

Toronto Public Library

(Pamphlet Collection)

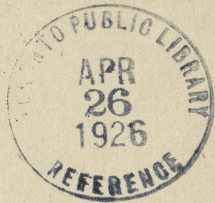
P362

.K25.2

Welfare

Social Service





Helping Erring Children



J. J. Kelso
Toronto

WARWICK BRO'S & RUTTER, LIMITED
Printers, Toronto.

An Address

Delivered before the Canadian Club of Vancouver,
on February 18th, 1909.

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen:—It is indeed an opportunity and a privilege to meet you all and to discuss for a short time a phase of social work that affects and should interest the whole community. I have been particularly pleased to find in Vancouver so many people who are concerned about the welfare of the growing generation. It is truly a hopeful sign when the leaders of public thought take hold of social problems and endeavour to find the proper remedy for the wrongs that exist.

I am to talk to you to-day more especially on the subject of youthful delinquency. We used to call it "crime," and oh, what crimes we have committed against children in the sacred name of justice! We have allowed boys and girls to be brought up under the most baneful social conditions and then when they give evidence of that wrong training, we have them arrested, imprisoned and punished, without pity or remorse. Crime is always the indication of a social disease and if we are wise we will try to get at the underlying causes that lead men to violate the established laws of the country. In the case of children you will invariably find as a result of

sympathetic investigation that they are not, and cannot fairly be held responsible for the offences they commit. Vicious homes, drunkenness, lack of moral instruction and example always have and always will produce a crop of delinquents and law-breakers, and if we wish to do the right thing by the child, as well as protect the state, we will rigidly insist on better care and instruction, or we will remove him to a cleaner and healthier environment. I can assure you from long experience that it would be just as intelligent to whip a sick boy as it is to punish the lad who has committed a so-called crime. We should never confound the thoughtless impulses of youth with the criminal deliberation of adult years, nor should we entertain any idea of punishment or revenge in dealing with the youthful wrong-doer.

The Lovable Bad Boy.

I must confess to a good deal of love for the bad boy. There is something about him that appeals irresistibly to me—perhaps it is the recollection of my own youth—but whatever the cause I have always felt impelled to take his part and lend him a helping hand. This I find is a feeling that is shared by many, even by the ladies. I suppose because we enjoy a spice of badness in the monotony of trying to be always good. And is it not true that often the worst and most troublesome boys make the best men, learning through their follies and the hard knocks of experience to guide their lives into wise and useful channels. Some of you are living witnesses of

this fact. Gentlemen, may I ask of you, in the name of all that is good, to be patient with the bad boy, to win him over by kindly methods, and whatever you do, never to put him in a prison. Someone has said that "every time a boy goes to prison a citizen dies," and this I can affirm from many sad experiences to be literally true.

Robbing a Reformatory.

As you know, I have the general direction and control of work for neglected and homeless children for the Government of Ontario, and in this position I have fortunately had many opportunities for practically helping and encouraging young people. This morning a gentleman who is deeply interested in the boys of Vancouver asked me to tell you something of how we emptied the state reformatory in Ontario. Some years ago I received a telephone message from the warden of our Central Prison asking me to come out and see his kindergarten class. Two little fellows, one ten and the other eleven, had been convicted of crime and sentenced to five years each in the Reformatory. They had been brought by an officer to the Central Prison to await transfer, and were playing around the corridors eagerly absorbing a fatal knowledge of the criminal life. Well, I took charge of those two boys, and without consulting anybody placed them in farm homes, and from that day to this they have never seen the institution to which they were legally consigned. I waited with bated breath to see what would happen, but no one showed the least concern or even enquired as to what had become of the children. This encouraged me to try it again,

and in the following two years I successfully waylaid or intercepted some forty boys, all under sentence to the Reformatory, and all spirited away to situations and foster homes before they had reached their legal destination. The Attorney-General one day asked me, "Look here, Kelso, where do you get the law for all this?" "Law," I replied, "there isn't any law that I know of, but don't you think it is the best thing for the boys?" He agreed that it was, and kindly consented to shut his eyes to what was going on. It would be impossible to tell you the subsequent history of each boy, but you will be glad to hear that they are growing up as useful citizens instead of habitual criminals. One of the boys I sent to the proprietor of a country newspaper, and after seven years he is still there. I met this gentleman while on his vacation last summer, and he remarked, "That young fellow you sent me is getting out the paper in my absence, and is in complete charge of the establishment."

