

V.—*Report of the Charity Organisation Committee on Imbeciles, Idiots, and Harmless Lunatics.*

[Read Tuesday, 20th February, 1877.]

WE have considered the final report of the Special Committee of the Charity Organisation Society of London, on the "Education and Cure of Idiots, Imbeciles, and Harmless Lunatics," adopted on the 2nd of January in the present year, and we concur in the recommendations of the Committee.

The Committee limit their recommendations to the extension to the rest of England and Wales of the plan attempted in the London Metropolitan District, but they add that they believe they are offering a model which will be accepted in principle far beyond these limits.

The Committee then say :—

"In reference to Ireland, Mr. Jonathan Pim writes :—'The provisions for the relief of idiots and imbeciles, when I read my paper before the Statistical Society in 1864, were simply that they might be confined in lunatic asylums, as being insane; or in prison, as criminals; or in work-houses, as paupers; and no change has taken place since, except the establishment, about eight years ago, of the Stewart Asylum, in which there are at present 43 inmates.' The Charity Organisation Committee of the Irish Statistical and Social Inquiry Society has already been induced, by the action of this Committee, to review the legal provisions in Ireland for the care and instruction of imbeciles, idiots, deaf and dumb, and blind, and to make a report, proposing amended legislation, whereby all these classes would be provided for."

It appears from this Report that the onus of having the metropolitan model, approved of by the Committee, extended beyond England and Wales to Ireland is thrown on those interested in Irish affairs.

It becomes of importance, therefore, to learn what is being done on the matter in England, and to consider whether anything can be added in the way of argument or suggestion, to what we have already recommended for legislation on this subject in our Report of the 28th of June last.

At the meeting of the Council of the Charity Organisation Society of London, on the 22nd of January last, the Report of the Special Committee on Idiots was brought forward, and two resolutions adopted :—

(1) "That this Council cordially approves and adopts the Report of their Special Committee upon the education and care of idiots, imbeciles, and harmless lunatics."

(2) "That a deputation be appointed to present the Report to the President of the Local Government Board, and to represent to him the urgent need of early legislation for the proper education and care of idiots, imbeciles, and harmless lunatics, belonging to the pauper and poorer portion of the working class, and that a copy of the Report be also forwarded to the Chairman of the Commissioners in Lunacy, with a request that they should give the benefit of their valuable experience and support to this object."

Under these circumstances, we recommend that the Council of this Society should adopt a similar course, and send the two Reports of

this Committee and the Report of the London Committee, to the Lord Lieutenant, the Chief Secretary, the Lord Chancellor, the Attorney General, the Solicitor General, the Vice-President, and other members of the Irish Local Government Board, and to the Inspectors of Lunatics, the Inspectors-General of Prisons, and the Registrar of Lunacy in Ireland.

In our former Report we noticed that the provision for idiots and lunatics in Ireland was in some respects sixteen years behind the corresponding legislation in England and Wales—being under the old English Act of 1837, instead of under the more recent Act of 1853. We noticed that under the earlier Act, justices have to wait until lunatics, as well as idiots, have become dangerous, and until an intent to commit a crime is proved, and we added:—

“The delay thus caused in the case of the commencement of attacks of insanity is most injurious.”

This, we find, is very strongly corroborated by the English Report above referred to:—

“It is a received medical opinion, that the chance of recovery diminishes in proportion to the distance of the treatment from the commencement of the attack.”

As so large a portion of the cost of lunatics and idiots is defrayed, under the plan introduced by the present Government in 1875, by a contribution from the general taxes, which is at an equal rate per lunatic supported throughout the United Kingdom, it is an additional reason for assimilating the law, that without such assimilation as we have recommended, there will be an unequal application in different parts of the United Kingdom of the grants from the general taxes to which all parts of the United Kingdom contribute.

In our Report we pointed out the importance of terminating the conflict of the law of chargeability of idiots and imbeciles in Ireland, according as they are sent to district lunatic asylums or workhouses.

As to the portion of the charge which at present is, or would, on the plan we have suggested, be borne by the poor-rates, it would appear to fall within the principle of the Poor-law Amendment (Ireland) Act, 1876, passed since our former Report was made. Under that Act, the expenses of the deaf and dumb and blind are charged to the union at large, and we think the same principle should apply to idiots, imbeciles, and harmless lunatics.

We desire, in conclusion, to record our cordial concurrence in the resolution of the London Committee, in which they

“Express their sense of the important services which Sir Charles Trevelyan has rendered to the public in arranging the agenda, drafting the report, and defraying the whole of the expenditure connected with the work of the Committee.”

We trace in this truly charitable and zealous devotion of exertions for the benefit of a very helpless class, the same spirit of enlightened humanity which distinguished Sir Charles Trevelyan's administration of the important affairs entrusted to him in connexion with the relief of the Irish Famine.