

The Lilian Greg Occupation Centre for Mentally Defective Children.

BY ELFIRA RATHBONE.

THE Lilian Greg Centre was opened in October, 1919, in memory of the late Miss Lilian Greg, a very brilliant teacher, who threw up a great career in order to devote her life and energies to developing to the utmost the life of one mentally deficient child whom she had adopted. In this work Miss Greg was singularly successful, and made the little girl, Marjorie Pasley, a joy, not only to herself, but to all who came in contact with her. After the death of Miss Greg and her adopted child, her friends felt that they would like to introduce into the lives of other defectives the joy, and method of love, that had proved so successful.

I feel very diffident about writing of a purely experimental piece of work at so early a stage and it is only possible to give an impression of the work and an outline of what we hope to make it in the future.

A Committee was formed last year, with the help of Miss Evelyn Fox, of the Central Association, and Miss Darnell, of the London Association for the Care of the Mentally Defective, to consider the advisability of opening an Occupation Centre for children living in the districts of South Islington and Finsbury, who were excluded from the Special Schools as uneducable, and were under the care of the London Association for the Care of the Mentally Defective.

The Centre is open every morning between 9-30 and 12. We have about 23 children on our books, and a steady average of 16 to 18 attend each morning; colds and illness are the only reasons for absence. They work in a large room which we rent from St. Jude's Church, King's Cross, and are under the care of a paid teacher and a voluntary helper. In the afternoons this same teacher works a second Centre at Toynbee Hall, so that her post is a full-time one. For some months we had had a class for elder boys and girls there on two afternoons a week, but we felt that daily steady work with a few every afternoon was of more value than two afternoons with a larger number.

The ages of the children attending the King's Cross Centre are from eight to sixteen, the majority being ten or eleven years old. We have two boys of fourteen and one big girl at present. We have had no difficulties in mixing ages, because all need to be kept constantly and incessantly in sight and mind, so the usual difficulties have had no chance of arising.

The children come from various homes, some being very poor and neglected. We have, for instance, one boy who lives in a dark back room in which a family of five ate and three slept. He never went out, as he was blind, and was unable to retaliate when teased in the court. Another child, on the contrary, is the idolised darling of a family of well-to-do artisans. Her life, however, was equally dull, as she used to sit lonely and companionless at a window day after day.

The main object of the work is to teach children to *be* rather than to *do*. The workers, therefore, concentrate mainly on developing initiative, imagination and discipline, rather than on the attainment of manual dexterity. As the children we now take are only those who have been excluded from Special

Schools as uneducable, they can never enter the world as wage earners, but will eventually have to go to institutions. We therefore strive to develop their characters sufficiently to enable them to become helpful, instead of helpless, members of such institutions. Dancing, therefore, drill, acting, quick constructive handwork take the first place; reading, writing and finished handwork come second. All progress is necessarily very slow, but all except one have improved almost out of knowledge and begun to show results even after three months' work.

The apparatus used and the various occupations are mainly such as poor mothers could supply and use to keep the children busy and happy. For instance, bobbins dyed with Dolly Dyes and chestnuts are used for threading; boot boxes for making dolls' houses, shops and carts; ribbon rollers, typewriting ribbon wheels, and strips of wood for the construction of toys; chalks and brown paper for drawing, and egg cups and sand for making moulds; meat skewers for sand-pencils; and we make use of clay and any odds and ends in various ways. The children themselves often bring old match boxes, etc., and are always particularly interested in constructing something with material brought by themselves.

The children belong mainly to two types, the very lethargic "stay put" kind and the intensely restless. At first the difficulty of getting the slow to move or show any interest is only equalled by the difficulty of getting the restless to sit still or to concentrate for even five minutes. Perhaps the simplest way of describing the children would be to tell you about four typical ones.

There is Willie, aged ten, a little street arab, brought up on the kindness of the street, always dirty, neglected and cunning, but affectionate and eager. He loves to be in the limelight, and when he first came gave infinite trouble so as to focus attention on himself. Gradually the interest of the work has got hold of him and he now works steadily by himself and can construct a passable toy aeroplane unaided and sew on rug canvas, and more wonderful still has learnt to sink his individuality and play games with the others, really enjoying the game and forgetting himself.

Then there is Gladys, aged twelve, a very good child, but spastic. When she first came she could hardly walk; she now helps to carry the tables, put the chairs in their places, and can to a large extent use her fingers.

Next comes Emily, a Mongol of eleven, who consigned us to the infernal regions on our first visit and responded to our early advances at the Centre with a deep "Can't," followed by a blow if the effort was persisted in. She is now quite a pleasant member of the community and can make sand pies and thread beads, and can act as a rather comic Red-Riding Hood.

Jimmy and Alfred are our show boys: they have been with us from the start. Jimmy was the saddest little boy I have ever known, a very delicate, pigeon-chested, lifeless little fellow and always crying. He is now our reliable chief, always smiling and working very hard, and is now learning to read. He has ceased to stutter and his legs are beginning to look like legs instead of sticks. He still frets unduly in the holidays, but the feeling of being a success has taken the sad look out of his eyes, for good we hope. Alfred is a very vigorous youth, but his mother says that since he has been to the Centre he no longer gives any trouble at home, as he employs himself all the time and does what he is told.

