

THE CAMPAIGN TO CURB THE MOVING PICTURE EVIL IN NEW YORK

If the moving-picture show does not become a clean, safe, healthful, and moral place for the children of New York City it will not be the fault of Mayor Gaynor. The Mayor's committee on safeguarding the public at motion-picture entertainments will bring in its report in a short time. This committee of prominent citizens has held its meetings at frequent intervals during the last two months in the Mayor's office, and if wrestling with weighty problems develops gray matter the cerebral growth at these sessions must have been phenomenal.

Last Winter, the Motion Picture Conference, organized for the purpose of improving the physical conditions at moving-picture theatres, appeared several times before the Board of Aldermen and used every effort to compel the reporting Alderman Ralph Folk's bill for investigating these shows. But the Committee on Rules would not report it out. The conference then urged the Mayor to make use of his prerogative and appoint his own committee to draft the necessary ordinance for the control and improvement of moving-picture houses.

In his usual vigorous and thorough way the Mayor undertook some detective work of his own through the Department of Accounts. Before Mayor Gaynor's administration scarcely any one had ever heard of the Commissioner of Accounts. He was non-existent so far as the general public was concerned; but under Mayor Gaynor the Commissioner's offices on Broadway have been the centre about which has revolved many great movements for civic and public improvement. Raymond B. Fosdick, the present Commissioner, who has been making a record through the energetic and forceful administration of the new official duties with which the Mayor has seen fit to invest his department, visited a number of picture playhouses personally, being assisted in his investigations by representatives from a number of philanthropic organizations.

In his rounds Commissioner Fosdick made a number of sensational discoveries, which he embodied in his published report "On the Condition of Moving Picture Shows in New York." This was sub-

mitted to the Mayor last March and contained some startling disclosures.

Mr. Fosdick recommended in his report that Mayor Gaynor appoint a committee of citizens to co-operate with the Board of Aldermen in drafting the necessary legislation, which should be presented to the Board of Aldermen for the purpose of bringing about a correction in the abuses which had sprung up with the same rapid growth as the moving-picture business itself.

Of all the societies which have actively interested themselves in the campaign for purifying the moving-picture entertainments and their environment, none can show a record comparing with the Gerry Society, which has caused the arrest and prosecution of many criminals who were habitués of these shows. The attitude of the society toward moving-picture entertainments was outlined to a New York TIMES reporter by the Superintendent, Thomas D. Walsh, as follows:

"There is no objection to the moving-picture show as a means of entertainment. Properly conducted, it is most instructive and entertaining. But the evil lies in the conditions under which so many are given—the dark room, filled with adults and children, absolutely without supervision, affording no protection against the evil-minded and depraved men who frequent such places and sit beside the innocent boys and girls without a question or suspicion until irreparable harm is done.

"The society last year prosecuted twenty-eight cases of crimes committed under these conditions, and secured twenty convictions of men who lured children to their downfall. Numerous other cases of impairing the morals of children were prosecuted in the Court of Special Sessions.

"The percentage of criminal cases arising from this evil has, during the first six months of 1911, leaped upward over 100 per cent. These figures are well to be considered by those who plead for moving pictures as only an innocent pastime."

Of all those who are watching anxiously the outcome of the sessions at the Mayor's office, none, perhaps, is more deeply desirous of adequate legislation for the protection of young girls and children at moving-picture shows than Miss Maude E. Miner, Secretary of the New

Organized Efforts to Censor Exhibitions Which Under Existing Conditions Are Harmful.

York Probation Association, whose sympathetic devotion has worked such wonders in behalf of unfortunate girlhood in this city. In one of Miss Miner's recent reports, she quotes the confession of a child who had the "moving-picture habit" in illustration of the early beginnings of wayward tendencies among girls:

"I always asked a man to get my ticket because I'm not old enough to go in alone," said a child who explained how she gained admittance to the moving pictures on the Bowery. It was not that the pictures were bad, but that the men took the children to the dark balcony, where they could begin their vicious work.

When asked last week for her view in regard to the proposed additions or amendments to present statutes which govern the moving-picture industry, Miss Miner said:

"My message would be with regard to the lighting of these places. That is the phase of the situation which concerns me most. We ought to have the lights turned on, and have all these theatres illuminated in such a way that any immoral or undesirable conduct is an impossibility.

