

PRISONS AND PENAL REFORM.

PART I.

MODERN REFORMERS AND WHAT THEY THINK.

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(Member of the Penal Reform League.)

The study of the question of penal reform is necessarily an exceedingly interesting one. *Necessarily*, because it is one of fundamental importance to the community at large, and to posterity. Crime is as old as the world, and its prevention is a social problem which has ever been calling for solution. Punishment of the criminal is an easy thing, of a sort which induces, rather than deters from crime. But punishment—sane, reasonable and deterrent—is only just beginning to be tried, and that not in this country, to any appreciable extent, but in others.

The Penal Reform League has been in existence for some years; its general object is, "To interest the public in the right treatment of criminals, and to promote effective measures for their cure and rehabilitation, and for the prevention of crime." Much useful and effective spade work has been achieved, in pursuance of this object, by the strenuous labours of the Hon. Secretary and Founder, Captain Arthur J. St. John. This important work is temporarily somewhat in abeyance, owing to war conditions.

This excellent League has taught its members many things, principally and fundamentally that the prison system now in vogue, is unintelligent, inhumane, and non-deterrent. Secondly, that in the common interest of the criminal and of society, the present system, maintained probably by prejudice and an adherence to tradition not warranted by greater knowledge of social science, and higher standards of life, must be radically changed.

About two years and a half ago a very interesting Conference took place in London, at the house of Lord and Lady St. Cyres, the subject being: "The Court of Rehabilitation, a new way of dealing with Criminals." The Rev. W. F. Cobb, Chairman of the Committee of the League, said on this occasion that the new way meant a new outlook upon life, filled with a new spirit and a new object. That is in itself the essence or spirit of this great reform movement. "Society had failed and was failing," he continued to say, "to construct those social conditions which impelled towards what was right, and persuaded against what was wrong."

A distinguished guest from the West was present, a well-known reformer, namely, Mr. Thomas Mott Osborne, Chairman of the United States National Committee on Prison Labour, and of the New York State Commission on Prison Reform. More recently he has become Warden of the famous Sing-Sing Prison in the State of New York. I should like to give the reader a peep into the sanctum of this man's mind, who has already won his way into the hearts of the inmates and made radical changes in the prison system.

In order to understand rather than merely *imagine* what the effect of imprisonment on the prisoner is, and to get into closer touch with him, Mr. Osborne entered the Auburn Prison, State of New York, as a convict for a week, during which time he was treated in precisely the same manner as the rest of the inmates. In referring to the depressing and mischievous effect upon character of long hours of continuous confinement in close quarters, he said it was not until a man was released from prison that he appreciated how great the mental strain had been. All those who were desirous of effecting needful changes in the prison system, he said, were pledged to the idea of making prisons instruments of *reform*, not of *revenge*. The present prison system did all it could to deprive a man of his individuality and to force him down to the lowest level. Mr. Osborne condemned the whole system, which he said drove against human nature. Why, on the contrary, did not the authorities try to utilise human nature?

Mr. Osborne made good use of his time in prison. He studied the character of the convicts, and he was satisfied that human nature was capable of anything if it was able to endure such conditions in such an atmosphere. Some of his experiences were very interesting, and especially valuable as tending to show what fine material may often be found within prison walls, veiled beneath a rough exterior, to be utilised for good.

As a concrete example, the story of Jack Murphy must be briefly told. Mr. Osborne described him as simple, sincere, and straightforward, one of the finest fellows that one could come in contact with; cheerful, unselfish, and capable of great self-sacrifice. They were fellow workers in the basket shop, where conversation about the work was allowed. Apparently they also talked about higher and better things. When they parted Jack said, "It has been a godsend to me to have something interesting to talk about, and I don't know what I am going to do." Mr. Osborne's reply was, "I know what you are going to do; you are going to join with me to see if we cannot do something to change this prison system. We shall need a man inside the prison here, and I will try to do my part outside." Mr. Osborne's intention was to secure his pardon later on from the Governor of New York. When he intimated this to Jack, the latter said, "Don't you think of that for a single moment. I am willing to stay behind these walls all my life if I can help the Commission to bring about these reforms. I know these men here, and I can do things that you cannot do outside the prison walls, so I will stay here and help." This man was one out of many of the same sort.

Mr. Osborne is strongly opposed to a determinate sentence, on the ground that no judge is capable of estimating the amount of criminality in a man's soul. Captain St. John, our founder, shares and endorses this humane opinion. The great principle upon which reformers are striving to build up a new and better prison system is

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