

WOMEN IN PRISON.

BY TIGHE HOPKINS.



ALL officers of prisons who have had charge of both sexes are agreed that the women are "a much worse lot to manage" than the men. One of them, a well-known doctor, with upwards of fifteen years' experience of

local and convict prisons, put it to me in these simple terms: "The women give us trouble, the men don't." The statement is true as regards the women, but a little flattering as regards the men. In a great local prison, such as Wormwood Scrubbs, with a population averaging about a thousand males and two hundred females, the male side is more easily disciplined than the female. The men are mostly undergoing short terms of imprisonment—say, from a week up to eighteen months or two years—and except at exercise and in chapel, most of them are kept in separate confinement in their cells. In one

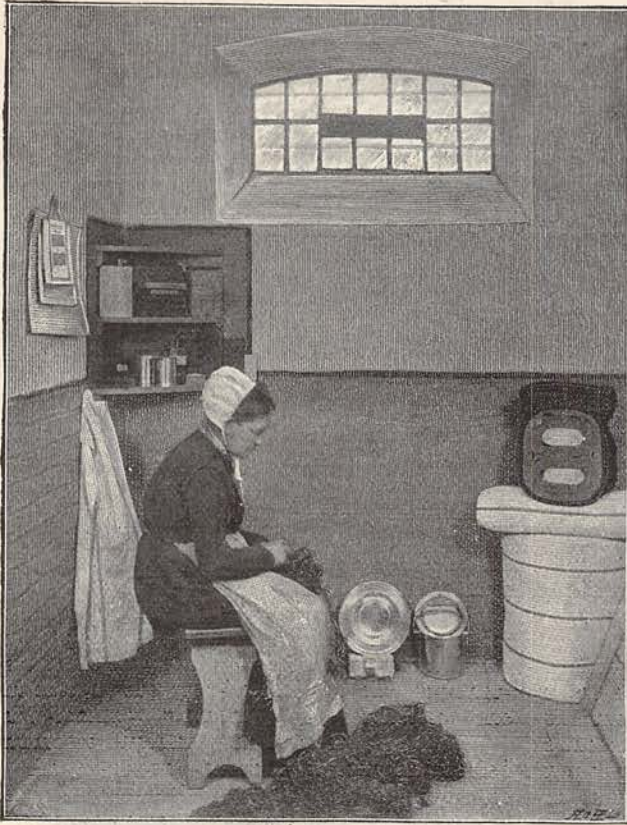
of the large convict or "public works" prisons—Portland, for instance, or Dartmoor—where the men, with sentences of from three years to life, work out the second and longest stage of their punishment, and where they pass the hours of labour in restricted association, there is always a rather numerous class of prisoners who are continually in trouble with their guardians, and a small body who are almost entirely unmanageable. But both in local and in convict prisons, the great majority of the men are sufficiently well conducted to enable discipline to be maintained at the highest pitch of efficiency (and a rigorous discipline it is), while there are many who serve out a sentence of ten, fifteen, or twenty years of penal servitude with hardly a scratch of the governor's pen against their names through all that weary time.

The record of the ladies is less satisfactory; but fortunately they are fewer in number than the men. Everywhere, indeed, as modern statistics have shown, women are less criminal than the other sex. In all countries "the



THE WORK-ROOM, WORMWOOD SCRUBBS PRISON.

(From a photograph by Sofer and Steadman, Strand, W.C.)



A FEMALE PRISONER IN HER CELL, WORMWOOD SCRUBBS.
(From a photograph by Sofer and Stedman, Strand, W.C.)

proportion of female offenders, as compared with female population, is at a very much lower ratio than that of males." In France, for example, there are four times as many male criminals as female. In the United States there are at least twelve times as many. "With us, although female crime has followed the very general decrease so marked in recent years, the proportion is as fifteen males to one female in the convict population, and as five to one in the local prisons." Unhappily, the proportion of re-convictions is greater amongst women than amongst men; and experience has shown that the woman who has once passed into prison is less likely than a first offender of the other sex to regain the path of honesty. In the principal female convict prison in England, "by far the largest number in custody are grey-haired, old, almost venerable-looking women." Nevertheless, the numbers diminish year by year.

