CHAPTER VI

THE UNANSWERED CHALLENGE

Dr. Saleeby did me the honour of referring to me in one of his addresses on this subject, and said that even I cannot produce any but a feeble-minded child from a feeble-minded ancestry. To which I reply, first of all, that he cannot produce a feeble-minded child. The whole point of our contention is that this phrase conveys nothing fixed and outside opinion. There is such a thing as mania, which has always been segregated; there is such a thing as idiotcy, which has always been segregated; but feeble-mindedness is a new phrase under which you might segregate anybody. It is essential that this fundamental fallacy in the use of statistics should be got somehow into the modern mind. Such people must be made to see the point, which is surely plain enough, that it is useless to have exact figures if they are exact figures about an inexact phrase. If I say, "There are five fools in Acton," it is surely quite clear that, though no mathematician can make five the same as four or six, that will not stop you or anyone else from finding a few more fools in Acton. Now weak-mindedness, like folly, is a term divided from madness in this vital manner—that in one sense
it applies to all men, in another to most men, in another to very many men, and so on. It is as if Dr. Saleeby were to say, "Vanity, I find, is undoubtedly hereditary. Here is Mrs. Jones, who was very sensitive about her sonnets being criticised, and I found her little daughter in a new frock looking in the glass. The experiment is conclusive, the demonstration is complete; there in the first generation is the artistic temperament—that is vanity; and there in the second generation is dress—and that is vanity." We should answer, "My friend, all is vanity, vanity and vexation of spirit—especially when one has to listen to logic of your favourite kind. Obviously all human beings must value themselves; and obviously there is in all such valuation an element of weakness, since it is not the valuation of eternal justice. What is the use of your finding by experiment in some people a thing we know by reason must be in all of them?"

Here it will be as well to pause a moment and avert one possible misunderstanding. I do not mean that you and I cannot and do not practically see and personally remark on this or that eccentric or intermediate type, for which the word "feeble-minded" might be a very convenient word, and might correspond to a genuine though indefinable fact of experience. In the same way we might speak, and do speak, of such and such a person being "mad with vanity" without wanting two keepers to walk in and take the person off. But I ask the reader to
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remember always that I am talking of words, not as they are used in talk or novels, but as they will be used, and have been used, in warrants and certificates, and Acts of Parliament. The distinction between the two is perfectly clear and practical. The difference is that a novelist or a talker can be trusted to try and hit the mark; it is all to his glory that the cap should fit, that the type should be recognised; that he should, in a literary sense, hang the right man. But it is by no means always to the interests of governments or officials to hang the right man. The fact that they often do stretch words in order to cover cases is the whole foundation of having any fixed laws or free institutions at all. My point is not that I have never met anyone whom I should call feeble-minded, rather than mad or imbecile. My point is that if I want to dispossess a nephew, oust a rival, silence a blackmailer, or get rid of an importunate widow, there is nothing in logic to prevent my calling them feeble-minded too. And the vaguer the charge is the less they will be able to disprove it.

One does not, as I have said, need to deny heredity in order to resist such legislation, any more than one needs to deny the spiritual world in order to resist an epidemic of witch-burning. I admit there may be such a thing as hereditary feeble-mindedness; I believe there is such a thing as witchcraft. Believing that there are spirits, I am bound in mere reason to suppose that there are probably evil spirits;
believing that there are evil spirits, I am bound in mere reason to suppose that some men grow evil by dealing with them. All that is mere rationalism; the superstition (that is the unreasoning repugnance and terror) is in the person who admits there can be angels but denies there can be devils. The superstition is in the person who admits there can be devils but denies there can be diabolists. Yet I should certainly resist any effort to search for witches, for a perfectly simple reason, which is the key of the whole of this controversy. The reason is that it is one thing to believe in witches, and quite another to believe in witch-smellers. I have more respect for the old witch-finders than for the Eugenists, who go about persecuting the fool of the family; because the witch-finders, according to their own conviction, ran a risk. Witches were not the feeble-minded, but the strong-minded—the evil mesmerists, the rulers of the elements. Many a raid on a witch, right or wrong, seemed to the villagers who did it a righteous popular rising against a vast spiritual tyranny, a papacy of sin. Yet we know that the thing degenerated into a rabid and despicable persecution of the feeble or the old. It ended by being a war upon the weak. It ended by being what Eugenics begins by being.

