THE CRIMINAL INEBRIATE FEMALE.*

By THOMAS HOLMES.

I CONFINE myself to my own experience of the men and women who have come within the provisions of the Habitual Inebriates Act of 1899, and within some clause of the Government Licensing Act of the present year. The two Acts deal with the same class of people—*i.e.*, men and women who are charged with drunkenness four times in one year.

The former Act made provision for these offenders by giving the magistrates or judges power to commit them to inebriate reformatories for a period not exceeding three years. The latter Act gives directions for them to be placed on "Black Lists," and for their photographs and descriptions to be circulated among the police and licensed publicans.

Publicans on the one hand were to be subjected to substantial fines if they knowingly served the "Listed," while the latter were made liable to fine or imprisonment if they purchased or attempted to purchase intoxicating drink within a period of three years.

Both Acts have failed in their object. The inebriate reformatory does not reform the confirmed drunkard, and the "Black List" does not deter them from getting drink and getting drunk.

It is not my object in this short article to show why these Acts have failed. I purpose showing the class of individuals the State has dubbed "habitual inebriates," and in revealing their characteristics: the reason of failure will probably be shown. Early in 1899 I took some trouble to ascertain the character of those

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who came within the Act of that year. I had my own long experience in London police-courts to guide me. I found that 80 per cent. of the women would be gross, homeless "unfortunates," not victims essentially of drink, but of uncontrollable sensuality; 10 per cent. garrulous old women from the workhouses, who had never possessed sound minds, and on whom the smallest amount of alcohol produced strange and powerful effects; 10 per cent. only were decent women, and some of these were epileptics. I also found that a considerable number of the 80 per cent. were beyond question insane, even as Tottie Fay and Jane Cakebread were insane.

The men who came within the Act may be grouped in three classes: (1) Loafers, corner-men at public-houses, who never did any work unless in prison, who were equally ready to rob a drunken man or assault a defenceless woman; (2) beggars, habitués of the "shelter" or cheap lodging-house; (3) men who live on the immorality of women. I could not find a decent male drunkard that came within the Act. More than four years have passed, during which I have been daily in attendance at a court, and I have not known one man convicted under the Act, though I believe one or two have been so convicted at other courts. In May, 1899, I gave my forecast in an article I contributed to the *Contemporary Review*. I have before me the several reports of inebriate reformatories published by the Government Inspector. Those reports more than confirm my statement that the men and women whom the State calls "habitual inebriates" are nothing of the sort, but are victims of sensuality, dementia, idleness, and of utter grossness, to whom drink is necessary if they are to pursue their horrible avocations. When sober their conduct passes, but when under the influence of drink they become wild animals, and every sense of decency is thrown to the winds. The State lumps them together, and says to County Councils, philanthropic societies, and to private individuals: "Take this mass of horrible humanity, turn them into decent citizens by curing them of drink—take these people, and you shall have 10s. 6d. per week for each of them, and the County Councils shall also give you grants in aid." Can anything be more absurd, more scientifically ridiculous? No matter what may be wrong with the individual, that individual must be treated in a haphazard, non-scientific kind of way for inebriety, and the community must pay for it. Is it any

wonder that the women sent to reformatories do not reform?—the wonder would be if they did. There is no classification: how can there be under the present conditions? They have good quarters, good food, fresh air and exercise, just enough work to increase their health, the birds sing to them, and the flowers smile upon them; but in renewing the health and increasing the bodily vigour of these people the animal is also renewed and the controlling instinct made more vigorous. Consequently, these women come from the reformatory not lusting for drink, but lusting for the exercise of their gross passions. They are upon the streets the first night of their liberty. This is an unpleasant fact, but it ought to be faced. By our present treatment of so-called “habitual inebriates” we are only enabling a number of women to regain health and preserve some show of appearance that they may follow the most horrible life to which a human being can be devoted. But what of the 10 per cent. of women—not animals—who have to associate with them? Their punishment is greater than they can bear. I know several, and their letters to me are full of sheer pathos that cannot be surpassed.

One such—an educated and talented lady, wife of a talented husband, a victim more of drugs than drink—begs, pitifully prays, for deliverance: “What have I done that I should be exposed to this, Sunday and week-day alike? No escape from their language. I shall go mad or die.”

The cruelty of associating women of this kind with the others is only equalled by its absurdity. Is a pure and refined woman likely to be reformed by the association? She may be reformed in a way not contemplated. If the treatment be meant as a punishment, then indeed it is splendid, for it exceeds the horrors of the thumb-screw and the rack.

If the State insists on its sensually-possessed women being called “inebriates” and treated for inebriety, then, in the interests of decency and common-sense, the State should provide a separate establishment for them. They are a class apart, so let them be kept apart.

I have often the privilege of seeing what is termed the “Black List.” I look at it with fear and wonderment. It is a revelation—an awe-inspiring picture-gallery. I would like every student

of humanity—and more especially every medical practitioner—to have a copy. They should study the portraits and read the descriptions.

On January 1 of this year the Act came into force. On May 9 339 men and women, mostly women, were placed on the "List," the last up to that date being the lady I have referred to; her portrait appears with the others. To read the description of each "Lister" is an education: Name, Mary Jones; residence, no fixed abode; place of business, none. Then follows particulars regarding height, age, build, complexion, etc., and the like, and then, last of all, remarks: Frequents Euston or some other road. Another advance in education is made when the faces are studied. Are we getting back to primeval man? The hundreds of portraits—though only a few out of the thousands that might be produced—would lead one to think so. The morbid subjects look bewildered, as though feeling something wrong, but knowing not what. No one can look at their portraits without at once realizing that there is something more behind it all than the mere drink habit. No one can meet them face to face as I do, look into their eyes, and know their pitifully sad yet terrible lives, without affirming that the State proclaims its ignorance when it classifies these mentally and morally deranged creatures as "habitual inebriates," and its impotence when it offers 10s. 6d. per week for them to be cured of "the love of drink." I know that bolts and bars will not cure them, that two years, though spent in retirement and healthy surroundings, will not reform them; that human sympathy, coupled with earnest effort and prolonged care, will not make them as other women. To God and science their future belongs, for they cannot help themselves. Science may well take up the serious study of the saddest and most helpless, yet most terrible, of all our social sores—the mass of our afflicted humanity that our Legislature complacently classifies as "habitual inebriates."