

# **The Problem**

OF THE

# **Feeble-Minded**

**An Abstract of the Report of the  
Royal Commission on the Care  
and Control of the Feeble-Minded**

**With an Introduction by the  
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## SEGREGATION

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THE Royal Commission on the Feeble-Minded have attacked a Eugenic problem of the first order of magnitude with thoroughness and remarkable success. A great deal of the evidence before them emphasizes the view that the annual output of mentally defective children admits of being largely diminished in future generations, and that feeble-minded persons may be more kindly treated and better protected than now, at apparently an inconsiderable increase of total cost to the community. They propose to do this by means of the continuous control of the mentally defective and the segregation of a large number of them in labour colonies and the like, to which only a false philanthropy can object, when the conditions are fully known. Every high form of civilisation brings evils in its train, eating like cancer into the constitution of the people, and surely leading to their gradual deterioration and ultimate ruin, unless they are boldly withstood in good time. The propagation of mental deficiency is one of these evils and the report shows that it is now ripe to be dealt with.

One person in every 118 of our population is mentally defective, being either mad, idiotic, or feeble-minded. There are little short of a quarter of a million of these unfortunate persons in England and Wales alone. Nearly one-half of them are in asylums:

The Royal Commissioners calculate that of the remainder more than 66,000 are merely feeble-minded, and are unprovided for; also that these are precisely the most dangerous class of all when considered from what I should describe as a Eugenic point of view.

The persons in question are naturally incapable of standing alone. If protected and supervised they may lead harmless, and even useful, lives and do something towards earning their living. But when unprotected and cast upon the world, they go to the bad. They do so, not necessarily through vicious propensities, but from the absence of will-power to resist temptations; and quickly sink into the pauper and criminal classes. The women commonly become prostitutes. The feeble-minded, as distinguished from the idiots, are an exceptionally fecund class, mostly of illegitimate children, and a terrible proportion of their offspring are born mentally deficient. A decorous family life among their children is obviously impossible; the conditions of their nurture prevent it. Some of the issue of the feeble-minded are wholly mad or imbecile and find their way to asylums; others are merely feeble-minded and drift into bad ways as their parents did before them; in others, again, the evil is latent, but may break out in a subsequent generation. So the mischief goes on increasingly, and, judging from the growth of insanity, a considerable part of the population has already become bearers of germs of degeneracy.

The report contains abundant and painful evidence of all this; voluminous extracts from it might be made; I give here only three, which have been taken more or less at random and in which I have slightly

altered a word or stop here and there to make them read more fluently.

*Vol. I., p. 538.*—"Mental deficiency is by its nature and definition a permanent and incurable condition. Once having come upon the State for support and protection, the presumption should be that the individual continues to require its help and control; that he or she is not in a position to rear a family or to contract a marriage; and that the *onus* of proving that he or she no longer requires support and control should be thrown on the individual or his relatives."

*Vol. I., p. 108.*—"Whatever improvement may result, the expense and trouble are thrown away if the child, later, is thrown out into the world, without being able to protect and take care of itself. Protection, shelter, and care must, as a rule, be life-long and permanent. . . . It is to the interest of the girls themselves, who would seem in general to be quite happy in such institutions, and who do not, as a rule, attempt to leave them."

*Vol. I., p. 637.*—*Question 11017:* "You say there should be institutions for those whom you discharge?"  
*Answer:* "Yes, certainly, they ought not to go into the world, any of them, never mind how competent they are to work."

Almost all the evidence printed in the report points unmistakably to segregation for life as the only means of preventing feeble-minded girls from doing great harm to the community. They propagate children freely, as already mentioned, who, whether they be as little, less, or more, mentally endowed than themselves, are in all cases subject to most undesirable conditions of nurture.

The questions then arise whether segregation can be accomplished without cruelty to the subjects of it and without prohibitory expense. The reply, so far as it goes, to the first of these questions is strongly affirmative. Not a few institutions, as labour colonies and others, exist here, in Germany, and elsewhere, but especially in America, where feeble-minded persons are taken in, where they live happily and feel as if at home, and where they remain for many years. Unfortunately, as yet, no power exists for their compulsory detention. The inmates are taken out, it may be, by their not wise relatives, or they want a change and leave of their own accord. Anyhow, when they quit the shelter of the institution, they usually go to the bad, and after a time very often apply to be taken in again, with an actual or a forthcoming illegitimate baby.

Feeble-mindedness is of many grades. In a large institution, the inmates, whether men or women, can be graded and be much more easily supervised than in small ones, and be occupied in work, greatly to their own happiness, or in play, according to their several capacities. As regards cost of maintenance, some few of the feeble-minded may wholly or nearly pay for their keep by their work; almost all of them can do something towards the expenses. The cost of maintenance per head, all included, does not necessarily exceed £25 a year. What the average cost of each uncared-for, feeble-minded person may now be can only be guessed, but in workhouse and prison maintenance, in thefts, destruction and food, it may be safely reckoned to far exceed that sum.

The general upshot of the Report of the Royal Commission is that a Central Department should be

created, with authority to deal with all persons who are so mentally defective as to be unable to manage their own affairs, or who are a source of danger to others. At present these persons fall under many different and overlapping authorities, while the feeble-minded are, for the most part, under no definite authority at all. As to the details of the scheme, it is hopeless to attempt to describe them intelligibly in a few lines, the existing conditions and the proposed reforms of them being far too complex and interdependent to admit of a brief summary. But all these details appear to have been thought out with thoroughness and elaboration by an exceptionally competent body of men, after a prolonged inquiry and the examination of a multitude of witnesses. Their proposals, though here and there drastic, are always considerate towards the feelings of the unhappy persons to whom they refer, and to those of their relatives. It can hardly, then, be doubted that this remarkable Report will be examined with minute care by the officials of the departments concerned, and that in its present, or, it may be, in a somewhat amended form, the action it advocates will ultimately gain a Eugenic victory over evils that have long lain unnoticed, but are now shown to be a very serious and growing danger to our national efficiency.