that on January 1st, 1910, there were: Able-bodied indoor poor (in health), 24,916; able-bodied indoor poor (temporarily sick), 34,843; able-bodied outdoor poor, 75,109.

Now let us remember that included in these figures are many persons not directly chargeable :—

- (1) Widows receiving relief for children.
- (2) Deserted wives.
- (3) Women waiting for maternity wards.
- (4) Wives with children, whose husbands are in hospital or prison, and who cannot keep the children without assistance.
- (5) Men relieved on account of the sickness of wife or child.
- (6) Able-bodied men who become chargeable on the death or absence of their wives, and who cannot get on without them.

All the various persons I have named are classed as able-bodied . . . and properly so. They form at least 60 per cent. of the ordinarily able-bodied. Many of these are chargeable only in the sense that they are the responsible heads of families relieved—often by medical attendance only.

I wish to say nothing to weaken that sense of responsibility which alone keeps this form of relief in check, or to minimise the burden imposed upon the community in the maintenance of a service to meet all these varying requirements; but I want to insist that those who study the statistics, and build their social and economic theories out of them do not realise the diversity of causation lying behind this chargeability.

They see that there are so many thousands of able-bodied paupers, and assume that these are unemployed workmen needing only to be employed to be rendered independent.

The chargeability of an able-bodied widow with her children may be, and often is, due as much to biological as to economic cause. . . . The desertion or imprisonment of a husband or wife may be due—and I find frequently is due—to a distinctly inheritable defect—namely, mental. Many husbands and wives part because life together is impossible . . . and for reasons of character associated with inheritance. . . . And in such cases it is good for the community and the race that they should part.

Now all these varying classes cover quite 60 per cent. of the ordinary able-bodied class. Of the remaining 40 per cent., at least 38 per cent. suffer from some mental or physical defect or some abnormality or deficiency, and in nearly every case of indoor able-bodied pauperism it will be found that the individual is of a low mental type.

It is this low mental type that I particularly commend to the attention of those working for the Prevention of Destitution. What are you going to do with it? It is prolific: it is healthy: and under pampering legislation and administration it has a survival value not to be found among the higher and more sensitive types. Yet it has neither the mental nor physical energy to keep pace with the normal population, and be at all times self-supporting.

This low type finds its way inevitably to the workhouse. Lack of initiative, lack of control, and the entire absence of a right perception is a far more important cause of pauperism than any of the alleged economic causes. How do you propose to deal with it?

The Poor Law is said to have failed with regard to this class. What else can be expected? The Poor Law is set and hedged about with a number and variety of contrivances designed by the various religious and charitable agencies to arrest the course of the destitute person on his devious path to the workhouse. The arrangement acts as a sort of human sieve through which only the hopeless and the helpless pass to the Poor Law. All that can be used, turned, or exploited by

the arresting organisations do not reach the Poor Law. . . . It is retained, used, and exploited, and made the subject of favourable report.

And the failure of the Poor Law with this class is not less than the failure of the Education Department, the Central Unemployed Body, or any other organisation, and for this reason: If the organisation treats them as normal persons, they fail to come up to the standard; if they are treated as less than normal, the organisation at once becomes a charity, is pampering as such, and thus increases the volume of its dependents.

To this broad general class four smaller classes regularly contribute:—

(1) The feeble-minded, to which I need only refer.

(2) The wandering family. The man and woman with children who wander up and down the country, never having a settled home, and often no settled locality. Their children are born and die in the workhouse, their existence is eked out with periods of hop-picking, pea- and fruit-picking, in short intervals in prison, the infirmary, or the workhouse. The children are not educated (guardians will not even adopt them because they “do not belong to the parish,” they never learn a trade, and have not even the slum child’s privilege of a settled environment.

(3) The “ins and outs.” These differ from the last, but are so well known that I need only refer to them.

(4) Again, in a special class society permits reproduction, but holds the parent unfit to rear the offspring. Under the Poor Law Act, 1899, guardians were empowered to adopt and withhold from their parents the children of parents whose mode of life is such as to render them unfit to have the control of children. A large number of children have been adopted under this statute, and the parents set free—without enforceable obligation to even contribute towards the maintenance of such children—to recommence the process of reproduction over again, well knowing that they will be relieved of their fresh obligation by the community, if, in the meantime, their conduct is only sufficiently bad.

The Poor Law, like the Prevention of Destitution Scheme, is defenceless against all these classes. Whilst society permits full freedom for production and development, it must provide a service for their care and, at least partial, maintenance; moreover, no deterrent policy will influence men and women who by character and temperament are impervious to the considerations which move the normal person.

No scheme for the Prevention of Destitution can hope to be successful which is not based upon the principle that the individual whose destitution is to be prevented actively co-operates in the measures to that end. This assumes the desire to be assisted and the capacity to co-operate. What is the nature of the appeal to be made in these cases?

The able-bodied pauper in health is a person outside the considerations which move the normal person; appeals to his manliness, his courage, or his self-respect all fall on barren ground, because there is nothing in him to respond. . . . As Dr. Slaughter has so well said, “he was born without manly independence . . . he came into the world with his mainspring broken,” and no sort of virtuous appeal can reach or move him.

To what length is the community prepared to go in its defence against these classes? It is clear that for some of them the only measure is that suggested by the Eugenics Society—namely, detention and segregation.

The important considerations are (1) the liberty of the subject; and (2) the

increase in cost imposed on the present generation for a service the benefit of which will not be felt in this generation. With regard to the former a distinction must be drawn between liberty and licence. The latter term is more appropriate to many existing conditions. If the term liberty is to cover freedom in its widest and wildest sense, then there is no justification for the measure of interference already established.

The increase in cost ought not to be great, due regard being given to the relief afforded to the existing system by the withdrawal of its expensive members, and the possibility of detention in self-maintaining conditions.

Eugenics and the Prevention of Destitution will be best served if and when we secure that the best in our organisation is used in an effort to educate and develop those who are really educable, and in whom the development is possible on the right lines; and that our accommodation for the treatment of sickness shall be available for those who may be nursed back to health and independence to take their share in doing the world's work, instead of, as at present, being absorbed by the hopeless, the incompetent, and the defective. Thus would be saved the waste in our organisation, not only in itself, but in the improper survival value it gives to the defective.

Any scheme for the Prevention of Destitution, to be successful, must take into account the value of original human quality, and must consider the consequences of supplementing the survival value of defective strains.

Survival value consists of two parts—production and preservation. The fecundity of the defective is abundantly established; the preservative element is supplied in the social organisation which so elaborates its administration as, not merely to arrest the natural decease of the defective, but to preserve and develop the defective community on better terms than the normal person—and at his expense.