"I think that films such as those which originated through suggestions from the Russell Sage Foundation and other humane organizations are admirable in every way. It's an excellent thing to have these educational pictures, which furnish instruction as well as entertainment to audiences; and are the means of conveying many an instructive lesson to the poorer classes who would not be reached in any other way.

"If people would only go together in families to the moving-picture exhibitions there would be no danger. That is what I like to see. The mothers and fathers should go in order to supervise their own children. Amusement is a necessary thing. Some sort of entertainment must be provided for the young people, and the older ones as well. It is not necessary to keep the children out of these places, but it is very necessary for their families to go with them."

The Society for the Prevention of Crime, through the efforts of its Superintendent, Thomas L. McClintock, has probably issued and circulated more pamphlets dealing with dangers incident to moving-picture shows than any of the other humane societies which are interested in the movement.

With reference to the present conditions at moving-picture entertainments, and his society's attitude in regard to the alleged crimes which children are led to commit after viewing certain pictures,

Mr. McClintock said to THE TIMES reporter:

"No one claims that any child who goes into these places comes out with the intention of carrying out in real life what he has seen in the theatre.

"The moving-picture show is an accepted institution of our present-day life. It has both its good and its bad side.

"It is good so long as the physical conditions of the show house are up to the requirements, and so long as the pictures are entertaining and instructive. It is good so long as children can attend such places without coming in contact with the vicious elements in our city. In a large number of moving-picture shows this good side has at present been emphasized.

"The bad side is evidenced in the poorly constructed show house, including poor ventilation, darkened room and suggestive pictures. While admitting that the larger number of pictures now shown are in no way open to criticism, it still must be admitted that this condition has existed only since civic organizations like our own and interested citizens submitted these conditions in proper evidentiary form before Mayor McClellan, who thereupon took such drastic action as to compel a change for the better in the conduct of these shows.

"This change for the better has also been fostered by the formation of the Board of Censorship which, in so far as it could, has insisted that the suggestive picture shall not be shown. But the Board's authority, because of its non-official standing, is limited, and some such suggestive pictures are even now being shown.

"I think at the present time we have enough law to prevent the admission of minors to these places unaccompanied by parent or guardian, enough law to shut out places in poor physical conditions for such performances, enough law to shut out all suggestive pictures. If the moving-picture men would act in good faith the law regarding children could be uniformly enforced.

"The ticket sellers are usually seated in glass booths at the front of the shows. They see children hanging about the place, waiting to find some adult stranger who will go in with them and pose as parents.

"And when they sell admission to these same youngsters they know perfectly well they are breaking the law. And the employes inside the theatre recognize such cases very easily when the child, immediately after entering, separates from his 'relative' and takes a seat at the front

while the supposed parent or friend remains in the back of the house."

There are two classes of pictures over which the National Board of Censorship, composed of earnest men and women of standing in this city, has no control. These are the "special release pictures," which is not shown in the regular picture theatres and does not reach the usual motion picture audience, and the old pictures which were shown before the board acquired its power of censorship for the whole country.

The first includes such pictures as those of the prize fight at Reno and the famous picture of Roosevelt in Africa (to which there could have been no objection). Companies for the production of such pictures may be specially formed and thus come outside the regular manufacturers' agreement to abide by the board's decision, but such pictures may not be shown in the regular motion picture theatres.

"There is great diversity of opinion," said one of the board members to a TIMES representative, "as to which pictures are too objectionable to be shown. The other day we had a protest sent to us against the production of Zola's story, 'L'Assommoir.' It is a picture showing the dreadful effects of drink and is intensely dramatic. When it was passed the committee thought it was a fine picture, but there are many who take the ground that nothing of this character should be shown, even when the moral is good and the picture is intended to point out the dangers and punishment resulting from evil conduct. Even the committee itself is sometimes divided over the question of whether a picture is indecent, or merely common and vulgar, or in bad taste. The board undertakes to cut out all pictures that are suggestive or indecent or which suggest any criminal act."

