

- (c.) The difficulty of thorough inspection ;
- (d.) The probable effect of the introduction of the children of depraved parents into the homes of the poor ;
- (e.) The ignorance on the part of the average foster-mother as to scientific methods of dealing with children suffering from hereditary taint and specially bad environment.

And the cottage-home system is recommended as a substitute, its advantages, as stated, being—

- (a.) Suitable homes ;
- (b.) Classification ;
- (c.) Thorough inspection ;
- (d.) Separation ;
- (e.) Scientific training and education.

Will you kindly give this subject your most careful and impartial consideration, and then let me have a full and candid expression of your views concerning it, giving at the same time a statement of your experience of what has been done under the boarding-out system, and making suggestions for its improvement, or for its replacement by some other method.

The question whether our present system is on good lines or not vitally affects the whole attitude of the State in its attempt to mould the future lives of these children so that they will become a gain morally and industrially instead of a burden to the country ; I have therefore to ask you to approach the subject from the purely judicial standpoint.

E. O. GIBBES, Secretary.

SIR,—

Receiving Home, Wellington, 2nd June, 1909.

As instructed by the Department, I forward my report on the boarding-out system, its advantages and disadvantages, as they have come under my observation.

(a.) I find no difficulty in obtaining homes. Even with the large number of children belonging to my school, the number of homes offered in which to place them is always in excess of the number of children to be boarded out ; but when the regulations are to be obeyed and the child's character and history taken into account, it is often very difficult to find a suitable home. The good, gentle little child is easily dealt with, but a boy unruly and untamed, with more love of mischief than anything else, and a profound disbelief in every one who attempts to control him, learned from the foolish ways of his father and mother—it is difficult to find a home for him. However, the work is well worth doing, and when a suitable home is found with a good foster-mother, kind and firm, where he shares the natural family life, and has a fair amount of work to do out of school hours, I am certain that the boy has a better chance of developing all his natural powers and becoming a good citizen than if he were reared in a cottage home, which, however good, is still an institution, not a home. Letters and interviews from and with women applying for children are amusing. One writes, " I want a dark-eyed, curly-haired little girl " ; another, " A child with a long nose and a nice open face " ; another, " A fair-haired little girl, but not red-headed ; I could not love a red-headed child," and so on. At first one laughs ; but, looking deeper, one sees that a childless woman has shown her heart's longing for the kind of child she has never had. In time one is found to satisfy her, and she is happy, and so is the child. Surely that home is better and more full of love—which is the best thing we can get for our children—than a cottage home among twenty-four or thirty other children.

The Department's regulation that families are not to be separated is no doubt wise and humane, but it is no light task to find a home to receive four, five, and even seven children. Even that can be done : I lately found a woman courageous enough to undertake seven, and brothers and sisters are growing up together ; in most cottage homes they would have been separated. When I hear people running down the boarding-out system I think of the past and present surroundings of many a little child—in the past wanted by nobody, now safe in the arms and the heart of a good woman—and memories come to me of what I have seen of the marvellous devotion by foster-mothers to the children—weeks and months of nursing the little suffering creatures, nights of broken rest and anxious days—in one case the child so diseased and the care needed so great, yet given cheerfully by the foster-mother, that I was amazed, and said to her one day, " You are a good woman : I could not do what you are doing." She said quite simply, " Oh ! I love the poor darling, and must take care of him when he is so ill." She would not allow me to ask the Department for higher maintenance-payment for the child. When he died she mourned for him, although I believe she would have been very ill herself if the poor little one had lived much longer. If women like that can be found, surely their homes are fit for our children ; and I can testify that there are many such in my district. I know of homes where the foster-parents, both father and mother, have shown the most extraordinary patience and untiring effort to cure boys and girls of bad habits. The foster-fathers are wonderfully good and kind to the children.

(b.) I do not see that, in boarding-out, classification is an impossibility—at least, in the wider sense of the word. Children with certain faults and tendencies must be placed in carefully chosen homes, with a woman who understands the faults to be corrected, and watches that other children are not injured by the boarded-out children. In case of a child considered too young for one of our institutions, and of doubtful character, I always try to get a foster-home without other children. I explain the case to the foster-mother and speak to the school-teacher about the child. I think the people who so strongly oppose the boarding-out system are not aware of the fact that children showing themselves of bad character, and consequently a danger to others, are always withdrawn from board and sent to one of the schools where they can be kept in residence. Children of known bad character are never boarded-out.

(c.) Surely the inspection required by the Department is sufficient—monthly by Local Visitor, quarterly reports by school-teacher, yearly by Visiting Officer, at least six-monthly by Manager, and, in the case of delicate or troublesome children, constant communication with the Manager.