

OUR CRIMINALS

In Kansas City, Where They Do Little
Else Save Sing and Play Pi-
anos in Brothels.

Colored Criminals in K. C.
To Editor Pleasanton:

In compliance with your request to contribute an article on the criminal Negro of Kansas City, I do so fully aware of my inability to discuss this phase of sociology with the skill and experimental knowledge possessed by some, but as clerk of the police court of Kansas City for the past two years, I've had an opportunity to study certain Negro characteristics as exhibited by those who have been brought before the court for trial, and I may add that there is no better school in which to study the criminal tendencies of petty thieves and other violators of law in this bustling and progressive city, than in the police court.

Out of 7,394 cases tried in the court during 1899, 2,272 were cases against Negroes, a little less than one-third of all cases tried, while the Negro population is but one-tenth of the city's population. However, it must also be remembered that Negroes are arrested for trivial offenses, in the commission of which a white person would not be molested. In this connection I wish to say that I do not believe there is a more prejudiced police force in the country than we have here in Kansas City. Although there are some excellent men connected with the department, they are woefully in the minority.

The Monday morning's police court session furnishes the best opportunity to study the seamy side of city life. Drop in and witness the motley array of offenders as they are marched out of the detention room to face the police judge. First comes a "bully," who started in to "clean out" the "North End" or Bowery district, but ran up against policeman's club and suddenly realizes that he was "up against the real thing now." The judge assesses a fine of ten dollars and costs. Then come a couple of Negro women who have fought over the affections of some dusky dude. "Five dollars each," says the court, while the cause of the trouble laughs at their discomfiture; next, a bunch of flashily dressed females, whose brazen countenances betoken their occupation. Ten dollars and costs each, which they pay with an indifference that plainly indicates that they care little for money and still less for public opinion. Here comes a gang of twenty or thirty Negroes of all shades of complexion and degrees of intelligence, who were raided in a "crap" game, each one of whom anxiously scans the crowd of on-lookers in the court room to see if his "woman" is on hand to pay his fine. After a few explanations by the officers making the raid and an exhibition of the "bones" and money secured from the "crap" table, mingled with strong denials by the culprits, a fine of two dollars and costs is imposed and they are hustled back into the detention room to make room for a dejected looking husband who is charged with cruelty to his wife who appears to prosecute. After the judge has heard each side, and patiently listened to the stories told with a pathos that would all but make a statue weep, he kindly lectures them both and advises them to go in peace to their home and try to live happily together. They leave with tears in their eyes and smiles on their faces, while everyone pronounces the judge a second Solomon.

Now comes one of the so-called Negro "clubs" that was raided and seventy-eight men and women arrested on Saturday or Sunday night at this resort are lined up before His Honor for frequenting a disorderly house. All guilty. The proprietor is fined \$500, his charter is burned in open court and the frequenters of the alleged "club house" are fined \$10 each. While the better element of Negroes heave a sigh of relief under the impression that this particular

social evil is eradicated, but a week later, Phœnix-like, this same "club" will rise again. One of the peculiar things about this "club" evil which exists in such a vicious form here in Kansas City, is that those Negroes who proclaim loudest in private against the dangers of these dives, are, as a rule, too cowardly to appear in court to prosecute the keepers of these social cancers where they claim their sons and daughters are being ruined.

During the year 1899, fines aggregating \$36,830.50 were assessed against Negroes in this court, of which \$3,233 were paid; \$15,984.50 was served in the work-house, while the balance, \$17,623.50, represents the amount of stays of execution, remittals and appeals.

There are a number of Negro men and women who can be relied upon to turn up regularly at certain seasons in police court, and when they fail to appear, we simply telephone to the county jail and invariably find they are doing time for some petty offense.

I can say with a great deal of pleasure that less than one per cent. of the Negroes brought before this court for trial belong to that class of intelligent, cultured and progressive men and women upon whose shoulders rests the responsibility of uplifting the race, and this is one of my strongest reasons for being an advocate of higher education for my people. From this condition of things one must deduce the fact that there is a class of natural criminals, or, at least a class composed of individuals born of criminal tendencies, whose moral sense is so blunt as to deprive them of a proper conception of the rights of property or the individual rights of men to life, liberty and the exercise of those prerogatives which insure peace and happiness among their fellow beings. For this class the prisons and so-called reformatories have few terrors. Society then must do what it can to protect itself; must provide a remedy. What must be done? There is one thing, while it may not be the specific needed, is worthy of a trial. Parents and teachers must go earnestly to work, hand in hand, with the determination that the child-beast as well as the child-mind shall be carefully trained; the rough edges must be removed, even though stern physical force be necessary, and then if each one of us can be brought to realize the magnitude of the task that lies before us, the courage and correct determination required of each of us to bring about this successful fruition of our fondest hopes, we can serenely join in the song of the favorite American poet, Whittier when he sings:

"God give us men!
A time like this demands great men, strong
hearts and willing hands!
Men whom the spoils of office will not buy,
Men whom the lust for office will not kill.
For while the rabble with its time-worn creeds,
Its fond professions and its little deeds,
Wrangle on in selfish strife—
Lo! freedom weeps and wailing justice sleeps!"

NELSON C. CREWS.