Norman House

An approach to Homelessness

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OLD BILL was the criminologist's dream of an "inadequate". He was forty, looked sixty, and from photographs he produced he seemed to have looked sixty all his life. He was small, lithe, and apologetic for his existence. His father was a sailor, his mother a drunkard, and Bill claimed to have been driven to stealing to feed his younger brothers. He had wandered, stolen, sold matches and lavender, and Old Moore's Almanacs. He had lived in hostels, Reception Centres, and disused buildings. Since the age of fifteen, he had spent more time in punitive establishments of one sort or another than he had in free society. His criminal record was distinguished by its length. He could not have hoped to maintain himself on the proceeds of his offences. He had stolen from his landlord when he was living at a small hostel. He had stolen newspapers from an unattended stand, bread rolls from a bakery, and chocolate from a sweet shop. He had two convictions for loitering with intent to steal from motor cars, both of which he vigorously denied.

Like most men in prison, he disliked his place there and longed for freedom. "When I come out this time, my friend", Bill wrote, "I'm going to settle down, get a steady job, and a room to live in. Hostels are no good at all, my good friend". Bill survived for not more than three months after every release. Four letters he wrote are almost duplicates, distinguishable chiefly by the date of writing and the variation in the length of prison sentence. "I'm sorry to say I've found you again my friend, but not in the right place, but the wrong place, my friend. The Judge this time gave me six months. But never mind, God is good, my very good friend". The continuing goodness of God was as certain as Bill's determination to settle down, and to live "like other people live. If I had a place to go to when I come out this time, these places (prison) would never see me no more, my good friend".

Bill wrote his last letter from prison in 1956. He died suddenly in 1959. But during those three years he achieved his ambition to live like other people live. He found a job which was within his capacity, and he held it. As a

cinema attendant he may have been the least esteemed member of the staff, but he believed that he was as important a member of the team as the manager. He found private lodgings, and he stayed there. He saved, and bought clothes, and acquired a steady girl-friend. She was an immature middle-aged woman who looked with pride to Bill as her hero. Bill, with equal pride looked on himself as her mentor.

His funeral was as undistinguished as his christening. Like all inadequates, he had fought an unequal fight without ever questioning its inequality. Repeated failure, therefore, remained a mystery. The hope of success may have been dimmed with time. But it was never extinguished. There was always a next time, when there would be a place to go to, somebody to accept, to support and sustain him, and so help him to show that he was no different after all from others who settled successfully and happily in society.

There were only three of us at Bill's funeral—the priest, Bill's girl, and I. The priest could be excused for thinking that Old Bill was just another of society's lonely, forgotten men, resting now in the chilling anonymity of a large London cemetery. His girl was more concerned with tomb-stones. As for me, as I looked down on the machine-produced coffin—paid for out of Bill's own savings—I couldn't help smiling a little as I thought how impossibly pompous he would have been if he had realised that he was one of the architects of Norman House.

It was men like Old Bill who brought home to me as a visitor at one of the London prisons, the crippling handicap for the offender of having nowhere to go to on his discharge from prison, and no family or friends who could exert a stabilising influence upon him. Lodging houses gave shelter. The Assistance Board stood the cost. The Labour Exchange might offer a job. But while the help given might prevent an immediate return to prison, it did nothing to integrate the offender in society.

Norman House was already a fact when Old Bill came out of prison for what was to be the last time. For the next five months he lived at the house, experiencing for the first time for many years, if not for the first time ever, what it is to be respected and valued, and accepted. He belonged now in a family of fifteen people, most of them men with a similar background to his, a history of deprivation, repeated social failure, and many imprisonments as the penalty for it. Soon he had saved enough to buy a suit. He had his photograph taken to commemorate the event. For Bill it was a great occasion. It signified a triumphant emancipation from Charity and Patronage. And there were people to share his pleasure.

When he moved into lodgings the pattern of his life was set. From then until his death he maintained his routine, always

calling at the house at least twice every week.

During its first five years, almost two hundred men lived at Norman House. Some were older than Bill, but most were younger. Few had known and lived with both parents. Some had known neither, and had lived in public all their lives, from the orphanages of their chidhood to the prisons and the lodging houses, the reception centres and the open road of their later years. But there were others who'd had a better start in life. Their intelligence was higher than average. They had done better in school and in work. They were skilled or semi-skilled workers. For Old Bill and others like him, their failure was inexcusable.

All the men who lived at the house in the first five years responded to its way of life. The family was never bigger than fifteen members, and no two, however similarly they might have been psychiatrically classified, bore sufficient affinities for them to be treated alike.

