

THE EX-CRIMINALS

On the afternoon of the Sunday on which I visited the Blackfriars Shelter, I attended another service, conducted by Commissioner Sturgess, at Quaker Street.

Here the room was filled by about 150 men, all of whom had been rescued, and were then working in the various Shelters or elsewhere. I may say that I have seldom seen a congregation of more respectable appearance, and never one that joined with greater earnestness in a religious service.

I will take this opportunity to observe that the Salvation Army enforces no religious test upon those to whom it extends its assistance. If a man is a member of the Church of England or a Roman Catholic, for instance, and wishes to remain so, all that it tries to do is to make him a good member of his Church. Its only *sine qua non* is that the individual should show himself ready to work zealously at any task which it may be able to find for him.

The rest of that afternoon I spent in interviewing ex-criminals who were then in the charge of the Salvation Army. To give details of their cases in this book is impossible. Here I will only say, therefore, that some of these had been most desperate characters, who had served as much as thirty or forty years in various prisons, or

even been condemned to death for murder. Indeed, the nineteen men whom I interviewed had, between them, done 371 years of what is known as 'time.'

I cannot honestly report that I liked the looks of all these gentry, or believed everything that they told me. For instance, when such people swear that they have been wrongly convicted, an old lawyer and magistrate like myself, who knows what pains are taken by every English Court to safeguard the innocent, is apt to be sceptical. Still, it should be added that many of these jailbirds are now to all appearance quite reformed, while some of them are doing well in more or less responsible positions, under the supervision of the Army.

The Salvation Army Officers have authority from the Home Office to visit the various prisons, where the inmates are informed that those who are desirous of seeing them must give in their names. Then on a certain day, the Officer, who, under Commissioner Sturgess, is responsible for the Prison work of the Army in England, appears at the Wandsworth or the Pentonville Prison, or wherever it may be. There he finds, perhaps, as many as 150 men waiting to see him, the total number of ex-prisoners who pass through the hands of the Army in England averaging at present about 1,000 per annum. He interviews these men in their cells privately, the prison officials remaining outside, and stops as long with each of them as he deems to be needful, for the Governors of the prisons give him every opportunity of attaining the object of his work. This Officer informed me that his

conversation with the prisoners is not restricted in any way. It may be about their future or of spiritual matters, or it may have to do with their family affairs.

The details of each case are carefully recorded in a book which I saw, and when a convict is discharged and given over to the care of the Army, a photograph and an official statement of his record is furnished with him. This statement the Army finds a great help, as in dealing with such people it is necessary to know their past in order to be able to guard against their weak points.

The Government authorities have now begun to seek the aid of the Army in certain special cases. If they feel that it is unnecessary to retain a man any longer, they will sometimes hand him over, should the Salvation Army Officers be willing to take him in and be responsible for him. General Booth and his subordinates think that if this system were enlarged and followed up, it would result in the mitigation or the abbreviation of many sentences, without exposing the public to danger.

In discussing this matter with them, I ventured to point out that it would be a bad thing if the Army became in any way identified with the prison Authorities, and began, at any rate in the mind of the criminal classes, to wear the initials G.R. instead of those of the Army upon their collars. This was not disputed by Commissioner Sturgess, with whom I debated the question.

What the Army desires, however, is that the Government should subsidize this work in order to enable it to support the ex-convicts until it can find opportunity to place them in positions where they can earn their own bread. The trouble with such folk is that, naturally enough, few desire to employ them, and until they are employed, which in the case of aged persons or of those with a very bad record may be never, they must be fed, clothed, and housed.

After going into the whole subject at considerable length and in much detail, the conclusion which I came to was that this work of the visitation of prisoners by Salvation Army Officers, and the care of them when released either on or before the completion of their sentences, is one that might be usefully extended, should the Home Office Authorities see fit so to do. There is no doubt, although it cannot guarantee success in every case, that the Salvation Army is peculiarly successful in its dealings with hardened criminals.

Why this is so is not easy to explain. I think, however, that there are two main reasons for its success. The first is that the Army takes great care never to break a promise which it may make through any of its Officers. Thus, if a man in jail is told that his relatives will be hunted up and communicated with, or that an application will be made to the Authorities to have him committed to the care of the Army, or that work will be found for him on his release, and the like, that undertaking, whatever it may be, is noted in the book which I have

mentioned, and although years may pass before it can be fulfilled, is in due course carried out to the letter. Now, convicts are shy birds, who put little faith in promises. But when they find that these are always kept they gain confidence in the makers of them, and often learn to trust them entirely.

