

THE ANTI-SUICIDE BUREAU

This is a branch of the Army's work with which I have been more or less acquainted for some years.

The idea of an Anti-Suicide Bureau arose in the Army four or five years ago; but every one seems to have forgotten with whom it actually originated. I suppose that it grew, like Topsy, or was discovered simultaneously by several Officers, like a new planet by different astronomers studying the heavens in faith and hope. At any rate, the results of the idea are remarkable. Thus in London alone 1,064 cases were dealt with in the year 1909, and of those cases it is estimated that all but about a dozen were turned from their fatal purpose. Let us halve these figures, and say that 500 lives were actually saved, that 500 men live to-day in and about London who otherwise would be dead by their own hands and buried in dishonoured graves. Or let us even quarter them, and surely this remains a wonderful work, especially when we remember that London is by no means the only place in which it is being carried on.

How is it done? the reader may ask. I answer by knowledge of human nature, by the power of sympathy, by gentle kindness. A poor wretch staggers into a humble little room at the Salvation Army Headquarters in Queen Victoria Street. He unfolds an incoherent tale. He is an

unpleasant and disturbing person whom any lawyer or business man would get rid of as soon as possible. He vapours about self-destruction, he hints at dark troubles with his wife. He produces drugs or weapons--a point at which most people would certainly show him out. But the Officers in charge do nothing of the sort. They laugh at him or give him a cup of tea. They bid him brace himself together, and tell them the truth and nothing but the truth. Then out pours the awful tale, which, however bad it may be, they listen to quite unmoved though not unconcerned, for they hear such every day. When it is finished, they ask coolly enough why, in the name of all that their visitor reverences or holds dear, he considers it necessary to commit suicide for a trifling job like that. A new light dawns upon the desperate man. He answers, because he can see no other way out.

Why, exclaims the Officer, there are a dozen ways out. Let us find one of them. You, A., have been faithless to your wife. Well, when the matter is explained to her, I daresay she will forgive you. You, B., have defrauded your employer. Well, employers are not always relentless. I'll call on him this evening and talk the matter over. You, C., are hopelessly in debt through horse-racing or speculation. Well, at the worst you can go through the Court and start afresh. You, D., have committed a crime. Go and own up to it like a man, stand your trial, and work out your sentence. I daresay it won't be so very heavy if you take that course, and we will look after you when it is over. You, E., have been brought into this state through your miserable vices, drink, or whatever they may be. Cure yourself of the

vices--we'll show you how--don't crown them by cutting your throat like a cur. You, F., have been afflicted with great sorrows. Well, those sorrows have some purpose and some meaning. There's always a dawn beyond the night; wait for that dawn; it will come here or hereafter.

And so on, and on, through all the gamut of human sin and misery.

Of course, there are cases in which the Army fails. As I have said, there were about a dozen of these last year, six of which, if I remember right, occurred with startling rapidity one after the other. The Suicide Officers of the Army always take up the daily paper with fear and trembling, and not infrequently find that the man whom they thought they had consoled and set upon a different path, has been discovered dead by drowning in the river, or by poison in the streets, or by whatever it may be. But everything has its proportion of failures, and where intending suicides are concerned 1 or 2 per cent, or on the quarter basis that I have adopted as beyond question of sincerity of intent, 4 or 8 per cent is not a large average. Indeed, 20 per cent would not be large, or even 50 per cent. But these figures do not occur.

Of course, it is suggested that many of those who drift into the Anti-Suicide Bureau have no real intention of making away with themselves, but that they come there only to see what they can get in the way of money or other comfort. As regards money, the answer is

that, except very occasionally, the Army gives none, for the simple reason that it has none to give. For the rest the fatal cases which happen show that there is a grim purpose at work in the minds of many of the applicants. But I repeat, let us halve the figures, let us even quarter them, which, as Euclid remarked, is absurd, and even then what are we to conclude?

Before proceeding with my comments upon this work I ought to state, perhaps, that the Army has various branches of this Anti-Suicide Crusade. Thus, it is at work in almost all our big cities, and also in America, in Australia, and in Japan. The Japanese Bureau was opened last year with very good results. This is the more remarkable in a country where ancient tradition and immemorial custom hallow the system of hara-kiri in any case of trouble or disgrace.

Moreover, the idea is spreading, Count Tolstoy is said to have been interested in it. Applications have been received from the Hague for particulars of the Army methods in the matter. Similar work is being carried out in Vienna, not by the Army, but on its lines. The Army has been informed that if it will open an Anti-Suicide Bureau in Budapest, office accommodation, etc., will be found for it. And so forth.

