

## BELGIUM AND THE CHILD DELINQUENT

IT may appear strange to those unacquainted with social organization in France and Belgium to learn that the latter country has left the former decades behind in the curing of crime. While France is only just waking up to the necessity of coping with the appalling crimes, daily reported, of youthful criminals and with the cases of cruelty to young children by their natural protectors—a factor which partly accounts for the first evil—Belgium has for over twenty years tackled the question of the protection of childhood and the proper provision for caring for and re-educating deficient and abnormal children. The efforts being made to rescue children from the almost inevitable career of crime and degradation to which vicious surroundings and congenital infirmities have driven them is one of the most admirable examples of practical idealism in the present age, and places Belgium in the front rank as a civilizing agent of humanity.

From the period of the crèche to the kindergarten stage, the dossier of every child rescued by the *Oeuvre de la Protection de l'Enfance* and its various co-operating organizations is carefully preserved with the report of any necessary curative or corrective treatment applied. When the period of school education arrives (compulsory from the age of 8 to 14), the process of segregation is virtually accomplished; the normal and the abnormal child are separately classified. The latter is assigned to a special class, the *classe des anormaux*, which is attached to the great public schools and conducted by teachers trained for that particular purpose. Here, as in every branch of Belgian education, the teacher, fully equipped for his work, is allowed much personal initiative. This has the proven

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advantage of exciting a greater interest in his task and a more active observation and inventiveness. Instead of being a mere pedagogic automaton, he frequently becomes an originator in his profession. This *classe des anormaux* is quite distinct from the *classe des arriérés*, another institution in the Belgian Public Schools, in which those pupils who have for any reason fallen behind their own class receive the supplementary tuition to enable them to catch up with it.

The 15th of May, 1912, is an outstanding date in Belgian legislation. On that day was promulgated a law for providing for the systematic re-education and re-adaptation of deficient, criminal, or abnormal children. It included the institution of the first Children's Court with a special judge. A law passed in 1867 had obliged a judge to make a distinction between the adult offender and the minor below sixteen. But this was a distinction of degree, and not of character. His only alternative to committing the child to prison was to return it to its parent, or place it at the disposal of the Government. The results of this law were not to any degree satisfactory. In the general increase of crime, the proportion of juvenile criminals showed a notable rise. The truth that, in the words of Judge Wets, 'the child criminal or delinquent is almost invariably a product of heredity and environment,' was lost sight of in the arbitrary classification of minors as inoffensive or as delinquent. No account was taken of the fact that among the former many had remained so through absence of temptation while of the latter the majority, perhaps, had become offenders through the mere accident of circumstance. With the institution of the Children's Court the whole system was revolutionized. Punitive methods were replaced by the organized re-education and re-adaptation of youthful delinquents; the fruitless repression of crime by its prophylactic. The decisions of the judge ruled in all cases of mendi-

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cants and vagrants under sixteen (above this age the offenders were answerable to the ordinary courts), and of minors lacking parental discipline and guilty of misdemeanours. Special measures were applied in the cases of crimes of exceptional gravity by young criminals whose moral perversity precluded their being admitted into those special institutions created for the protection and reform of minors.

Of the organizations co-operating in the cause of child-rescue there are, incredible as it may seem for a little country like Belgium, no less than two hundred and sixty-five. With the help of Mme. Mulle, the directress of the *Ecole centrale de Service Social*, I was enabled to visit some typical institutions. This, with the information obtained from a work of earnest and human appeal, *l'Enfant de Justice* by Judge Wets, the fruit of fifteen years' experience as Judge of the Brussels *Tribunal de l'Enfance*, has allowed me to gain some general notion of what is being achieved in Belgium.

