Children of All Ages--A Plea for the Degenerate

By ALEXANDER JOHNSON

General Secretary, National Conference of Charities and Correction; Formerly Superintendent of the Indiana School for Feeble-Minded Youth.

There is nothing which helps so much to a right comprehension of the feeble-minded as to remember that no matter what may be their actual ages in years, in heart and mind they are children. To fully realize this fact, one must know them long and intimately and know many of them. More mistakes in their treatment come from neglect or forgetfulness of this cardinal fact than from all the causes put together.

Now, while it is true that the feeble-minded are children, they are unlike other children in the fact that they will never grow up to manhood and womanhood. They will never be fit for the responsibilities of adult life. So we must consider them to be children of all ages.

No one knows just how many there are of this class in the United States. The census office tried to enumerate them in 1880, and again in 1890. But the results were so evidently inaccurate that, in 1900 and 1910, the only number of feeble-minded given in the census was of those in institutions. That the number is large and that it is out of all proportion to the accommodations provided for them in the states that have institutions for their care is certain. Every institution of the kind usually has a long “waiting list” of names of proper inmates for whom there is no room. Often the names stay on the list till the boy or girl has passed the age of admission.

While we have no exact knowledge of the number, we are able to make a fairly good estimate. We know pretty nearly how many insane people we must care for, and in countries where more accurate statistics exist than we possess it is found that the number of the two classes is very nearly equal. In a few of our cities, careful examination has been made of the children of school age and the number of feeble-minded among them has been found. A partial census has been taken in several of our states of the number of defectives, and, although these figures have not been official, they may be useful in connection with the others. From these calculations and other data we are fairly confident that the proportion is somewhere between one in 300 and one in 500 of the total population. To be on the safe side, let us assume that only one in 500, or one-fifth of 1 per cent of the whole population, are of this class. That will mean in the whole country rather more than 186,000. We believe that this is a very conservative estimate.

Now, we should remember that the term “feeble-minded,” as commonly used, is not a strictly scientific category. It is merely a useful general term. The scientific classification of the people whom this term denotes is difficult and technical, and, for popular use, a division of them into three classes is sufficient. We call the three classes Idiots, Imbeciles and Morons. The Idiot is the lowest class. Some of them are quite helpless and have to be fed and tended like babies. The Moron is the highest class. They are often so nearly normal that it takes trained observation to detect their defects. The Im-
beciles of various grades come in between these two. The classes differ among themselves very greatly. The differences between the Idiot and the Imbecile, and the Imbecile and the Moron, are usually very much greater than the difference between a Moron and a normal person. Then, too, the classes grade into each other. There are individuals concerning whom it is difficult to say to which class they belong. It would be easily possible to stand fifteen or twenty of each of the three classes in a row, with the Morons at one end and the Idiots at the other, so arranged that no two people in charge of feeble-minded persons would certainly agree upon the exact place to draw the line between the classes.

It seems probable that the feeble-minded as a class are increasing in proportion to the general population, although it is not possible to be certain about this. It is certain, however, that people generally are giving much more attention to them than formerly. The defectives cause a heavy burden on the tax payer, not merely because they must be supported in some way at the cost of the public (whether that is in proper institutions or in places that are not desirable for them), but because all the social problems, of crime, vice, insanity, pauperism, blindness, deafness, chronic disease, illegitimacy and all the rest are complicated and made more difficult because of feeble-mindedness. The superintendent of the Elmira Reformatory found 20 to 30 per cent of his inmates to be feeble-minded. In the state prison of Indiana, 12 per cent were found to be mentally defective, either insane, epileptic or feeble-minded. One-third of the defectives had been committed for such crimes as murder, manslaughter and rape. Of the non-defective prisoners, less than half that proportion were in prison for crimes of the sort mentioned. Many tramps and many prostitutes are feeble-minded. Among the paupers, there are many either plainly feeble-minded or on the border line.

Where do they come from? A few cases are caused by accident or infantile diseases; probably dissipation in the parents causes a few cases; a few are simply variations from the normal type which our present science cannot, or does not, explain. But by far the largest proportion, certainly 75 per cent of the whole number, are direct results of heredity. The children are defective because their parents were defective.

If the above statement is even approximately true, it follows that we could make sure that none of the present stock of feeble-minded people should become parents, then in about thirty years there would only be about one-fourth the present number. Instead of the 186,000 for whom we must provide, there would only be about 46,500 for our children to care for, or perhaps a few more than that number, owing to the increase of total population.

