

THE PAUPER INEBRIATE:

A NOTE ON THE ETIOLOGY OF POVERTY.

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THE extent to which alcohol is the cause of that condition of poverty which leads to entry into the workhouse is difficult accurately to gauge. The following replies to a series of questions circulated among the medical officers of the London workhouses show that the influence is large. The statements, however, must be taken, as they are, as estimates, which therefore will vary by reason of the personal equation. At present no "cause" is tabulated by the Board of Guardians for the condition of poverty that leads a person to apply for indoor relief. There are but two questions: Is he destitute? and Is he willing to come inside? It would give the nation much valuable knowledge if in each case the cause were entered; not using such a vague phrase as "could not find work," but probing further to the sort of work that the applicant had performed, whether it had been regular, skilled or unskilled, and the reason why he had left his last occupation, with, of course, special reference to his habits, whether (*a*) sober, (*b*) temperate, (*c*) drinking. In the case of old people whose children ceased to support them, the inquiry might extend to the reason for this along similar lines to the above, and, again, with reference to children or wives deserted by the father.

It may be objected that time, and therefore money, would be expended over these inquiries; but if the ruinous extent to which alcohol impoverishes the nation were thus more obviously presented to our too blind countrymen another impulse would be lent to the forces which would render the present overwhelming temptations to drink less hopelessly prevalent.

The questions were sent to thirty-one medical officers of workhouses and workhouse infirmaries in London. Replies were received from twenty, and of these six stated that they were unable to give definite statements owing to the shortness of time within which the returns were asked.

To the first question, "What proportion of cases have to seek workhouse relief through the effects of alcohol—(a) directly through their own consumption of it, and (b) indirectly through the habits of parents or guardians?" very varied answers were made. One stated (a) 10 per cent., (b) 15 per cent., another 25 per cent. and 20 per cent., while others gave estimates of 50 per cent., of 60 per cent., of 75 per cent., and of (a) 88 per cent., (b) 7 to 8 per cent. Others were unable to give figures, and used remarks as these: "The majority"; "The majority have indulged in alcohol greater part of their lives, more or less"; "Considerable number of the older inmates, as direct result of alcoholic intemperance, undoubtedly, but I do not believe the proportion is so large as generally assumed"; "Very many—quite the largest proportion, and a very large percentage of the young through the second cause."

The consensus of opinion, therefore, leaves no room for doubt but that the enormous and expensive establishments supported by the community generally are necessitated very largely by the drinking habits of those who have thus been led to seek their refuge. When it is remembered that the number of paupers relieved in the London Unions, exclusive of lunatics and vagrants, is about 112,000, and the cost every year is nearly three millions, or on the average nearly fifteen shillings per head of the population, the terrible incubus deriving from the self-indulgence of so many of its fellow-members may be appreciated.

The second question asked was, "In what proportion of cases is alcohol the cause of young, 'able-bodied' men and women becoming inmates?" That is to say, is a dearth of employment a cause of sending to the workhouse those who, after honestly fulfilling their engagements, have come to an end of their work, and after earnestly seeking fresh places cannot find them? Our friend of the 10 per cent. answer to the first question repeats that figure for this, and another says "Very few"; but others reply, "A very large proportion," "Probably 75 per cent.," "99 per cent.,"

“99·9 per cent.” One writes from a house specially used for those who won't work: “I have a strong impression that the consumption of alcohol is all-powerful in a large number of instances. It is obvious that many of them have had drinking bouts not long before their admission.”

My own experience is in a workhouse and infirmary that are comparatively small for London, and there are special facilities in the neighbourhood for casual light labour and for obtaining charitable relief. But, so far as it goes, it confirms the more serious statements recorded. The few younger people admitted are there almost entirely through alcoholism, and many even of the oldest, ninety years and upwards, are admitted under the influence of drink. My own feeling is that the genuine out-of-work man rarely, if ever, comes inside a workhouse.

