

FEEBLE-MINDEDNESS AND CRIME

(The Descendants of Jasper Bar)

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THE Nams, the Kallikaks, the Zeros and the rest of the innumerable tribes of Ishmaelites unearthed in our insatiable thirst for the truth about heredity, have abundantly proved that certain mental traits are characteristic of generation after generation of the same stock. Whether we find it in a Bourbon Louis, with his famous "après moi le deluge" or a Huck Finn in his picturesque indigence, the mental and social condition which we call "moronity" challenges our utmost skill and wisdom.

We agree that the moron is lacking in a certain power consciously to adjust his thinking to new requirements. He is said to be retarded in mental development. We used to distinguish as mentally defective only those persons so lacking both mentally and physically as to require asylum and medical care. But with the growing complexity of the social order and the increasing demands made upon the individual in the community in order to "get along" we have begun to realize that feeble-mindedness is not only that pitch black intellectual darkness that we call idiocy, but the various degrees of incapacity shading into the mental equipment lowest in the scale of abilities which enables an individual to compete with his fellows. Moronity, in the hierarchy of mental capacities, is an interval of uncertainty in mental measurement. Given a Louis in the sheltered circumstances afforded by heredity, wealth and position, and require of him only golf, an interest in motor cars and airedales, and he will be able to "compete with his normal fellows"; but place in his hands the destinies of a nation and he will hurl that nation to destruction as he would shatter a fragile toy. The social significance of mental inequalities of endowment becomes increasingly apparent in the growing realization of their bearing upon the problems of social agencies, courts, correctional institutions and the public schools.

Our courts are daily called upon to decide whether some individual who has committed a crime should be held responsible

for his action, in what measure he understood the nature and consequences of his wrong-doing. For example, the importance of a low level of intelligence as a factor in juvenile delinquency is attested by statistical studies of groups of delinquents, and juvenile courts and correctional institutions everywhere are taking this factor into account. Our charity organizations are face to face with the question of what to do with unimprovable cases. The X—family has been to the Associated Charities year after year for help; they have found the man a job a dozen times within a twelve-month, but the woman wastes what is given her, buys a pink china-silk shirt waist that is dear to her heart instead of shoes for Johnny; the children are running the streets and playing truant; the oldest boy has been brought repeatedly before the juvenile court,—and so it goes on year after year. The social agencies are realizing that these are questions of innate incapacity. Very often the unmarried mother is an irresponsible moron girl, who does not appreciate the importance of control and is unable to exercise it. On another mental level “Mrs. Warren’s Profession” becomes “Annie’s Profession.” But it is through the agency of the public school that the most effective efforts are being made to deal with this problem of moronity, and it is to the public school that we must look for our most potent instruments for dealing with it. With very inadequate facilities the schools are already making heroic efforts to adjust the methods and content of instruction to the various mental levels with which they must deal. Any formula for social treatment, then, must involve the effective use of our best present means for reaching the moron before he becomes a social liability.

The social significance of inferior mental capacity is strikingly apparent in its intimate relation to all forms of anti-social conduct. This failure, or at least unstable social equilibrium, of the moron in his adjustments in the community is his most outstanding characteristic. But in our treatment of him we have to take into account these very social relations to ignore which means failure in dealing with him. These people are members of our communities; they have home ties and friends and loved ones that are not to be ignored. They are not isolated individuals to be dealt with according to a formula, however scientific; and any progress we may make, as Dr. Taft pointed out in an address before the Mental Hygiene Conference, must take human relationships into account. Our problem is infinitely complicated by this social aspect. Our formulas are devised in our psychological laboratories, but they must be applied by the psychologist who is also sociologist and humanitarian.

In our institutions for the feeble-minded, in our university

clinics, and in our city mental clinics we have been making it our concern to find out as much as possible about the moron. We enquire who he is, where he is, where he came from and even "when is a moron not a moron." But when a moron *is* a moron he may be a descendant of a weakling European king or he may be a descendant of a Jasper Bar. In any case, by his behaviour we shall know him. These are the actual sordid facts with respect to the descendants of Jasper Bar:

In the Mississippi Valley on the boundary line between Minnesota and Wisconsin, lives an old circuit rider and his wife, whose descendants for three generations have peopled the squalid shacks and rickety tenements, country poor-houses, saloons and gambling places of several small Minnesota and Wisconsin towns whose misfortune it has been to become their temporary abode.

