

FEMALE PRISONERS.

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MUCH pains have been taken of late by a new school of scientists to establish a criminal type. They have proved, at least to their own satisfaction, that all offenders—all who have adopted crime as a calling—display certain traits and characteristics peculiar to themselves. Professor Lombroso, one of the leading exponents of this new doctrine, has now extended his investigations more especially to the female sex, to whom he applies the same rather farfetched theories. Plain practical people will demand more evidence, based on wider knowledge and inquiry, before they accept the principle definitely that the criminal, whether male or female, forms a class apart, distinct and different from the rest of mankind, predestined to evil courses by the shape of their heads, the length of their noses, or the colour of their hair. No doubt a weak moral sense, with decided inferiority, physical and mental, may help many to slide into crime, but the bias towards evil is surely our common heritage; to be escaped under happy conditions, to be avoided by higher influences, but still general to all. What is true of the race as a whole is true of its parts. Women no less than men are liable to lapse, to fall into the lowest depths; the barriers raised by religion, education, example, keep many virtuous and pure who under adverse circumstances would have committed crime, whatever their facial and

physical characteristics. The one broad fact remains incontrovertible that women are much the same all the world over; whether in gaol or out of it, whether elevated to the highest pedestal or sunk into the deepest mire, there is probably bad in the best, just as there is undoubtedly good in the worst.

A long and intimate acquaintance with females in durance has convinced me that



OAKUM PICKING.

they do not greatly differ from their more happily-situated sisters—those who have been more delicately nurtured and sheltered from trials, who have escaped the neglect and the temptations to which the unfortunate have succumbed. Women in prison display most feminine foibles, some no doubt exaggerated and developed into positive wickedness. They are full of vanity—often a proximate cause of their present trouble—they are, at times, childish, foolishly, fiendishly obstinate, to the extent of appearing perfectly mulish and

intractable; they are wrong-headed, fanciful, of fitful temper, quick to take offence and see it where it was not intended, when roused they are almost untameable, and their passion degenerates speedily into storms of hysterical and maniacal fury. Yet they have also their good points, and will exhibit many estimable traits—gratitude, affection, considerateness, constancy, unswerving loyalty to their comrades of both sexes.

As it is pleasanter to look on the bright rather than the dark side, let us illustrate this first by some of the cases that show them in the better light.

It is one of the fallacies of Lombroso and the criminal anthropologists that the female criminal is a bad mother. A visit to the baby's ward of any large prison will soon dispel this idea. Here are often to be found twenty or thirty infants all unweaned, or less



A MADONNA OF THE CELLS.

than twelve months of age, and in that earliest stage when a mother's care is most needed. That they get this is proved by the undoubted fact that the poor mites, marked thus prematurely by the prison brand, invariably do well, and improve manifestly in weight and aspect. Of course they are well looked after; the mothers get extra diet, milk, jellies, beef-tea; the babies also, if they require feeding, and the doctors order it. Stigma apart, children do better in gaol than when their parents are at large. One has only to contrast the snug well-warmed cell, with its bed and baby's cot; to remember the regular diet, the care and constant attention, with what these poor women must endure outside, to realise where they are best off.

Again, the baby is a humanising influence in gaol; it is the supreme

touch of nature that proves human kinship, and, were it not for the horribly evil effects on the children from a sentimental point of view, it would be wiser perhaps to leave them longer with their mothers, where women are sentenced to lengthy imprisonments. I know no more painful experience than to be implored by a mother not to separate her from her child when the strict letter of the rule requires it; but there is no prison rule, I am glad to think, more liberally interpreted.

The birth of a baby is always a great event in prison. The mother is carefully and devotedly nursed by two of her fellow-prisoners. The child is christened by the nearest neighbouring clergyman, and not by the prison chaplain; it is exhibited with immense satisfaction to all visitors, and "our baby" is spoken of with pride by the female officials. The maternal instinct is aroused in all the other prisoners, and the advent of the little child has a softening influence which is as unique as it is beautiful. In prisons, as well as in happy homes, "a little child shall lead them" is a prophecy which holds true. There is quite a keen competition to be permitted to hold the baby, and hard faces seamed with evil-doing become radiated with tenderness as they gaze at the tiny face of the new inmate of her Majesty's prison. The choice of a name is seriously discussed, and criticism of the colour of the child's hair and eyes is just as keen as they would be outside the walls of a grim gaol. The stigma of having been born in prison cannot however be entirely eradicated, notwithstanding the affection which is lavished on the infant by the unlucky companions of its mother.

