

THE CHILDREN ACT AND THE OLDHAM LEAGUE.

BY CHARLES DAWSON, Esq.

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THE passing of the Children Act, 1908, introduced by the Rt. Hon. Herbert Samuel, M.P., and the establishment of a Children's League in Oldham suggested to me to bring before the Society what the recent law has enacted, and what voluntary effort has effected for the protection and happiness of young children. The legal provisions of the Children Act are intended to rescue children from what Mr. Samuel calls the "bad home," and the voluntary efforts are directed at brightening and making more happy the homes and surroundings of the children of the ordinary working classes. As to those of the first class, Mr. Samuel said in a recent address: "both humanity and policy required that the neglected child should be rescued from the bad home." Surely no one would deny protection to helpless children against neglect, cruel and sometimes brutal treatment—and even policy apart from humanity dictates intervention in the case of a bad home. It has been said: "The child is father of the man;" but he is more immediately the father of the youth, who, if neglected falls into the ranks of the criminals who form the Hooligans of London, the Apaches of Paris, and the waifs and strays of all large cities. We are dismayed at the unrest and upheavals which are caused by what is called Socialism—but if the foundations of Society are insecure the edifice must rock and totter, as it does. No doubt this eruption is comparatively of modern growth, but the reason is obvious. The spread of vehicles of information has revealed to the masses the excess of their own misery, and at the same time has made them acquainted with the happiness, the luxury, and the pleasures of the few. Their former ignorance was that "bliss" of which the poet speaks in modern verse, and to which an ancient writer referred when he said: "Ignoti nulla cupido—There is no desire for the unknown." The discontent engendered by our social anomalies has created a class who, bereft of family ties or affections, send out on our streets their neglected children for whose rescue and safety the new Act, which codifies others, has been passed.

One of the best ways to describe its working is to show what was possible before its enactment. Our fellow countryman and my fellow citizen, Gerald Griffin, addressing the artist about to paint Father Mathew's portrait, said: "That picture should in its lineaments portray the previous state

the Ireland he so reformed, so that 'every ray we see them shedding in its very light must tell what a gloom before was spreading,' and every section of this Act reveals the horrors and inhumanities which were possible before its passing. For instance :

Sec. I, Part i. provides " that persons receiving infants under the age of seven for reward, must notify such reception to the local authority (local authority for first part of Act is the Board of Guardians) within forty-eight hours." Such notice must state the name and address of the person receiving, and the name of person from whom the child was received. The local authority in Dublin for the fourth part is the Borough Council.

In addition, it is " provided that *any* person with or without reward taking charge of a child must give similar notice."

Likewise " notice of death or removal must be given within forty-eight hours to local authority," and further, " where a child has been in charge at passing of Act notice must be given as if child were received after commencement of Act." Before the Act it was possible to hand over an inconvenient child for a small pittance to some other person, or it was possible for a consideration to place it where no questions would be asked as to its future.

But the whereabouts of the child and its guardians are not only now registered, but Sec. 2 provides that during the care of infants the local authorities shall appoint Inspectors, whose duty it shall be " to visit the infants and the premises in which they are kept, and satisfy themselves as to the proper nursing and maintenance of the infants."

Any person refusing admission to Inspectors, or obstructing may be brought before a Justice, who may grant a warrant for inspection. The Act provides for penalties for any offences, and which we will find laid down in a subsequent Section.

The Local Authority can fix the number of infants by Section 4, and any person keeping any children in excess of that number shall be deemed to have committed an offence under the Act. In cases of cruelty, *neglect*,* or even of ignorance, the children can be removed. Before the passing of the Act all these acts of ignorance, cruelty or neglect could remain undiscovered and unpunished.

But Section 7 is a most important one, as it affects the safety of infant life. By it it is made an offence under a *very heavy* penalty for the person in charge " to have any interest in life insurance of any child." It is needless to dwell

* This neglect is very great ; only a few days ago a child-nurse only three years of age was run over and killed in the public streets of Dublin. Surely such neglect forms an offence under the Act, and should be punished.

on the importance of preventing under the heaviest penalty the nefarious traffic in the lives of children from whose deaths money can be derived.

