LONDON PRISONS

A Retrospective

Inspired by *Criminal Prisons of London*,
by Henry Mayhew and John Binny.
1862.



Modernized and edited with an
Introduction by Graeme R. Newman

2026

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Inspired by The Criminal Prisons of London, and Scenes of Prison Life, by Henry Mayhew and John Binny (London: Griffin, Bohn and Company, 1862).

This edition is a substantially rewritten and condensed modernization of the original text, not a reprint of it.

Modernized and Edited, with an Introduction, by Graeme R. Newman

This edition's text was substantially generated with AI assistance (Claude, by Anthropic), under the editorial direction, selection, and review of Graeme R. Newman.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction by Graeme R. Newman

The chapters that follow are a modernization of a substantial portion of “The Great World of London,” a mid-Victorian survey of the capital's institutions, first published in the early 1860s and generally attributed to Henry Mayhew and John Binny. Mayhew needs no introduction to anyone acquainted with nineteenth-century social investigation; Binny's name is less familiar today, though his own contribution to the prison material was substantial. Together they produced something unusual for their period: not a polemic, and not a simple guide, but a patient, door-by-door tour of London's places of confinement, told largely in the words of the governors, warders, chaplains, and prisoners themselves, interspersed with the authors' own often pointed commentary on what they had seen.

The original volume covered the whole of London's “great world” — its markets, its slums, its charities, its criminal underworld — of which the prisons formed only one part, if a large one. What follows here is that prison material alone: Pentonville, Millbank, Brixton, the Hulks at Woolwich, Coldbath Fields, Tothill Fields, Wandsworth, Holloway, Newgate, the House of Detention at Clerkenwell, and Horsemonger Lane, each visited in turn, each described with the same unhurried attention to physical detail and human particularity. The modernization has aimed to preserve that attention rather than smooth it away: the governors still speak in their own recorded words: the statistics, however dense, are generally worked back into the surrounding prose; and the authors' own arguments — about the folly of purposeless hard labour, the false economy of the silent system, the cruelty of imprisoning a man for want of five shillings — are kept intact, since they are very often the most interesting thing on the page.

A word on authorship, since the boundary is not always obvious from the page and is worth stating without hedging. Every fact, every statistic, every direct quotation, and every first-person observation in the chapters that follow originates with Mayhew and Binny's own reporting. When the text says “we visited” or “the governor told us,”

that “we” is the original Victorian authors, describing their own visits in their own persona; none of it has been invented, embellished, or attributed to them by the present editors. What is new to this edition is the prose itself. The original 1862 text runs to a great deal more length than what appears here, in a denser and more discursive Victorian style, organized loosely and repeating itself across chapters; each chapter in this edition has been rewritten sentence by sentence in a more contemporary idiom, generally condensed to somewhere between a fifth and a half of its original length, and reorganized under clearer section headings, while keeping every fact, every named individual, and every substantive argument the original authors advanced. Where the source text itself was badly garbled by the scanning process used to digitize it — entire clauses shuffled out of order, words merged or split — the surrounding context and cross-checking against the authors' own later, clearer restatement of the same material elsewhere in the text was used to reconstruct the intended sense before rewriting it; nothing has been supplied from outside the original record itself. This introduction, by contrast, along with the historical retrospective that follows it, is entirely the work of the present editors and draws on nothing written by Mayhew or Binny at all.

One further point of orientation is worth making before the reader begins. The chapter that opens this volume, “The Great World of London,” is not really about prisons at all; it is Mayhew and Binny's own opening survey of the capital's size, population, wealth, and poverty, written as the overture to their entire multi-volume project rather than to its prison chapters specifically. We debated leaving it out altogether, on the reasonable ground that a reader who has picked up a book about London's prisons might not expect, or want, forty pages on London's markets and rookeries before reaching a single cell door. We have kept it in the end, for two reasons. The first is simply completeness: it is the chapter that gives the rest their proportion, establishing just how vast a city, and just how vast a population of the desperate and the criminal, the institutions described afterward existed to manage. The second is that the original authors plainly intended it as their reader's first impression of London before any narrower subject was introduced, and a genuinely faithful

retrospective of their work seemed better served by preserving that intention than by quietly correcting it. Readers eager to reach the prisons directly may skip ahead to the second chapter without losing any thread; those who stay will find, we think, that the panorama sharpens rather than dilutes everything that follows.

It seemed worth adding a further word here, though, on what became of the places described so exactly in these pages, since a reader coming to this material a century and a half after it was written might reasonably wonder whether any of it survives, and whether the arguments it makes have any bearing on a London that has since rebuilt itself several times over.

