

Repeal Boosts Alcoholic Mental Cases

It is a fact long accepted and testified to by authorities in the field of mental ills that alcohol is a never failing but rather a steadily increasing factor as shown by the official records.

One of the most significant surveys in this regard was that recently detailed in an interview with Mrs. D. Leigh Colvin, President of the National W.C.T.U.

Briefly, the survey finds that yearly first admissions of alcoholics, as such, with and without psychosis, to mental institutions in the United States more than tripled, and the number of women so confined increased $4\frac{1}{2}$ times, in the 21 years beginning in 1922, "peak year of prohibition enforcement," and ending in 1942, latest year in which statistics are available.

With the exception of 1922, alcoholics are shown consistently by the census bureau to be the largest group among those classed without psychosis admitted to mental institutions. In 1922, mental deficient were listed first, and alcoholics second.

Alcoholism is additionally the sixth leading cause of confinement in the groups listed as with psychosis. In this position, it ranks next in number of cases to dementia praecox, cerebral arteriosclerosis, manic-depressive, senile and general paresis.

No census bureau reports on mental confinement were issued from 1923 through 1925. Those from 1926 to 1933, last year of general prohibition, show only confinements to state hospitals, which, however, in 1922 received about 73.1 per cent. of first admissions to all institutions. In state hospitals, the number of alcoholics did not reach 4,000 per year until 1931, when law enforcement became notoriously indifferent and lax.

It is pointed out that the census reports do not show the total alcoholic inmates, as distinguished from admissions, in mental institutions, year by year. The resident alcoholics in all asylums is shown at the year-end, 1939, to have been 13,555, including 11,536 men and 1,960 women, with the sex of 59 patients unstated.

Commenting upon the relationship of mental cases among women to the alcohol factor, Mrs. Colvin said: "Mid-forties appear to be the most dangerous ages, alcoholically, for men, and the early forties for women. Median age for first admissions with psychosis in 1942 was 45 for men and 41.5 for women, and in cases without psychosis, 'The Foundation' says (Oct., 1945), 43.1 for men and 40 for women."

THE PRISON SYSTEM

"RECIDIVISM"

One of the most difficult things to understand is how and why people, even after great suffering as the result of certain actions, come to repeat them, thus incurring, or at any rate inviting, a repetition of the suffering. One sees it in all sorts of places. One of the most common examples is that of the girl who, after all the trouble and suffering caused by having a child while still unmarried, before very long goes through it all again. The poor drunkard, who may come before the Bench for his hundredth conviction, is yet another.

Once I had a nice cat, who found herself the delighted mother of a family of kittens. She was quite happy with them in a shed outside for some days; and then, one morning, she staidly walked past me in the kitchen carrying one of her infants in her mouth. Without any hesitation she went into a room where a large cupboard was. The door of this was never quite closed, the catch being defective. Puss poked it wide open, and laid her baby down on the floor among some rag bags kept there. I picked up the kitten and carried it out again. Within three minutes the performance was repeated. I shut the door of the kitchen. Like magic, puss was in at the window of a room on the other side of the house, again steadfastly making her way to the cupboard. Exasperated, I scolded her; and taking the baby out again, helped puss out with a lift of my slipper to emphasise my irritation. Believe me, that cat spent the whole morning doing the same thing. I smacked her, scolded, stamped and stormed, even threw water over her and her infant; but nothing could stop her weary, constant return to the attack. I forget just what happened in the end, but the incident made me think. Something in the mind, or the instinct of the animal, was responsible for the blind, unrelenting determination to put her offspring inside the house; and nothing I could do made any difference. She was completely the slave of the impulse to ensure safety for her child.

Some criminals are just like that. Reading some of the literature on American prisons, one is completely horrified by the severity of the punishments meted out for some offences. Horrors are not quite a thing of the past in the States, although great efforts are being made to eliminate them, and to bring the prison system into line with the most enlightened ideas; but in some of the separate State prisons there is much to deplore. The question is asked, "Do those who undergo such terrible misery, and even agony, ever risk a repetition of it?" And the answer is, "There is a fifty-five per cent. recidivism."

What are we to make of that? A good deal suggests itself. One is almost forced to the conclusion that

the poor wretches are driven by some force within themselves which is beyond their ability to deal with. It is just like my cat; who really could not help herself. It is worth while to try to find out, if we can, what causes this oblivion to consequences, dreadful though experience has shown them to be.

Science, medical and psychological, has gone into the problem very deeply.

In many instances some pressure on a part of the brain, some purely physical cause, has been at work, perhaps all through the man's life. If this can be located, and perhaps, as is sometimes, mercifully, the case, dealt with effectively, the man becomes normal, readjusts himself to ordinary life, and his strange tendency is gone. In other cases, the trouble is one to be investigated by the psychiatrist. Deep waters, these; but justice demands that everything possible should be done for the man who "keeps on keeping on," even against his own wish and will.

Recently I heard of a man who said that he would advocate that all men guilty of offences against little girls and women should be flogged, and told that in about six weeks the dose would be repeated, after they had got over the first one. "That would stop them," he declared. How easy! The facts are all opposed to this course, or any similar one, being a remedy. As a matter of fact, it is stated, by those who know, that such treatment is exactly the kind to produce such reactions in the culprit as will infallibly end in the repetition of the crime.

We speak of wanting our system to be a protection for the community. Let us then make up our minds to one fact. This is that the mere infliction of suffering and misery is not enough to ensure that a man who has done a terrible thing in the community will not do it again. Some would say, "Then let them be kept in jail so that they will not be able to do the same thing again." Common sense shows that in a few years there would not be room in the country to build jails large enough to accommodate the numbers. Nor would there be money enough to provide for their safe keeping.

Surely some better way suggests itself. The way of understanding, and of removing the cause of the criminal impulse if this can be ascertained to be capable of elimination.

In one state in the U.S.A., a board of no less than eleven specialists investigates the circumstances, physical, mental, hereditary, economic, spiritual, educational, environmental, etc., of each person who is to undergo trial for crime. Each specialist makes his report, and everything learned is at the disposal of those who are to pronounce sentence.

It is worth thinking about, is it not?