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THE SOCIAL HYGIENE SERGEANT

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A year ago Harley Brooks, budding ornament of the Broadway stage, was playing the juvenile lead in the sparkling musical comedy success, "Polly and Her Pals," at the Gayety Theatre, and fascinating the feminine element in his audience by the jaunty air with which he wore his fashionable flannels in the scene on the bathing-beach at Trouville in the second act. Today, Sergeant 1st Class Brooks, attired in neat olive drab, is wearing out issued shoes at the rate of about a pair a week on the dusty roads of a southern camp, and addressing himself nightly to an audience in which the feminine element is present only by implication. For, by a strange accident of the war, the humming-bird actor has been transformed into that strange new ornithological specimen, a social hygiene sergeant.

"What is a social hygiene sergeant? Any kin to a domestic science corporal?" The ignorance indicated by this question is not without some color of excuse. Owing to the maidenly reticence of our public press, it is still possible for the ordinarily well-informed American citizen, in the second year of the war, to think of it as being waged only in Europe, Asia, Africa, and a few other out-of-the-way places like that, with scarcely a suspicion of the great battle being fought every day right here in our own country. In this battle, whose object is to "keep our fighters fit," and in which age-old ignorance, error, falsehood, have been the enemy's leaders, the social hygiene sergeant, doubly a soldier, has played his part.

There has been much discussion as to the outstanding figure of the war. Some say it is Joffre, some Foch, some Haig, some General Pershing. Personally I am inclined to believe it is none of these, but the social hygiene sergeant. Others have led armies and won bloody victories; but never before now has any soldier conducted a campaign such as he has been conducting during the

past year, and conducting it successfully. Only a little while ago —on the Mexican border with its condoned license and cynical stockades—people would have laughed at the very idea of a man in uniform standing up in a tent, surrounded with grim pictures and explaining venereal disease to a bunch of rookies. Such is the daily job of the social hygiene sergeant.

When Uncle Sam—in this instance less paternalistic than fatherly—conceived the happy idea of giving to each of his boys in the service the knowledge they needed to protect them in their new venture, he called to his aid the social hygiene sergeant. The story of the latter's response will make one of the most interesting and significant pages in the medical, moral, and social history of the war. But more remarkable than the work he has performed, the service he has rendered, is the social hygiene sergeant himself. This is, first of all, the story of the social hygiene sergeant.

Have you ever wondered what a cross-section of our great new civilian army would be like? Well, the social hygiene sergeant is such a cross-section. His variety is infinite. He is not one type, but all types. He represents every calling or profession—but one. He is never a doctor. If he were, he would himself be wearing the caduceus on his collar, instead of on his sleeve, under a chevron, so greatly is Uncle Sam in need of trained medical officers at this juncture. But he is teacher, newspaper man, Y. M. C. A. worker, expert accountant, drug-clerk, farmer. He is, we have seen, an actor. He is also a breeder, an owner of fast horse-flesh, a man of the race-track. There is, apparently, nothing a man can have done in civil life, yet not be in the army a successful social hygiene sergeant.

He comes also from every part of the country, with every variety of background, education and special training. He comes from the cities and colleges of New England, but he comes equally from the farm lands of the South and West, from the little villages of the Southern mountains. He has been a teacher and preacher in the wild hill country of West Virginia. He has won the coveted prize of a Rhodes scholarship which will entitle him, when the war is over, to "carry on" in the cloisters

of Oxford. He has lived in the seclusion of the Ozarks, seeing nothing of the world till he came to Washington and Baltimore for his instruction as a social hygiene sergeant. He has lived in China and learned to speak Chinese more fluently than most well-educated Americans speak French. Yet in all these guises he is one and the same, a patriotic American, a man among men, a doughboy among doughboys, a red-blooded soldier among soldiers.