The answer, on the first point, is: less than one might expect, and more than one might expect, in roughly equal measure. Of the eleven establishments described in this volume, only three remain in use as prisons at all. Newgate closed in 1902 and was demolished two years later; the Central Criminal Court, universally known by the name of the street it stands on, the Old Bailey, occupies the site today, built in part from Newgate's own reclaimed stone. Millbank closed in 1890, its great pentagonal wings pulled down over the following two years; the philanthropist Henry Tate then funded a new gallery for British art on the cleared ground, which opened in 1897 and stands there still, considerably better attended than its predecessor. Coldbath Fields closed in 1885 and was handed to the Post Office, which built the Mount Pleasant sorting office on the site — the name itself, by all accounts, chosen with a certain dry irony by an official who happened to notice it already attached to a nearby lane. Tothill Fields closed in 1877; its buildings came down in 1885, and Westminster Cathedral now stands on ground that once held the boys' and girls' wings this book describes at such length, its foundations, we are told, reusing the prison's own. The House of Detention at Clerkenwell closed in 1886 and was demolished in 1890, replaced first by a board school and later converted to flats and offices, though a portion of its underground cells reportedly survives beneath them. Horsemonger Lane closed in 1878 and was pulled down soon after; a small public park, Newington Gardens, occupies the site today, tucked in behind the Crown Court that succeeded the old Sessions House next door.

Only Pentonville, Wandsworth, and Brixton remain open as prisons, and Holloway — rebuilt more than once since the visits described in these pages, most recently in the 1970s and 1980s — continued as London's principal women's prison for a further century and a half before finally closing in 2016, its site sold for housing and its two carved stone griffins, the same pair this book's own account of Holloway describes flanking the inner porch, removed to the Museum of London for safekeeping. London has had no dedicated women's prison since; women sentenced by London courts are now generally sent to Bronzefield or Downview, both well outside the city, at a real and well-documented cost to the family contact that every modern theory of rehabilitation regards as essential. Readers of the Brixton and Millbank chapters in this volume, with their close attention to the prison nursery and the particular strain of a mother's confinement on her children, may find that arrangement a genuinely uncomfortable echo of problems this book's own authors thought worth dwelling on at length, a century and a half before the last women's cell in London was finally vacated.

The three survivors offer, if anything, an even more uncomfortable echo. At the time this introduction is being written, Pentonville, Wandsworth, and Brixton are all currently the subject of published inspection reports describing conditions that would not have surprised Mayhew and Binny in the least: severe and worsening overcrowding, with a majority of cells built for one prisoner now holding two; crumbling, poorly maintained buildings; chronic short-staffing; and, at Pentonville specifically, conditions serious enough that His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons took the unusual step, in 2025, of issuing an Urgent Notification requiring the Ministry of Justice to produce an improvement plan within twenty-eight days. Wandsworth's own most recent inspection found more than eighty percent of its prisoners sharing cells designed for one, a figure this book's own account of the 1846 Brixton overcrowding crisis — seventy cells, each built for one, routinely holding three, two mattresses laid together on the floor — would find entirely familiar, down very nearly to the numbers. It was exactly that Brixton crisis, described in Chapter Fifteen of this volume, that led the Surrey magistrates to build Wandsworth in the first place, as a model

establishment specifically designed to end the practice; that the same prison should find itself, a hundred and seventy years later, cited for precisely the same failing, is the kind of historical irony no responsible editor could allow to pass without comment.

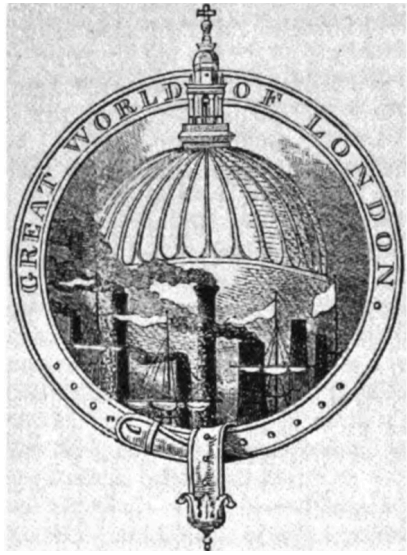
None of this is offered as a simple claim that nothing has changed, which would be both untrue and unfair to a great deal of genuine reform undertaken in the intervening years — capital punishment abolished, corporal punishment abolished, the treadwheel and the crank abandoned everywhere, sentencing brought under the kind of judicial and statutory oversight that a Victorian magistrate would scarcely recognize. But Mayhew and Binny's central argument, restated in one form or another across nearly every chapter of this book, was that a prison system built on overcrowding, undertrained staff, purposeless labour, and insufficient thought for what happens to a prisoner after release will reliably produce exactly the outcomes it is nominally designed to prevent. That argument does not appear to have gone out of date. Where these authors found a professional criminal class replenished, generation after generation, by juvenile neglect and habitual recommitment, current reoffending statistics for England and Wales continue to show close to half of all adult prisoners reconvicted within a year of release, a proportion that rises considerably higher still for those serving the shortest sentences — the very population, as it happens, that occupied so much of Mayhew and Binny's own attention at Coldbath Fields and Tothill Fields.