The next question follows up this subject, and asks, “Have you any (adult) life abstainers in your workhouse?” The answers were strikingly unanimous: “None known”; “Out of 1,600, I have found one!”; “No”; “Very few, and they seem to live longer than the others”; “Never heard of any”; “Not more than 0·3 per cent.”; “Occasionally met with; one or two in now”; while the extreme that is said on the other side is: “Yes”; and “A large number of the adult inmates assert that they are life-abstainers, or at the most very moderate drinkers.” On two occasions I have gone into the dining-room of my own workhouse and asked any who had been abstainers any length of time to hold up a hand. On one occasion not one hand was held up; on the other one old lady of eighty-five years did so, as having been a teetotaler for forty years, and one half-witted woman claimed to be. But temperance societies, the Rechabites, etc., show that there are many teetotalers of the working classes. Apparently it is sufficient to be a teetotaler to insure almost certain safeguard from being driven into the workhouse.

The fourth question, “Can you notice in children reared from early infancy in the workhouse any difference between those of alcoholic parents and others?” showed that, no statistics being kept, it is almost impossible to answer it accurately. Some said “Yes,” others said “No,” others that they were unable to say. One replied that he had noticed a very marked difference—as shown in the form of temper, low type, etc., and another that

the children of the former suffered much from neglect. Evidence, such as was quoted before the Physical Deterioration Committee, shows that, where records are kept, there is a marked difference to be observed. Perhaps the reason for this escaping notice in our workhouses is that, after all, most of the children are of the one class—the drinking class. It is refreshing at times to see the vigour and rate of growth of children born of healthy, sober mothers who have come under our care through no fault of their own.

To the fifth question, “Can you say whether the alcoholics are less able or less inclined to work, or both?” most of my correspondents replied: “Both, undoubtedly,” or “On the whole less able, certainly less inclined.” Two made fuller remarks, which I will quote: “Many of our best workers in the institution are those who have failed through excessive drinking, but this, of course, proves nothing, except that capable workmen are brought to the workhouse through drink who otherwise would never be there.” “There can be, in my opinion, not the slightest doubt that the consumption of alcohol, both directly and indirectly, is a most important factor in causing physical deterioration to the consumers themselves, and to their children by rendering it impossible for them to procure sufficient wholesome food and good clothing.” My own experience is that the loss of power, skill, and desire to work resulting from the continued taking of alcohol is the source of constant trouble and want of discipline in the workhouse.

Many of those who replied made valuable remarks, which are not altogether covered by the answers quoted above. I will therefore give a selection of these:

“Fifty per cent. of our lunacy cases are due to alcoholism, direct and indirect.”

“The importance of the influence of alcoholism in connection with our work cannot be exaggerated, more especially, perhaps, in connection with work under the Lunacy Acts.”

“I could write volumes on the subject of alcohol as the chief factor in the history and conditions of these pauper inmates.”

“One sees a number of young men, one time able-bodied, who are afflicted with phthisis, and thus incapacitated, and in my

opinion mostly through the effects of alcoholism. I think there would be found at these places ample material for investigation."

"The history given by inmates can very seldom be relied upon when it is a question of alcoholic habits."

"I have noticed that injuries are in a large proportion induced by alcoholism."

"I entertain very strong opinions as to alcohol being the chief agent in causing much of the pauperism."

"I have taken the greatest interest in the subject of alcohol being the cause, directly or indirectly, of admissions both to the workhouses and infirmaries. I have had twelve years' experience, and had probably 100,000 cases under observation. I have at present 600 children under my care. I am not an abstainer myself. I regard alcohol as the almost sole cause of probably 98 per cent. of the total admissions. It is certainly the principal one in causing 70 to 80 per cent. of the deaths from consumption—this is the result of a most careful inquiry into the history of each case—and I have little hesitation in regarding it also as being at the root of any physical deterioration in our race."

What surprises me more than the fact that so many of our fellow-countrymen become the victims of alcoholism is the thought that anyone who has knowledge of evidence such as the above still maintains that for him alcohol is good.