The Act not only defines the duty of registered and rewarded guardians, for Section 12 provides "that *any* person over the age of 16 years who has the custody, charge, or care of any child, and who wilfully assaults, illtreats, or exposes such child to danger to health or life, shall be guilty of an offence under the Act." Now there is a practice in Dublin which many people must have noticed during the past severe weather, of carrying infants of a few weeks or months in the streets during periods of rain, frost, or snow—it is obvious in many cases that the person carrying the infant is not the mother, but a girl sent out to beg and who brings the child to excite sympathy—but the police of Dublin, well-known for kind-heartedness, don't appear to be instructed in their duties and powers as to street begging. I wish our city police were, as they are in every British city except London, under the control of the municipal authority. In Dublin they are more a government force. Some years ago, when in Edinburgh on corporate business, Dr. Littlejohn, the head of the Public Health Department, told me that every constable was an officer of public health and municipal law; in Dublin they are not in such close touch with the municipal authority.

The action of the police as to general street begging and illegal trading is very much hampered by our city not having Day Industrial Schools. Section 77 of the Act deals with these. It provides that "when the Secretary of State—in Ireland the Chief Secretary—is satisfied, a school in which industrial training, elementary education, and one or more meals a day, but not lodging, are provided, is necessary or expedient for the proper training and control of children he may, on the application required by the Act, certify any such school as fit for the reception of children." By Section 78 "the Court before which a child is brought may send it to a Day Industrial School." Section 80 defines in case of those needing it the grant in aid by the Treasury, and in Section 82 the contribution of the local authority and the parents is dealt with. With regard to the application of these Sections in Ireland, the Chief Secretary in the *Dublin Gazette* of the 22nd March, 1910, lays down the Treasury contributions as follows:

1. For children where, if the child were sent to a residential school the Treasury grant would be more than 2s.—2s. *od.* a week.
2. Where the Treasury grant for a residential school would be 2s.—1s. *6d.*
3. For children without an Order of Court (Section 29), 1s. a week.

The conditions of grant set forth are :

1. Accommodation, detention, medical and other care.
2. Industrial training.
3. Elementary education.
4. Meals.

Addition to grant can be made in respect of drawing and manual instruction.

Just fancy the effect of these provisions on the present and future of our little street arab. "So bright," as a recent writer lately said of him in one of our dailies, "a breezy, cheery little chap, who loses no opportunity to earn an honest penny, but meets disappointment philosophically. Leave a muddy bicycle outside a shop door, and you will find him industriously polishing it with his cap. If you fail to remunerate him he is not likely to whine. He will scamper off good-humouredly in search of further adventures and better fortune. He gives you the impression that he possesses a good deal of undeveloped material." Nothing could be more true or better said.

Well, what does the Day Industrial School offer to him ?

1. Industrial training to develop that "undeveloped material."
2. Elementary Education to still further sharpen that cheery intellect.
3. And though last by no means least, a wholesome meal to strengthen the well-made little frame.

On the matter of children's food, I must say the Christian parents are not so careful as the Jews in the feeding of their children. The Jewish mothers are good cooks, they give nourishing food more plentifully to their children, more butter, fish and other wholesome diet. I read some time since when preparing this paper that a Jewish infant or young child will weigh at any given age some pounds more than a Christian child. Why?—because it is better fed. I wish we had great food industries as well as great drink ones. Why should the latter be our only industry? Food of all kinds, bread stuffs, eggs, vegetables, poultry, butter, fish and flesh could be made profitable industries, as well as drink ones, and would lead to no deterioration of body or soul. At any rate the transfer of our little street arabs for a few hours per day from the streets to the training of hand and brain, and a square meal, would be a transition from a hell to a heaven on earth. I might finish this portion of my subject by saying that in countries so sensitive about religious matters as the people of these islands are, that provisions are made in the Act to safeguard the religion of children dealt with under it.