An ex-prison governor, of long and varied experience, has divided the women in durance into three categories, or classes. To the first belong those impulsive criminals whose mis-

deed—possibly, if not probably, their first—"is more or less unpremeditated, born of some sudden, overmastering excess or fury—a momentary madness, not sufficient to satisfy the courts or their irresponsibility, but only to be explained as the temporary withdrawal of all barriers in a nature too easily inflamed." Criminals of this class are fewer in England than in France, and they are always the smallest category in our prisons. They do not, as a rule, belong to the troublesome order. Their crime is usually a serious one—the taking of life, or some deed almost as heinous—and the terrible penalty it has involved has an almost crushing effect. Often these women are sincerely and intensely penitent, and suffer an agony of remorse through all the years of their sentence. The vindictive ones amongst them, on the other hand, and those especially who have belonged to the refined or well-to-do classes, are difficult to subject, and still more difficult to keep in subjection. In their furious excesses, which are liable to be as sudden as they are unaccountable, they are not less dangerous to their fellow-prisoners than to the

wardresses, and sometimes most dangerous of all to themselves; and wrist-irons or the straight-jacket have to be produced at a moment's notice.

The second and largest class of criminal women includes, according to Major Arthur Griffiths, "all who have taken to crime deliberately for their own base purposes; all who have drifted into it imperceptibly, the result of inheritance, of early associations, of evil teaching and example; all who, once embarked in crime, are seldom weaned from it, especially if it has been undertaken and continued at the instance of, or through devotion to, some criminal man—the parent, child, husband, more often the lover, to whom they are quite as faithful as though bound by the marriage tie." A very large proportion of these are professional thieves and swindlers, the more famous and successful of whom are almost invariably associated with some partner or partners in crime of the other sex; and these include women of education, good linguists, and clever and entertaining talkers, who lodged last in elegant quarters in the

West End of town, who are at home in the gayest capitals of Europe, and who not improbably put off in the reception-room a silk dress and bonnet of the latest fashion, for the prison gown of blue-and-white check, the style of which does *not* change with the *modes* in the gay world. There is a third class, "the lees and residuum of the other two," the

one or more of these who are generally responsible for those periodical "breakings-out" which are all but unheard of amongst male prisoners. All officers on the female side are familiar with that ominous beginning of revolt which is signalled by a drumming of feet on the door of a cell. The inmate of that cell—perhaps it is a punishment cell, rather dark



CAPTAIN PRICE, R.N., GOVERNOR OF WORMWOOD SCRUBBS PRISON.

(From a photograph by Sofer and Stedman, Strand, W.C.)

members of which are amongst the failures of our penal system. It is superfluous to say that the third is the most difficult class to deal with. Outside of prison these women are incorrigible law-breakers; inside, they are almost incorrigible offenders. Parliament never succeeds in framing laws to please them, and when under lock and key they baffle most of the arts of prison discipline. If they were a more numerous order, it would be practically impossible to control them; for they spend half their time in prison, and are almost perpetually passing in and out. It is

and very dreary, to which she has just been relegated for some breach of discipline—has worked herself into a rage, and wants to excite a little mutiny in the ward. She has thrown herself full length upon the floor, and commences to hammer the door with the soles of her feet. Every prisoner in the ward knows that sound, and the example of the mutineer is almost certain to find immediate followers. If there are many "bad 'uns" in the ward, the volume of sound gradually increases until there may be thirty or forty women on their backs in their cells, pounding with all their

force at the doors, and the whole place is in an uproar. Such an outbreak as this, periodical on the female side of a prison, is unknown on the male side. Differences of temperament between the sexes furnish, perhaps, the principal explanation; but there are also to



A PRISON WARDRESS.

(From a photograph by Soper and Stedman, Strand, W.C.)

be taken into account certain differences of discipline. The grim chamber in which the prison "cat" and the triangles are lodged together is peculiar to the male side of the prison; that is to say, corporal punishment, the fear of which is the most powerful deterrent amongst male prisoners, has no part in the discipline of the female side.

But it is not for a moment to be supposed that lack of order is a principal characteristic of a modern women's prison. The women's yard in the Newgate of Mrs. Fry's day, infamously celebrated as "Hell upon Earth," has no counterpart in any British gaol of these days. Discipline of the most perfect kind is not the exception, but the rule. The disturbers of the peace, who, happily, are a comparatively small minority, are not allowed to mingle with their well-behaved sisters. They are kept in separate confinement, and at purely penal tasks; they are generally exercised alone, and in a variety of ways are made to feel that prison is a much more uncomfortable place for the troublesome than for the

well-conducted prisoner. In the spacious and airy workrooms the aspect of prison is, to the visitor from the outer world, by no means unkindly. There is nothing here that would offend the most susceptible of Government Inspectors—indeed, it may be questioned if there is a free workroom in London, or in any great manufacturing centre, in which every condition necessary to the health of the workers is so rigorously enforced. Look at the dimensions of the sewing-room in the picture—the height and breadth, and the amount of light which it receives. In winter these rooms are well warmed, and in the hottest days of summer they are cool. And just as orderly as it appears in the picture is the general conduct of the women at work. If one of those demure-looking seamstresses should do anything to disturb the peace, she would, amongst other penalties, forfeit the privilege of working in association. The same strict order may be observed in the large and not uncheerful exercise-yards, where the women walk for an hour every morning in fine weather. The rule of silence is maintained by obliging the women to walk at a certain distance from each other; and with this and the close scrutiny of the wardresses posted at intervals throughout the yard, a cunning pair of tongues is needed to carry on even the most fragmentary gossip.