The results of the Reformatory's work were far from satisfactory. Boys went there as prisoners, they regarded themselves as the victims of a harsh and unjust system, and they were in no mood to benefit by any instruction that might be given them. They were banished from the world, and on the expiration of their term they were less fitted than ever to battle with an adverse fate. The world had no use for jail-birds, and the only congenial companions were those who like themselves had been "cast as rubbish to the void." Consequently at least half found their way again to prison and the penitentiary. In the hope of securing better results the Government

proposed to build a more modern institution in a central locality. There were at the time about one hundred and fifty boys in the institution, and in view of the excellent showing of the forty boys already helped, I felt it my duty to do something for the lads serving sentence. With fear and trembling I offered to take charge of the whole number and get them situations, but the proposition was declined with thanks as too dangerous.

The Institution Emptied.

The following year the offer was renewed and accepted, and I was given authority to do as I pleased with one hundred and twenty-five boys from twelve to twenty years of age. Officials declared that to liberate those fellows would be to flood the country with criminals; but love and sympathy can conquer the hardest heart, and I determined that nothing would deter me from taking advantage to the full of such an excellent opportunity of demonstrating the ultimate goodness of the human heart. Each boy was dealt with separately—they came in with sullen countenance and defiant manner; they ended in tears and with a mighty purpose gripping their lives. One big fellow of eighteen was locked up in a basement cell. “No use talking to him,” the warden said, “He is the worst tempered fellow we ever had—would stick a knife in you as quick as look at you—the penitentiary is the place for him.” “Dear God,” I murmured to myself, “What an opportunity to test the power of love!” And turning round I said, “Warden, if I can’t influence that fellow for good, I’ll give up the whole job; take me to him right away.” The

warden looked at me but said nothing. He led the way to the dark cellar, and there, glaring at us from behind the bars, was as ferocious a face as I ever saw. Unlocking the door the warden simply remarked, "Here is a gentlemen come to see you," and walked away. Ten minutes later that big, rough fellow was sitting in a corner of that dark passage-way, crying like a child—precious tears, that washed many a sin from his over-burdened soul! Nearly five years later I was making my way through a big crowd at our National Exhibition, when I heard someone call me. Going back I met this young man, and pointing to a stand he said, "I own all this, and that fellow over there works for me." Now, wasn't it worth a special effort to bring about such results as this? And going over the records I have not been able to trace more than six who subsequently got into any prison.

The Modern Institution.

Do not consider me as desiring in any way to reflect upon your local institution for boys. It is excellently situated, and in the hands of a splendid superintendent, but I would strongly advise that it be converted into an industrial school, with the indefinite sentence, and the speedy restoration of each lad to normal home life. Treat the boys as intelligent human beings, capable of good, and lead them by friendly and sympathetic methods to reverence that "inner soul of which they are the show."

Give your institution and its superintendent your hearty co-operation. Visit the boys fre-

quently and invite one of them occasionally to your home with the view of encouraging him to use well the talents that have been given him. The numbers should be kept low so as to provide for individual treatment, and the rules should be sufficiently lax to permit of a boy going for a meal or a short visit to any good citizen who wishes to be of service.

An "Incorrigible" Boy.

One more illustration of what can be done with boys, when the motive is one of confidence and regard:

A boy was committed to an industrial school by a magistrate as "utterly incorrigible." Word was received at the police station that if he were brought down to the train an officer of the school would be there to receive him. Two constables were detailed to deliver him over. To their great astonishment, a young lady, dainty and delicate in appearance, stepped up. "Is this my boy?" she asked. "Why you can't take him out, he'll give you the slip within five minutes." Oh, no, he won't," she replied, and turning to the lad she remarked simply, "You have heard what they say, can I trust you, for I could not run after you?" "Yes, I'll go with you all right," said the boy. Without a moment's hesitation she gave him some money to go and buy a ticket and then handed him her valise to carry. The officers watched until the train was out of sight, and then walked away shaking their heads. When they were comfortably seated in the train, the boy turned to his escort and said, "I'd have

given them the slip in a minute, but I wouldn't run away from you for the world." It may be difficult to explain by what strange process our hearts instantly bound with joy at the thought of being trusted, but certain it is that our poor, weak, erring human nature holds in affectionate honour and esteem the man or woman who trusts us, and teaches us that however greatly we have sinned we are not altogether bad.

