

## ENGLISH PRISONS TO-DAY.\*

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The relief of the hour's daily exercise in the open to prisoners in solitary confinement is emphasised. "But the sense of freedom" is, to a very large extent, spoilt by the character of the exercise imposed. . . . And the prisoner is supposed (more particularly if he is working in his cell during the day) to rob himself of a portion of his short recreation by watching for an empty closet and falling out for the performance therein of his daily function."

Evidence shows, we are told, that "the food is often of poor quality, the flour musty, the porridge thin (or thickened with mice-droppings) the potatoes diseased, the meat leathery or bad. At one prison in 1919 the potatoes were uneatable for three months. At another the oatmeal was contaminated with rat excreta, and, in consequence of protest by political prisoners, was officially condemned." "But," continue the authors, "we are assured that when the 'politicals' were released the old oatmeal was brought out again and was eaten by the ordinary prisoners. We do not wish to suggest that food is objectionable in this manner, as a general rule. In some prisons scrupulous care appears to be taken. But complaints of this kind are sufficiently frequent to demand notice and emphasis."

In regard to personal cleanliness Rule 33 provides that "a prisoner shall be required to keep himself clean and decent in his person," but evidence indicates that only in the most extreme cases is anything done to ensure cleanliness and decency.

"During the three years I was in prison," states one witness, "I never heard a prisoner reprimanded for uncleanness, although men were often obviously dirty and boasted of the fact in order to retain the polish of their bowls they refrained from washing. There were other men, too, who disliked water and soap, and used as little as possible even at the weekly bath. Another witness tells how he was discussing with a prisoner the advantages of working in the kitchen. "You get a bath twice a week, don't you?" he asked. "Yes," replied the second prisoner, "but then you needn't get into the water if you don't want to.""

Visitors to the prisons are always impressed by the cleanliness of the halls and cells, yet ex-prisoners again and again assert that the cleanliness of the prison is only obtained at the expense of the cleanliness of the prisoner. For instance, the washing basins in many prisons are still made of tin which has to be highly polished. One ex-prisoner says: "What the prisoner is supposed to wash his hands in, after he has performed these various processes, I do not know. If he uses his basin the polish all goes, and his labour has been in vain." "If your tin was clean you were dirty," remarks another ex-prisoner. Some prisoners

apparently dispense with washing. Others resort to the use of alternative utensils."

"I washed each morning in my enamel dinner plate to save dirtying my wash tin," states one ex-prisoner. "One of the first bits of advice I got on entering prison," says another witness "was to use the earthenware chamber for washing, in order to save dirtying the tin basin. This was commonly done. I was also told to use my prayer card for a lid to my chamber in order not to spoil the polish of the tin lid. I found that many of the cards on the cell walls had dirty circles on them, showing that they had been used for this purpose." A warder of long experience asserts that prisoners often throw their urine out of the window and then wash in the chamber, and that they even throw out the solid excrement, wrapped in paper and rags in order to avoid dirtying the chamber.

Several ex-prisoners complain that no distinct bath is reserved for the venereal and other medical cases, but the authors state that in most prisons special baths are provided for those suffering from contagious diseases, the doors being marked with red crosses.

"The complaint constantly recurs that the underclothing of prisoners is irregularly supplied and badly washed. 'In —,' says one prisoner, 'I could not get clean linen for three weeks, and found myself seething with lice at the end of that time.' 'I frequently had to refuse "clean" clothes because they were dirtier than those I had on,' says another."

A number of witnesses complain that the underclothing worn by prisoners with skin disease is not properly separated.

Again, "a standing Order (214) prescribes that 'trousers which have been worn by a prisoner three months will be washed before they are issued to another.' By far the greater number of prisoners are sentenced to terms of less than three months. The consequence is that one pair of trousers passes constantly to a succession of short-term prisoners without being washed."

When asked what he considered the worst feature of prison life, an ex-prisoner answered, "having to ask for, and perhaps be denied, the use of the w.c."

Again, one ex-prisoner complains that the wet food makes the prisoner pass an enormous quantity of urine, and, as there are thirteen hours of the day during which the chamber may not be emptied, he finds the utensil supplied not large enough, so he is driven to use his wash-bowl.

In the chapter on the hospital staff, remarks made by Miss Beatrice Kent when she took part in a deputation to the Home Secretary in March, 1918, are quoted, the nursing arrangements are discussed, and THE BRITISH JOURNAL OF NURSING is referred to as pleading for the employment of trained nurses in all prisons, and noting their recent employment at Holloway.

The authors state that the Hospital Lady Superintendent is not a trained nurse, but this is manifestly incorrect, as this official is a highly-trained Guy's nurse, with experience as Matron of both civil and military hospitals.

\* Report of Prison System Enquiry Committee. Longmans, Green & Co.

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