

Former Pastor Launches Anti-Suicide Campaign

Fifty Per Cent Decrease In Nation's Cases Of Self Destruction Is Goal Of Unique Organization



The Rev. Robert Rehkgugel, 64-year-old head of the Suicide Prevention Society of America, is endeavoring to enlist the aid of 1,000 retired ministers in his nationwide campaign against self destruction.

By Whit Wellman

DID you ever decide you were "through"? That going on wasn't worth while any longer, and the easiest way out of trouble was to put a period to life? Friends probably said that it was wrong, cowardly—a murder, really, committed by yourself on the person called "you." No matter—what you had decided upon was your own business, yours alone. And yet—you read something, heard a word dropped that made you hesitate. Was there another way?

Norman Entler stood before the door of a pleasant Oakland home, his finger on the bell. His finger pressed hard, and soon footsteps came toward the door; it opened, and friendly Rev. Robert Rehkgugel said, "Come in, won't you?"

Entler looked hard at the heavy-set, smiling pastor. Could this cordial, soft speaking man help him?

In the war, in the army . . . Entler remembered he had been an officer with the British, gone through worse than this. Battlefields, shell fire, gas, the terrible mutilation of the body? No—facing this kindly retired Methodist pastor, Entler knew the hour coming would be worse. But an officer didn't back out of things; he faced them. Entler straightened his more than six feet of athlete's body, saluted ironically—

"Yes, sir!" he said.

The Suicide Prevention Society of America had its first client.

"I've lived about 64 years, my friend," the clergyman said. "Tell me about it."

His big caller grinned for the first time in weeks. "I've lived a thousand years, Dominie." Then he suddenly sobered. "I don't want any more of them."

To Entler, sitting in a deep chair, facing this quiet, confident pastor, was harder than anything he'd gone through in the war; there were no screaming shells, but it was zero hour. His spirit was humiliated, as he talked he grew ashamed. He'd left the army on a "big ticket," with an honorable discharge; he still felt like an officer of the King, yet here he sat, mumbling a little at first, then breaking—words pouring out incoherently for the first time in his life.

"Go ahead, son. Tell me. It's all right."

And Entler went on with his tale. They'd called him "Beast" Entler in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Arabia, Egypt and a dozen other places, because nothing stopped him. Nothing stopped him in that sunny living room.

He'd been sitting at a table in his home, looking from the window to the rock garden surrounding his landscape gardening nursery. A small glass of poison covered one corner of the will he had signed. His fingers curled around the glass as he read a line of his scrawled instructions—"Seal my heart in a vase and send it to my wife."

The morning newspaper rustled beside him; he picked it up, and a caption startled him: "Society for Prevention of Suicides Formed Here

Norman Entler, a former British army officer, was the first person to be pulled back from the brink of self destruction through the influence of the kindly, retired Methodist pastor.

—Ex-Pastor of Oakland Has Plan to Put End to Self-Destruction.

"I made up my mind to call on you first," he said. "And here I am."

Battles, sending men over the top, living in foul trenches for endless months, shooting spies and deserters behind the lines, coming home gassed, with a tricky heart and a bullet-scarred body—all of this didn't count.

ENTLER'S trouble was a simple, homely thing; and none the less easy to bear. His wife had left him.

His life had been expressed in action; emotions which took form in direct effort he understood. Pent up emotions, denied, frustrated, were something you couldn't do anything about. You just waited for the pain to blur. He wasn't fighting other men's battles, but his own.

The Rev. Rehkgugel knew it wasn't easy to bring back a man's wife; women had minds of their own, these modern days, and the pastor's task lay in showing Entler the world as it was, a possible world in which to accomplish his desires—not to revive the past.

Entler had lived a man's life, fighting, commanding, succeeding. Would he let one woman finish him? Entler was 56 years old, but looked no more than 40; he was physically weary, yes—with a bad heart, scarred lungs, but with an enormous fund of vitality which persisted. This vigor shown in his face, it was evidenced in his great, well-formed hands. There was this—an officer's life was based on pride. Ordinary men stayed in the ranks. Gentlemen, men above average, rose to command others. An officer's first accomplishment was to master himself—and this Norman Entler had failed to do.