The appearance of the workroom just referred to may cause the reader to think that prison tasks on the women's side are not of too severe a nature. As a matter of fact they are, for the most part, light enough. The laundry is, perhaps, the hardest work. At Wormwood Scrubbs the whole of the washing for both sides of the prison is done by the women, but there are plenty of hands for it, and the work seems pretty evenly divided. It is no harder, I imagine, than the ordinary task of a hired laundress; and the hours of prison labour are always shorter than those of free labour. A glance at the accompanying illustration will show that the prison laundresses are women of sturdy build, quite able to stand over the tub six hours a day. It is the doctor's business to certify a prisoner as fit or unfit for this or that form of labour, and the infirm or weakly woman would never be sent to the laundry.

There are thousands of women in every part of England, toiling by day and by night in the over-crowded workshop, the bare garret, in the factory and the field, who would make very light indeed of the "hard labour" assigned to the female convict. At "sweater's" wages, I doubt whether a woman could keep body and soul together by the profits she would make on the amount of work that is

exacted day by day in the prisons. Understand that the prisoners are kept steadily going; idleness is a fault that never escapes punishment, and for every hour of the working day there is its appointed task. But the task is not extraordinary in quantity; most women working for wages, and many an industrious housewife of the middle classes, get through more in a day than is ever demanded of the women under sentence of "hard labour." Imagine the case of some poor driven creature, the slave of an East-End tailor, struggling through weary days and more weary nights for pence enough to keep the shelter of an attic, who, stealing a loaf from a baker's shop one night, should the next night find herself in prison. It would be for her the most blessed translation. It would be almost like going to stay free of cost in an hotel. If it were winter, how grateful the warmth of the cell would be; and she would hardly know herself in her clean and comfortable felon's clothes, and morning, noon, and evening she would be fed much more wholesomely and generously than she was ever able to feed herself. As for the prison tasks, well, if she should be given a place in that big, bright, clean, and well-warmed sewing-room, with its easy duties of the needle, I fear she might be tempted to regret that she had not stolen *two* loaves. There are numbers of strugglers for life who are better off in prison than they are out of

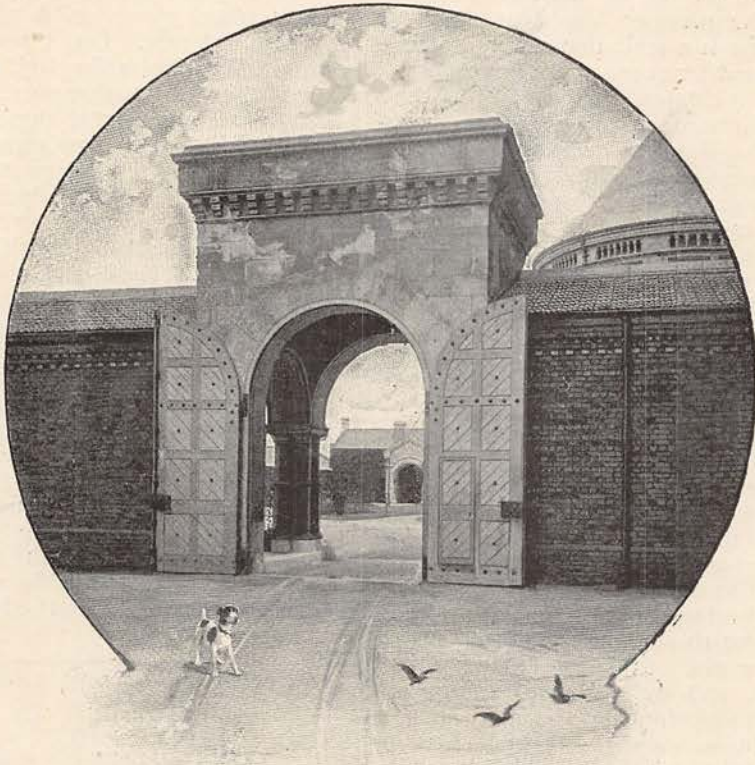
it, and who, strange as it sounds, find the prison a place not so much of punishment as of rest and ease. Let it not be thought, however, that this is the fault of the penal régime. The explanation must be looked for in that cruel anomaly of our social system which, in certain circumstances, makes the life of so-called freedom less tolerable than the ignominious servitude of prison.

