REFORM FOR THE TRUANT BOY IN INDUSTRIAL TRAINING AND FARMING: AN EFFORT TO IMPROVE EXISTING LAWS AND LESSEN THE EVIL: BY CHARLES HARCOURT

HERE is something very human about the derelict, and while, of course, we admire the man who is faithful to duty, it must be confessed that we rather like to catch him napping now and then. Most of us would own to a certain sympathy with Antony in his fatal dallying at the Egyptian Court, nor are we precisely displeased to find Drake playing bowls when he should have been aboard the Revenge, or Wellington waltzing while Napoleon approaches within cannon shot. The picture of Hamilton romping with his children while his colleagues patiently await his attendance at a critical Cabinet meeting is of far more interest to us than the possible effect of that Cabinet meeting upon the political history of the day. In fact, all the world has a soft spot in its heart for truants, great or small, because the world is full of them. Truancy is by no means confined to the red-headed, snub-nosed, bare-footed, freckle-faced boy who steals an afternoon’s fishing or follows the circus parade when he should be at school; the genus truant includes equally the statesman or soldier who helps himself to a play time once in a while, the business man who sends himself a telegram as a subterfuge for securing a surreptitious holiday at the race-course and the salesman whose grandmother’s funeral always happens on the day of the big ball game.

Because of this touch of human irregularity, we find it difficult to contemplate truancy from the coldly impersonal standpoint of the law. Naturally, if one is a tax-payer and possibly the parent of one or more of the half-million children enrolled in the schools of the city of New York, one has a theoretical disapproval of truancy. But in the main we are fairly indifferent about the enforcement of the Compulsory Education Act. It is only when we come into direct contact with the extensive organization maintained to enforce this law and realize the serious difficulties and complications involved in the work and the far-reaching consequences of its neglect, that we begin really to comprehend its importance, and also to understand that the tendency to play truant, while natural to all humanity, does not originate so much in the child as in his environment.

In the forty-six school board districts of New York, the Compulsory Education Law is enforced by twenty-three district superintendents, under whose direction work eighty-three attendance officers,—
a number far too small for the purpose. An increase of this force would be justified on the mere score of economy, for it would facilitate the checking in its incipiency of the career of many truants who develop into "incorrigibles," and whose reformation after this point has been passed necessitates extraordinary expense and trouble. In the course of the last fiscal year the officers of the Board of Education investigated about two hundred thousand cases of children illegally absent from school and caused the arrest of nearly five hundred persons for violation of the Compulsory Education Law. Thousands of these cases were turned over to the school authorities by the officers of the United States Labor department, when they found children of school age,—that is, under sixteen years—employed in factories.

The Compulsory Education Law is in many respects a defective piece of legislation. It was framed and enacted, in the main, by rural representatives who had little understanding of the needs of the city of New York and less regard for them. The verbal construction of the Act is so faulty as to operate against its enforcement. A Philadelphia lawyer would hesitate to interpret the fifth section, and it is not at all surprising that magistrates frequently fail to find a definition of their duty in it. As a result, only one-fourth of the delinquent parents or guardians brought before the courts receive the punishment which they deserve. To attempt a comprehensive analysis of this Act would be altogether beyond the scope and purpose of the present paper, but it may be well to draw attention to two of its most patent defects. One section is entitled "Persons Employing Children Unlawfully to be Fined," and after much tortuous verbiage and tedious recital of conditions and circumstances the section ends by providing a "penalty" for its violation. Now a penalty is recoverable only by civil action, usually involving uncertainty, vexation and delay. Consequently, in many cases, the Board of Education is compelled to forego further action in the matter after a conviction has been secured.

This law prohibits the engagement of a child in any form of labor,—other than domestic, of course,—during the period of enforced instruction, and includes in this prohibition the long months of vacation. The restriction undoubtedly had its origin in a laudable motive, but it works unnecessary hardship on a number of needy parents and is often detrimental to the welfare of the boy for whose protection it is designed. In the country, where a youngster is apt to spend his holidays in a helpful environment and under moral influences, the measure may have a salutary effect, but its operation in New York tends to force many thousands of children to pass the greater part
of their time upon the streets during the vacation months,—with the most undesirable consequences. It would be better in every way for the child of poor parents in the city that he should be usefully employed out of school hours and during vacation,—always, of course, under special conditions as to the hours and character of his labor.

On account of these and other defects, much thought and study have been given by the principals and teachers of the New York schools to the revision of the Compulsory Education Law, with the result that an admirable amended form has been presented to the Commissioner of Education. These amendments should be passed by the legislature with as little delay as need be, for in no city of the United States is it so difficult as in the city of New York to compel attendance at school, and the task should not be rendered harder by a defective law.