The children are either brought by their parents or collected in groups at

central points by the teachers. The difficulty of coming to and fro four times in the middle of a busy morning's work is a great one for the parents. One mother, however, gave up a job worth 10/- a week to do so, and said that the benefit the child derived from the Centre was more than worth it. It is, however, a serious matter and guides are expensive. We therefore bring or take home any within reasonable distance and allow tram fares to others.

On arrival at the Centre, the children put their lunch, which they bring in grubby little pieces of newspaper, into brown paper bags made by themselves with varying success, and all showing a heavy hand with the paste. These are stencilled by themselves on the outside, so as to be recognisable by their owners. We then have a hymn, "Father we thank thee for the night," and a song, then breathing exercises, nose-blowing, etc. After that come simple drill or balancing exercises, such as walking on blocks of wood. We use ordinary fire-wood blocks of wood for this and have found this exercise very useful. After this we do occupations of all sorts. Supposing our subject for the day to be "The Three Little Pigs"; we tell the story very simply, getting the huffing and puffing, etc., done by the children, and so introducing our breathing and articulation work. Then next we draw the little pig, an oval and triangle forming our design. We work it as a finger-play, then draw it on slates. The second grade only colour a ready-drawn pig. Then follows a dance or games. Afterwards the first grade will perhaps construct a paper, straw and brick house, while the second grade play with sand or clay.

We then have games and lunch. The children are given cocoa, which costs about 2/- a week for the whole school.

On other days the children will sew or construct dolls' houses and toys; every day the work varies and the mood of the children often necessitates an entire change of programme, there being days when anything in the shape of exciting work must go by the board and soothing occupations only can be used. After lunch we generally have our toy band or a story and singing, after which they go home. They help each other to put on their things and soon learn to button other people's buttons, often when the effort of doing their own has proved too much for their perseverance.

The life of the school and the effort of control necessary to live in company is extraordinarily valuable to these children unable to excel in the outside world; at school you may become a caretaker or a leader, valued for your service to the community and able to give and not only to receive help. It is this altered attitude of mind which is one of the main causes of the rapid increase of happiness in the children's lives. They suffer so at home from the fact that they are clogs and not cogs in the wheel; at school, among weaker or less virtuous people, they are able to excel and to live a life of work and play like the normal happy child they have always envied.

As for the cost of the Centre, the two chief items are rent and cleaning, and the salary of the teacher. The cost of the former naturally varies very considerably according to the Centre. For instance, at King's Cross we pay £65 a year for rent and cleaning and about £5 for heating, whereas at Toynbee Hall Centre no rent is paid. The salary of a teacher capable of doing the work is £200 a year for the full-time post at the two Centres. I think this is the very lowest salary possible, as the work requires a great deal of initiative, imagina-

tion and education. Each child is a problem and must have individual care and thought, and, unless the teacher has a living wage and enough to rest on, no good work is possible. The cost per head therefore is rather expensive, but to my mind quite legitimate, as the children trained at these Centres will become decidedly less costly to keep in after years and therefore return a part of the value of the money which has been expended. Certainly if happiness is worth aiming at, Centres are a very cheap investment. The mothers say that the children are so much healthier, happier and more obedient that they are able to look after the other members of their families much better than they could do in the old days when the defectives needed all their time and energy.

It is felt that nothing the Centre can do is comparable in value to what the mother will attempt to do and does do for the child. The Committee therefore help the mothers to take a holiday, arranging for the defective to go to relatives. Grants are made to defray railway fares or towards the cost of board while away. This year five of our children went away with their mothers, and the results in all cases were amazingly pleasing. All came back stronger and better and brighter for the change and really helped to face the long strain once more.

The relationship of the Centre to the parents is a great joy, they are always so helpful, grateful and understanding; and try so hard to make it a partnership of work for the benefit of their child so that the work though strenuous is amazingly interesting and worth doing.

NOTE.—The above is an account of a full-time Centre. It is however quite possible to adapt such a scheme to a Centre which will only be open part-time.—*Ed.*

News and Notes.

Board of Control, Sixth Annual Report (1919)

This report, which has just been issued, states that the total number of mentally defective persons under care during 1919 was 10,129, as compared with 8626 in the previous year. Attention is drawn to the incomplete way in which, in many areas, the duty of ascertainment of defectives subject to be dealt with under the Mental Deficiency Act is carried out, which has led to great lack of uniformity in the figures sent in to the Board by the different Local Authorities. In County Boroughs these range from 2.43 per thousand of the population in the returns of one Authority to nil in those of another, while the figures supplied by County Councils vary from 3.55 per thousand to less than .25.

Owing to these varying figures it is impossible to give any but the roughest estimate of the number for whom provision will be necessary, but the Board estimate that Local Authorities who are considering provision for defectives might safely estimate that accommodation will be needed in the near future for at least 1 per 1000 of the population. The Board, on the ground of economy and effective classification and organisation, urge the importance of co-operation between different Local Authorities and Local Education Authorities, in the provision of Institutions. They point out the great importance, not yet sufficiently realised of providing suitable training and teaching, even for low-grade defectives, in institutions.