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REFORMING PARENTS THROUGH THEIR CHILDREN

Judge John B. Mayo, Presiding Justice of the Children's Courts of New York, Which Pass on About 1000 Cases a Month

Mrs. Charles Dana Gibson, a "Big Sister" Who Often Attends Children's Court

Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt, a Leader in Juvenile Reclamation Work

Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney, Who Looks for Art Geniuses Among Reclaimed Children

How the Reclamation Work of the New York Juvenile Courts Is Carried On, as Told by Judge John B. Mayo, Their Presiding Justice

THE greatest home-builders of the country are the children's courts of New York. In fact, they altogether dwarf any similar institutions. For instance, Judge Lindsay's court, in Colorado, has about 1000 cases a year. They have more than that in a month.

Of late attention has been directed to the methods by which these New York courts reform parents through their children. The manner in which delinquent adults are enabled to establish suitable homes for their offspring is, to say the least, unique.

At the head of the children's courts committee is Justice John B. Mayo, who is also presiding judge in the children's court of New York county, the largest children's court in the world, and he is virtually also at the head of numerous other organizations which aid in juvenile reclamation. In the following interview he explains how the work of home-making is conducted.

"IN PRACTICALLY every serious case the child's presence in court means that there is something wrong with that home. Often it is merely a lack of attention given to the child's development: a taking for granted that school and Sunday-school attendance are effecting all that is necessary in the matter of character-building. This is a great mistake. School and Sunday school are valuable aids to good home training, but can never replace the latter most important social and political factor.

"History shows that the existence of the home, and the necessity for its defense, led to the formation of the township, on which all our civic government is based; and my observation of modern ethical conditions, both from a material and a religious viewpoint, has convinced me that sound conditions in the home must be the basis of our future progress, unless we are to adopt the theories of socialism.

"The easy-going type of parent, above referred to, is, as a rule, readily influenced; the shock of his child's arraignment in court and the ensuing revelations and judicial comment are usually sufficient to insure future vigilance.

"Parents, morally weak, whose neglect and shiftless or dissolute habits have been the cause of their children's appearance in court, are, as a general thing, sincerely attached to their offspring and make earnest efforts to improve their homes as soon as they realize that such improvement is imperative.

"These two kinds of parents furnish almost all the material for court cases. Of course, there are rare cases of wanton cruelty, just as there are examples of precocious criminality and individuals who are mentally defective; but their proportion of the total is so small as to be negligible in a brief general survey. As individual cases, they are, of course, of the utmost gravity.

"Ninety per cent of all delinquent children brought into our courts are subject to some sort of religious influence," further said Justice Mayo, recently. "That may, no doubt does, sound like a sweeping assertion. In fact, a man to whom I made the statement by letter, not long ago, in answer to a request for information as to our methods, wrote back to me to find out whether I really meant what I said. He seemed to think the percentage should be reversed.

"I was obliged to reply that I was not in error—that nine out of every ten children apprehended have not lacked moral training. To my mind, however, that merely goes to show that there must be something deeper than mere teaching or preaching, if we are to reclaim those who have gone astray because of their environments.

"Of what good is it to tell a child that he has done wrong when he is battered about by drunken parents, and flies to the streets for relief? I do not mean, however, to convey the idea that drunkenness is the only cause which deprives children of proper home influences. Poverty is often as much to blame, and the neglect of parents engrossed in other pursuits.

"We can't expect too much of parents who must toil from early morning till late at night for a mere existence. When they come home in the evening they are so worn out that it is little wonder if their children are neglected. Besides that, the whole family may be housed in a few little rooms, and suffer from lack of fresh air and nourishing food.

"In any such case it would be of no avail to punish the child or the parents, or both. I may say, right here, that our courts are engaged in a work of reclamation, first of all, and that we consider punishment only as a last resort. Likewise, the really vicious children are largely in the minority. Most of those with whom we deal are purely delinquents, and respond easily and naturally to the proper influences.

"It follows, therefore, that the great majority of children are returned to their natural guardians after a brief detention, lasting maybe a few hours, maybe a week or so. The home, if it is only self-sustaining and fairly suitable and decent, is usually the best place for even a seriously delinquent child. If the surroundings are in some respects unsuitable, it is right here that our home-building begins. We do not attempt to give a child back to his parents without proper supervision until they are able to care for him properly; but the probation officer and the volunteer worker always see to it that the child and his parents are afforded the fullest opportunity of meeting the court's requirements, and are often furnished with material assistance where their good intentions are apparent.

"However, there are many times when, for the reasons I have given, we cannot parole a youngster into the custody of his parents. Before they could reclaim him they would have to be able to offer him a relatively happy, comfortable home, and that they are unable to do.

"Here you encounter another phase of our home-building. Does the home appear to be capable of improvement? Can the cause leading to the court charge be removed? Has the child previously been in court, so that it appears that attempts to aid him and his family have met with doubtful or only temporary success?

"If the answers to these questions are unfavorable, the court will end its direct relations with the home in order to make room for an indirect influence often more potent. We parole him into the custody of some charitable society, or commit him to an institution where he will be well housed. Whenever they are able, his parents are required to pay for his support, or at least a small amount per week, say $2 to $2.50.

"You would be surprised to observe how the ambitions of parents are aroused when they find it necessary to create a real home in order to secure the return of a child. Of course, they are not always equal to the task themselves. Either from ill luck, ill health, dissipation or numerous other causes, they may be too poor or too weak to improve their conditions. Still, they never lack assistance.

"Whatever sex, race, creed or color we must deal with in the courts, there is an organization to look after it. For example, there are the Big Brothers and the Big Sisters, the various Hebrew and Catholic societies, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and several institutions for the care of colored children. When it is evident that a home must be rebuilt, one of these organizations assumes a species of guardianship over the parents.

"Ordinarily people are ready enough to rehabilitate themselves if they get a chance, and the various charities find a fruitful field for the exercise of their means and their energies."

At this juncture it may be well to note the personality of the man around whom center these great organizations for home-making and citizen-saving. Of all the country's people, it is probable that, directly and indirectly, he has had the careers of more children in his hands than any other American.

As to appearance, he is large, strong, impressive. Hardly more than in his prime, his hair and mustache are of the color that bespeaks experience. His clear eyes, ruddy complexion and broad shoulders are expressive of regular living.

In manner he is at once firm and kindly. He can scarcely be said to be either a gentleman of the old school or the new, because he has the graces of the one and the alertness of the other.

Ever since child-saving has become an issue in New York—and New York was the first city to undertake it on so extensive a scale—he has been at the head of the children's court. Before he became a justice of the court of special sessions, he was a magistrate, and it was his inborn sympathy with the young, and his natural capacity for dealing with the problems of youth, that led to his selection for the position he now occupies.

At present there are in the neighborhood of 15,000 cases annually before the children's courts of the City of New York and the counties of New York, Kings, Queens and Richmond. Of these, all but a small percentage are diverted from wayward or criminal careers,

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