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One of Our Jobs:

CRIME PREVENTION

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"I won't go! You're not going to put me away! I'm going to . . ." The loud wails of sixteen-year-old Bill died away in the distance as two burly policemen carried him, struggling, to the lock-up. The Court room resumed its traditional calm, the silence being broken only by the whimpering of Tom, whose fate had yet to be decided by the Bench. In all his thirteen years, Tom had never been so frightened. Bill had been dragged away in spite of his protests and he had not been able to escape. The quiet little man sitting at the far end of the long table between two other men had simply said, "Bill, we are going to send you to a reformatory," and Bill had been taken away.

Now the quiet little man was looking at Tom. Tom suddenly felt very helpless and very much alone. He caught his father's eye and he was frightened by the threatening glare, frightened because he knew his father would be even worse at home, where he was usually drunk. His mother's head was down on her hands. She was sobbing. She couldn't help him now.

"Your Worships, may I say something about Tom, please?" Tom looked over at the man who had spoken. He didn't know much about him, except that he had come to talk to him the day before. He had called himself a "Probation Officer" and he seemed the right sort of man. Why, he had even understood how it was more

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194102

exciting breaking into factories than going up to that "pansy" club or moping round at home. The quiet little man at the end of the table seemed to be paying a lot of attention to the Probation Officer. Tom heard the officer saying ". . . led into this by the older boy . . . Bill a hardened criminal . . . Tom likes the adventure of dodging policemen . . . have a job for him already . . . likes football and can get him a place in a club team . . . the makings of a man . . ." Tom's father grunted. Tom wondered why he couldn't have a man like this Probation Officer for a father.

"Tom, we've thought a lot about you," the quiet little man was saying. "We're going to give you a chance. We're not going to put you away although you have done enough to deserve it. If we give you a chance to go straight, to go to work, and to get your excitement in a club without breaking the law, will you take it?" Tom managed to whisper "Yes, sir."

The quiet little man then said, "We will release Tom on probation for twelve months. Tom, you are to do what your Probation Officer tells you, and if all goes well you will be discharged at the end of twelve months."

The Probation Officer went home with Tom and his parents and told Tom plainly that he was to spend his nights either at home, or at the new club or round at the officer's own home. He warned the parents not to nag Tom and not to beat him. He also warned them that if they continued to neglect Tom he would be taken out of their charge and committed to the care of the Children's Welfare Department. He then took Tom down to a factory, introduced him to the foreman, and left him happily turning the handle of a bellows, while all around him men with big hammers made the sparks fly. On the way home

he bought some books which Tom would be able to read when he came round to his house.

THE WORK OF CHILDREN'S COURTS

More than two thousand different Bills and Toms and Marys and Janes are brought before the Children's Courts in Victoria each year. The Bench, comprised of a Children's Court Special Magistrate and local Justices of the Peace, has wide powers for dealing with boys and girls between seven and seventeen years of age. The extreme penalty, committal to a reformatory, is imposed only on those boys or girls who have failed to respond to more lenient treatment of previous offences. A more usual method is to release the offender on probation for a period of some months. About a quarter of the cases which come before the court are released on probation.¹ Where the offender seems already to have learnt his lesson by the time he comes to the Court, and where the home background is likely to help rather than hinder the child's progress, his case may be adjourned for some months. If all goes well he will be discharged at the end of the period without appearing at the Court again. About a quarter of the cases before the Court are dealt with in this way. Another quarter, approximately, are discharged immediately, and the remainder receive varying treatment.²

In reaching its decision as to what is best for the child, the Bench relies very largely on what the Probation Officer can say about the child's

1. In 1939 there were 680 probations and, of these, 608 were eventually discharged as "satisfactory."

2. The Children's Court pays attention to the cause of delinquency rather than to the particular act of delinquency. The Court seeks treatment which will reform the offender before he grows up into a life of crime. It seeks to correct rather than to punish.

physical and mental standards, environment, school career, developmental history, and the basic causes which have led to the act for which the child is before the Court.³

THE PROBATION OFFICER'S WORK

While the Probation Officer's visit to the home is primarily in connection with a particular act of delinquency, his work often leads him into a complicated set of abnormal social conditions. There may be overcrowding in the house—when ten people live in a three-roomed house it literally drives the boy into the street; the house may be in a congested area where there is no playing space so that gangs gather in the streets and lanes; there may be poverty so that the child is driven to work in the evenings, wandering the streets "collecting" or selling papers; there may be starvation and malnutrition with a consequent physical condition which begets intractability and uncontrolled anti-social impulses; there may be loose morals, sexually speaking, with prostitution within and without the marriage bond, and with droves of unwanted, ill-cared-for children; there may be economic insecurity because the breadwinner depends on casual work or because he drinks, or gambles; there may be great hearts and resolute wills but overpowering ignorance—ignorance of "homecraft," of hygiene, of methodical finance, of creative recreation, ignorance of first steps in self-help; and, worst of all, there

3. The police officer who brings the offender to the Court is obliged to notify the appropriate Probation Officer so that he may investigate these matters and guide the Court in its deliberations. Provision is made for six Probation Officers at each Children's Court in Victoria. There is one each for Protestant, Roman Catholic and Hebrew boys, and a similar number for girls. There are also two Stipendiary Probation Officers attached to the central office of the Courts. They bring a high degree of skill and a certain amount of clinical treatment to the handling of the more difficult cases.

may be a complete lack of friendship. The Probation Officer may sit by a smouldering fire in the kitchen holding a dirty urchin on his knee and talking to the mother while she irons the family's ragged clothes. Those are the moments when he can perhaps teach the parents how to handle their problem child more effectively.

