

## One hundred years ago

### The need for classification of paupers

ON several occasions we have called attention to the necessity for improved classification of the inmates of workhouses and have shown how hardly the present system presses upon that small percentage of the poor whose misfortunes are not attributable to their own evil courses. The abhorrence with which respectable paupers regard the institutions professedly designed to minister to their wants is well known and has unfortunately only too substantial a foundation. An article in the December number of the *Nineteenth Century* by Edith Sellers, entitled "Shifting Scenes in Rural Workhouses", fully bears out the contentions maintained in these pages. We select the following examples from those given as illustrations of the abuses still existing. In one workhouse were found, all occupying the same living room and dormitory, 12 men, of whom two were murderers who had served respectively 20 and five years' penal servitude for their crimes, while another was a repulsive lunatic. Another male ward elsewhere contained 13 men, some of them ill but doing their best to get well as soon as possible so that they might escape from the unpleasant

propinquity of the two idiots and the dangerous lunatic with bullying tendencies whose society was thrust upon them. The women were in similar evil case. At one small workhouse there were but two, of whom one was imbecile, so that the other found little companionship or sympathy of a desirable kind. The women's ward at another place was terrorised by "a harridan of the worst sort", known as "the Tigress", whose vagaries neither the officials nor the magistrates could or would control. At yet a third workhouse the family party consisted of two imbeciles, two feeble-minded persons, one vicious woman, and one unhappy old lady who, to the detriment of her peace of mind, was none of these things. With scenes like these before their eyes is it any wonder that to the deserving poor the workhouse is an accursed place? For the more striking features of the picture the various boards of guardians and their officials are in great measure responsible. It is an abuse of the powers given under Section 24 of the Lunacy Act, 1890, that lunatics of the class described should be detained in a workhouse. But even where the provisions of the Act are adhered to there remains much to be done. After eliminating those paupers whose abnormality in the way of vice or mental disorder is

sufficiently marked to justify their detention in prisons or lunatic asylums, there remain other well-defined groups whose deserts differ widely although under the present arrangement all share alike in the charity publicly dispensed. An essential condition of any measure of reform is therefore suitable classification. In the large unions of London and the provinces something is done in this direction by the removal of children and imbeciles to special homes or asylums, the provision of wards for lock cases, the appointment of male nurses to deal with the more ruffianly of the sick, and so on; but where the total number of paupers is small even this degree of separation is impracticable. There should be available for the poor of any district at least one institution between the workhouse on the one hand and the prison or lunatic asylum on the other, and in country places this could only be managed by a fusion of parishes and by using the existing buildings for distinct classes of cases.

### REFERENCE

*Lancet*, 2 January 1904, 43–44.

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