

Provision for Imbeciles.

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON PROVISION FOR IDIOTIC AND FEEBLE-MINDED PERSONS.

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The first report of your Standing Committee on Provision for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Persons, delivered at the Conference of St. Louis, 1884, discussed the numbers and distribution of this unfortunate class, their susceptibility to educational, moral, and physical training, the obligations of the State and society to them, and presented plans and suggestions for the organization of State institutions wherever these unfortunates shall be accepted as the wards of a Commonwealth.

The second report made to your Conference, at Washington last year, awakened attention throughout the country. Statistical in its character, and dealing with the much or little that had been done by specific legislation in twenty States of the Union and by Congress itself, it was supplemented by that ethical and thrilling description of the training of a feeble-minded child, uttered by the late lamented James B. Richards. Published even imperfectly in your Proceedings, it is a classic in the language of modern charity. It has been copied into a hundred publications, and has animated the eloquence of as many pulpits in our land. The discussion which followed is a memorable one in the annals of the Conference: that evening at the national capital, given by you to God's innocent ones, will bless you forever.

Because of the unfortunate absence of our chairman, Dr. Stewart, his subordinates on the committee can give only a brief supplement to what has been done already, gathering a few points from the reports of fifteen institutions, as made during the past year.

MASSACHUSETTS.—The Massachusetts School for the Feeble-minded at South Boston has on roll one hundred and fifty-one. The

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Discussion.

Mr. MOTT, of Minnesota.—I was called to draft the bill under which our State School for Idiots and Imbeciles is organized; and, having been a member of the board of directors of the Institute with which the school is connected for twenty-three years, there comes to me the thought of the immeasurable relief to the homes from which they come. The first movement that was made in this State was to remove the few that had drifted into the asylums for the insane. They were given to us to see what we could do for them. At the very next meeting of the legislature, as chairman of the committee on charitable institutions, I presented a report and a bill which provided for the care and custody of these idiotic children as well as the education of the feeble-minded. After picturing to those legislators the homes in which were inmates, hopeless, helpless, shameless, enslaving the mothers, demoralizing other members of the family, that bill passed both Houses unanimously. So I say to you, Go home to your people, and tell them that it is not only relief to the suffering subjects themselves that is wanted, but it is a duty that every legislator of this republic owes to the homes,—in many cases, refined and cultivated homes,—to make provision for these children. Try this, tell the truth, and you will find that American voters are always true to American homes, and will never fail to relieve and protect them.

Mr. MORRIS, of Indiana.—My observation the past year, as superintendent of the Indiana Asylum for Feeble-minded Children, has led me to believe that in many instances we confer as great a favor upon the parent, in caring for the child, as we confer upon the unfortunate child itself. If it be said that public institutions are unnecessary, since attendants can be secured to perform these duties in the families, let it be remembered that the very presence of such an attendant is a constant reminder of the misfortune that has befallen them, and increases rather than diminishes the weight of their sorrow. But all families so afflicted are not wealthy. The poor we have always with us; and when, with poverty, they are compelled to face the vacant stare, and listen to the idle babblings of the idiot or imbecile, how untold must be their misery! Add to the misfortune of such a family the drunkenness of the father, and we have a state of affairs that exists in many a locality. A short time since, a drunken father called at our institution to see his imbecile child, seven years of age. I learned that he had buried two children, both imbeciles, and had a little girl at home, a worse subject than the boy for whom we were caring. This little fellow had all the actions of his drunken father, and was a living demonstration of the terrible evils of tobacco and beer.