Section 23 provides "that the Court shall endeavour, in handing over children to any guardianship or school, to ascertain the religious persuasion to which the child belongs, and shall if possible select persons of the same religion, or a person who gives such undertaking as sufficient that the child shall be brought up in accordance with its own religious persuasion." Further provision for Roman Catholic children is made in the application of the Act to Ireland by Section 133, Sub-Section 18, which provides "that a youthful offender or child who appears to belong to the Roman Catholic Church shall not be ordered to be sent, removed, or transferred to any save to a certified school conducted in accordance with the doctrines of that church. The youthful offender shall be deemed to belong to the religious persuasion to which his parents belong, and when that is unknown, to the religion in which he appears to have been baptized, or to which he professes to belong." Previous to the passing of the Children Act, the Corporation under the Act of 1903 have established in Dublin a Children's Court, where one of their members presides, and the provisions regarding street vendors are fully carried out. However, instead of having an Industrial School to send offenders to, they are only sent to a place of detention, where neither instruction nor food is provided. So in taking leave of the Act we can see it fairly provides for the physical care, the intellectual development, and the religious rights of the objects of the enactment.

There are many Day Industrial Schools in large English towns, but as yet there are none in Dublin. However, the matter is under the consideration of the Finance Committee, and they will doubtless take such steps as they are able and empowered to do. The Town Clerk of Liverpool, where there are five such schools, informs me that the Children Act has proved a most valuable measure, but he cherishes the hope, which I do, "that the conditions of home life may be so improved as to obviate the necessity of removing children at all."

The Town Clerk says—"That the Local Education Authority are responsible for the whole expenditure in connexion with the five Industrial Schools."

In Bristol the Corporation Education Committee have several Day Industrial Schools under their control.

But the resources of Bristol are far larger than those of Dublin, its rateable valuation is £1,844,826; rate in the £, 9/2.

I now turn to the voluntary action for the care, culture, and happiness of children not subjects included in the classes provided for in the Act.

THE OLDHAM CHILDREN LEAGUE.

I found the best example of voluntary action in this town. In an address delivered at Lime House on 20th March, Mr. Samuel said: "My firm conviction all through the various stages of the Act was that the State should rely to the utmost upon the co-operation of voluntary organization," and that "the family should be helped to do its proper work." We all know that great distinction between the modern and pre-Christian times was the foundation, the hearth, round which the new centre of civilisation—the family—gathered. In Oldham poverty does not break up the home, but up to lately the homes were dreary, dull and dirty. This Lancashire town is the outcome of the development of the coal mines and the importation of cotton with its incidental industries. It has over three hundred mills, with 12 million spindles, and three hundred chimneys are perpetually puffing smoke. So it could scarcely be expected that it could be a bright or clean town. Some years ago, however, a Society was formed for its cleansing and ornamentation. It was called "Beautiful Oldham." Its object was to plant and ornament the streets, to turn vacant spaces into handsome parks, to erect fountains, to encourage the cultivation of flowers, and the spread of the three great essentials of human health—Light, Air and Cleanliness—in every house. Our own city of Dublin, with few exceptions, is practically devoid of trees, and almost bereft of public fountains. Any tree planting that has been done has been carried out by the Corporation, and these in Upper O'Connell Street, Lord Edward Street, and Clontarf only demonstrate what could be done on a larger scale. Trees in a city are not only objects of beauty, but they are sources of health. In the daylight they emit oxygen, the gas on which human life mainly depends. Some time ago an eminent French physician said that the balmy and exhilarating air of Paris arose largely from the trees in the Boulevards.

And as for public fountains the streets have none, and yet no city has a finer water supply or higher pressure. One cannot mention this subject without remembering the work of its great promoter, the late Sir John Gray. He effected for Dublin what Pliny said the Emperors did for pagan Rome, and what the Roman Pontiffs have since done for that Christian city "by bringing pure water from the far-off country to play and sparkle in the homes of the people." An illustrious family connected with this city have already done much for the health and comfort of the people; some day I hope they will supplement it by adding the ornament of trees and fountains to our streets.