The moving-picture interests are represented in the Mayor's committee by Tobias A. Keppler, who outlined the situation to the reporter, and summarized the problems that have come before the committee, with a possible solution of each, as follows:

"The trouble has been not with the moving picture, but with the abuse of the moving picture. Since it was discovered how to develop the moving-picture machine out of the stereopticon the possibilities of this new invention have not yet been realized. It brings the world to the feet of any one who is willing to appreciate its educational value. One may learn more of China in five minutes—or of how they make cheese in Switzerland—than in any other way.

"There should be by all means a proper regulation in the presentation of pictures, but not such a regulation as will stultify the range of subjects or the representations of emotion so as to limit them to arbitrary and conventional standards. And this because intellectual development is always greatest when it is unfettered and untrammelled by those who are opinionated, or those others who are wedded to the idea that only their own thoughts are right and that no others should be permitted to grow.

"There are many objections made against the moving-picture house by these people," he went on. "And first of all they claim it is stuffy, uncleanly and unsanitary. In some cases this is a just criticism, but in the majority it is unfounded.

"The law should compel moving-picture proprietors to keep their places sanitary and well ventilated, but I have been unable to find anywhere a law applying to such cases. This is true not only of moving-picture theatres, but of all places of amusement. I know of no legislation which seriously contemplates safeguarding the ventilation and other hygienic conditions of places of amusement, and the present inquiry with reference to moving pictures has suggested the advisability of hygienic regulations safeguarding the health of all public gatherings.

"The next argument against motion picture entertainments—that they have a bad effect on the morals of children—is the cause of the most absurd exaggeration.

"The moving picture has killed the gallery business of most of the theatres in this country, and while the public may not be aware of it, the solidly packed gallery has always been the theatrical manager's staff of life. At the present time the theatrical interests—especially in New York City—are very aggressive in persecuting and discrediting the moving picture show.

"There is really no reason why the moving-picture theatres should be kept dark. It has been demonstrated that moving-picture films can be presented in the theatres so well lighted that a newspaper may be read in any part of the house just as well as in a dark theatre. And it should therefore be made compulsory, as a matter of law, to have moving pictures presented only in places where it is possible to read wherever one is seated.

"The better class of moving-picture managers are anxious to see this reform inaugurated, just as they are anxious that all the other proper regulations should be enacted, in order that the general tone of the business may be elevated, that the moving-picture playhouse may take its rightful place in the field of entertainment and instruction that it deserves as the poor man's theatre.

"The lighting of these places of amusement will make them no greater menace to morals than other places where human beings get together.

"Children and human beings in general are neither more nor less vicious since the moving-picture machine was invented than before. Boys played hooky, stole apples, stabbed each other, and did everything under the sun thirty years ago, and a thousand years ago, that they do to-day. The question of wrong that children do is not because of the moving picture, but in spite of it. It is because of the fact that the human being is an imperfect animal.

"To deprive them of the moving picture is to deprive them of a great opportunity for development. The moving picture furnishes the most pleasurable method of education, because the child is not conscious of the fact that it is imbibing knowledge, and is at the same time amused and entertained.

"It is proposed that a portion of each moving-picture house separated by a sufficient distance from the other seats in the house be reserved exclusively for children between the hours of three and seven every day, when they may attend without being forced to meet any adults or associates with them; and, as an additional safeguard, that such portion of the house be in charge of a licensed matron, say over forty years of age, who has been thoroughly examined in regard to her ability and qualifications for holding such a position.

"The only other serious criticism raised against moving pictures is the danger of fire or panic.

"There is practically nothing in a moving-picture house to catch fire so as to cause a sudden conflagration. The only inflammable portions of the apparatus are the reels, and the newer reels are being manufactured of non-inflammable material. These reels are put through a moving-picture lamp or machine which is placed in an inclosure or operator's booth which is always constructed of fireproof material. So that if all the reels should catch fire at once—a thing which is not on record—no one would be touched. Those who are really familiar with conditions know that there is no danger of fire at these shows."

An amendment to the present Building Code reducing the seating capacity of the small theatre which operates under a common license from 300 to 200 has been recently introduced and still further complicates the situation.

Among the societies and organizations which have taken active part in this campaign are the Women's Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, a number of parish clubs from Protestant Episcopal churches, men's clubs in churches of all denominations and representatives of the Young Men's Christian Associations.