"You can't do this to yourself," the pastor concluded. "Promise that you'll postpone suicide until we get you straightened up—adjusted."

"O. K., Dominie. I'll give it a whirl!"

ENTLER went home that day to arrange his affairs, pay a lump sum to his wife—which took most of his capital and landscape business—and sat down to consider the future. A friend dropped in, they consumed several sandwiches, hot coffee; Entler's memory went back to war days, when he roamed the earth, getting into tight spots and out of them.

"I remember Lawrence, the Englishman, who led the Arabs to victory in Palestine. Allenby in Egypt, a stone-faced general! There was the night my best friend sniped at the Boche before we went over the top of the mud trench. We? We started together, he got to the top of a protecting sack. A blast of shrapnel got him in the throat before I'd moved a foot. Seems so damned long ago!"

"You've got a book in your head," his friend said. "Why don't you write it?"

Norman Entler laughed, then considered.

"I've lived a thousand years," his friend suggested. "That's your title."

Today the former British officer has written the first chapter of his book; one chapter a week for 20 weeks, the authentic experiences of a life time packed with thrills, tragedy and humor—events in the life of a fighting man. Entler is far from being "through"; he knows that he has just begun.

"READJUSTMENT," says the anti-suicide pastor, "is the keynote. We cannot always change difficult circumstances—cannot bring back the past—but we can adjust ourselves to the present."

"Most would-be suicides do not really want to die. They want to live—but seem, for the time being, unable to conquer whatever their unfortunate situation may be."

"Norman Entler was our first case, and I have every reason to believe that he will go ahead, leaving the past where it belongs—behind him. His new outlook has already made him a different person. The book he's begun, 'I Have Lived a Thousand Years,' will be the finest thing he's ever attempted. The final chapter, I've told him, should describe how near he came to suicide, and how he gained a victory over himself—how he conquered, not the situation—his wife has not come back to him—but how he conquered himself. That man is winning the hardest fight of his life—with himself."

A high school teacher came to the Rev. Rehkgugel. Her sister had lost her position, suffered an injury in an accident, and was contemplating suicide. The pastor went home with the sister, chatted with the other woman, and persuaded her to visit her own church. From this, and talking with the pastor, she gained renewed peace and hope; she is now on the way to recovery, planning a new life.

"In the United States," said the Rev. Rehkgugel, "there are 1,000 ministers, retired men with many good years left them; returned from foreign missions who cannot go back to the foreign field because there is no money to send them, and ministers who lost their pastorates because of the depression. These men are trained and ready. I believe that most of them will be happy for a chance to take the platform."

Among several prominent sponsors of the movement is the Countess Julie Lasalle Stevenson, founder of "The Child Guidance League of America," with headquarters in Hollywood.

DISCUSSING several means of suicide, the Rev. Rehkgugel refuted the theory that weapons, poisons, or tall buildings, were factors in the death rate.

"The whole cause is mental. If we can change a person's attitude toward life, he'll want to live. A million tall buildings won't make him want to jump off. There is a rumor that the San Fran-



The above old English print of medieval times depicts a person who has committed suicide being attacked by demons from Hell who, in turn, are being driven off by an angel with a flaming sword. The question is: Which wins the battle for the suicide's soul, devil or angel?

cisco Bay bridge will carry miles of high wire fencing to prevent people from leaping into the bay. It may prevent them from that particular form of self destruction, but only a different mental outlook will keep them from finding some other 'way out.'

Soon after an Oakland newspaper told of the pastor's anti-suicide plans, he was flooded with letters from men and women who "were through," and wanted to tell him about it. Several pitiful letters came to him, one from a woman who signed herself "Two-thirds Done."