There is not the slightest hint in the social hygiene sergeant of the uplifter, or the reformer, the saint or the "pussyfooter." If he attacks venereal disease and sexual promiscuity, it is because he has learned the truth about both and is eager to spread it. He has learned that gonorrhea is a thousand times worse than a bad cold, in spite of what many who ought to have known better have carelessly told him. He has learned that syphilis, if not treated in time, causes both paresis and locomotor ataxia, and that that leading citizen at home, whose softening of the brain, or heart failure, was supposed to have been brought on by overwork, poor fellow, in reality died as the result of something quite different. He knows what the temptations of a soldier's life are, how easy it is to "fall for" them. He has been put on his guard. He wants to put others on their guard. That is his own personal conception of his duty as a soldier.

The social hygiene sergeant is alert, resourceful, quick to bring into play any special talent he may possess to arrest the attention of the men, to win and hold their confidence. If he can box he arranges matches with the best boxers in camp to prove that he is neither "softy" nor "mollycoddle." If he can write, he prepares an article every week or so on some aspect of his work for the camp paper. Once, when he was dubbed "parson," "reformer," by those in authority, he said nothing but, when the chance came, he went to a neighboring town to play the pipe organ at a patriotic meeting for one of his tormentors, and called upon his years of experience on the stage and with the Vernon Castles, to put on a play for another.

Above all, the social hygiene sergeant has ingenuity and stubborn determination. He is seldom at a loss to put across his

program. Arriving at one camp with his stereopticon, but without his screen, he went right ahead and presented his exhibit to eight thousand men.

"They came in groups of from two to three companies in mess hall where I had already set up the screen—my bedsheet, if you please."

Again, he had trouble in keeping his placard exhibit up in a Y. M. C. A. building. The secretary suggested the placards being arranged so that they might be taken down at any time. Result, they were found to be down most of the time. At his next camp he wrote:

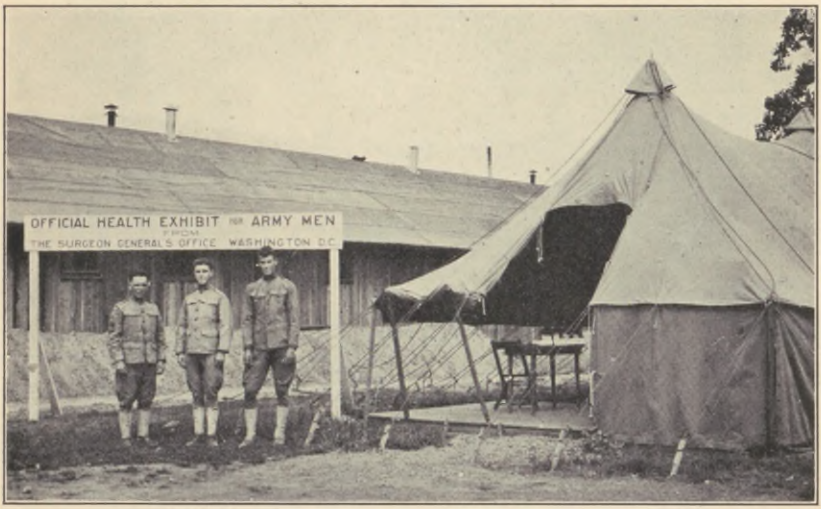
"I have put those placards up for keeps, and if the secretary sees fit to take my exhibit down he will be minus the side of his building."

In the sergeant's next expense account appeared the item: "Spikes."