In this work there are two outstanding features : (1) complete co-operation between state, provincial, communal, and private enterprises, whether lay or religious, which no party or political interest, no red tape of any kind, is permitted to compromise. The national motto, *l'Union fait la Force*, is here no empty formula. 'That is one advantage of our small and compact country,' said Mme. Mulle, 'for it greatly facilitates co-operation and control in the various ramifications of our work of child-rescue.' The law of the 15th of May legalized the co-operation of public and private enterprise in the new judicial administration. 'This conception of judiciary action,' says Judge Wets, 'assumed a wide appeal to private co-operation under its most diverse aspects, while maintaining the possibility of indispensable recourse to the state institutions.'

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(2) A system of scientific classification in which the services of the most noted psychiatrists are engaged in sorting out from the heterogeneous assemblage of subjects, the fit, the potentially fit, and the wholly unfit; and in determining, through tests and prolonged observation, the degree and character of each individual case. The problem of moral responsibility (the only equitable method of estimating human conduct) is here probed.

It rests with the judge of the Children's Court to decide which particular establishment is best suited to deal with the convicted minor. He is allowed the option of conceding a regime of semi-liberty, under the supervision of a delegate, whose business it is to collect all particulars regarding the parentage, conditions of life, family relations, and physical and moral health of his protégé. The office, taken from disinterested devotion to the cause, calls for tact, sympathy and experience of children and their temptations. Its emoluments are negligible. Attached to the service of the *Tribunal des Enfants* there are four hundred and forty-two men and one hundred and forty-two women delegates. Alone in his study, the judge with his paternal attitude usually succeeds in drawing from the young offender a full and truthful confession. The child, feeling that he is in the presence of a protector and not an accuser, then faces the subsequent court examination without apprehension.

With the permission of Judge Wets, I assisted at one of these sittings of the *Tribunal des Enfants*. After examining the respective dossiers amplified by the depositions of the delegates, the Judge, seated between the *Procureur du Roi* and the Court Secretary, proceeded to examine the young delinquents. The offences were typical of childhood and adolescence.

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Three little girls, of about nine years of age, convicted of shop-lifting, stood up. There was something engaging in the manner in which Adèle, Angèle, and Simone, related the details of their little exploit, each describing her own particular share in it without the least attempt to lighten her own responsibility. Indeed, there appeared to have been complete harmony in the distribution of the spoils. Moreover, their generosity was extended to other little friends, and it was only through the investigations of one of the mothers of these—the child's unexplained possession of a dainty little workbox—that the *pot aux roses* was discovered. To the little culprits the whole affair had appeared in the light of a great adventure, in which the question of ethics but dimly appeared. Absolute neglect of surveillance after school hours, full freedom to roam the streets and pick up undesirable acquaintances, were comprehensible factors in their misdeeds.

Other and more serious offences were successively examined. In every case deplorable conditions, ill-treatment, incitement to or connivance in wrong-doing on the part of parents, families living in one room, a promiscuity excluding human decency, were alleged in their defence. Some seven or eight cases were disposed of during that afternoon, with a thoroughness quite impossible in the Paris Children's Court, where fifty cases are dealt with in the same time.

Children affected by any form of mental abnormality are sent by the judge to the Central School of Observation at Moll. This great institution is the logical outcome of the law of the 15th of May. The work, which was started in 1913, was wrecked by the German invasion. The buildings were forcibly evacuated and the inmates dislodged. Not until 1919 could the sections be re-united and the work resumed. For the full description of this establishment and its

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extent—its laboratories for medical and physiological examinations, its pavilions for the treatment and re-education of the different categories of abnormal children, its workshops for those capable of being trained according to their aptitudes—the reader must be referred to the work already mentioned (*l'Enfant de Justice*). It is unrivalled by any similar institution in Europe.