The Warden and his wife demanded a social and economic equality. Everybody was required to work for his living, the only exception in the eyes of the offenders and naïve visitors being the Warden. The life of the house was lived on the ground floor, in the kitchen, the dining room where all ate together, and the sitting room. There was no escape allowed from human contact. It may have caused annoyance and irritation, and sometimes emotional outburst. But the whole concept of Norman House centred in the belief that failure in the sphere of human relationships underlies criminal behaviour, and that for many offenders, learning to live with people is the first step in the process of personal adjustment. "Going Straight" is not a mechanical adherence to a non-delinquent way of life. It is the outcome of attachment to people. So far as the inadequates who lived at Norman House are concerned, their condition of social isolation in the past made acceptable living meaningless because there was nobody to approve the behaviour.

Crime ceased while the offenders lived at the house because crime had become meaningless. Men who had been accepted by the family they had joined responded by living in the way the family lived. Crime never presented a problem because it was frequently the least of the men's problems. Even those whose criminal behaviour seemed to be more psychologically motivated than that of the low-grade inadequate, acquired a temporary and superficial control over their tendencies and impulses, possibly because the emotional involvements which they could no longer escape gave them an outlet which had previously been found in criminal behaviour.

The process of growing-up in a family is never easy, and not all

who fail find themselves in prison. But to create an artificial family of people with problems, and often a long history of failure, offers no prospect of peaceful growth. The men who came to Norman House were selected, for not all homeless men in prison want to live what may well be for them an entirely new way of life. Others who show a desire are so disturbed that living at Norman House could do little to secure a satisfactory and lasting adjustment. The homeless men who were accepted in the first five years were those who wanted to settle, and who showed some ability to achieve it. In the first year almost all the men came from one London prison where they were visited regularly by the Warden. By the fifth year less than one-half came from that prison, the majority being accepted, therefore, on the recommendation of social workers directly and indirectly connected with the courts and prisons outside London. The final decision still remained with the Warden.

This development brought its own difficulties. In particular it revealed the defects of a coldly scientific classification of offenders, and statistically determined prognoses, on the one hand, and on the other the defects of the generous, compassionate, uncritical assessment which was built on hope. The process of living in a family sometimes made nonsense of classifications, and always revealed differences to emphasise that there is no dividing line between sickness and health, normality and abnormality.

Norman House has been criticised for its selectivity—its refusal for example, to accept alcoholics, or pathological gamblers. Originally selection had been made according to the offender's desire to settle outside prison, and his ability to succeed with the help Norman House offered. But experience quickly showed that there was a group aspect also to the offender's resettlement. Individual therapy remained important. But it was fully effective only when it recognised the therapeutic force which the group exerted. It was clear that the offender who stood to gain the most in a climate of this nature was the inadequate. It was not suited to the needs of the alcoholic, or the pathological gambler.

The group did not operate therapeutically by accident as it were. The prison scene may have improved greatly in the last decade. But it is still divorced from reality. It is the artificiality of the prison environment that induces in the prisoner a false sense of well-being. For the inadequate in particular, freedom is no philosphical concept. It is the right to live as others live—working, loving, and watching the telly. Looked at within the four walls of his cell, it is a simple life, and eminently accessible. "If I can work in here for two-and-ninepence a week, I'm sure I can work outside for a fiver". But a

week out of prison takes the shine away from freedom, and life becomes real again.

So the work of Norman House became the responsibility of supporting, persuading, pushing, and sometimes bullying men to do what they had promised themselves with such easy facility when they were in prison. This in turn made a heavy demand on the staff. It was the degree of their availability that determined the therapeutic force of the group. Some men may have complained that they were "under a microscope". It was their needs that shaped the treatment in the same way that deprived children demand attention. The parallel between them was always a close one. It was revealing, also, that those who complained of the treatment were not only those whose need for it was greatest, but who were also the quickest to feel the loss of it when they moved into private lodgings. It was a sad day when John Smith, with his long history of wayfaring and petty crime returned to the house after three days in lodgings to ask; "Please can I come back again?" It was a child who spoke, confessing a child's need for support and protection.

During the first five years, only one man went back to prison while he lived at the house. But almost one-half of the total failed to maintain their progress when they left. They tended to leave their jobs, lose their lodgings, wander from the neighbourhood, and in some cases to return to prison. This indicated that the inadequate at least needed to live for longer at Norman House than the four months that had become the average length of stay by the end of the fifth year. It also indicated that the step from the house into society was too severe. To meet the need for continuing and decreasing support, Norman House is about to open its own boarding house.

A study of the first two-hundred men to pass through Norman House indicates that the greatest contribution the house can make lies in the field of inadequacy. It can help the neurotic and the mentally ill. But it cannot resolve their condition. It supports the sexual offender, for example, so that he is available for psychiatric treatment. But unless treatment is pursued realistically and intensively, experience shows that even two years at Norman House does not affect his basic condition.

The needs of the inadequates approximate more to the needs of children. They need affection and the security that comes from knowing it is not affected by what they do or do not do. They need attention. In short, they need the discipline of any healthy, well-ordered, happy family. And that is what Norman House is peculiarly well-qualified to give.

Norman House, The First Five Years, a short objective report, is available from Norman House, c/o 24 Harberton Road, London, N.19.: 2s. 6d. (postage paid)