When I said above that I believed in witches, but not in witch-smellers, I stated my full position about that conception of heredity, that half-formed philosophy of fears and omens; of curses and weird recurrence and darkness and the doom of blood, which, as
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preached to humanity to-day, is often more inhuman than witchcraft itself. I do not deny that this dark element exists; I only affirm that it is dark; or, in other words, that its most strenuous students are evidently in the dark about it. I would no more trust Dr. Karl Pearson on a heredity-hunt than on a heresy-hunt. I am perfectly ready to give my reasons for thinking this; and I believe any well-balanced person, if he reflects on them, will think as I do. There are two senses in which a man may be said to know or not know a subject. I know the subject of arithmetic, for instance; that is, I am not good at it, but I know what it is. I am sufficiently familiar with its use to see the absurdity of anyone who says, "So vulgar a fraction cannot be mentioned before ladies," or "This unit is Unionist, I hope." Considering myself for one moment as an arithmetician, I may say that I know next to nothing about my subject: but I know my subject. I know it in the street. There is the other kind of man, like Dr. Karl Pearson, who undoubtedly knows a vast amount about his subject; who undoubtedly lives in great forests of facts concerning kinship and inheritance. But it is not, by any means, the same thing to have searched the forests and to have recognised the frontiers. Indeed, the two things generally belong to two very different types of mind. I gravely doubt whether the Astronomer-Royal would write the best essay on the relations between astronomy and astrology. I doubt whether the President of the Geographical Society could
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give the best definition and history of the words "geography" and "geology."

Now the students of heredity, especially, understand all of their subject except their subject. They were, I suppose, bred and born in that briar-patch, and have really explored it without coming to the end of it. That is, they have studied everything but the question of what they are studying. Now I do not propose to rely merely on myself to tell them what they are studying. I propose, as will be seen in a moment, to call the testimony of a great man who has himself studied it. But to begin with, the domain of heredity (for those who see its frontiers) is a sort of triangle, enclosed on its three sides by three facts. The first is that heredity undoubtedly exists, or there would be no such thing as a family likeness, and every marriage might suddenly produce a small negro. The second is that even simple heredity can never be simple; its complexity must be literally unfathomable, for in that field fight unthinkable millions. But yet again it never is simple heredity: for the instant anyone is, he experiences. The third is that these innumerable ancient influences, these instant inundations of experiences, come together according to a combination that is unlike anything else on this earth. It is a combination that does combine. It cannot be sorted out again, even on the Day of Judgment. Two totally different people have become in the sense most sacred, frightful, and unanswerable, one flesh. If a
golden-haired Scandinavian girl has married a very swarthy Jew, the Scandinavian side of the family may say till they are blue in the face that the baby has his mother's nose or his mother's eyes. They can never be certain the black-haired Bedouin is not present in every feature, in every inch. In the person of the baby he may have gently pulled his wife's nose. In the person of the baby he may have partly blacked his wife's eyes.

Those are the three first facts of heredity. That it exists; that it is subtle and made of a million elements; that it is simple, and cannot be unmade into those elements. To summarise: you know there is wine in the soup. You do not know how many wines there are in the soup, because you do not know how many wines there are in the world. And you never will know, because all chemists, all cooks, and all common-sense people tell you that the soup is of such a sort that it can never be chemically analysed. That is a perfectly fair parallel to the hereditary element in the human soul. There are many ways in which one can feel that there is wine in the soup, as in suddenly tasting a wine specially favoured; that corresponds to seeing suddenly flash on a young face the image of some ancestor you have known. But even then the taster cannot be certain he is not tasting one familiar wine among many unfamiliar ones—or seeing one known ancestor among a million unknown ancestors. Another way is to get drunk on the soup, which corresponds to the case of those
who say they are driven to sin and death by hereditary doom. But even then the drunkard cannot be certain it was the soup, any more than the traditional drunkard who is certain it was the salmon.

Those are the facts about heredity which anyone can see. The upshot of them is not only that a miss is as good as a mile, but a miss is as good as a win. If the child has his parents' nose (or noses) that may be heredity. But if he has not, that may be heredity too. And as we need not take heredity lightly because two generations differ—so we need not take heredity a scrap more seriously because two generations are similar. The thing is there, in what cases we know not, in what proportion we know not, and we cannot know.