Colonel Unsworth who, until recently had charge of the Anti-Suicide Bureau from its commencement, is of opinion that suicide is very much on the increase, a statement that it would be difficult to dispute in view of the number of cases recorded daily in the local Press. For

instance, I read one on this morning of writing, in a Norfolk paper, where a farmer had blown out his brains, to all appearance because he had a difference of opinion with his wife as to whether he should, or should not, take on another farm.

Colonel Unsworth attributed this sad state of affairs to sundry causes. The first of these was the intense and ever-increasing nervous pressure of our time. The second, the spread of fatalism, The third, the advance of materialistic ideas, and of the general disbelief in the doctrine of future retribution. The fourth, a certain noticeable return in such matters to the standard of Pagan nations, especially of ancient Rome, where it was held that if things went wrong and life became valueless, or even uninteresting, to bring it to an end was in no sense shameful but praiseworthy. In illustration of this point, he quoted a remark said to have been made by a magistrate not long ago, to the effect that in certain conditions a man was not to be blamed for taking his own life.

His fifth reason was that circumstances arise in which some people convince themselves that their deaths would benefit their families. Thus, insurances may fall in, for, after one or two premiums have been paid, many offices take the risk of suicide. Or they may know that when they are gone, wealthy relatives will take care of their children, who will thus be happier and better off than these are while they, the fathers, live. Wrong as it may be, this, indeed, is an attitude with which it is difficult not to feel a certain sympathy.

After all, we are told that there is no greater love than that of a man who lays down his life for his friend, though there can be no doubt that the saying was not intended to include this kind of laying down of life.

Colonel Unsworth's sixth cause was the increasing atrophy of the public conscience. He stated that suicide is rarely preached against from the pulpit, as drunkenness is for instance. Further, a jury can seldom be induced to bring in a verdict of *felo-de-se*. Even where the victim was obviously and, perhaps painfully sane, his act is put down to temporary insanity.

Other causes are drink, hereditary disposition, madness in all its protean shapes; incurable disease, unwillingness to face the consequences of sin or folly; the passion of sexual love, which is sometimes so mighty as to amount to madness; the effects of utter grief such as result from the loss of those far more beloved than self, of which an instance is at hand in the case of the Officer in charge of the Shelter at Great Peter Street, Westminster, mentioned earlier in this book, who, it may be remembered, tried to kill himself after the death of his wife and child; and lastly, where women are concerned, terror and shame at the prospect of giving birth to a child, whose appearance in the world is not sanctioned by law or custom.

Suicide among women is, however, comparatively rare, a fact which

suggests either that the causes which produce it press on or affect them less, or that in this particular, their minds are better balanced than are those of men. I was told, at any rate, that but few women apply to the Suicide Bureau of the Army for help in this temptation; though, perhaps, that may be due to the greater secretiveness of the sex.

Speaking generally, this magnitude of the evil to be attacked may be gauged from the fact that about 3,800 people die by their own hands in England and Wales every year, a somewhat appalling total.

Intending suicides come into the hands of the Army Bureau in various ways. Some of them see notices in the Press descriptive of this branch of the Social Work. Some of them are found by policemen in desperate circumstances and brought to the Bureau, and some are sent there from different localities by Salvation Army Officers.

I have looked through the records of numbers of these cases, but, for obvious reasons, it is difficult to give a full and accurate description of any of them. The reader, therefore, must be content to accept my assurance of their genuine nature. One or two, however, may be alluded to with becoming vagueness. Here is an example of a not infrequent kind, when a person arrives at the office having already attempted the deed.

A business man who had recently made a study of agnostic literature,

had become involved in certain complications, which resulted in a quarrel with his wife. His means not being sufficient to the support of a double establishment, he took the train to London with a bottle of sulphonal in his pocket (not a drug to be recommended for his purpose) and swallowed tablets all the way to town. When he had taken seventy-five grains, and the bottle, as I saw, was two-thirds empty, he found that the drug worked in a way he did not expect. Instead of killing him, it awoke his religious susceptibilities, which the course of agnostic literature had scotched but not killed, and he began to wonder with some earnestness whether, after all, there might not be a Hereafter which, in the circumstances, he did not care to face.

In this acute perplexity he bethought him of the Salvation Army, and arrived at the Bureau in a state of considerable excitement, as quickly as a taxicab could bring him. A doctor and a fortnight in hospital did the rest. The Army found him another situation in place of the one which he had lost, and composed his differences with his wife. They are now both Salvationists and very happy. So, in this instance, all's well that ends well.

Case Two.--A man, in a responsible position, and of rather extravagant habits, married a wife of more extravagant habits, and found that, whatever the proverb may say, it costs more to keep two than one. His money matters became desperately involved, but, being afraid to confide in his wife, he spent a Sunday afternoon in trying to make up his mind whether he would shoot or drown himself. While he

was thus engaged, a Salvation Army band happened to pass his door, and reminded him of what he had read about the Anti-Suicide Bureau. Postponing decision as to the exact method of his departure from this earth, he called there, and was persuaded to make a clean breast of the matter to his wife.