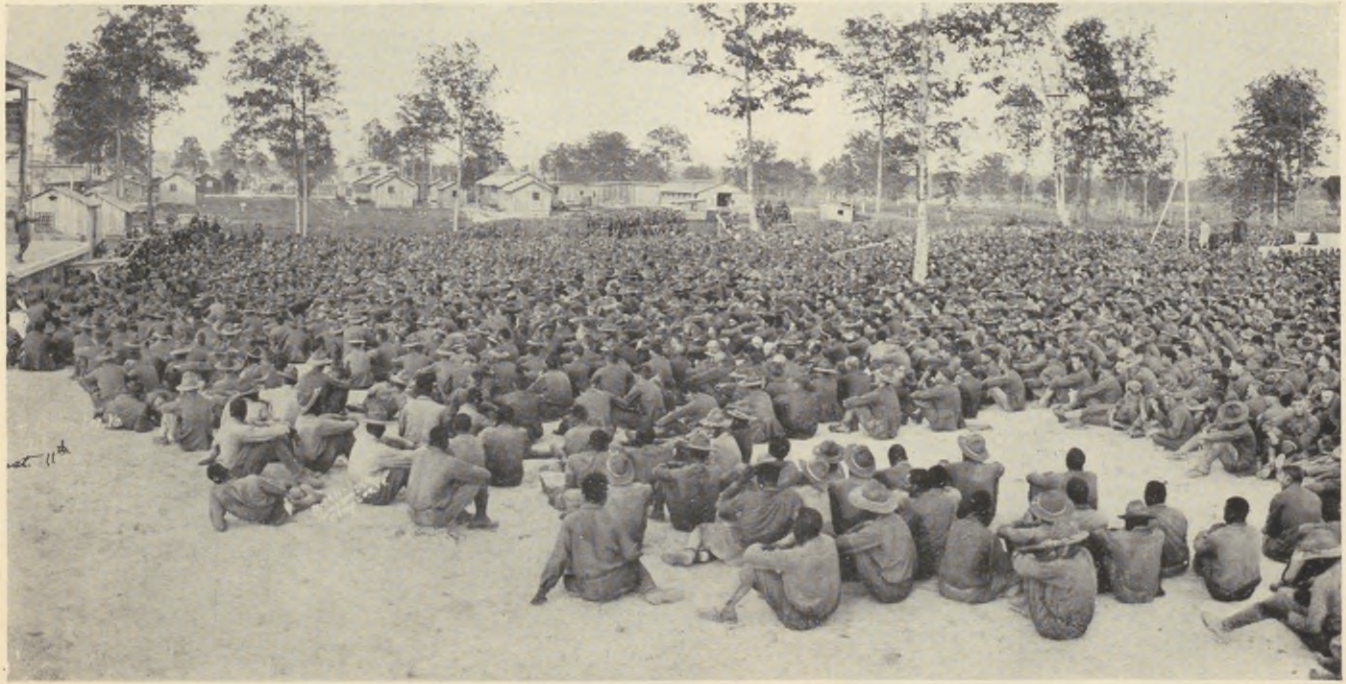
But he also has tact and patience. If a "wise guy" in his audience tries to display his superior knowledge, openly questioning every statement, the sergeant does not repress him or attempt to argue. Instead, he yields him the floor, then puts a few questions of his own which generally lead to the disturber's confusion and evoke roars of appreciative laughter from the others.

For the social hygiene sergeant is a popular man in his camp. He has made good. Others may smile at his proselyting zeal and ardor. Not so the soldiers. They understand what he is getting at, all right. Others may surmise. They *know*. Those who have had the most experience and fared worst, respect him most and give him the greatest help. They crowd around him to add their testimony, tell their stories. Tragic, terrible stories, some of them.

"Those pictures of babies made me want to cry, sergeant. I'm in love with a girl but I can't marry her. I don't dare to. Perhaps I've got a chance yet, though. I never quite understood about it all before, like you explained it tonight. I'm much obliged to you, sergeant. I'm leaving camp tomorrow, but I want to keep in touch with you."



THE WORK OF THE SOCIAL HYGIENE SERGEANT



A Social Hygiene Lecture at Camp Lee, Virginia. August, 1918.

Thus the social hygiene sergeant has won prestige for himself, respect for his calling. It would have been easy enough to fail. A single misstep would have brought discredit upon the work, utterly compromising it. But he has seldom taken this misstep. On the contrary, he has won out all along the line, and has succeeded in giving new dignity and importance to the subject with which he is dealing.

It has had its effect upon him, too, this job which is unlike any other job in the army—which gives him greater freedom and accordingly calls for a far higher degree of self-reliance and initiative. The modest shy youth who, it seemed, was scarcely capable of going into a big camp as a N. C. O., and impressing his personality upon men and officers—who was chosen, perhaps, only because a sergeant was needed in that particular camp, and because sergeants were scarce—has surprised every one by the aggressiveness and executive ability he has developed. The dry lawyer, whose reports at first read like briefs, has come gradually under the spell of his human material, and begun to write of his experiences like a novelist. The business man has discovered that there is something in life besides business, the farmer besides crops, the druggist besides pills and prescriptions. It has been a wonderful school of experience for one and all, and when the war is over, the world, or this corner of the world which we call America, will be the richer for the social hygiene sergeant.

