

## FEEBLE-MINDEDNESS—THE PROBLEM—CONDITIONS IN INDIANA.

EDNA R. JATHO, Philadelphia, Pa.

Employed on Survey of Indiana under Indiana Committee on Mental Defectives.

In the three-fold problem of Mental Defect we have Insanity, Epilepsy and Feeble-mindedness. Insanity and epilepsy, while not properly understood, are popularly recognized and are looked upon as explaining and excusing social irregularities and crime. But feeble-mindedness, which includes by far the largest proportion of mental defectives, is unrecognized, misunderstood and condemned.

The feeble-minded are adult children; their struggle to lead adult lives in competition with their normal fellows is a pitiful succession of social and economic failures. For a few minutes I want to discuss the problem of feeble-mindedness from its psychological basis and then proceed to the rehearsal of stories of real folks—stories that show how these adult children fall short in their effort to take a proper place in community life.

Feeble-mindedness, or amentia, is an absence of the quality that makes for normality. It is the place at which mankind loses his high birthright of reasoning power, and becomes something less than the man who has developed, through his years of childish growth and the struggles of adolescence, that perfect mind that makes him the highest of all creatures, a reasoning being. Amentia is a unit character, and represents a level of mentality lower than normal in all its manifestations. It does away with the old "faculty" psychology. A feeble-minded person could not be an idiot in powers of attention and have a good memory; nor will he reason well and perhaps fail to have imagination; nor will he have strong volition and lack judgment. His mental processes will be, on the whole, those of a normal child of the age at which his (the feeble) mind reached its level. In so far as any normal child will vary in special mental aptitudes, just so far will a feeble-minded person vary in ability for specific kinds of mental activity. But he will in no point rise above his mental level—he will do no more in other lines than a normal child of the same mental age, gifted with a one-sided talent. For example, a man of thirty, having a mentality of eight years, may be a very good reader. He has a peculiar aptness for the recognition of symbols and for stringing them together; but he will

understand no more than a normal child of eight who, it happens, is better at reading than at anything else.

Believing with me that the mental level determines the ability of the feeble-minded individual, I may mention in passing the three great levels at which we classify subnormal mentality. There is first and lowest, the Idiot, who attains a mental ability equal to that of babies one and two years old. Some idiots can feed themselves and move about as smart babies do—others cannot. Many idiots of mature age are as helpless and as dirty as tiny babies. The Imbecile rises a little higher in the scale—he attains to a mind like that of normal children from three up to eight years of age. Low-grade imbeciles play a little, show interest in their surroundings and can make known their physical needs. As we come higher in the scale of imbecility we find these aments able to do simple routine tasks and run easy errands. Above the imbeciles are the Morons—those whose mental power resembles that of children from eight up to twelve years of age. These Morons can do simple tasks with only a little supervision—they make good household helpers (not managers)—they can run machinery and often work without supervision—but they cannot plan. The difference between the occupational ability in low, middle and high-grade Morons is almost as startling as the vivid contrast between normal and defective.

Mental level or “mental age” is a result of a gradual slowing up and final and complete stoppage of mental development. The limitations manifest themselves between infancy and adolescence, leaving the subnormal individuals at a mental standstill somewhere between infancy and twelve years of age, while their bodies go on with the passing of the years, and the evolution of physical phenomena makes them men and women in the flesh while still they are children in the mind.

For nearly a year I have helped to search the highways and towns of certain counties of Indiana to find these defectives. They have not been hard to find, because they are to be found everywhere. Every State has them; no community escapes; no kind or amount of industry can free you from them; no legal rigor can expel them (except to some other community). Your State needs a farm colony—it needs more than one—for the feeble-minded. I can tell you of one place in a beautiful town where you would have a colony ready-made by building a fence around the slums. There is a section of about twelve blocks where in every one of the fifty houses there is defect of one kind or another—pauperism, syphilitic infirmities, and immorality walking hand in hand with feeble-mindedness. Some of the homes are clean, some are too filthy to talk about. There are about eight family names represented in this community and they all belong to each other somehow. As one old Moron woman said, “Yes, mom, we air all kin here. I jest found

out after I took my second man that he were some kind of a cousin to my kids." The people who live in the beautiful homes of this fine town know they have these folks in their back yards, but they say, "What can we do?" And I repeat it, "What can they do?" I know another very beautiful and prosperous town in Indiana with a black spot like that in it—not so big, but one in which the problem of prostitution assumes alarming proportions.