Afterwards the Army took up his extremely complicated affairs. I saw a pile of documents relating to them that must have been at least 4 ins. thick. The various money-lenders were interviewed, and persuaded to accept payment in weekly or monthly instalments. The account was almost square when I saw it, and the person concerned extremely happy and grateful. I should say that, in this case, a lawyer's bill for the work which was done for nothing would have amounted to quite £50.

In another somewhat similar case, that of an official who had tampered with moneys in his charge, though this was not discovered, some of the creditors had placed the business in the hands of debt-collecting-agencies, than whom, said Colonel Unsworth, 'there are no harder or more cruel creditors.' At any rate, they drove this poor man almost to madness, with the usual result. A friend brought him to the Army, who shouldered his affairs, dealt with the debt-collecting agencies, obtained help from his connexions, and paid off what was owing by instalments. He and his family are now again quite comfortable.

Case Three.--A man was cursed with such a fearful temper that he

could keep no situation. He came to London in a state of fury, with a razor in his pocket. Happening to see the words 'Salvation Army Shelter' on a building, it occurred to him to hear what the Suicide Officers had to say before he cut his throat. They dealt with the matter, and showed him the error of his way. He is now in a very good single-handed situation abroad where, as he cannot talk the language, he finds it difficult to quarrel with those about him.

Case Four.--Telephone operator, who was driven mad by that dreadful instrument and by domestic worries. The Army Officers saved the man and smoothed over the domestic worries; but how he gets on with the telephone instruments is not recorded.

Case Five.--Unsuitable marriage and bad temper. The wife had become involved in some trouble in early life, and unwisely, as it proved, confessed to the husband, who brought it up against her every time there was a quarrel between them. In this instance, also, suicide was averted and the domestic differences were arranged.

Case Six--A man in a business firm, married, with children, was through no fault of his own thrown out of work, owing to the appointment of a new manager. He came at last to the Embankment, and afterwards applied for a job in answer to an advertisement. The advertiser told him it was a pity that as he had been so near the river he did not go into it. The man determined to commit suicide; but the Officers dissuaded him from this course and helped him. He

returned a year later in a condition of considerable prosperity, having worked his way to a Colony where he is now doing extremely well, his visit to England being in connexion with the business in which he had become a partner.

And so on ad infinitum. I might tell many such stories, some of them of a much more tragic character than those I have instanced, but refrain from doing so lest by chance they should be identified, especially where the individuals concerned belonged to the upper strata of society. Perhaps enough has been said, however, to show what a great work is being done by the Army in this Department, where in London alone it deals with several would-be suicides every day.

Of course, some of these people are frauds. For instance, one of the Officers told me that not long ago a medical man, who was evidently a drunkard, called on him and said that he would commit suicide unless money were given to him. He was informed that this was against the rules; whereon the man produced a bottle and said that if the money were not forthcoming, he would drink its contents and make an end of himself in the office. As may be imagined the Officer went through an anxious moment, not quite knowing what to do. However, he looked the man over, summed him up to the best of his judgment and ability, and coming to the conclusion that he was a bully and a braggart, said that he might do what he liked. The man swallowed the contents of the bottle, exclaiming that he would be dead in a few minutes, and a pause ensued, during which the Officer confessed to me that he felt very

uncomfortable. The end of it was that his visitor said, with a laugh, that 'he would not like to cumber the Salvation Army with his corpse,' and walked out of the room. The draught which he had taken was comparatively harmless.

As I have mentioned, however, a proportion of the cases are quite irreclaimable. They come and consult the Army, then depart and do the deed. Six that can be traced have been lost in this way during the last few months.

Colonel Unsworth explained to me what I had already guessed, that this business of dealing with scores and hundreds of despairing beings standing on the very edge of the grave, is a terrible strain upon any man. The responsibility becomes too great, and he who has to bear it is apt to be crushed beneath its weight. Every morning he reads his paper with a sensation of nervous dread, fearing lest among the police news he should find a brief account of the discovery of some corpse which he can identify as that of an individual with whom he had pleaded at his office on the yesterday and in vain.

On former occasions when I visited him, Colonel Unsworth used to show me a small museum of poisons, knives, revolvers, etc., which he had taken from those who proposed to use them to cut the Gordian knot of life.

Now, however, he has but few of these dreadful relics. I asked him

what he had done with the rest. He answered that he had destroyed them.

'The truth is,' he added, 'that after some years of this business I can no longer bear to look at the horrid things; they get upon my nerves.'

If I may venture to offer a word of advice to the Chiefs of the Salvation Army, I would suggest that the very responsible position of first Anti-Suicide Officer in London is not one that any man should be asked to fill in perpetuity.