The function of the social hygiene sergeant, as the reader will have divined, is to run a social hygiene exhibit in camp. The idea of such an exhibit was not entirely original with Uncle Sam, who rather adopted than conceived it. Shortly after the war broke out, and recruits began to pour in, the Missouri State Social Hygiene Society installed one in Jefferson Barracks. It was, however, a purely civilian affair, and was attended by a civilian, a young medical student of St. Louis. The real novelty consisted in the taking over of the exhibit by the War Department, and in the replacing of the civilian attendant by a soldier —the social hygiene sergeant.

The first sergeant, specially trained for the work, was sent out in January, 1918. The story of his adventures, and of the

two who followed him, as they went from camp to camp, breaking ground and developing a technique of attack, would make an Odyssey well worth writing—and reading. It was not all simple sailing at first. They met here and there with obstacles and rebuffs that might have discouraged others less able, resourceful, and determined. They succeeded, and when the general success of the undertaking seemed assured, six more sergeants were assigned to their stations.

Each sergeant was supplied with a stereomotorgraph, five or six sets of slides, some placards, and quantities of literature. It was his business to install this material where it could be most advantageously displayed; to be in regular attendance upon it at those hours when the soldiers were most likely to congregate; to explain it and answer questions. He was not to lecture, because to lecture on venereal disease is the proper function of the medical officer. He was merely to talk, to interpret. But in so doing he was laying the cornerstone for the whole structure of social hygiene instruction in the army.

This structure is very complete. A staff of official lecturers has been built up to cover the camps. Moving-picture plays have been produced. Various types of literature and placards have been devised and distributed. But of all these features the social hygiene sergeant has been by far the most effective. There are only thirty-five prints of the film "Fit to Fight" at present in circulation. The lecture service is likewise limited by the number of qualified lecturers available and by the physical impossibility for one lecturer to be in two or more camps at the same time. The social hygiene sergeant, however, is always on hand in the camp to which he is assigned, and keeps up continuously the instruction which could otherwise be only occasional and intermittent.

Today it is not too much to say that the social hygiene sergeant has become an institution. At first he was accepted with certain misgivings and reservations by more than one camp commander. It was hard to get him into some camps at all. The idea would obviously not appeal to those officers who believed that "nature must take her course, or that educational measures, generally,

were inadequate to their purpose." Now the chief difficulty is to supply the demand. "Send us a sergeant at once—the best you've got," is the constant appeal of the camp surgeon, and some of the larger camps are even asking for two or three, so as to cover the ground thoroughly.

There are now about fifty social hygiene sergeants in the field. It has not been easy to get them—of just the right sort. It requires a picked man for such a job—hand-picked. Not that any particular knowledge or previous experience is necessary. Often the man who knows nothing at all about venereal disease, at the beginning, is much better than one who has picked up considerable knowledge concerning it in a drug-store, a G. U. infirmary, or a venereal ward. Point of view is the important thing. And naturally, the social hygiene sergeant must be a man of personal integrity—one who is ready to practice what he preaches.

To get such men, a lookout is kept in all the camps; but the chief source of supply has been the great army medical center, Camp Greenleaf, Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. There is a service company there, the largest in the army, numbering more than two thousand men. It is a reservoir for special details sent out to all parts of the country, and is replete with material for social hygiene sergeants. One was found there recently who had served for four years as a special sanitary inspector in the health department of an eastern city. Yet he was cooking for officers' mess when his deliverance was effected! Such misfits are "nuts" for the Social Hygiene Division.

Once the sergeant candidate has been caught, his transfer is secured, and he is brought to the "sergeants' school"—in Old McCoy Hall, Baltimore. There, for two or three weeks, he is carefully coached in the various aspects of his subject, as well as in the best ways of utilizing his material. No attempt is made, however, to lay down hard and fast rules for carrying on the work under conditions that vary widely from one camp to another.