We have said the number is probably very near the same as the insane. Now, of the total number of insane, there are about 85 per cent under something like proper care and control. Of the total number of the feeble-minded, only about 15 per cent are under proper care and control. Yet it is easy to see that the danger to our body politic from the feeble-minded is very much greater than from the insane. No danger can be so great as that of the lowering of the average character and strength of the population. Few of the insane, even if they were neglected, would have children, and even if they did, comparatively few of the children would inherit the defects of the parent, yet of the feeble-minded, neglected and uncontrolled, nearly all will become parents, and very few of the children will escape the taint in one form or another.

The above statement must be taken simply as a fact of experience. It is manifestly impossible to compile actual statistics on such questions as these, and we must base our opinion on the judgment of people who have had much experience in dealing with degenerates. The reason for this care of the insane and this neglect of the feeble-minded is because we are afraid of the one and only despise the other.

Another thing is true. Degeneration tends to extinction. If the defectives were simply let alone they would soon disappear. If we could transport the whole class of feeble-minded in the United States to some island in the Pacific ocean, and keep everybody else away from them, they would die out in three or four gen-
The mother of a feebleminded child is usually a feebleminded woman, but it is the exception when the father is a feebleminded man. The weak and decaying stock is constantly recruited and strengthened by strong but vicious blood from outside the class. The treatment which feebleminded women and girls are subject to, when they are not carefully guarded and controlled, is one of the blackest of our many social sins.

All these things make us conclude that the mother state owes to these weak children of hers, not only care and food and clothing, but control. In some way they must be kept from the world, and kept permanently. The humane, scientific, economic, Christian and certain method of care and control is that of segregation. They should be taken out of the world and set off by themselves in “Villages of the Simple,” as dear old Dr. Kerlin used to call them, where they may be clean and happy and useful and safe—where they may be kept from bad men and the trials and temptations of the outside world with which they are unable to struggle successfully.

Some other schemes have been suggested, but they are either repugnant to our humanity or else they would need also segregated care to make them effective. The opponents of the method of segregation base their objection on the cost which they claim would be prohibitory. With kind care, common sense management, the absence of ostentation and display defectives may be cared for at a very low cost, certainly not more than two-thirds of the average cost of the insane. But it is also a fact that a great many of them can be made fully self-supporting by their own labor, if they are only properly handled. Certainly all of the Morons and at least one-third of the Imbeciles can be usefully employed and earn their living; many of the lower grade of Imbeciles can be taught to do some useful labor; not more than 20 or 30 per cent of the whole number are entirely incapable of useful work. The first essential is happiness. Make them happy and you can do much with them; fail in that, and your failure is total. And they are easily made happy. They are like little children, affectionate and fickle; pleased with trifles; a kind word, a smile, a pat on the shoulder, a word of praise, gratifies them and calls out their best efforts.

Even if the ratio of cost were as large as that of caring for the insane, it would still be economic for the state to care for all the degenerates. When we think how largely their presence complicates all the other burdens, the saving to be effected by their proper control and final approximate elimination would be felt in every department of government. What every state should do is to carry further the work which many have begun—to take in at once to the training schools all the young defectives and all the women of child-bearing age, and to train them and employ them usefully. This would be the wise policy for every state, and the results in happiness and the diminution of vice and crime would be more rapid and complete than can be obtained from any other one method.

The United States is proposing to build two battle ships every year. The cost of one battle ship would be almost enough to care for the more serious cases of degenerates. It is, of course, a large proposition and a great thing to do, but the American people are not afraid of great things; they are looking for good investments and are willing to spend any amount of money if only they can secure an adequate return. Nothing that the public could spend would bring so large and so prompt a return as the expenditure for the complete care of the feebleminded.

**SPARKS FROM A SOCIAL WORKER’S ANVIL.**

Empires are built upon babies.

The hope of a nation is in its children.

Small families do not necessarily possess the choicest children.

Infecundity is both the symptom and the cause of a decomposing nation.

One in every 16.6 marriages in the United States is dissolved by divorce.

The family home is the chief place of development of the social individual.
THE CHILD AT CAMP ALGONQUIN.

Legend: Many years ago Camp Algonquin was a part of the Red Man's paradise. It is rolling and beautifully wooded with noble oaks. The Fox River bounds it at the foot of the hills. The story goes that the Potawatomie Indians bivouacked here when the forest was young, and the ruddy mothers hung their pappooses in the young trees, and thus, the legend runs, happened the bending of the twigs, the youthful saplings, which inclined the trees that today, from graciously nodding trunks, cast their cooling shadows on the green slopes of Camp Algonquin. However this may be, the spot is now permanently dedicated to mothers and little children, dwellers of the congested tenement regions from the big city now builded where also the Indians used to hunt—one place the country is "besides a long ways off."