Second only to her maternal instinct is a woman's strength of attachment to her lord and master. It will survive and rise superior to the worst ill-usage. One of the most painful of prison sights is the reception ward on the female side with its newest arrivals, showing their hideous marks and scars, the black eyes and cruel bruises inflicted by the cowardly brutes who tyrannize over them. This loyalty is sometimes almost beautiful. I remember one case where a woman sentenced was clearly the lesser offender. Great interest was made by philanthropic persons to persuade her to state her case

fully by petition to the Secretary of State, but she obstinately refused, although it was likely to secure her release. It was at first believed that she was too stupid to understand the boon held out to her, and I was at some pains to explain the facts most fully. She needed no such counsel or advice, and still refused; her plea was that she would only incriminate others—one man in particular—to whom she was devoted.



"The assault was made with a canful of gruel."

Her statement *might* get her out, but it would certainly get him into prison. She preferred to bear the whole brunt of the penalty alone.

As a general rule no doubt the woman is the tool and catspaw, although in certain heinous offences, such as murder by poison, infanticide, forgery following peculiar opportunity, or great frauds, she takes the lead, or works alone. No doubt too her influence in inciting to crime is potent at times, and

it has been well said that many crimes are committed *for* them, if not *by* them; yet she is most often the weaker vessel, deluded or dragged into wrong-doing. Many, however, fall into crime readily enough, and without strong protest or repugnance. I know of one woman who in all innocence married a man engaged in "long firm" frauds, and who discovered his malpractices quite by accident afterwards. Instead of upbraiding him she joined at once and willingly in his business, and became his best ally and assistant. It was the same in a notorious case of a series of bank forgeries, where the wife came into

declared, for some breach of prison discipline. The "pal" on release had taken counsel with her friend, and the latter, who was continually in and out of gaol, promised to avenge her on the first opportunity. The assault was made with a canful of gruel, and in addition to the personal injury inflicted the warder's dress was spoiled. Any weapon serves a woman in her fury—a pail of water, a medicine bottle full or empty, the cell stool, or any weapon that remains after a general smash up. Scissors would be oftener used, but as they are such dangerous implements they are closely watched and



TAKING EXERCISE.

the fraud late, but afterwards was a prime mover.

While fierce feuds are not unknown, strong and enduring friendships are made in prison. A woman has been known to break out badly, to destroy every atom of furniture, bedding and clothing because she had been separated from a friend and set to work at another table in the needle-room. This sort of romantic attachment has been made the excuse for still worse. Not long ago a prisoner just received immediately assaulted one of her officers because she had heard outside that this warder had "been down on a pal" of hers; had "cased" her, got up a case against her, unfairly it was

carefully counted after the prisoners have used them; but the woman resolved upon outrage will pick up a stone or a scrap of iron in the exercising yard, secrete it, sharpen it with clever ingenuity for use when opportunity offers. The thin end of a wooden spoon, the only table utensil permitted in prison, has been sometimes brought to a point to serve as a lethal weapon.

Female prisoners do not, however, invariably regard their warders with malevolence. On the contrary they will at times exhibit really good feeling towards them—gratitude, considerateness, even affection. There was a matron once at Millbank, stricken with malignant disease, who lingered on many

months, and during the whole of this last fatal illness her charges evinced so much sympathy that the word went round there must be no misconduct. Never were prisoners so uniformly well-behaved on the female side, although at that particular moment some very hard cases were in custody. Female prisoners are, as a rule, best managed by a quiet, firm hand, they are more amenable to kindness than severity, can be better led than driven. A soft word, a gentle reminder, persuasion, entreaty, kindly advice will often cure ill-temper (and this is often the base and origin of feminine misconduct) when sharp measures—reproof followed by punishment—leads only to defiance of all authority. Much tact must of course be shown in thus exercising forbearance. If there is any suspicion of weakness in the executive, discipline will at once deteriorate. Women may be held by a silken thread, but they must not be allowed to have quite their own way or they will get altogether out of hand. Once at Durham the whole female prison was in uproar because an improper indulgence, that of visiting each other in their cells, had been first allowed then withdrawn.

Nothing is more remarkable with women in durance than the contagion of misconduct, and the rapidity with which it spreads. When they can hear each other, or still worse see, a disturbance may be got up by one woman which soon grows into something like a riot. This was especially the case in old Millbank, a prison of faulty construction, where the buildings completely enclosed the exercising yards, and where shouts and signals could be exchanged from window to window of the cells, and across the yard. The exercise of a whole ward had sometimes to be stopped through the outcry of one woman in confinement extending to the rest in the yard. Once a female prisoner "starts out" to misbehave she is extraordinarily persistent, irreclaimable, and untamable for weeks. She will keep up some monotonous sing-song at the top of her voice, drum and hammer on her cell door for hours at a time. If her temperament is sulky and surly she will lapse into absolute silence from which nothing will rouse her, crouching all the time in the farthest corner of a semi-dark cell. When noisily inclined, the only treatment is complete isolation. Prisons are generally provided with what is known as a "dumb" cell, one built inside another and placed at a distance from the main building. The consciousness that no cries are heard, that all

disturbance is wasted and useless, invariably silences the noisiest woman.