Of the various causes of truancy none is so troublesome or difficult to counteract as that which lies in the indifference or opposition of illiterate parents to the education of their offspring. We have in the city of New York something like one hundred and fifteen thousand foreign born children of school age, representing about seventeen per cent. of the entire public school enrolment. In addition to these are many more who, although born in this country, are the children of parents only in slight degree Americanized and who have not as yet assimilated either in physical characteristics, sentiments or habits, the standards of the land of their adoption. Such parents have little idea of the worth of education, while they have the keenest appreciation of the value of the child as a money-getting agency, and would much rather see him selling newspapers or polishing shoes than attending school. Therefore, they resort to every kind of subterfuge to avoid the required attendance and seek by every means to instil in the mind of the child a dislike for study. Antagonism to the Compulsory Education Law is not, however, confined to foreigners, but is found in many Americans who, while not indifferent to the advantages of education, are driven by stress of poverty to attempt to evade the requirement of the law. In one year, almost one thousand children were found who were unable to attend school because their parents were too poor to afford them sufficient clothing to permit of their going out upon the street.

In numerous cases the operation of the law entails unquestionable hardship. Here are two typical illustrations. A widower has five children of whom the eldest is a girl of thirteen years. The man is industrious and thrifty, but his wages are barely sufficient to support
THE ADMINISTRATION BUILDING OF THE PARENTAL SCHOOL FOR TRUANT BOYS.

SOME OF THE COTTAGES OF THE PARENTAL SCHOOL WHICH ARE ARRANGED AROUND THE CAMPUS.
THE CAMPUS OF THE PARENTAL SCHOOL ABOUT WHICH THE BOYS' COTTAGES ARE GROUPED.

GENERAL VIEW OF THE PARENTAL SCHOOL, SHOWING INDUSTRIAL SHOPS AND OUTLYING FARM LAND.
TRUANT BOYS WHO ARE LEARNING TO BE FLORISTS AT THE BROOKLYN TRUANT SCHOOL.

HITCHING UP FOR THE FIRE DRILL AT THE BROOKLYN TRUANT SCHOOL.
THERE IS NO DIFFICULTY IN SECURING PROMPT ATTENDANCE AT THE WORKSHOP OF THE MANHATTAN TRUANT SCHOOL.

AND THE BOYS FIND THAT STUDY HELPS THEM IN THE WORKSHOP.
the family and will not allow of his hiring a caretaker to look after his little ones during his absence. He wishes to maintain his home, such as it is, and loathes the thought of placing his motherless infants in a charitable institution. Three of the children attend school, but the youngest is only four years of age. The eldest girl is quite capable of playing the part of “little mother,” caring for the home and looking after the baby in the absence of the others; but the law forbids such an arrangement. There is no compromise possible, even though the girl may be unusually advanced in her studies.

Again, we have a widow with a family of small children, the eldest being a boy of thirteen, who is exceptionally bright and would have no difficulty in earning five or six dollars a week. In his case, too, the same prohibition operates. The mother makes a pitifully scanty livelihood by washing or such other work as she may be able to do at home; her boy is not permitted to add to the income, although the family may be, much against their will, the recipients of charitable aid. These illustrations are not advanced as an argument against compulsory education, but as a suggestion that the law in its present form may be too rigid and that some degree of elasticity might be imparted with advantage to its operation. Our present-day tendency toward paternalism is often attended by a great deal of hardship with regard to individuals.

A CONSIDERABLE proportion of the truancy is attributable to the part-time classes, which have a distinct tendency to increase this evil. A child who is not permitted to commence his school day until afternoon has many temptations to play truant in a city like New York and many opportunities to fall into bad company. The “penny theater” is another agency for causing absence from school. The attendance officers have found hundreds of children in such places during school hours. The proprietors profess to exclude them, but they seem to have no difficulty in obtaining admittance to these places which are as much a menace to the morals as they are an obstruction to the education of our children.

In the great majority of cases of truancy it is not found necessary to resort to extreme measures. A system of probation which seems to have produced excellent results was adopted several years ago. Of a total number of nearly thirty-five hundred truants subjected to this system last year, two-thirds improved steadily. When truants, as first offenders, are brought before district superintendents, they are usually placed on probation, transferred to another school and required to report weekly, or more often, to the district superintendent. When these mild remedies fail, resort is had to the courts.
INDUSTRIAL TRAINING AND FARMING FOR TRUANTS

Parents are summoned and when found guilty of negligence or more deliberate violation of the law they are subjected to a sentence which sometimes entails imprisonment. The child who fails to mend his ways under probation is finally committed as an “incorrigible” to one of the truant schools.

The casual truant is of little account, except that his sporadic lapses from grace must be prevented from developing into habit; the chronic truant demands the greater attention and also presents the greater possibilities of reformation. It takes a good boy to make a bad boy. Only your positive character is pronouncedly bad and he might have been as pronouncedly good under different conditions. You never find a neutral character among the “incorrigibles”—the thing would be a paradox. The bad boy always possesses some fundamentally good traits which afford workable material to the reformer. These may be wholly uncultivated and difficult to discover, but they are invariably there and often in a surprisingly plastic state. This fact is the keynote and foundation of the work of the truant school.