Dr. DANA, of Minnesota.—After listening to these two suggestive papers, I want the privilege of setting home the duty that we in Minnesota owe to the class whose needs have just been presented. Much as we have to be proud of, because of what has been done, I will hazard the statement that we are not half-alive to the claims of the class in question or to our obligations promptly to care for the same. We think that, in this Commonwealth, we have made ample provision, inasmuch as we have accommodations at Faribault for about one hundred: whereas there are already some seventy applications on file for those who cannot as yet be admitted, and the number provided for represents only one-ninth of the imbeciles estimated to be proper subjects for State provision. It is only a few years since we began to do anything at all in Minnesota for these unfortunates. Now, we have advanced so far that we have arrived at the point where we not only feel that they ought to be housed in institutions, but that, in the vast majority of cases, they are improvable. I devoutly wish that all our citizens might visit Faribault, and see what has been done with these children rescued from homes in which they were an incessant burden to fathers and mothers, and almost a curse to brothers and sisters. Transferred to the school at Faribault, they are there medically cared for, educated, and trained by gifted women, who have consecrated themselves to the teaching of these most dependent of all God's children. The time has come for every commonwealth in these United States to establish an institution for the feeble-minded, not only for the improvable among them, but, as in that splendid institution of Dr. Kerlin's, for those as well who belong to the custodial class. I speak with deep feeling on this subject. So far as Minnesotians are concerned, I want them to be aroused to enthusiasm in doing for this class, so that, when the next legislature assembles, provision may be made for the enlargement of our work in this direction. We do not realize how large is the number that we have not yet taken under the care and guardianship of the State. Not only feelings of humanity should urge us to action, but also the necessity of protecting society. I believe that this State ought to provide for the life-care and housing of those we are now considering; for only thus can communities be secured from the propagation of their kind. The worst thing possible is to allow such to be kept in poorhouses, where they go on multiplying their species and augmenting human misery and sin. There is not a grander charity under heaven or a more hopeful and noble work than in doing for this pitiable and dependent class. May we of Minnesota learn to love this work, and remember with ever grateful regard the brother to whom we owe the foundation of our institution and the policy that will undoubtedly shape it for years to come!

Dr. BYERS, of Ohio.—I should like to indorse every word that Dr. Dana has uttered, and to emphasize with all the force I can the fact that the only provision made outside of State institutions for the education and custodial care of the feeble-minded is to be found in the county poorhouses, where they are subject to every possible form

of neglect, and where the species is being constantly propagated. I could horrify this audience by a recital of facts that have come under my personal observation in this regard. We have between four and five hundred idiotic persons under county care in the different county infirmaries of my own State. For years, we have been urging custodial care, and are now hoping that the time is not far distant when, in connection with our educational institutions for feeble-minded youth, we shall have proper custodial care under the same administration. When girls are discharged from the institutions, we have no place to send them but to the county infirmaries. The State is not exercising a wise economy that permits anything of that kind. We must provide custodial care as well as education.

Dr. BUCKNER, of Texas, said that he was very glad to hear so much in behalf of establishing homes and schools for feeble-minded children. He was glad to be able to say to the people of Texas, on his return, that philanthropists are emphasizing the importance of this reform; and he hoped that they would continue to work for it until a home was established in every State for feeble-minded children.

Bishop WHIPPLE, of Minnesota.—We are living in a time when opinions and creeds are being very strangely sifted, when Christian folk are brought face to face, day by day, with men who utter doubts that touch the very quick of our hearts. I am not sure that we can silence questionings by arguments; but I am sure that the men and the women who, in the spirit and the power of Christ, go out to care for God's suffering children, whatever may be their creed, no one can gainsay, and no one can ever deny. Another thought, however, that I want to present perhaps some of you may tell me is not practicable. But we have heard again and again during this Conference that the awful sin of intemperance,—that deadly plague that is coming up on to the very thresholds of our homes, that which has left scars on our hearts that never can be healed this side of the grave,—that this is the parent of most of the crime, imbecility, and pauperism that curse our beloved land. We all feel it, and we all pay our just meed of honor to the brave hearts who stand in the forefront to effect a reform. Every State, every Christian State, recognizes the fact that there are grievous dangers connected with the traffic in strong drink, and for that reason will only allow men to vend it under the State's license. The legislators of States recognize clearly the fact that it is a crime against humanity when spirituous drinks are vended to minors, and the State has placed a penalty on this crime. That penalty for the most part is not enforced. I ask you to consider, then, whether it is not practicable to create a public opinion, so that our legislators shall pass a law that any man who, under a license, shall vend spirituous drinks to minors, shall never receive a license again. You would avoid thereby all those questions of punishment for the crime. I merely ask you to consider this question. Perhaps it will help us to interpose another barrier to this great evil.

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