When Jasper Bar was living in the mountains of Tennessee in the early part of the thirties he felt "called to go among the people and preach the word of God." Now Jasper, being very loquacious and very earnest, managed to collect a few dollars which enabled him to attend the Moody School in Chicago for a short time. Being a glib talker and not burdened with any inkling of his own shortcomings, he travelled about the country holding revival meetings and haranguing the mountaineers. Meanwhile his wife, Hannah, was left at home to rear the offspring in the fear of the Lord, and with what means the Lord provided without much aid from Jasper. Hannah, with a sense of the decencies of life, tried with her feeble might to care for the rapidly increasing brood, but circumstances were too much for her weak native endowment. The family moved north. As the labours of Jasper yielded meagre financial returns, the squalor of the home increased out of all proportion to Hannah's strength. Eight children had been born to them, and with the exception of a baby girl who died in infancy their growing needs overtaxed the futile pair who gave them birth. They were an uncouth, lackadaisical, shiftless lot and seem to have been imbued with all the unlovely characteristics without the rather picturesque virtues of those strange folk of the Southern Mountains among whom their parents sojourned.

The surviving children of Jasper are Salome, Naomi, Benjamin, Noah, Adam, Sarah and Deborah, whose biblical names alone bear witness to the paternal profession. Salome, the eldest, and her uncouth mate used to keep a brothel. The man is a logger when he works at anything. Their drunken brawls and ill-famed transactions are the black tales of every small town in which they have lived. The story goes that a Canadian traveller stopped at

their public-house one night and was never seen again. Old Jasper told the tale, and, though the authorities could secure no evidence against them, Jasper felt that there was no villainy of which they were incapable. They were driven out of the home town and have been heard of since in several towns along the river, but they seem to have no settled abode. Their children, seven in number, are for the most part of that ilk. When only fifteen years of age two of the daughters became pregnant in the pursuit of their mother's profession and in her house. The girls have all become women of the streets, and the boys, with one notable exception, are habitual drunkards and typical ne'er-do-wells. The one who is hard working and industrious tries in vain to escape the parental curse. Wherever he goes, there—sooner or later—some one of his ubiquitous relatives is bound to appear to make trouble for him. Salome is as inconstant as the shifting wind. Since she left her original spouse, she has a new "husband" every time the moon changes.

Naomi, second daughter of Jasper and Hannah, married a livery barn labourer who was very much addicted to the use of alcoholic liquors. Naomi was unable to keep the home for her five children, and received little encouragement from her maudlin, drunken spouse. The condition grew so bad that the four remaining children were taken from their feeble-minded mother and committed to a state institution for the care of dependents. One of the boys is now in a state school for the feeble-minded, and both girls are married. The girls, twins, are pretty, empty-headed little women of the same loquacious type as their grandfather, old Jasper, and with about the same kind of vivid but unscrupulous imagination. Under the favourable circumstances provided by their thrifty husbands they are able to keep rather neat homes. Such are the pretty morons from among whom are recruited many of those travellers to that "moral bourne from which no female traveller returns." One boy appears, in spite of his parental handicap, to be endowed with average human capacity. His mentality is ninety-four per cent normal which, like the 99.44 per cent pure of ivory soap, denotes standard quality of brain power. He has, however, traits which have already seriously interfered with his adjustment to his environment. His degenerate practices, his untruthfulness and general untrustworthiness made his training and care a difficult problem. The heritage from the paternal side is no whit less black than from the maternal side of the house.*

* His father, both paternal grandparents, his paternal grandfather's mother and both of his paternal grandmother's parents were markedly feeble-minded. Two brothers and a sister of his father were feeble-minded and flagrantly immoral. The family is a notorious one in the community. At the age of eleven years and eight months this boy's mental age was eleven years, giving him an intelligence quotient of 94. He has been under observation since, and his school record and a subsequent mental examination confirm the evidence of his normal mentality.

But, to return to the sons of Jasper Bar: Benjamin married and produced four children. Benjamin's only steady occupation was loafing. He and his wife were always more or less social charges; neither was competent to order family affairs with any sort of prudence. Of the four children, two died, one is in an institution for the feeble-minded, and the other wanders about the country working just enough to keep going, without energy enough to remain at a steady occupation or mind enough to follow it.