"My life is two-thirds spent in the normal course of events. But I doubt very much that I care to wait the end of the other third. In fact, I debate from day to day. Sometime I'm going to do it. I just haven't decided upon the means. That's all that deters me."

"I suppose the anti-suicide arguments would be 'my debt to society,' or even a religious argument. But neither would work with me."

"I didn't ask to come here, but I have a perfect right to decide to leave. And I've about decided."

"The world is too painful. My body is pretty badly used up, and it is not my fault. Physicians tell me I can never regain my health. I scarcely get a night's sleep and seldom are the days that are free from pain. Should I go on and on? Suffer? No!"

"Two-thirds Done."

A CHINESE youth, Joseph Wesley Hee Won, working over a hot cook stove at Stockton, Calif., wrote that he wished to correct the high suicide rate among his people, and asked the pastor for advice.

"Suicide is a useless thing and a great mistake," he said. "Maybe I could convince some of them that they should stop and think before committing such a great mistake as self destruction."

In answer to "Two-Thirds Done," whose letter was published, a person signing himself "Epa-phras" wrote an open letter:

" . . . I should like to drive this truth home, that every suicide is a tragic mistake. Just that; a tragic mistake. Why call it that? Well, one could write a book, there are so many reasons. But let me give just one good reason, and state it so plainly that it may shock this person back to her sense before it is too late.

"Let me ask you, friend, is murder a mistake? Suppose you should be plotting right now the death of some acquaintance—would it be wrong?"

"Suicide is murder, pure and simple. The fact that the crime is usually committed in cold blood makes it all the more horrible, and tragic."

"It makes no difference that the person murdered is 'me'. The result is the same: a human life is taken by violence—by my guilty hand."

" . . . Consider well, my friend, before committing murder in cold blood!"

"Sincerely yours,

"Epa-phras."

THE definite goal of the Suicide Prevention Society is a 50 per cent decrease of suicide cases in America by 1940. Its motto is "Prevent, Seek, and Save."

Methods to be followed, according to the Rev. Rehkgugel, who has turned his home at 1530 First Avenue, Oakland, Calif., into temporary headquarters for his work, will take the form of a national publicity campaign carried on through the press, churches, radio, and movies, as well as lectures; he also expects to see an early announcement of a Suicide Prevention Sunday and a Suicide Prevention Week in every State. A national endowment fund will be created by voluntary subscriptions, but for which there are to be no solicitors and no collectors.

"We plan in addition," he says, "a Suicide Prevention Patrol. A company of men and women trained and pledged to prevent from self destruction those ready to perish, and to restore them to their families and to society."

Since primitive times, suicide has been recognized as an evil of society. In law, it was *felo de se*, the intentional taking of one's own life.

Strangely, among uncivilized people it was uncommon, though not unknown. A number of Oriental religions favored suicide, but it was forbidden by the Koran. By Aristotle it was condemned as unmanly. The early Romans recognized many reasons for suicide, and punished with confiscation of property only suicides committed to escape punishment for a crime.

S. T. AUGUSTINE considered suicide a sin, and various church councils, as early as the fifth century, deprived the corpse of the ordinary religious rites. In medieval law the suicide's entire property was confiscated, and custom decreed public indignities to the corpse—such as dragging by the heels face downward, as in France; or burying at the crossroads with a stake through the body, as in England. An old English law compelled forfeiture of lands and goods in all suicide cases, but the requirement came to be often evaded through the granting of a coroner's verdict of insanity, and the law was abolished. In France, today, neither suicide nor attempted suicide can be punished by law.

In the United States suicide is unlawful in many states, and an unintentional killing of another person during an attempt at self-destruction is homicide. In several states an attempt at suicide is a common law misdemeanor, and in other states a felony. In New York aiding a suicide is considered manslaughter in the first degree, and the attempt itself by a sane person was a crime until 1919.

Hard times of the past five years are undoubtedly one of the causes of the higher suicide rate in America, as were the post-war days of readjustment in Germany followed by hundreds of youths taking their own lives.