It is the same when he gets his first orders, and goes out into the field, a fullfledged sergeant. Through a little mimeographed bulletin issued weekly from Washington, "The Round Table,"

and through direct personal correspondence, he gets advice and suggestions, and the results of his work are carefully checked up by traveling inspectors. But for the most part he is left to work out his own problems for himself as they arise, and from the start it is impressed upon him that the three prime requisites for success are: initiative, adaptability, resourcefulness.

On reaching camp the sergeant's first duty is to report to the camp surgeon, under whom he is to work, and who assigns him to some organization for mess and quarters. He will not actually belong to that organization, however. He will not have to stand retreat or reveille, and more, perhaps, than any man in camp, he will be a free lance, his own master.

He will have an excellent chance to "soldier" if he wishes to. For he is often under little direct observation and it is not impossible to "camouflage" one's reports. That he almost never takes advantage of this opportunity, that he keeps steadily at work, finding new corners of the camp to cover, new ways to interest the men already covered, speaks well for the morale of the corps, its seriousness and devotion.

Sometimes the sergeant makes use of the Y. M. C. A. or K. of C. buildings for his work. Sometimes he invades mess halls and post exchanges for the same purpose. But where it is possible—where a sympathetic camp surgeon or a cordial quartermaster beams upon him, his favorite procedure is to procure a large hospital tent and set up housekeeping on his own account.

The tent may be set up in some central area of the camp, or the terminus of the city car-line. Or it may be moved about from one regimental area to another. In either case it quickly becomes a center of soldier life. There is never any trouble about getting attendance, even without orders. In one camp from two to five hundred men come to the exhibit every night. To accommodate them the sergeant has been obliged to add a second tent, putting this end to end, and thus doubling his floor-space. Also, being an enterprising youth—he is a successful young lawyer in civil life—he commandeered another organization's stereomotorgraph, which had been kicking about camp, and started it off on a course of its own among the Y buildings.

Much as he may love his tent, this is only the point of departure for the really active sergeant. From it he radiates to every part of the camp. He carries his leaflets about and distributes them at moving-picture plays and boxing-matches, even popping them into the soldiers' hands on pay-day! He looks up medical officers and chaplains, to interest them in his work. He gets acquainted with athletic directors and "Y" secretaries. He makes lists of books on social hygiene in the well-stocked camp library, types them, and has them ready for distribution when called for. He may frequent inspections and visit prophylactic stations, to see how he may use them, too, for his educational propaganda.

Then there are always special problems—groups of men who cannot be reached by the usual methods. There are the illiterates, colored or white. Since they cannot read the little book, "Keeping Fit to Fight," of which more than two millions have now been distributed to soldiers, he must read and explain this to them—also the text on the placards and reading slides of the stereomotorgraphs. And there are the various foreign language groups to be worked with in the same way, with the aid of interpreters.

To make a real success of his job the social hygiene sergeant must work long hours, shifting his material by day, with the help of a quartermaster's truck, and showing it mostly at night, when the men are free from military duties. Follow him as he trudges through the dusty camp, for transportation is scarce, and it is a lucky sergeant who picks up a "flivver with chauffeur attachment," or even a side-car. He carries a hammer and nails in one hand, a big bundle of placards under the other arm. Reaching his destination, which may be the detention camp, the development battalion, the mustering office, a regimental infirmary, or the depot brigade, he picks out a strategic point and proceeds to post the placards with the ardor and determination of a young Luther nailing his cartel to the door of the church.

Stand and watch him a while. You will not be alone long. A crowd is pretty certain to gather and question him curiously. It is a good chance for a little impromptu program on the side.

and he will "hand out" some of the "dope" he has always on tap. His language will, perhaps, offend your polite ears. For the social hygiene sergeant is no highbrow reformer. He is, for the time being, at any rate, merely a doughboy among doughboys, and he relies plentifully upon the inherent interest of his subject to fix the attention. It is this ready adaptability to his present environment, whatever his social or educational status at home, that makes him so successful a campaigner.

But to get the social hygiene sergeant at his best—in his own lair, or on his native heath,—drop in on him some night at tent, mess-hall, post exchange, or Y building,—whatever the place may be where he has installed his "stereo." This singular looking instrument, of which he is excessively proud, and which, standing firmly braced on its four legs, looks fixedly out at you through its square hood, furnishes the heavy artillery for the sergeant's attack. Or rather, it is a sort of monster machine gun, shooting a series of fifty-two slides at you every seventeen minutes.