Noah, another son of Jasper's, bought a farm from his father, inducing the old man to deed it to him without any security except his word that he would pay for it. But a promise rests lightly upon Noah's conscience, and he will neither vacate the barren, stony, little farm nor pay his powerless old father. Here he and his family, a wife and three daughters, all feeble-minded, live in filth differing only in degree from the home of his worthless brother. But the household of Noah is very religious. The daughters are half starved and consequently small and undeveloped; two have incipient tuberculosis and all three have suffered from eczema; at school they are in the habit of going through the pockets of the girls' coats in the cloak room to replenish their stock of pencils, handkerchiefs and ribbons, but they consider it unchristian to attend movie shows. The mother proudly affirms, "My girls wouldn't go to a movie show. They'd a sight rather go to a meetin' of the Army (Salvation). They do so enjoy them meetin's!" Of a surety they cannot be normal girls!

Adam, a labourer on the railroad, and his excitable, nervous wife have one feeble-minded child. One child was still-born and another died in convulsions. That Adam is said to be "wickedly disposed" and otherwise economically incompetent, stamps him with the Bar characteristics.

Sarah married a man of about average mentality and left that part of the state which was infested by the Bar clan. They have lived on a farm and have reared five children. The mother has been able to maintain her home and to care for and afford her five children their educational opportunities. The husband is a man of little force but apparently normal capacity. Sarah is, to all appearances, a normal woman and is so considered by people in the community. Two of the children are morons, one is normal, and of the other two one is mentally slow and the other is a nervous, erratic, flighty child of exceedingly unstable mental constitution.

Deborah Bar, the last of the children of Jasper and Hannah with whom our story deals, married Frank Bent, a tramp, who appeared long enough to marry this moron woman and beget five

feeble-minded sons and daughters, than whom no lower level of human kind exists. Bent was excessively alcoholic, knew not even the guise of morality, and worked no more than his fancy listed. He deserted his family and has not been heard of since. Deborah, the now divorced wife, lives in a little tar-paper shanty where the old man who married her undersized, under-developed daughter, used to live with them both. Two of her sons are horse thieves, but have never been apprehended for their robbery. The youngest son lives with his mother. Lazy, shiftless and degenerate, they cannot be said to work at any definite employment, their activity is noticeable only in the summer months at odd jobs and in the winter the town supports them to keep rigorous Nature from cleansing her house by the elimination of her unfit. Grown men in strength, they are too lazy to cut the wood that the town furnished to keep themselves warm in winter; yet they are called, by some strange irony of the English tongue, "labourers".

Of the two daughters, Eunice, the younger, has never developed mentally, morally, or physically. She is at nineteen no larger than a thirteen year old child, and is married to the man of fifty-five who lived with both mother and daughter until—anticipating the plan of the righteously indignant townspeople to force him to marry the mother—he married the daughter and moved to a shack in the woods near the saw mill where he works. The two rooms of the shack are filthy beyond imagining; the few cracked dishes are never washed; the walls are hung with old clothing; the floor is littered with rags, and a dirty bed and filthy old couch are the only furnishings of one room, while the kitchen contains stove, table, and a few rickety chairs. In the middle of the afternoon the entrance of a caller did not disturb the "drunk" slumbers of one of the brothers occupying the couch in the bed-room of the pair, and the miserable little woman seemed all unconscious of the degradation of her existence.

The last child of Deborah, the daughter of Jasper, was Mary. Mary married a human derelict, Dick Shan by name, whose only known virtue was his affection for his sole surviving imbecile child. The other four children, one of whom at least did not belong to Shan, died after the wise provision of Nature when she is trying to correct one of her mistakes. The life of Dick Shan and his wife, made up of drunken brawls, debauches and sprees, is a repetition of the old tale of the descendants of Jasper and their consorts. His wife deserted him and went to live in a lumber camp, the common property of the camp until she was driven out and returned to Shan. There is one time, and only one on record, when the unwilling Shan tasted the luxury of a bath. In his infrequent periods of labouring, he was

always compelled to dig to leeward of his fellow workmen. One summer, however, the young men of the town forced upon him bath, shave, haircut and clean clothes throughout, and the next day Dick, clad once more in his habitual dirty rags, left town, a sadder but a cleaner man.

Now Dick was the outcome of the marriage of Anne Carter and an Irish grave-digger, Mike Shan. Mike was an industrious pious soul, quite unable however to forge ahead. Unkempt in his appearance, he usually went about his doleful business telling his beads. "Alas, poor Yorick!" But Anne, his wife, was a woman of different calibre. Her family are intelligent people, universally respected and well off in regard to this world's goods. Her brothers are both retired farmers, owners of substantial farms in a section of the state noted for its agricultural prosperity; her three sisters married men of business and social standing, and the children of these unions are without exception normal in mental ability, while her father and mother were people of means and intelligence, very well thought of in the farming community in which they made their home. And yet Anne Carter, a woman of unusual mental endowment, like her brothers and sisters of gentle breeding and careful training, married Mike, the grave-digger, and bore him the feeble-minded Dick who mated with a woman of the brothels. But Anne had two other children not akin to Dick in native endowment, a daughter who is a nurse of unusual ability, superintendent of a city hospital, and a son who is a very successful business man.

