

## The Closing of Penetang Reformatory

BY REV. J. R. PATTERSON

**A**BOUT two years ago the Ontario Government decided to abandon the Boys Reformatory at Penetang, and replace it with a new and more modern institution to be erected in Oxford county. To-day the old Reformatory is closed; but the proposed new one has not been built; nor is it likely to be. The reason why is given at length in the fascinating annual report of Mr. J. J. Kelso, Superintendent of Neglected and Dependent Children in Ontario.

### MR. KELSO'S IDEA.

Land for the new institution was already purchased and work on the new buildings was about to begin, when it was suggested that the Reformatory be abolished and its work be turned over to the Children's Aid Societies and the Industrial Schools. At once the question arose, What shall be done with the hundred-odd boys who are inmates of the institution at Penetang? Here Mr. Kelso came forward with what seemed to many a bold proposition. He undertook to take over every boy in the place, without regard to his previous reputation or offence; gain, if possible, his confidence and affection; parole him on his word of honor, find him a suitable home and a suitable situation, take charge of his visitation and oversight, and so endeavor to lead him up to respectable manhood and useful citizenship. Not a few thought it a daring venture. But Mr. Kelso had some previous experience to guide him. Already he had intercepted between twenty and thirty youths on their way to the Reformatory, and his experience in dealing with those who had been under sentence gave him hope in undertaking to deal with those who had been in detention. Officials held up their hands in horror; but the Government gave its consent and the great experiment began.

### MAKING THE ACQUAINTANCE OF HIS WARD.

Mr. Kelso's first step was to make the acquaintance of the boys he had undertaken to shepherd. To this end he first gathered by correspondence all possible information touching each lad's antecedents—his home, his history, his offence, etc. Then he visited the boys at the Reformatory. To some men neither experience would yield encouragement. From nearly all the constables and other local officials applied to came the same response: "Do what you like with that boy, but do not send him back to this town." Nor did a personal inspection reveal a lot of youths who promised well for freedom. They were all addicted to tobacco, profanity, etc., and had the swagger and bravado of professional criminals. They spoke of the Reformatory as a "prison," and regarded themselves as "prisoners." Their one business there was to "do time," and they laughed incredulously when told that the place of their confinement was an educational institution.

But their benefactor knew better than to be deceived by appearances. He knew that the bad boy is not always as bad as he seems. In the present instance, it was easy to discover that if the boys were bad, they were bad for want of good homes and proper training. Nearly fifty per cent. were orphans or half orphans; nearly all were the children of careless or dissolute parents; some had never been taught the difference between right and wrong.

Again, Mr. Kelso was convinced that their incarceration had done many of them harm rather than good. They had taught one another evil, and had taught one another to resist what good influences were brought to bear upon them. In short, it was very clear that in the Reformatory as outside of it the "gang" is worse than any of its members. The boys would do in concert what they would never dream of doing

as individuals. Separation, not assembly, was to be their salvation.

Further, Mr. Kelso well knew that in every bad boy there is, often carefully concealed from the casual observer, a better boy; and that better boy will always respond to confidence and love.

But that better boy does not readily reveal himself before a crowd. Mr. Kelso wisely determined to interview each boy privately, and to make each one an offer of liberty.

### ENTERING INTO A COMPACT.

Through the kindness of the Superintendent, Mr. McCrosson, a room was provided, and here each boy was taken into Mr. Kelso's confidence. To each it was clearly explained that his liberation was a matter of personal favor and responsibility; that in going out he would be fully trusted; helped in every reasonable way, and would have a friend to look to; while, on the other hand, any failure on his part would involve the discrediting of his benefactor, and would bring pain to those who wished to help him. "This promise and this appeal made a deep impression. In some cases tears flowed down their cheeks at the thought of somebody being willing to trust them and give them an opportunity to show that they were not entirely lost to the sense of goodness and honor. They entered with indifference, if not defiance. They left, in nearly every case, with ambitions aroused and dawning consciousness of manhood that afterwards was to have a fuller and nobler development."

### "TREATED LIKE GENTLEMEN."

The next step was to bring the boys to Toronto before sending them out to their situations or foster homes. In order that their sponsor might learn something of the habits and disposition of each lad, they were brought down in parties of from four to six. Good clothing was provided in order that they might not be humiliated or ashamed. On arrival in Toronto, they were met at the station and cordially welcomed, given a good supper, and furnished with full information concerning the efforts which were being made in their behalf. The next day they were shown round the city, taken to entertainments, etc., and released from anything like surveillance or restraint.

"Such treatment," says their benefactor, "completely bewildered them." Yes, and it won them. "We take no chances," said a policeman as he tightly gripped the arm of a small boy. Such a policy would have been fatal in the work we are describing. Thank God, Mr. Kelso was wise enough to take the chance. And the result justified the venture.

"Why, you treat us like gentlemen!" said one lad. The boys thoroughly appreciated the display of confidence, and frequently expressed their determination to be worthy of the trust reposed in them. Before he left the city each boy was given a neat valise containing some extra clothing, stamped envelopes that he might write concerning his progress; and was assured that if anything went wrong he would be welcomed back and again be assisted in any reasonable way. It is believed that each boy left Toronto with a high resolve to lead a good life; even should they under the pressure of temptation fall, they will ever be the better for the kindness shown them.

### HOMES, SITUATIONS, OVERSIGHT.

From the office of their friend, Mr. Kelso, the boys were sent out to liberty. Some went back to their homes. But in other cases, where their homes were not proper places for



MR. J. J. KELSO