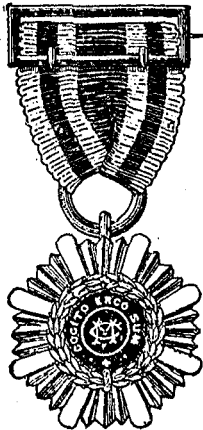


The Matrons' Council Conference.

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THE PLACE OF TRAINED NURSING IN PRISONS.



Mrs. Bedford Fenwick said:—When I sat down to consider my paper I realised how impossible it was to deal with so important a subject as that of "Trained Nursing in Prisons" in the few minutes at my disposal at this Conference, that if trained nursing touched the structure of prison management it was imperative that it should permeate the whole edifice, and that a conference to deal with this far-reaching reform alone would be necessary.

Criminals and their treatment have always possessed a profound interest for me, and as a child, before our prisons were closed to the public, I had visited several, an experience which left an ineffaceable impression on my mind. All my sympathies were with the degraded prisoners. When quite a little girl a kind uncle, at my special request, took me to see the murderers' graveyard at the old prison at Lincoln. It was indeed a gruesome spot. In what appeared to have been an old tower, reached by a long flight of outside steps, was a door in the wall. Through this door was an enclosure, the surrounding walls rising to a great height, which were open to the sullen sky. Here, at intervals, half hidden in the rank, blueish grass, were little inscribed stones, marking the graves of those hanged by the neck until they were dead. There was nothing of God's Acre about this terrible and heart rending place where neither you nor I would care to be alone on All Hallow E'en.

In the country, forty years ago, poaching was a blacker crime than it is to-day, and each village had its "incorrigible rogue," who, when caught red-handed, was periodically sent to durance vile by indignant "justices," and his wife and family left to pay the price. Such a one was K— of our parish, and upon my second prison visit I found him on the treadmill—a hardened villain, no doubt, as he grinned from ear to ear with delight at the sight of our party. Never will you see a human being degraded by punishment so useless and senseless as the treadmill, which has long since passed into disuse with other instruments of torture. When at St. Bartholomew's I lived under the shadow of Old Newgate, and knew its interior well. Later, during the Græco-Turkish War, I went over the prisons at Chalcis, in Eubœa, typical no doubt of other Greek prisons, and placed in the hands of an influential person some information concerning them, which I am informed has eased the prisoners somewhat.

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It is not improbable that penology, the science which treats of public punishment, will in this century become altogether obsolete, and in the study of psychology will be found the key to the riddle of crime, and through its application to the decrease, if not to the prevention, of violation of moral law.

The condition of our prisons and the treatment of prisoners is so much more intelligent to-day, when compared with the stupid brutality of one hundred years ago, that it seems almost presumptuous to suggest that more could have been done. To-day a criminal is universally recognised as a human being instead of a wild beast.

Those of us who have studied the treatment of prisoners, and who have, in imagination, passed in and out of the pest-houses in which they were formerly confined in the shadow of that stupendous humanist, Elizabeth Fry, know that had the human being ceased to evolve, the extraordinary revolution in the treatment of the criminal, the lunatic, and the sick might have sufficed; but the rapid ascending evolution of the human calls for equally rapid understanding of, and devotion to, his needs. If education guides the development of every member of the race, then education is just as applicable to the criminal as to anyone else. It has been said by a keen social reformer that the prison and the university should stand together on the same broad basis of education. The prison warder should be the brother of the university professor.

One who has suffered imprisonment has written: If the life of every human being is determined to a greater or lesser extent by the social conditions and environment in which he is placed these same social conditions must to some extent be responsible for the life of crime. A deep sense of responsibility is therefore laid on the community for the salvation of lives entrusted to its care.

In past ages punishment by the State has had but three motives—vengeance, example, and protection. But for the State to wreck vengeance is useless. In truth it is as impossible to punish crime as to reward harmony. Crime is intangible. Only the individuality of the criminal should be considered. Admitting that we should punish him, to what extent should we do so? Absolute justice would reply: To the extent of his responsibility for his act. The insane murderer is not executed, nor the young child imprisoned for arson. Self-defence annihilates guilt, as almost always does unbearable provocation. Here irresponsibility tempers justice. This should be true of all punishment, yet the criminal law makes no provision for the study of the accused or convicted man's heredity, environment, and susceptibility. Bad example, excitement, fear, egotism, opportunity, wealth and indolence, the special character and particular passions of individual races, imagination, arousing a mistaken but sincere effort to right some social or political wrong: these do not excuse a crime, but in any rational system they should be considered in the infliction of punishment. With hundreds of others they are causes for which the condemned was not responsible, but for the effects of which he must

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