The Better Way.

Gradually we are coming to recognize and put into practice the better way of dealing with erring children. It was a great joy to me to learn recently that the citizens of Vancouver by a big majority vote decided in favour of a children's court and a children's judge. The design of this law is to take children under sixteen out of the criminal procedure and deal with them entirely by educational methods. The law in itself is of little value except in so far as its administration falls into the hands of men and women who love children, and have the almost divine power of impressing their personality for good on immature but receptive minds. It takes a soul to win a soul. We may talk to children by the hour, and make but little headway, but if we are consumed with true zeal, if the cry of our hearts is, "Lord, give me this soul or let me die," we surely shall not fail, and happy children going on their way rejoicing may be our great reward.

Once a child comes under the jurisdiction of a children's court it is never lost sight of until firmly established in right living. Faithful men

and women, acting as probation agents, are appointed as guardians. They visit the home, and with a powerful judge behind them, they guide the boy's life along safe channels until he is able to stand alone. Instead of punishing the child, all those persons or agencies that aid, abet or encourage a youth in wrong-doing are hailed before the court, and here we rectify a mistake that has long been tolerated in our criminal procedure. We have allowed children to be brought up under the vilest social conditions, and then have sought to punish them for living the only kind of life they knew anything about, entirely ignoring the contributory causes or persons.

Crime and Its Cure.

Let me now speak for a moment on the general question of crime, one of the heaviest burdens imposed upon this young country, and a growing evil that should give us anxious thought. I am glad to see present your Chief of Police, whom I have reason to know is a good official and ready to co-operate with any agency having in view the social betterment of our race. It has long been my belief that we should encourage the police force in all our cities to look upon themselves as social agents, rather than as mere machines to secure the arrest and conviction of law-breakers. Is there not the danger of the very agency that was designed for the protection of the community becoming a menace to the liberty and happiness of the poor? I mention the poor especially, because it is very rare indeed that a man possessed of money goes to jail. In our own City of Toronto, which we are proud to call a

city of high moral tone, there were no less than nineteen thousand arrests last year, and when one stops to think of what all that means, not alone to the unhappy offenders, but to their innocent mothers, sisters, wives and children, the sum total of human suffering and misery involved is truly appalling. In the City of Cleveland, Ohio, a new Chief of Police was appointed, whose big heart was touched with a feeling of compassion for the hundreds of broken-hearted mothers and wives who hung around the station and besieged his office for mercy on the poor offender, their sole support, the man they loved, as only the poor can love, in spite of all his shortcomings. Calling his men together he urged them to only make arrests when absolutely necessary, to act as peace-makers, explaining the law in a kindly way and helping the poor to avoid the police station. What has been the result? Three years ago there were thirty thousand arrests in Cleveland; two years ago there were twenty thousand, while last year there were only ten thousand, and less serious crimes than formerly existed! Do not be afraid to break away from tradition—you in the West, with history yet in the making, may be able to show the older cities of the East a better way, and it is worth the effort.

Fair Social Conditions.

There is hardly time for me to touch upon the important subject of public charity. This is too often left to the well-meaning efforts of irresponsible persons, and almost unconsciously a huge system of relief is developed that is a heavy burden on the taxpayer and no real benefit to the poor. It is very like a system of robbing the

people of their just rights and then throwing them a sop of charity. It should be the aim of every public-spirited citizen to make social conditions fair and equitable for all, so that men can themselves make reasonable provision for old age. There has been much waste in charitable funds, because we have failed to recognize that this department, affecting the welfare of all, is worthy of business administration, and should be directed by capable persons, properly remunerated and commanding the respect and confidence of the entire community. It is the privilege of every person here to have a share in that larger and nobler social service, which means the giving, not of money, but of one's self, to the common good. "Happiness consisteth not in the abundance of the things we possess." Men in the West have many opportunities for making money, and one hears of scarcely anything else, but money, when it is gained, does not satisfy. Only the consciousness of duty well performed can give us peace, and I will return to the East well pleased with my visit, if I have been able to give any of you an idea or an inspiration that will lead to something attempted and accomplished for the social betterment of your beautiful and growing city.

On the motion of Mayor Douglas, seconded by Mr. F. C. Wade, K.C., a hearty vote of thanks was accorded Mr. Kelso for his address. Mr. J. N. Ellis, President of the Club, introduced the speaker.