The feeble-minded population of towns and accessible country districts shifts with the tides of business. In the woods about the lakes and in the isolation of river bottoms we find the defectives persisting, in spite of barrenness, starvation and inconvenience. Their wants are few and easily satisfied. In the lake community, in the northern part of the State, are found several groups of defectives who have lived in the same spot for two or three generations. One such family contained sixteen children, three of whom are normal, have married and have normal families. Two others are low-grade Morons, and the remaining eleven are idiots, resembling some of their paternal kinfolks, among whom idiocy and imbecility were not uncommon. Seven of these eleven idiots could not walk and none of them could talk. Only three of them are now living. The home that shelters them and their mother was left to them by their father. It is a tiny four-room cabin in the hills, inaccessible except by footpath. One room of this house has fallen away from the rest, and the other three rooms are small and dark, with wide cracks between the logs, through which the rain and snow drifts in on their beds.

You must hear about a family living in the river-bottoms in the southern part of the State. Because of the great number of adult feeble-minded we were finding in this community we often went two together, because we felt more sure of our judgment in a given case, when we could talk it over afterwards. The man who drove our car would try any kind of a road; but half a mile down the field towards this house he gave it up and walked with us through the fields until a turn in the path took him out of sight of the car, which he wanted to watch. Leaving him there to await our return, we went through the woods, across a freshly ploughed field, through a field of tall corn, and at last we reached the house of our search. We could never have found it had not the voices of the boys in the barn guided us to it. It was in the lowest and wettest part of the field, set like an ark on a scarcely dry mound. The vapor was so heavy that it kept us coughing. Here in dirt and disorder lived a family of five, all Morons. Twin boys are of low grade, the parents only middle grade, and an eighteen-year-old girl a little brighter than the others. Their isolation was as complete as if they were on another planet. The mother said her husband was not

strong and no one would rent him a good farm. This farm is under water two months in the flood season, and in the winter they cannot get out because of snow. Yet they never try to better themselves—they accept their condition with calm indifference.

The broad highway of town and open country has its fascination for the feeble-minded just as it has for the rest of us. I cannot walk on the street at any time and fail to see defectives. But when, as in Indiana, it has been my "job" to hunt for them, I need only to select my section of the town and then go into house after house and talk with them. I like to talk with a Moron mother or father—they will tell so guilelessly just what I want to know: "Katy's baby ain't got no father. No, no, Katy never was real bright—she didn't learn nothing in school. John? He's fourteen and in the fourth grade—he's smarter than the others. John can write his name real nice. The old man, you say? Nope. He can't read. My first man could, though, but not the second one. This man can't keep no steady job; he's working on the coal bank now. Henry? Oh, Henry's in school in Indianapolis." I ask, "Is he in Plainfield?" "Yes, that's the place. Seems like he'll never get out. My least boy, he's ain't stout and he has red, sore eyes; the teacher can't learn him nothing 'cause he can't see. My other big girl, she's got red, sore eyes, too—" and so on.

Behind it and through it all I can read the old, old story of prostitution, illegitimacy, delinquency and general no-accountness of the feeble minds behind it. You may think I made up this story, but it is the story I heard from a gaudily dressed low-grade Moron mother, who did not know that I knew that she herself was a prostitute.

In the towns and cities the presence of the feeble-minded complicates our social service; it increases the number of accidents and adds to the list of the unemployed. The school system is corroded with the lower 3 per cent of its population mentally unfit to profit by its teaching. The administration of poor relief by the overseers of the poor lends almost all of its time and money to the feeble-minded of the township. I just had one township trustee tell me, with something like disgust, that two of his many paupers had married the only two paupers (widows) in a nearby township—thereby clearing one record and adding two families of feeble-minded children to his list. Later in the same day the trustee who had lost his two pauper women and their families told me the same story—but he thought it was funny! Poor farms are filled with feeble-minded folk who never did get along, and many of them entered the farm between twenty and forty years of age and have spent many years there. I talked with one woman in a county farm who had married four times, her last two husbands being inmates of the same poor farm. She had one epileptic daughter. That girl is now

an inmate of the farm at twenty years of age, and last summer she gave birth to an illegitimate baby, which fortunately died at birth.

You may turn your head as you will, you still face mental defect, and the bulk of it is feeble-mindedness. We have established, as the result of the survey of ten counties in Indiana, that 2.2 per cent of the population is defective. Of this, 1.7 per cent is feeble-minded. Much of our crime, nearly all of our pauperism, a large proportion of school failures, practically all public prostitution, and a share of the gamut of ills that society is heir to, springs from among the feeble-minded. It is none of their fault. They stumble along the pathway of life, poorly prepared for the battle they fight. They are only grown-up children, and as such should not be blamed, imprisoned or cast aside, but sheltered, trained and supervised.