Its objects are the study of the individual psychology of the subject, supplemented by a course of prolonged observation, and his re-classification and social re-adaptation. 'The child of the Children's Court,' says M. Rouvroy, the Director, 'is, above all others, a social reaction. A rapid examination merely suffices to discover the more easily discernible phenomena. The so-called medico-pedagogic clinics reveal neither the slight mental anomalies (the most difficult of detection) nor the affective irregularities which underlie our psychiatric cases. The simple determination of the mental age by means of the psycho-metric scale is deceptive and often leaves the real problem unsolved. A prolonged course of observation is necessary in insufficiently evidenced and all affective cases.'

This measure, approved at the International Congress for the Protection of Children in 1921, was realized years before at the Central School of Moll. The method pursued is biographical and begun immediately the child enters. For three days he is completely isolated; and, while engaged on some assigned task (manual or scholastic), he is visited in turn by director, chaplain, teachers, and attendants, who converse with him separately on subjects pertaining to their particular departments. Each contributes his notes to the child's dossier. This course of observation is pursued, unknown to the subject, in class-room, refectory, play-

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ground, workshop, dormitory, and in the industrial homes of semi-liberty to which he is assigned after giving the necessary signs of amendment.

The Central School of Moll is set apart for boys. There is a similar institution for girls at St. Servais.

The inhuman practice of incarcerating distinctly abnormal minors in an insane asylum has been abolished since 1926. Several such institutions have been transformed into establishments where every effort is made to reclaim those susceptible of re-education and re-adaptation, and to eliminate all doubt as to their total mental incapacity before interning them as insane. It is only when no other course is possible that such a measure is adopted.

A notable institution is the Medico-Pedagogic Clinic of Brabant, the joint conception of Dr. Decroly, whose pedagogic methods are everywhere adopted in Belgium, and Dr. Boulenger, a psychiatrist of international renown. Its execution, impeded by the outbreak of the war, was only realized in 1920. Its function is the preliminary and rapid examination by the most approved tests of abnormal minors. It furnishes a medico-pedagogic report with all data available concerning the heredity and antecedents of the subject, of great value to the judge of the Children's Court. No delinquent appears before him without this preliminary examination. Its revelations have proved that the cases brought to him cannot be properly examined without its co-operation. In the words of Judge Wets, 'It may be regarded as the antechamber of the great School-Farm of Waterloo,' of which a rapid inspection under the guidance of its director, Dr. Boulenger, has left me an unforgettable impression.

The history of this institution—a monument of human altruism seconded by science—is, like that of others of its kind in Belgium, a damning indictment

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of war as a check to all civilizing influences. Begun in 1914, it was only in 1920 that the work could be resumed. It was officially inaugurated in 1926. Close to the village of Waterloo, on a rise of undulating country of meadow land, where the only sounds are the lowing of a cow or the distant whistle of a train, lies the School Farm, enclosed in its forty-five acres of land by a low hawthorn hedge, gay with creamy bloom in spring. Anything more cheerful outwardly it would be difficult to imagine. The absence of forbidding walls with their suggestion of concealment and forcible confinement is the first thing that dispels depressing impressions. The absence of a common uniform marking the inmates as set apart from their fellow creatures is a second pleasant feature as from the road you see them at games in the playgrounds, or exercising under the instructions of their teachers, or at work in the garden or fields. And the distant voices are the voices of happy children.

This cheerful impression is doubled by the interior disposition of the group of buildings of cream-coloured brick. Abundant light and air through big windows bring a constant sense of outdoor influence and freedom. In the provision made for the welfare of the two hundred and fifty inmates, in the lofty kitchen with its great patented tilting cauldrons, where all the food is steam-cooked and everything is done by electricity, in the ranges of enamel baths and lavatory fittings, in the airy dormitories—the most perfect modern devices have been adopted. The great gymnasium is fitted with every apparatus for the correction of malformation and the development of muscular control and co-ordination.

In the model farm the pupils learn the proper care of animals, in the garden the successful cultivation of plants. 'The chief aim of the School Farm,' says M. Libert, the head-instructor, 'is to prepare the child

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for social life, through exercises which will enable him to provide for his own needs, and live with his fellows without being a burden or a danger to others. What he learns is not of so much consequence as the process of learning. It is the work of the farm in its various branches that offers the best means of arousing his physical, mental and moral activities.'

