

THE WOMEN'S SOCIAL WORK IN LONDON

At the commencement of my investigation of this branch of the Salvation Army activities in England, I discussed its general aspects with Mrs. Bramwell Booth, who has it in her charge. She pointed out to me that this Women's Social Work is a much larger business than it was believed to be even by those who had some acquaintance with the Salvation Army, and that it deals with many matters of great importance in their bearing on the complex problems of our civilization.

Among them, to take some that she mentioned, which recur to my mind, are the questions of illegitimacy and prostitution, of maternity homes for poor girls who have fallen into trouble, of women thieves, of what is known as the White Slave traffic, of female children who have been exposed to awful treatment, of women who are drunkards or drug-takers, of aged and destitute women, of intractable or vicious-minded girls, and, lastly, of the training of young persons to enable them to deal scientifically with all these evils, or under the name of Slum Sisters, to wait upon the poor in their homes, and nurse them through the trials of maternity.

How practical and efficient this training is, no one can know who has not, like myself, visited and inquired into the various Institutions

and Refuges of the Army in different cities of the land. It is a wonderful thing, as has happened to me again and again, to see some quiet, middle-aged lady, often so shy that it is difficult to extract from her the information required, ruling with the most perfect success a number of young women, who, a few weeks or months before, were the vilest of the vile, and what is stranger still, reforming as she rules. These ladies exercise no severity; the punishment, which, perhaps necessarily, is a leading feature in some of our Government Institutions, is unknown to their system. I am told that no one is ever struck, no one is imprisoned, no one is restricted in diet for any offence. As an Officer said to me:--

'If we cannot manage a girl by love, we recognize that the case is beyond us, and ask her to go away. This, however, very seldom happens.'

As a matter of fact, that case which is beyond the regenerating powers of the Army must be very bad indeed, at any rate where young people are concerned. In the vast majority of instances a cure is effected, and apparently a permanent cure. In every one of these Homes there is a room reserved for the accommodation of those who have passed through it and gone out into the world again, should they care to return there in their holidays or other intervals of leisure. That room is always in great demand, and I can imagine no more eloquent testimony to the manner of the treatment of its occupants while they dwelt in these Homes as 'cases.'

In truth, a study of the female Officers of the Salvation Army is calculated to convert the observer not only to a belief in the right of women to the suffrage, but also to that of their fitness to rule among, or even over men. Only I never heard that any of these ladies ever sought such privileges; moreover, few of the sex would care to win them at the price of the training, self-denial, and stern experience which it is their lot to undergo.

Mrs. Bramwell Booth pointed out to me that although the actual work of the Army on these women's questions is 'more than just a little,' it had, as it were, only touched their fringe. Yet even this 'fringe' has many threads, seeing that over 44,000 of these women's cases have been helped in one way or another since this branch of the home work began about twenty years ago.

She added that scarcely a month goes by in which the Army does not break out in a new direction, open a new Institution, or attempt to attack a new problem; and this, be it remembered, not only in these islands but over the face of half the earth. At present its sphere of influence is limited by the lack of funds. Give it enough money, she said, and there is little that it would not dare to try. Everywhere the harvest is plentiful, and if the workers remain comparatively few, it is because material means are lacking for their support. Given the money and the workers would be found. Nor will they ask much for maintenance or salary, enough to provide the necessary buildings, and

to keep body and soul together, that is all.[4]

What are these women doing? In London they run more than a score of Homes and Agencies, including a Maternity Hospital, which I will describe later, where hundreds of poor deceived girls are taken in during their trouble. I believe it is almost the only one of the sort, at any rate on the same scale, in that great city.

Also they manage various Homes for drunken women. It has always been supposed to be a practical impossibility to effect a cure in such cases, but the lady Officers of the Salvation Army succeed in turning about 50 per cent of their patients into perfectly sober persons. At least they remain sober for three years from the date of their discharge, after which they are often followed no further.

Another of their objects is to find out the fathers of illegitimate children, and persuade them to sign a form of agreement which has been carefully drawn by Counsel, binding themselves to contribute towards the cost of the maintenance of the child. Or failing this, should the evidence be sufficient, they try to obtain affiliation orders against such fathers in a Magistrates' Court. Here I may state that the amount of affiliation money collected in England by the Army in 1909 was £1,217, of which £208 was for new cases. Further, £671 was collected and paid over for maintenance to deserted wives. Little or none of this money would have been forthcoming but for its exertions.