THERE is a truant school in Manhattan and another in Brooklyn. The former, by excessive crowding, will accommodate seventy-five boys. It is, of course, very inadequate to the needs, and fifty per cent. of the children committed to it have to be transferred, for lack of room, to private institutions, where their board and tuition are paid for by the city. The Manhattan Truant School is managed by Miss Mary Leonard, whose official title is Matron-Superintendent. Miss Leonard is a motherly lady with the necessary degree of firmness. She has surprisingly little difficulty in controlling her charges. It seems that these “incorrigibles,” when subjected to discipline and the influences of a good environment quickly become rather exceptionally good boys. They apply themselves diligently to their studies and many of them not only overtake, but pass the grades appropriate to their ages. The school day includes an hour in the workshop, which is eagerly looked forward to by all the boys. Also, they are required to spend a considerable portion of each day in the yard, engaged in play, gymnastics or military drill, but are not permitted to leave the establishment except on Sunday, when they are taken to church under charge. They are required to clean their rooms and perform other work of a domestic nature, the matron’s object being to keep them busily employed from the time they rise at six o’clock until they go to bed, healthfully weary, at eight. They are well fed and sleep in airy dormitories. Some difficulty is found at first in inducing these youngsters to bathe and to wear a nightgown next to the skin, but not the slightest compromise is permitted in either mat-
ter, and it is never long before an inmate shows the good effect of the unaccustomed cleanliness and regularity in his living.

The parents of the inmates of the truant schools are permitted to visit them on one Sunday of each month. Strange to say, very few of these fathers and mothers find any disgrace in the situation of their sons. On the contrary, they are generally proud of the fact that the boy is in “boarding school” at the expense of the city. The institution is commonly styled “The College” by them, and relatives abroad are informed that Ludovic or Yakob is “going to college,”—but the writers carefully refrain from any mention of commitment by a magistrate. There is also a tendency on the part of most parental guardians of inmates of the truant schools to shift the burden of their support to the city, and there is a conflict of opinion among magistrates as to their authority in these cases to compel those who are able to do so to contribute to the cost of maintenance. Aside from the question of relieving the tax-payers of an unjust charge, it is desirable that the law should be amended so as to convey specific authority in this direction, for undoubtedly, under present conditions, many parents deliberately aim to have their children sent to the truant school.

Unfortunately, lack of proper accommodation necessitates the premature discharge of many boys in order to make room for newcomers. This difficulty will, in a considerable degree, be overcome by the new Parental School which is nearing completion and which will be ready for occupancy early in the present year. It is situated in the Borough of Queens on the road leading from Flushing to Jamaica, and will consist of a farm, upward of one hundred acres in extent, and fifteen buildings in the modified Mission style of architecture. Eleven of these are cottages designed for the accommodation of the boys and arranged around a spacious campus. Each cottage is divided in the middle by a fireproof wall, either half providing apartments for a group of thirty boys. Each group will be in charge of its own master and matron and will constitute a distinct unit for administrative purposes. In the basement of each half cottage there will be a playroom, a lavatory and store room for clothing. On the first floor will be a living room, a dining room, a pantry, reception room and matron’s room. On the second floor is provided a dormitory with thirty beds and individual lockers. In the power house, which is located about three hundred feet from the nearest cottage, there will be steam and electric generators, a bakery, a laundry and a kitchen, from which food will be conveyed to the cottages through a subway. The farm buildings will be placed at a distance of about fifteen hundred feet to the rear of the power house.
INDUSTRIAL TRAINING AND FARMING FOR TRUANTS

When all the cottages are built and equipped, they will afford accommodation for six hundred and sixty boys. These boys will have facilities for education equal to those afforded by any of the public schools of New York, and the teachers employed will be the best available. A special feature will, of course, be made of industrial education. Shops will be equipped and run for the purpose of teaching, in a practical manner, tailoring, carpentering, printing, plumbing, tinsmithing and gasfitting. Agriculture and horticulture, as well as manual training, will be included in the course of instruction. Book study will occupy the time from half-past eight until noon, and the afternoon will be devoted to work in the shops or on the farm.

The most pronounced advantages will be enjoyed by the new Parental School. It will not only have facilities for accommodating a much greater number of truants than can at present be taken care of, but it will also possess extraordinary agencies for their improvement. The quarters in the city schools are cramped and open air exercise is restricted to a small shut-in yard. At Jamaica the boys will find themselves in an entirely new and healthy environment. Their play and much of their work will take place under the wholesome and inspiring conditions of the countryside. Instead of one hour daily of manual training in a little shop with exceedingly limited facilities, they will have the opportunity for learning a useful trade under practical conditions and with the fullest equipment.

If the ordinary city truant school is attractive to parents, the new Parental School is calculated to be doubly so, but the boy who may go there with the idea of having an easy time is doomed to disappointment. Mr. Edward B. Shallow, Associate City Superintendent, who has spent many years working for the enforcement of school attendance, will be in charge of the Parental School, and it is not in his mind to coddle his future charges. He purposes keeping the boys constantly active in mind and body. There will be plenty of diversity in their work and a fair admixture of play, but no room will be left during the day for an idle minute. Wherever it seems to be desirable, an inmate will be retained at the Parental School for the term of two years. During that time he will be taught, if possible, to love work, but in any case he will be forced to do a proper share of it. The boy who, from habits of truancy, is tending toward criminality and indolence will be shown the path of upright citizenship and honest industry. He will be given the fullest chance possible and one who fails to reform under such conditions must be hopeless indeed.