All that is taught in the class-room is demonstrated through actual fact. Discipline is here taught by gentle means; through the affections when possible, but in every case through the trust and confidence which the teacher, sooner or later, succeeds in inspiring in his pupil. 'One can never hope to make a normal being out of one in whom certain psychic centres are absent or incomplete' (to quote M. Libert). 'But to lead him to act rightly through automatism and the powerful influence of habit is to spare him much misery and to make of him, if not a normal being, at least a useful human unit, which is an appreciable result.'

The spectacle presented in any one of the classrooms reveals the magnitude of the task . . . . The current of life flowing into strange and garbled forms of humanity, shaped without apparent guiding hand; child faces seemingly fashioned by the spirit of some malignant genius; embryo human souls reaching out to their more fortunate brethren through the dim light of an elementary animal consciousness, through caricatural features which distort their every expression; smiles of such strange, unchildlike nature—mocking, sardonic, grotesque—as if to conceal their pathos; a childish hand stretched out for friendly contact with the passing visitor—such is the spectacle offered by that innocent race who bear the merciless fiat of outraged nature to a sinful humanity.

But here on the desks are simple phrases legibly written, simple drawings faithfully traced by these

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childish hands—proof that a connection has been established between their obscure minds and the subject upon which the teacher is concentrating their attention. This, through the ingenious Decroly method, that so wonderfully unlocks the closed understanding of the deficient child, and allows some rays of light to penetrate to the obscure mind. And a ripple of gratification passes over the class as the director exhibits some of the most successful achievements.

How all this chaotic human material is being transformed into beings for whom some form of human utility, some small share in the purposeful activity of the world, is still possible; how the tiny spark of intelligence is fanned into a feeble flame, that is the secret of those whose faith and optimism are accomplishing this modern miracle.

There must always remain a minority of irreclaimables beyond all human succour. Concerning these—mercifully unconscious of their tragic condition—the words of Dr. Boulenger remain with me: 'At least we shall have given them a happy childhood. That, alas! is all we can do for them.'

As we passed through the bright and airy refectory, with its colourful mural designs, the sunlight fell upon the motionless figure of a girl of fourteen, standing at the end of the hall. The stony immobility of the figure, unmindful of our approach, the impassive not unbeautiful face, with the downward gaze of the blue eyes bent on some invisible object, presented an enigma as baffling as the sphinx. 'A voluntary mute,' said Dr. Boulenger. 'She relapses into these periods of absolute mutism during which it is impossible to obtain either word or sound from her.' After three vain attempts to elicit a response, 'Raise your right arm, Rose,' he said. The arm was raised as if by an automaton. 'Now lower it'—the arm descended in like manner. There was not the stir of a facial muscle,

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not the quiver of an eyelid . . . . We passed on, leaving the slim young figure in its psychic isolation.

The School Farm of Waterloo, the most perfect of its particular type, is only one of others equally admirable, contributing in a more limited degree to the cause so actively pursued by Belgian philanthropy. An organization of particular interest is the *Société Royale pour la Protection des Enfants martyrs*, initiated in 1892. Its special mission is to rescue children infamously exploited as the instruments of vice and transport them to the beautiful school-farm of Jules Lejeune, where a new existence and a new conception of life are provided for them.

In his short sketch of the two years of exile he spent in Belgium, M. Léon Daudet renders full justice to this valiant little country, her sacrifices during the war, and the part she plays as one of the great civilizing influences of the world—a fact not always sufficiently recognized. The magnificent effort she is putting forth in the cause, so vital to future generations, which forms the subject of this article, appears to me like the echo of the bugle call she sounded in 1914, when the whole nation rose up to avert the destruction of civilization itself.

EDITH VALERIO.