The second and more potent reason is to be found in the power of that loving sympathy which the Army extends even to the vilest, to those from whom the least puritanical of us would shrink. It shows such men that they are not utterly lost, as these believe; that it, at any rate, does not mark them with a figurative broad arrow and consign them to a separate division of society; that it is able to give them back the self-respect without which mankind is lower than the beast, and to place them, regenerated, upon a path that, if it be steep and thorny, still leads to those heights of peace and honour which they never thought to tread again.

This is done not by physical care and comfort, though, of course, these help towards the desired end, but by its own spiritual means, or so it would appear. Its Officers pray with the man; they awake his conscience, which is never dead in any of us; they pour the blessed light of hope into the dark places of his soul; they cause him to hate the past, and to desire to lead a new life. Once this desire is established, the rest is comparatively simple, for where the heart leads the feet will follow; but without it little or nothing can be done. Such is the explanation I have to offer. At any rate, I believe

it remains a fact that among the worst criminals the Salvation Army often succeeds where others have failed.

Another point that should not be overlooked in this connexion is that it must be a great comfort to the sinner and an encouragement of the most practical sort to find, as he sometimes will, that the hands which are dragging him and his kind from the mire, had once been as filthy as his own. When the worker can say to him, 'Look at me; in bygone days I was as bad as or worse than you'; when he can point to many others whose vices were formerly notorious, but who now fill positions of trust in the Army or outside of it, and are honoured of all men; then the lost one, emerging, perhaps, for the fifth or sixth time from the darkness of his prison, sees by the light of these concrete examples that the future has promise for us all. If they have succeeded why should he fail? That is the argument which comes home to him.

There remains a matter to be considered. Let us suppose that as time goes by the Authorities become more and more convinced of the value of the Army's prison work, and pass over to its care criminals in ever-increasing numbers, as they are doing in some other countries and in the great Colonies, what will be the effect upon the Army itself? Will not this mass of comparatively useless material clog the wheels of the great machine by overlading it with a vast number of ex-prisoners, some of whom, owing to their age or other circumstances, are quite incapable of earning their livelihood, and therefore must be

carried till their deaths? When I put the query to those in command, the answer given was that they did not think so, as they believed that the Army would be able to turn the great majority of these men into respectable, wage-earning members of society.

Thus of those who have been sent to it lately from the prisons, it has, I understand, been forced to return only two, because these men would not behave themselves, and proved to be a source of danger and contamination to others. As regards the residuum who are incapacitated by age or weakness of mind or body, General Booth and his Officers are of opinion that the Government should contribute to their support in such places as the Army may be able to find for them to dwell in under its care.

I hope that these forecasts, which after all are made by men of great experience who should know, may not prove to be over-sanguine. Still it must be remembered that in England alone there are, I am told, some 30,000 confirmed criminals in the jails, not reckoning the 5,000 who are classed as convicts. If even 20 per cent of these were passed over to the care of the Army, with or without State grants in aid of their support, this must in the nature of things prove a heavy burden upon its resources. When all is said and done it is harder to find employment for a jailbird, even if reformed, than for any other class of man, because so damaged a human article has but little commercial value in the Labour market.

If, however, the Salvation Army is prepared to face this gigantic task, it may be hoped that it will be given an opportunity of showing what it can do on a large scale, as it has already shown upon one more restricted. Prison reform is in the air. The present system is admitted more or less to have broken down. It has been shown to be incompetent to attain the real end for which it is established; that is, not punishment, as many still believe, for this hereditary idea is hard to eradicate, but prevention and, still more, reformation.

The 'Vengeance of the Law' is a phrase not easy to forget; but among humane and highly-civilized peoples the word Vengeance should be replaced by another, the best that I can think of is--Regeneration. The Law should not seek to avenge--that may be left to the savage codes, civil and religious, of the dark ages. Except in the case of the death sentence, which is not everywhere in favour, it should seek to regenerate.

If, then, among other agencies, the Salvation Army is able to prove beyond cavil that it can assist our criminal system to attain this noble end, ought not opportunity to be given it in full measure? Is it too much to hope that when the new Prison Act, of which the substance has recently been outlined by the Home Secretary, comes to be discussed, this object may be kept in view and the offer of the Salvation Army to co-operate in the great endeavour may not be lightly thrust aside? If its help is found so valuable in the solution of this particular problem in other lands, why should it be rejected here, or,

rather, why should it not be more largely utilized, as I know from their own lips, General Booth and his Officers hope and desire?[2]