Well, seeing the result of this society in Oldham, it struck some philanthropists to enlist the aid of children for the work of cleaning and beautifying their homes and their town. It appears to me this great source of what can be done by even very young children has never been sufficiently exploited, and so a "Children League" was formed, called "Young Beautiful Oldham." Foremost amongst its promoters was Mrs. Mary Higgs, to whom I am indebted for all the information I possess on the subject, and at the present moment she is the life and soul of the movement.

The league has now over 10,000 members. They are recruited chiefly from the public schools; the managers of all creeds co-operate in its promotion. I learn from Canon O'Callaghan, P.P. of St. Patrick's in Oldham, that he is in full sympathy with the movement, and he has written me to say "the Catholic children take part in the Society, which is a very good thing in any large town." The only thing he says which the Catholics here cannot do, as the non-Catholics can, is to publish a magazine which is a source of information and of a very respectable income, but referring to Dublin Canon O'Callaghan says: "I believe this or a similar Society with a Catholic magazine would be a good thing for Dublin." He has sent me a copy of the pledge which the young members take. It is as follows:

I PROMISE

1. To do all in my power to protect wild birds and plants, and flowers, and to influence others to do the same.
2. To do my best to sow seeds or plant flowers or trees in and around Oldham at least once a year.
3. *To do all I can to make my home, school and town beautiful.*

It can be well imagined what 20,000 little hands can do to aid in beautifying their home and their town.

In Dublin and suburbs we should easily with, including suburbs, 400,000 population have 20,000 children and 40,000 hands at this work of beautification. I am sure we could enlist the co-operation of all creeds and classes, and the active interest of managers of schools like Canon O'Callaghan.

He also told me there are flower shows held and prizes given to promote home culture of flowers. There are also excursions into the country where horticulture and tree planting are practically taught, and above all, where the children get a day's outing and entertainment.

But all the efforts of adults or of children cannot make homes cheerful, healthy, or beautiful if the houses themselves

are little better than ruins. Most of the manufacturing towns of the United Kingdom are comparatively of recent growth; therefore, old and dilapidated tenement houses are not so numerous as they were in Dublin—the working classes had to get new houses. This was not the case in Dublin. To meet the wants of the increasing population of the city—which in 1812 was only 176,619, and is now over 290,000—the working classes had to seek accommodation in the abandoned residences of families who had migrated into the suburbs. These houses, built for the use of one family, had not the sanitary appliances for a family in every room. The evil becoming so great the Corporation cleared congested areas at vast expense. About the year 1876 they leased some of those sites to the present Artizans Dwellings Co. at a moderate rent. Since then a large number of schemes have been promoted, amongst which I may mention the following: the Corporation blocks in various parts of the city; the Guinness Trust Buildings; the Iveagh Buildings; the Housing of the Very Poor Association; the Alexandra Guild, and the building of the Social Service Society of Trinity College, mostly forwarded by young men. In order to encourage this reform the Corporation of Dublin obtained by the Act of 1890, power to grant an abatement of 25% off the Municipal rates for all separated dwellings under £8 valuation, provided the premises were certified by the Public Health Department to be in sanitary condition. I find from the rate books the owners of such property got the abatement on the conditions named for 8,230 separate tenements.

Notwithstanding all this the cry of the slums is still heard.

The reason is much yet remains to be done, and I only wish that people with means and with sympathy would invest in further buildings—they are safe investments—the Artizans' Dwellings pays 5%.

But Rubbers are more attractive.

I trust the result of this meeting may be the effective carrying out of the legal promises of the Children Act, and the establishment of a voluntary Children League like that of Oldham, to make Dublin, already beautiful in many ways, more beautiful than it is.

The two cures for all the social ills are Legal rescue for Reform, and more happiness for Prevention.