The Homeless Offender

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IN THE YEARS since the war, states the White Paper on Penal Practice in a Changing Society, "crime has increased and is still increasing". Whatever our critics may say the causes of this increase are to a great extent outside the control of the Prison Commission. There have been both downward and upward movements in crime since 1945; and it would be as foolish for us to claim the credit for the former as to accept the blame for the latter. Yet for some part of this problem we can properly be held responsible. Statistics published in the Annual Report of the Prison Commissioners for 1959 show that just on 87 per cent of men and 89 per cent of women of the Star Class discharged from all prisons in 1956 had not returned to prison under sentence by the end of 1959. The crux of *our* problem, however, is the treatment of those who do come back. It is somewhat bigger than the encouraging figures above might suggest, for well over half of the 36,730 persons received into prison during 1959 under sentence of imprisonment, corrective training or preventive detention were known to have served sentences of imprisonment previously. Amongst them are to be found what is known as the hard core of persistent recidivists. All the evidence suggests that a very large number of these recidivists are homeless; either because they have no home whatever or because they have broken all links with their families. It would be disingenuous to pretend that we have the answer to this difficulty. Yet attempts have been made to deal with it, and I want to say a few words about one such attempt, without however making any inflated claims for it.

The problem of discharge is one that starts at reception. The homeless prisoner is himself sharply aware of his situation; the help one gets from him is almost nil. The answers on interview are vague and evasive: "I don't know. I expect I will move off to the Smoke; I know a few people down there." Or, "I thought of settling in this area, I've been told there are plenty of opportunities up here." It can be even worse: "I don't think about it. Let's get my time done. something will turn up—it always does." These replies are not meant to be unhelpful; they are the exact feelings of the homeless man; he has no ideas, he has no real affections and he has no hopes for the future.

It was to try to meet the needs of men of this sort and to give them a better chance that the "Friends of Wakefield" scheme was founded. Its aim is to establish for the homeless man a relationship with a family which will try to make contact with him and provide for him an oasis within the desert which faces him upon discharge.

The practical application of the scheme can be seen below.

If a prisoner agrees to take part in the scheme:

(1) A family suited to the man's background, temperament and needs is selected,

(2) With the man's consent particu-

lars of his "case" and his needs are sent to the host.
(3) Letters are exchanged between them,
(4) A visit is arranged if possible and desirable
(5) The prisoner spends his home-leave with the family.

In conjunction with the Associate, normally the Probation Officer, they plan, during this period of home-leave, for the man's discharge. They seek suitable employment so that on release he will start work at once, and find suitable accommodation so that there is a definite place to live on the night of discharge, for men still leave prison with a travel warrant and only five to ten shillings in their pockets. Already fifty families up and down the country participate in the scheme.

In discussion of this scheme one is always asked: "Who are these people who take men?" They appear to us to be ordinary people who are interested in their fellows to the degree that they are willing to offer them for a few days the hospitality of their own homes in order to help the offenders to adjust more easily and at this bewildering time to be given some comfort and friendship which otherwise they would be denied. Most of our Friends are family people with children and the vast majority have some knowledge of social work either through the churches or through reading and listening to talks on the problems of the after-care of the prisoner.

At the start of this new venture we suggested to the prisoner that he might like to make use of such a scheme to help him plan for release. The response to this was mixed. He felt a very natural suspicion: "Who are the people? Why do they want to help me?" In many cases there was an immediate refusal even to discuss the possibility of their taking part. It was too tied up with prison and with myself as a prison official to be anything but a racket or a means of "keeping tabs on him" after release. But on reflection the man returned and discussed the scheme in greater detail and the possible benefits he might derive from it.

It was from this uneasy compromise that we made our first approach to the people outside.

In one case only, after the initial correspondence had taken place, the contact proved so unsatisfactory that leave was cancelled, because neither party felt that any good would result from their continued relationship.

At the time of writing, twenty-seven men will have used the scheme in the past eighteen months. These include eleven Corrective Trainees, three Trainable Ordinaries, five ex-Borstal inmates (all were C.T.s at Wakefield) eleven stars (not in prison before, but all convicted) two ex-approved school. It will be seen from the class of offender that all, including the stars, had been in difficulties before, though some for only minor offences. Seven of the group had been married but were either divorced or separated; the remainder were single men. None, when discharge was mentioned, had any fixed ideas or plans. All had resigned themselves to forfeit their home-leave and would have left prison with little hope for their future.

In an assessment of the practical value of the scheme it is too early to be categorical, but we may, perhaps, be permitted to draw some conclusions from the effects we have seen.