The general question of prison labour is one that bristles with difficulties. If it be objected that a good deal of it, especially during the first stage of the sentence, is dull and monotonous, and not very useful, the answer is that such tasks are necessary for their punitive effect. Later, the prisoner of good conduct is put to more congenial labour; but it is obvious that the number of really useful callings which can be followed in prison is very limited, and the efforts of Government in this direction are hampered by the opposition of those who cry out against "competition with free labour." Nevertheless, a considerable variety of industrial occupations is found for H.M. prisoners.



WOMEN AT EXERCISE IN THE YARD OF WORMWOOD SCRUBBS.

(From a photograph by Soper and Stedman, Strand, W.C.)



WORMWOOD SCRUBS PRISON : YARD WHERE THE WOMEN ARE PHOTOGRAPHED.
(From a photograph by Soper and Stedman, Strand, W.C.)

They manufacture cotton, linen, woollen, and jute articles ; sacks, bags, ships' fenders, and nosebags ; and amongst other employments are cotton, hair, and wool picking, paper sorting, and sugar chopping. For Government offices and other public departments they make hearth-rugs, mats, mattings, bags, baskets, slippers, rope, and twine ; and for the prison service rugs, mops, brushes, belts, blankets, woollen cloths, sheetings, shirtings, handkerchiefs, calico, canvas, dowlas, towels, socks and stockings, etc. I am not sure whether bookbinding is amongst the employments of the female prisoners, but I have seen men at this trade in Wandsworth Prison.

Before they have been long in confinement, both sexes find that their well-being is largely dependent on their industry. Every day, Sundays excepted, such and such a quantity of work is required to be done. As has been shown, it is not excessive, but the non-fulfilment of the task brings penalties. Marks are assigned in proportion to the work turned out, and the more marks gained the better

the status of the prisoner, and the greater his or her chance of obtaining remission of a portion of the judge's sentence. A sentence of penal service may be reduced by about one-fourth by earning the highest possible number of marks ; and these marks, it is to be remembered, are awarded, not for good conduct (which in prison means little more than non-transgression of the rules), but for steady industry at the appointed task. Again, the marks given to industry raise the prisoner from a lower to a higher class ; and the little privileges allowed to prisoners in the first-class—permission to write more letters to and receive more visits from friends or relatives ; a restricted choice in the matter of diet ; and a somewhat lighter form of labour—are always coveted. Then, persistent failure to earn a reasonable number of marks, which may usually be construed as a determination to idleness, results in reduction in class, privation in diet, a more irksome task, and complete isolation from such limited social intercourse as the rules of the prison permit,

Once the situation is understood—that steady industry means a rather easier life, and (in penal servitude) a certainty of remission of sentence—it is generally found that both men and women work moderately well in prison. But there is this difference—as regards the relative position of the sexes—that, whereas in the long run the men can be compelled to work, there are no physical means of compelling the women. In the last resort, you can all but starve a male prisoner into submission, or—on the fiat of a visiting justice—you can tie him up and flog him. But the bread-and-water diet is now abolished for women; and it is, happily, beyond anybody's power to condemn them to the lash.

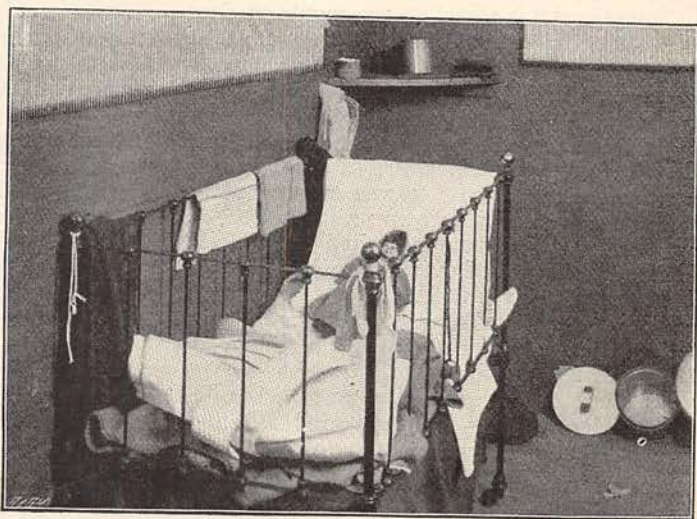
In these circumstances the women keep a certain power in their hands; and, within limits, they may almost be said to have the last word on the subject of labour. Of course, it is not often that the coercive powers of the prison are strained to breaking-point. As a rule the female prisoner gives in, as the male prisoner does, and works just hard enough to secure the proper number of marks per diem. In many cases with women, as with men, the work is done with zest, to make the time pass, to ease the itch of remorse, or to get the rare best berths, with their attendant bonuses, which are open to competition in prison.