Years after her mother's death, this daughter, in the dim little office of the country doctor—that curè of souls who is often minister to the sick in both mind and body—told a tale of erring human love for which the marriage of her mother with the Irish grave-digger was but the cloak. A professional man who was her father and the father of the younger boy, was a man of culture and fine mental endowment, but for his "cloth" could not marry the woman of his heart and was unwilling to accept the price. She bore the intolerable burden of an infamous marriage that she might, according to her warped sense of values, "clothe with an air of respectability" the children of her lover. So it came about, after the manner of life's little ironies, that a gifted woman of education and refinement is half-sister of an uncouth moron who is the consort of thieves and harlots. And in one of our institutions for the feeble-minded lives a grotesque, misshapen little creature, the imbecile daughter of this half-brother and his wife, the woman of the brothels,—a descendant of Jasper Bar.

So these are the descendants of Jasper Bar, moron. The tale could be matched in any community. But when our moron has been pigeon-holed and captioned, he seems somehow to acquire the impersonal status of "a case," and we forget to identify him with the whimsical old man who entertains us on the back door step and furnishes the material for a picturesque dinner-table anecdote.

How then can one justify bringing the descendants of Jasper Bar with all their unsavoury characteristics to the attention of "respectable married people with umbrellas"? The importance of dealing with this problem of moronity is in direct proportion to its magnitude. And it is not a problem which concerns only the social worker, the probation officer, and the judge; it concerns the housewife who employs a moron nurse-maid, the mother whose children attend the public schools with the Bar children, the employer who hires the Bar men to do his rough work, and the politician whose efforts in behalf of good government depend not only upon the vote of the university professor but also on that of the moron.

On the basis of surveys and statistical reports, it has been estimated that about two per cent of the morons are being cared for in special institutions for the mental defectives. It is not clear, however, that segregation in special institutions is advisable even if it were entirely feasible. Whether or not a particular individual should be segregated depends, from a sociological standpoint, on grade of intelligence; age, sex, and emotional stability as well as on other factors some of which we have already considered. Much of the rough work of the world is being successfully done by the moron. Nor are we justified in basing our conclusions as to what should be done with him entirely on the behaviour of those descendants of Jasper Bar who make trouble in the community. Most of our knowledge, it must be confessed, is based on investigations of those who *do* make trouble.

Of our proposed remedies, none has as yet proved adequate. Sterilization has cut across primitive attitudes and certain ethical considerations, and is at best unsatisfactory. So, too, in the face of the enormous number of morons and the complexity of their individual social relations, and in consideration of their possible economic contribution to society, segregation is not feasible. We have considered chiefly the cost in toll of human misery, the deadening social burden of moral obliquity, pauperism and vice of the descendants of Jasper Bar. But, while we have statisticised and shown in all their lurid colors the vices of the children of Benjamin, Adam, and Deborah, we have shown none of the "common grayness" of the children of Sarah because, forsooth, they have not made us

trouble. We may not generalize and evolve our formulas for social reform on the basis of considerations regarding only the dark side of the shield. In so doing we should be sure to work injustice to many.

Any concerted intelligent action must be based, if it is to prove successful, on a consideration of all the facts. Certainly to know who they are and where they are is the first essential. It is here that our mental clinics in connection with the public schools can render immediate and effective service. With the means now at their disposal the public schools can do much towards securing a complete census of the feeble-minded. Already in most of the large cities and in many of the towns and villages the existence of special classes implies the recognition and classification of differences in the level of intelligence. If mental clinics were made available for every school, in time an early complete census of the feeble-minded could be secured.

A complete census of the feeble-minded by means of mental clinics in connection with the public schools, vocational guidance, employment bureaus and after-care supervision and guidance, using as a nucleus the machinery already in operation as the basis for a system of organized supervision, would mean the wiser utilization of our social assets and more adequate control of our social liabilities.

The descendants of Jasper Bar are our common problem and

The common problem, yours, mine, everyone's,
Is—not to fancy what were fair in life
Provided it could be,—but, finding first
What may be, then find how to make it fair
Up to our means: a very different thing!