When he first enters the household he does so as an officer of the Court, with full powers of investigation. But if he works properly he should win the confidence of the family and become a friend—one who is prepared to help in any trouble, the family's only "backstop." To keep a boy out of further trouble he may have to go so far as to persuade the parents to move the family to another suburb, and then make the necessary arrangements and help in the shifting—perhaps wheel the baby's pram loaded with bedding, through several miles of city streets to the new locality. (The officer's job is entirely honorary and his resources may be too small to pay a carrier.)⁴

THE CHURCH'S RESPONSIBILITY

The Children's Courts depend on the Probation Officers more than can be estimated. Yet, "in actual practice, the Probation Officer frequently knows nothing of the case until he hears the evidence given in court. The Probation Officers are honorary, not necessarily having any special qualifications, training or experience; for the most part they are Church social workers, and are sincerely doing their best according to their

4. Moving may decrease the likelihood of delinquent activity. In 1939 Heidelberg Children's Court dealt with 23 offenders, being 0.31 per cent. of the child population of the district. In the same year Fitzroy Court dealt with 119 offenders, being 1.61 per cent. The probability of delinquent actions seems to be five times as great in crowded Fitzroy as in the spacious regions of Heidelberg.

outlook and their capabilities." ⁵ But "their best" is surely not "the best possible," and it is up to others to help them carry efficiently the responsibility which the Church has accepted in the work of the Children's Court.

Where can we find the fit and competent persons to take up this work? If we cannot find such people ready-made, can we ask the councils of the Churches to train men and women for the job? The difficulty for most men is that some of the work, especially the attendance at Court, has to be done in the daytime during business hours. Men are needed rather than women, because only about 5% of the offenders are girls.

REFORMATORIES

In conclusion, we will recall Bill and Tom. Tom, under the care of a competent Probation Officer, will live a life of new activities and at the end of the year will be well established as a useful citizen. Instead of being a liability on the State he will have become an asset.

About the young desperado Bill we cannot be so sure. He has been sent to a reformatory, and in Victoria the reformatories are run by the Churches for the State, but—we cannot be very hopeful. The story of the reformatories must be told some other time. For the moment we can only say that they are doing a good job with many lads, but their methods and their results are below overseas standards. A police officer described one of them to me as "a finishing school for criminals." While this is no doubt an exaggeration, it does seem that the reformatories

5. "Juvenile Crime," by Policewoman Clarey. Published in *The Australian Quarterly* in two parts, May and September, 1940.

must be regarded as institutions for detention rather than for reformation and training. An urgent feature is that many lads over fourteen who do not merit confinement in such institutions must be sent to them for lack of any other place. Many boys cannot remain at home and there are not enough hostels in the city to take them in and keep them in check while allowing them to work for their living. ⁶

In the year 1938, "827 youths, 19 years of age and under, were received in prison. Many of these youths are already habitual criminals, though not declared so by courts. In previous reports it has been shown that these delinquents have received little or no home training, 60% of them coming from children's institutions or reformatory schools in this or other States, and 60% also coming from broken homes, these two groups intermingling. From babyhood onwards, until they obtain stable positions in life, children require proper treatment and training in the right environment. Especially is supervision required during the difficult years of adolescence, when so many youths from children's institutions and broken homes go astray. The frequent absence of such training and supervision constitutes the real problem of crime prevention. The State would be paid handsome dividends in diminution of crime if it could improve its system of training and placing in life the homeless child." ⁷

⁶ The Brotherhood's Hostel for youths has some of these lads in residence and does as much of this work as its limited facilities permit. The Court Probation work requiring to be done would keep a member of the Brotherhood fully occupied if a way could be found to spare one from other Brotherhood duties.

⁷ *Report of Victorian Penal and Gaols Department for 1938.* Govt. Printer, Melbourne.

For further reading with special reference to the Victorian situation see:

The Making of a Criminal, by F. Oswald Barnett, M.Com., 1940. (2/6).

Charitable, Philanthropic and Welfare Work in Victoria, compiled and published by the Charity Organization Society, Melbourne, 1941. (1/-).

Careers for Boys and Girls, by G. R. Giles, B.Sc., Dip.Ed., issued by the Boys' Employment Movement, Melbourne, 1936. (3/-).

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The Superior of the Brotherhood of S. Laurence would be pleased to have your comments on this matter. Address all letters to St. Cuthbert's Priory, East Brunswick, N.11.

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