Now it is just here that the decent difference of function between Dr. Saleeby's trade and mine comes in. It is his business to study human health and sickness as a whole, in a spirit of more or less enlightened guesswork; and it is perfectly natural that he should allow for heredity here, there, and everywhere, as a man climbing a mountain or sailing a boat will allow for weather without even explaining it to himself. An utterly different attitude is incumbent on any conscientious man writing about what laws should be enforced or about how commonwealths should be governed. And when we consider how plain a fact is murder, and yet how hesitant and even hazy we all grow about the guilt of a murderer, when we consider how simple an act is stealing, and yet how
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hard it is to convict and punish those rich commercial pirates who steal the most, when we consider how cruel and clumsy the law can be even about things as old and plain as the Ten Commandments—I simply cannot conceive any responsible person proposing to legislate on our broken knowledge and bottomless ignorance of heredity.

But though I have to consider this dull matter in its due logical order, it appears to me that this part of the matter has been settled, and settled in a most masterly way, by somebody who has infinitely more right to speak on it than I have. Our press seems to have a perfect genius for fitting people with caps that don't fit; and affixing the wrong terms of eulogy and even the wrong terms of abuse. And just as people will talk of Bernard Shaw as a naughty winking Pierrot, when he is the last great Puritan and really believes in respectability; just as (si parva licet etc.) they will talk of my own paradoxes, when I pass my life in preaching that the truisms are true; so an enormous number of newspaper readers seem to have it fixed firmly in their heads that Mr. H. G. Wells is a harsh and horrible Eugenist in great goblin spectacles, who wants to put us all into metallic microscopes and dissect us with metallic tools. As a matter of fact, of course, Mr. Wells, so far from being too definite, is generally not definite enough. He is an absolute wizard in the appreciation of atmospheres and the opening of vistas; but his answers are more agnostic than his questions. His books will do every-
thing except shut. And so far from being the sort of man who would stop a man from propagating, he cannot even stop a full stop. He is not Eugenic enough to prevent the black dot at the end of a sentence from breeding a line of little dots.

But this is not the clear-cut blunder of which I spoke. The real blunder is this. Mr. Wells deserves a tiara of crowns and a garland of medals for all kinds of reasons. But if I were restricted, on grounds of public economy, to giving Mr. Wells only one medal ob civis servatos, I would give him a medal as the Eugenist who destroyed Eugenics. For everyone spoke of him, rightly or wrongly, as a Eugenist; and he certainly had, as I have not, the training and type of culture required to consider the matter merely in a biological and not in a generally moral sense. The result was that in that fine book, "Mankind in the Making," where he inevitably came to grips with the problem, he threw down to the Eugenists an intellectual challenge which seems to me unanswerable, but which, at any rate, is unanswered. I do not mean that no remote Eugenist wrote upon the subject; for it is impossible to read all writings, especially Eugenist writings. I do mean that the leading Eugenists write as if this challenge had never been offered. The gauntlet lies unlifted on the ground.

Having given honour for the idea where it is due, I may be permitted to summarise it myself for the sake of brevity. Mr. Wells' point was this. That we cannot be certain about the inheritance of health,
because health is not a quality. It is not a thing like darkness in the hair or length in the limbs. It is a relation, a balance. You have a tall, strong man; but his very strength depends on his not being too tall for his strength. You catch a healthy, full-blooded fellow; but his very health depends on his being not too full of blood. A heart that is strong for a dwarf will be weak for a giant; a nervous system that would kill a man with a trace of a certain illness will sustain him to ninety if he has no trace of that illness. Nay, the same nervous system might kill him if he had an excess of some other comparatively healthy thing. Seeing, therefore, that there are apparently healthy people of all types, it is obvious that if you mate two of them, you may even then produce a discord out of two inconsistent harmonies. It is obvious that you can no more be certain of a good offspring than you can be certain of a good tune if you play two fine airs at once on the same piano. You can be even less certain of it in the more delicate case of beauty, of which the Eugenists talk a great deal. Marry two handsome people whose noses tend to the aquiline, and their baby (for all you know) may be a goblin with a nose like an enormous parrot's. Indeed, I actually know a case of this kind. The Eugenist has to settle, not the result of fixing one steady thing to a second steady thing; but what will happen when one toppling and dizzy equilibrium crashes into another.

This is the interesting conclusion. It is on this
degree of knowledge that we are asked to abandon the universal morality of mankind. When we have stopped the lover from marrying the unfortunate woman he loves, when we have found him another uproariously healthy female whom he does not love in the least, even then we have no logical evidence that the result may not be as horrid and dangerous as if he had behaved like a man of honour.