Mrs. Bramwell Booth informed me that there exists a class of young men, most of them in the employ of tradesfolk, who habitually amuse themselves by getting servant girls into trouble, often under a promise of marriage. Then, if the usual results follow, it is common for these men to move away to another town, taking their references with them and, sometimes under a new name, to repeat the process there. She was of opinion that the age of consent ought to be raised to eighteen at least, a course for which there is much to be said. Also she thought, and this is more controversial, that when any young girl has been seduced under promise of marriage, the seducer should be liable to punishment under the criminal law. Of course, one of the difficulties here would be to prove the promise of marriage beyond all reasonable doubt.

Also to bring such matters within the cognizance of the criminal law would be a new and, indeed, a dangerous departure not altogether easy to justify, especially as old magistrates like myself, who have considerable experience of such cases must know, it is not always the man who is to blame. Personally, I incline to the view that if the age of consent were raised, and the contribution exacted from the putative father of an illegitimate child made proportionate to his means, and not limited, as it is now, to a maximum of 5s. a week, the criminal law might well be left out of the question. It must be remembered further, as Mrs. Booth pointed out herself, that there is another remedy, namely, that of a better home-training of girls who should be prepared by their mothers or friends to face the dangers of the world,

a duty which these too often neglect. The result is that many young women who feel lonely and desire to get married, overstep the limits of prudence on receipt of a promise that thus they may attain their end, with the result that generally they find themselves ruined and deserted.

Mrs. Bramwell Booth said that the Army is doing its utmost to mitigate the horrors of what is known as the White Slave traffic, both here and in many other countries. With this object it has a Bill before Parliament at the present time, of which one of the aims is to prevent children from being sent out of this country to France under circumstances that practically ensure their moral destruction. It seems that the state of things in Paris in this connexion is, in her own words, 'most abominable, too horrible for words.' Children are procured from certain theatre dancing schools, and their birth certificates sometimes falsified to make it appear that they are over fourteen, although often they may be as young as twelve or even ten. Then they are conveyed to vile places in Paris where their doom is sure.

Let us hope that in due course this Bill will become law, for if girls are protected up to sixteen in this country, surely they should not be sent out of it in doubtful circumstances under that age.

Needless to say abominations of this nature are not unknown in London. Thus a while ago the Army received a telegram from a German girl

asking, 'Can you help?' Two of its people went at once to the address given, and, contriving to get into the house, discovered there a young woman who, imagining that she had been engaged in Germany as a servant in an English family, found herself in a London brothel. Fortunately, being a girl of some character and resource, she held her own, and, having heard of the Salvation Army in her own land, persuaded a milkman to take the telegram that brought about her delivery from this den of wickedness.

Unfortunately it proved impossible to discover the woman who had hired her abroad, as the victim of the plot really knew nothing about that procuress. This girl was restored to her home in Germany none the worse for her terrific adventure, and a few weeks later refunded her travelling expenses. But how many must there be who have never heard of the Salvation Army, and can find no milkman to help them out of their vile prisons, for such places are no less.

Another branch of the Army women's work is that of the rescue of prostitutes from the streets, which is known as the 'Midnight Work.' For the purpose of this endeavour it hires a flat in Great Titchfield Street, of which, and of the mission that centres round it, I will speak later in this book.

The Women's Social Work of the Salvation Army began in London, in the year 1884, at the cottage of a woman-soldier of the Army who lived in Whitechapel. This lady, who was interested in girls without character,

took some of them into her home. Eventually she left the place which came into the hands of the Army, whereon Mrs. Bramwell Booth was sent to take charge of the twelve inmates whom it would accommodate. The seed that was thus sown in 1884 has now multiplied itself into fifty-nine Homes and Agencies for women in Great Britain alone, to say nothing of others abroad and in the Colonies. But this is only a beginning.

'We look forward,' said Mrs. Bramwell Booth to me, 'to a great increase of this side of our work at home. No year has passed without the opening of a new Women's Home of some kind, and we hope that this will continue. Thus I want to build a very big Maternity Hospital if I can get the money. We have about £20,000 in hand for this purpose; but the lesser of the two schemes before us will cost £35,000.'

Will not some rich and charitable person provide the £15,000 that are lacking?