During the actual home-leave

period two cases have caused some difficulty. One of the young C.Ts. stole £1 from his host on the day he was to return to the prison. This was reported to me and when he was taxed with the theft he admitted it and wrote a letter to apologise for his lapse. Another man left his leave host after two days and went to a girl-friend who he thought might help him. He returned to his host on the last day of his leave, made his apologies and returned to prison in time. This man was a very sensitive person and had been uncomfortable in accepting this kind and friendly hospitality of his hosts. On discharge this man refused any further assistance and returned to a common lodging house in Manchester in preference to the private lodgings which could have been supplied for him. All twenty-seven men returned from leave on time.

Upon release one of the number left the country and is now teaching on the Continent. The remainder returned to the areas in which their leave had been spent and took up the accommodation and employment that had been found for them. Three of the C.Ts. left the district in a matter of days and disappeared, leaving no trace of their whereabouts. All three got into further difficulties and are now back in prison after having been at liberty only a few weeks. Four others have also been convicted since discharge and are serving further prison sentences. These seven failures are in the main psychopathic personalities and they found it quite impossible to establish any sort of relationship with their leave host. Two left their district after a few months and returned to friends whom they had met at Wakefield prison and subsequently got into trouble again.

The degree of support such a scheme as this affords is insufficient for this type of man who appears to drift back to prison almost willingly. Their only companions seem to be ex-prisoners and their friendship seems to provide a relationship which nothing we offer can equal. The only hope for this class of inadequate person lies in the leave host being a person of great sensitivity and with a great deal of time to give to the case. Normal relations are not enough. These people require constant support and without it collapse almost at once.

However some results have given great encouragement. One young C.T. has been in his work and lodgings for a year, has been promoted at work and is in the process of getting his own flat and furniture. He is in close touch with his host and the support and friendship of the scheme appear to provide the stimuli he needed. Another young C.T. has just completed his licence. This has been a year of almost constant crisis; jobs were thrown up at the slightest pretext, the police were accused of deliberate persecution and threats of violence offered as every fresh difficulty arose. It has been the patience and tact and above all the inherent unselfishness of the host and the Associate that supported this man. It is too early to say if this avoidance of an open clash with authority can last but one can hope that something has been learned and a degree of maturity obtained which would not otherwise have been possible.

The success of the scheme lies in the rapport that is established between host and prisoner. If they are able to talk together and discuss things freely, continuing

even when troubles arise, then they seem to overcome the minor difficulties which can often be the beginning of the road back to prison.

The alcoholic is a problem quite on his own. Three have used the scheme and one has returned to prison after a year of difficulty. Alcoholics are better catered for by Alcoholics Annonymous who have kindly entered the scheme and are maintaining close contact with all men who use it. Their support is given both during leave and on release.

It has been possible, in two cases, to get the ex-prisoner to accept psychiatric treatment after release and, in the case of one, this was accepted by the court as a condition of probation when it was suggested by the leave host, who himself appeared in court.

What the scheme has done so far is infinitesimal. If our main purpose is "to instil in men under our care the will to lead a good and useful life on release and to fit them to do so" then we must depend on individual case work and the devoting of much time to the homeless and inadequate person. For years men are isolated behind walls, living in a setting that is geared to such a slow pace that it seriously hampers their ability to readjust. Yet we talk as if a sentence is something which, *ipso facto*, must be beneficial.

Training is the foundation on which we build, but for what purpose? We isolate men miles from their homes and families. We still give far too few letters; and visits are looked upon as a privilege! After care is the one thing men fear to talk about and we encourage an almost ostrich-like attitude to the problem. The main burden of the after care of those men falls on the voluntary society, much abused nowadays but still the only refuge for hundreds of men on their first night out of prison. They do this neither for profit nor for any suspect motive but because they care for men as individuals and not as cases.

Until we ourselves do better our criticism might well be aimed inwards and not at those who are already giving a service no one else seems to want to tackle unless it be endlessly to discuss or criticise.

This scheme is in some small measure designed to meet a real need. We require far more addresses of willing people to offer hospitality. We need more research into the problem of the man who cannot establish a valuable relationship with his fellow men. Above all we need more careful planning for discharge. Norman House, the new hostel at Liverpool and the Wakefield scheme are small attempts to cope with a very large problem. As long as friendless and inadequate people leave prison uncared for and unwanted they will come back, not because they want us but because it is the only place where security can be found.

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Merfyn Turner the first Warden of Norman House once said that when a homeless man is discharged from prison he needs four things: Accommodation, money, a job to go to and a friend; and of these four, he added, the last is the most important. If we have learnt nothing else from our work with this scheme, it has confirmed the truth of that statement.