The crowd, shy at first, and inclined to stand off, gradually comes closer to read the edifying texts and to study the pictures. Not pretty pictures, most of them: blind babies, syphilitic sores, unsteady victims of paresis and locomotor ataxia, making you remember painfully a chance visit, once upon a time, to a wax museum on the Bowery, and Scudder Middleton's bitter meditation upon the spectacle there of

> "Man's shining Body bleeding, wrecked, forlorn,
> Its sacred temples trampled down and torn,
> And all the magic and the marvel gone."

But what would you? It is not a pretty subject. Still it is a very vital subject for these boys, some of whom have known too little about it—others too much. Besides, the text slides attempt to raise the whole matter out of the realm of the purely physical, and to make an appeal to something higher than mere craven fear—to a sense of honor, of duty, of decency, of obligation to innocent women and to children yet unborn.

After the showing, while the rest scatter with phrases like: "Well, good *night!*" and "Never again for me!" a few linger

to ask questions, to impart further information, to tell stories. They are pathetically eager to air their knowledge, the "wise guys," to win sympathy, those who have been "burnt." This is your chance to learn something of the perplexed soul of youth, its hidden depths, now hidden no longer. At last these boys have found someone they can talk with intimately, yet not obscenely—someone quite manifestly on their own level, but with so different an approach to the Tree of Knowledge, which is the Tree of Life.

One has had a disease, he had thought himself cured, but now has his doubts. The sergeant learns the details and sends him to the regimental surgeon.

Another has been thinking of getting married, but what he has heard makes him wonder whether it would not be wise to be examined. The sergeant agrees, points out the danger to the woman, and advises the mysterious blood-test.

A third has a bad habit, he has tried in vain to break himself of. The sergeant here is able to suggest new methods of control, new conceptions of manhood.

A fourth has worried himself nearly insane over a phenomenon which has enriched so many quacks and driven so many unhappy boys to the verge of suicide. A single word of explanation and reassurance is all that is necessary in this instance, and a brooding thought, at the bottom, perhaps, of many soldierly shortcomings, is forever banished.

And so on. No wonder that the social hygiene sergeant has come to occupy a unique place in the camp economy—something between that of physician and father confessor, and that even the officers sometimes come to him for advice and enlightenment!

"There is a sergeant in our camp," writes one with a literary turn, who has whimsically tried to see himself as others see him—"there is a sergeant in our camp, who is a cross between surgeon, chaplain, and just plain soldier. He is the best-liked man in camp, chiefly because he seems to like everybody else. I have never known where in camp he lives. Once he told me he lived in the Sanitary Train. Again it was the Detention

Camp. Then he told me he lived with the Sanitary Detachment of the 79th F. A. And in June he said he was quartered in the Camp Library. Either he is an imaginative chap or he has a roving disposition.

"He has a queer job, too. He belongs in Washington, in the Surgeon General's Office. The S. G. O. sent him here on detailed service. . . .

"He told me a couple of months back that there was a sergeant like himself in almost every cantonment in the country.

" 'What kind of lads are they?' I asked him. 'Do they live at Camp Libraries or Post Offices?'

"He answered my last question first.

" 'They hang their hats wherever there's work to be done. They're a good bunch. But mixed. Everything from poets to peddlers. That is, before they held up their right hand. They're all the same now.'

" 'Which?' I asked. 'Poets?'

" 'Peddlers.'

" 'And what do they peddle?' I inquired smilingly.

" 'Health,' he answered with perfect gravity."

Peddlers of health—health and happiness. That is what these social hygiene sergeants really are. Soldiers themselves, they are, in the modern phrase, so fresh today, so quaint and old-fashioned tomorrow, "selling" social hygiene to soldiers. No finer work can be conceived than this, to which they give themselves night and day, clearing up the mists of ignorance, draining the stagnant marshes of moral malaria, and helping to win the world to a higher, cleaner, fairer standard of conduct.