The best workers, on whichever side of the prison, are always to be classed in two divisions. They comprise (1) those "first offenders," who are genuinely penitent, and who want to forget their disgrace, as far as hard work may make them forget it; and (2) a certain number of the "old hands," who have learned by previous experience that industry, or the show of it, "comes cheaper" than skulking.

But on the women's side of the prison, even more than on the men's, there is always a considerable class of prisoners to whom serious and steady work of any industrial kind is not only repulsive, but more or less impossible. The expert female sharper, shop-lifter, thief, or swindler, who has never condescended to use her hands like the rest of her sex, and who has a weakness for playing the fine lady in prison, spares neither trick nor tale in her ceaseless efforts to escape the drudgeries of her lot.

The disgrace of prison she does not feel, but she bitterly resents the indignity of having to go down on her knees and scrub the floor of her cell and the corridor in front of it. Anything in the nature of an industrial task is abhorrent to her. She petitions the matron, upbraids the governor, wheedles the chaplain, and tells the doctor he is killing her by inches. Sometimes, when every other device has failed, she hurts herself with a needle, scissors, or fragment of glass, in the hope of being removed to the infirmary. She feigns sickness, insanity, epilepsy—anything that is likely to "come off"; and an old hand at the art of malingering often puts to the severest test the skill of the most experienced prison doctor. Occasionally, without any pretence whatever, she flatly refuses to work, in which case the governor has to prescribe a few days' low diet, with solitary confinement.

Again, a prisoner of this class will work with exemplary patience for weeks together, and then on a sudden break loose. The deadly monotony of things becomes too much for her. The adventuress whose free life is a perpetual, varied excitement, and who can face almost anything but a changeless round of common duties, is mentally unable to endure for long the hard, dull routine of prison. To almost every prisoner, indeed, this is one of the sorest trials of a long sentence. A situation is created, which presently becomes almost, if not quite, intolerable. The stolid or the vacant mind sustains the awful lack of change with equanimity through a long course of years; but the imaginative, or the highly-strung temperament (and it is to be



IN A COT CELL.

(From a photograph by Soyer and Steadman, Strand, W.C.)



IN THE LAUNDRY, WORMWOOD SCRUBBS PRISON.
 (From a photograph by Sofer and Stedman, Strand, W.C.)

remembered that prison holds nearly all known types of both sexes) suffers more terribly than may be imagined; and an acute mental crisis may be followed by a brief defiance of all rule and authority.

Sometimes it is a fit of ungovernable passion, in which the nearest person—wardress or fellow-prisoner—is attacked with fury. Sometimes it is a fit of destructiveness, and the cell furniture is smashed, and the bed-covering and the clothes which the prisoner is wearing are torn to rags. It is a curious characteristic of these outbreaks that they seem often to be deliberately planned to bring punishment on the offender. A woman, locked in her cell, will divest herself of every garment, stand on her head, and scream for the wardress. She knows that she will be reported, and she is reported; but a "scene" on the following morning, in the office of the matron or the governor, means a temporary rest from labour; and the punishment that is bound to follow means a break in the monotony of life.

As a rule, the most hardened female prisoners, equally with the novitiates in crime, are more or less amenable to gentle treatment, and this is the more successful in proportion

as it is unofficial in character. The chaplain's ministrations are not invariably taken in good part, and where they are resented, or coldly acquiesced in, it is on the not very reasonable ground that the good man is "paid to talk religion." Many of them, however, find the chaplain a very practical friend, whose usefulness is not confined to quoting texts from memory. But the unpaid and unofficial visitors from the outer world—kind-hearted and sympathetic women, above all—are those who win their way most effectually into the hearts of the female prisoners. Here is given freely the trust which is so often sullenly or fearfully withheld from anyone and everyone holding an official position in the prison, and the bruised heart finds balm. One of the illustrations shows a party of women at exercise, of whom some are carrying babies. The prison baby plays quite an important part as a peace-maker and moral agent. With the consent of the mother, other prisoners on their good behaviour are allowed to nurse it for a while during the exercise hour; and a similar indulgence often calms the passion or relieves the melancholy of a truculent or despairing convict.