Another curious trait in the woman in durance is the great variation in her moods. A woman will behave quite differently in two succeeding sentences; in the first she is quite intractable, in the second as mild and well-mannered as possible. A good deal depends upon how she begins, but some predisposing cause may exist in one and be withdrawn in the other. One case may be quoted, that of H. J., which illustrates the question of feuds. The woman's worst side showed, and she was a fierce and persistent virago from first to last because her greatest enemy occupied a neighbouring cell. It took the warders all their time to prevent these women from fighting whenever they met, yet there were several pitched battles between them. The woman, H. J., was always the aggressor, and generally able to inflict much damage on her foe. I met H. J. twice afterwards in other prisons, where she was spared the exasperating companionship of her enemy, and her conduct was quite irreproachable.

Women prisoners are true daughters of Eve as regards personal appearance, and the unbecoming prison dress must hit their vanity hard. Hence nearly all, without exception, are anxious to improve it. There are a dozen fashions of wearing the morsel



THE PADDED CELL.

of cap with its long white strings; the first is manipulated, its shape changed, its position on the head altered, the latter are crimped and twisted and tied in all sorts of curious ways. The coiffure again gets a

great deal of attention. "Bangs" were at one time universal, resisting attempts made by old-fashioned matrons to taboo them. Nowadays the fashion, in grotesque imitation of what goes on outside, is changing into side curls, although curls like love-locks plastered tight on the forehead are always popular, and are attained at the cost of skimming the grease off the soup. Skirts are always made to follow the fashion, to hang straight and severe, or balloon out like a bell according to the mode. The worst hardship must be the prison shoes, which are coarse and ugly, and with no pretence at fit.

The woman in gaol is strictly limited to the regulation allowance in dress and in food. The latter is perhaps a hardship, as women are much more fanciful in this respect than men. There are some portions of the prison dietary exceedingly unpopular on the female side. The suet pudding, for instance, made of the whole-meal flour; the brown bread, and especially the "stirabout," or pudding compounded of Indian meal. How sharp is the contrast between the prison allowance and what women would provide for themselves is to

be seen in the strangely assorted articles a trial prisoner will have sent in to her when she has elected to feed herself. I have seen one such woman's dinner, which consisted of an enormous sandwich, a loaf cut in half thickly buttered inside, and enclosing two cold kidneys and several slices of bacon; with these went four gigantic leeks, an apple, two tomatoes, and a flat bottle of dark beer.

It is unusual to find any very great manual dexterity among the female criminals as a class. A good needlewoman may be met with, or some may be taught fine sewing, only to forget it on release, and to expect fresh instruction if they return. Laundry work is a staple employment, but the prisoners

are seldom capable of getting up linen with any skill; where they are employed in the kitchen or in the female officers' mess their cooking is of the rudest and plainest description. Pretty patchwork quilts are sometimes made, and a good deal of neat work, pads and bags for the post office, but little beyond this. A woman will however show considerable taste and ingenuity in the decoration of her cell; as it is strictly against orders she is perhaps the more eager to try her highest efforts.

When this is limited to an exquisite Dutch-like cleanliness, when you might eat off the floor, when the bed is folded with the utmost precision and the cell utensils shine like burnished silver, there is nothing but approval to be accorded. But the hankering for possessions, the most trumpery articles picked up or manufactured out of the most unpromising materials, is often strongly displayed by old hands. I have seen a cell ornamented with paper crosses, white, with red edges cleverly added from the knitting wool, covers for tin mugs, ingeniously made out of the same, like doyleys. This, the pardonable desire to make the unlovely cell a little more home-

like, might be respected more often perhaps, but rules are rules.

Female prisoners are famous for their fondness for pets. Cats are generally plentiful in a prison, and are often the cause of no little heart burning. When one woman's favourite cat makes a mouthful of another's favourite mouse there are "wigs on the green," it becomes the beginning of a quarrel that may have most serious consequences. Birds are encouraged to come outside cell windows by all sorts of tricks and devices. One of the happiest of prisoners was the assistant nurse in the female hospital, who was allowed to look after the hospital matron's parrot.



IN THE LAUNDRY.