

THE WELFARE OF THE FEEBLE-MINDED.

The Duchess of Sutherland, who, as President of the National Association for Promoting the Welfare of the Feeble-minded, presided at a special meeting of the Association held on June 11th, at Stafford House, London, put the case for generous public support of the objects of the Association with clearness and force. The physically and mentally defective child, she pointed out, has every chance, under existing conditions, of becoming part of the "scum" of our population, which is just another way of saying that many vagabond and criminal adults were in childhood mentally defective children, who might have been trained for better things. "They knew," her Grace said, "that in many of our asylums to-day there were men and women whom Mr. Asquith spoke of on the second reading of the Prisons Bill as persons of morbid and erratic nervous systems, to whom it was difficult to apply anything like the ordinary canons of moral responsibility." Such persons, however, are not only to be found in asylums, they are also in prisons, in work-houses, and, when not of vicious habits, they float about as part of the starving and struggling flotsam and jetsam of the industrial life of our large cities. When so high an authority as Mr. Asquith so clearly, and with strict accuracy as to facts, expresses the opinion that a considerable number of prisoners are persons of morbid and erratic nervous systems, to whom it is difficult to apply the ordinary canons of moral responsibility, there seems good ground for the Duchess's remark that the Association is doing in a measure a work which the State should do for itself. But the State takes no account of the roads along which come the lunatic, the pauper, and the criminal, although they are tolerably well defined; and until the State takes the reasonable view of its obligations in this connection in at least making some attempt to prevent that which may be preventable, such associations as this have excellent work to do. Her Grace remarked truly that fifty years ago there would have been no hope for those deficient. It would be interesting to consider whether the problem of the deficient member of society was quite the same fifty years ago as it is to-day. Pauperism has decreased, lunacy has increased, and a certain change has come over the criminal population during the last fifty years. The violent, insubordinate prisoner of the last generation of criminals has been replaced by a type of criminal more amenable to prison discipline. Concurrently with this change, no doubt, there has been considerable amelioration of the disciplinary methods adopted towards criminals, but whether *post hoc ergo propter hoc* is still an open question. The social changes that underlie those facts have an important bearing upon the whole class of questions which have as their common feature the element of deficiency. Every step towards organised efficiency in trade, commerce, education, and society generally, means that a new test has been created for the discovery and elimination of the weak and the unfit. That truth is not always present to the minds of those who advocate changes in our commercial, industrial, and social arrangements; it explains, however, some of the unhappy consequences that accompany economic and social progress. Fortunately, human nature is equal to the new difficulties; and though the progress of the last fifty years has brought with it the problem of the deficient members of society who cannot adjust themselves to their social environment, there has arisen a public spirit animating the more fortunate members of society to do their duty towards their less fortunate brethren. Everywhere there is evidence that this is so, and that at least the question of the care and education of mentally defective children is receiving earnest practical attention. London, Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow, and other large centres of population are moving in the direction of providing special facilities for the care and training of such children. Whether the instruction of defective children requires to be carried on in specially equipped schools, separate as regards buildings from schools in which the ordinary standard work is carried on, is a question for the school boards to consider. The obvious objections to that method are the cost of separate buildings, and being limited in number, the distance at which the schools would be placed from the homes of the majority of the children.

But we would encourage school boards to try the experiment of having separate class-rooms in the ordinary schools rather than separate buildings; and we would say further, do not attempt too much in the way of purely educational training, because the aptitudes of mentally defective children are usually industrial and

musical rather than in the region of memory and reasoning. The practical difficulty of separating the imbecile child, who should be placed in an imbecile institution, from the mentally defective child, who can be taught in a special class and kept at home, is one which the experience of a medical man, specially qualified for the work, can best determine. Circumstances unconnected with the state of the child's mind may occasionally determine the question for the one form of training or the other. But after all has been done for those children that school boards can do, there will still be work for such associations as that for whose funds the Duchess of Sutherland pleads. The officials who have to administer the Poor Law, the Criminal Laws, and the Lunacy Laws ought to welcome the help of this and kindred associations in promoting the welfare of many adult deficients who come their way, and for whose care when out of their hands there exists no provision.

It is obvious that the ladies and gentlemen who are trying to awaken public interest in this matter are not only doing a needful and praiseworthy thing, but they are tackling a subject of wider relations than some of them may appreciate. Failure to appreciate their proper functions may lead them to adopt methods and encourage schemes which may overlap, and perhaps threaten the financial stability of existing institutions for the care of imbeciles and idiots. Illustration of this is to be found in the fact that the principal and secretary of the Royal Albert Asylum, Lancaster, has found it necessary in the interests of that institution to write a letter to the editor of the *Manchester Guardian* in order to make clear to the benevolent public of Manchester, who have been asked to give £20,000 for the erection of two institutions in Manchester for the housing and training of feeble-minded children, that the Royal Albert Asylum exists "for the care, education, and training of idiotic, imbecile, and weak-minded children and young persons." There is real danger that the public may fail to apprehend the difference between the existing imbecile institutions and the proposed new provision for backward and feeble-minded children, with the result that public support may be given indifferently to both classes of institutions, to the financial injury of both. It is due to the existing institutions that those who are promoting the new movement should clearly define the objects and limits of their scheme before setting up establishments and appealing for public support. The eloquent and suggestive speeches of the Duchess of Sutherland and Miss Dendy, made at a meeting at Manchester in support of the scheme for the building of two institutions in that city, show that the line of demarcation between their scheme and the work of imbecile institutions is quite clear and distinct to their minds. It should therefore be easy for them to make it clear to the public, and it is their duty to do so, because it may be assumed that the sympathy of their audience was gained by the thought being present to their minds that help was asked for imbeciles. We say so because we are not at all sure that public sympathy is ready waiting an outlet towards feeble-minded thieves, loafers, *et hoc genus*; and it is certainly not clear that the responsible authorities, whose business it is to punish criminals and prevent crime, are ready to back up the efforts of this new movement. The first task to be undertaken is educative; that is to say, educative of public opinion regarding the true nature of what may be called social inefficiency as a sign or symptom of some forms of mental weakness. How far it will be possible to apply the doctrines of degeneracy in a practical scheme which will meet the requirements of the case, and at the same time satisfy the juridical point of view, is the problem to be solved. Prevention, which is both easier and better than cure in most cases, is the ideal here; but it must not be forgotten that the majority of lifelong criminals begin their career of crime in youth, without, in many cases, manifesting signs of deficiency in childhood, and if this work is to be done well it must include the care of the juvenile and adolescent offender.

We welcome the scheme as an attempt to deal practically with a complicated and difficult problem that has been long enough in the region of mere discussion, and we hope that its promoters will successfully keep clear of the difficulties that lie in its way even at the threshold.