It is in that spirit that this retrospective is offered: not as an exercise in nostalgia for buildings mostly gone, nor as a simple indictment of the buildings that remain, but as an invitation to read a genuinely careful piece of Victorian reporting against the present, and to notice how often the two align. Mayhew and Binny walked into these institutions convinced that plain, patient description — what a cell actually measures, what a prisoner actually eats, what a governor actually says when a boy asks whether anyone will meet him at the gate — would do more to advance reform than any amount of abstract argument. The century and a half since has not obviously proved them wrong.

CHAPTER I

The Great World of London

LONDON CONSIDERED AS A GREAT WORLD



A French economist once dismissed London as no longer a city but “a province covered in houses.” The remark is more clever than accurate. If “province” means anything like the English “shire,” then no county in England, and no department in France, comes close to matching London's population. The capital holds nearly twice as many people as the largest division of the old French Empire, and considerably more than any single county in Great Britain. At the close of the fourteenth century, the whole of England held fewer people than now live within London alone. Reckoning the world's population at just over a billion, London's share works out to roughly one person in every four hundred and fifty on Earth.

By that measure, London is the most densely peopled city in the world: a quarter again as large as Peking, two-thirds larger than Paris, more than twice the size of Constantinople, four times St. Petersburg, five times Vienna or New York or Madrid, nearly seven times Berlin, eight times Amsterdam, nine times Rome, fifteen times Copenhagen, and seventeen times Stockholm. On such a scale, London might fairly

be called not merely a city but a world of its own — and the essayist Addison had said as much a century earlier, describing the capital as an aggregate of different peoples rather than one family. The West End and the City, he thought, differed from each other in manners and conversation more than the courts of two separate countries; the residents of St. James's were, for all practical purposes, a distinct people from those of Cheapside, though they lived under the same laws and spoke the same tongue.

Taking the conceit further: if Belgravia and Bethnal Green stand as the frigid opposite poles of this world — one cold with fashion and ceremony, the other locked in a permanent winter of poverty — then Temple Bar might serve as its equator, dividing the commercial City from the fashionable West End, with a ridge of banks standing in for a gold coast nearby. The vast, half-explored territories of Southwark and Lambeth across the river are its unmapped continents; obscure City parishes are as unfamiliar to most Londoners as the interior of Africa; and the distance in manner and morality between a Westminster judge and a receiver of stolen goods in Petticoat Lane is, in its way, as wide as the distance between any two of the recognized racial types of the anthropologists of the day.

This variety extended to religion — a city that supported, within a few miles of each other, congregations following every shade of Christian and dissenting belief, along with a scattering of home-grown prophets and mystics of the kind every large city seems to produce — and, most tellingly, to language itself. London's dialects varied by class and trade as sharply as separate national languages: the studied drawl of the fashionable idler, dropping his final consonants as he spoke of an afternoon's ride in the park or an evening at the opera; the affected coo of society women, who spoke of the “ble-ue ske-i” and their “bootie little doggie,” and thought a friend had looked “sweetly pretty” at church; the slang of the fast young man about town, forever pressing his “governor” for money to keep himself in cigars and a fashionable lodging; the professional cant of the street beggar, deliberately built from words that sounded like their ordinary counterparts, so that a request for beer and tobacco and a game of cards became, in the mouth of an experienced practitioner, a string of near-nonsense syllables intelligible only to another beggar;

and the reversed, back-slang argot of the costermonger, in which a word was simply pronounced as if spelled backward, so that a good pot of beer became “on-doog top of reeb,” and a bad day's trade a “regular troumo.”

Oldest and most elaborate of all was the true “flash” language of the thieves — a secret vocabulary reputedly descended in part from the Latin once chanted by wandering medieval beggars, complete with its own words for money, lodging, and the police: to “roker Romany” was to speak this cant; one's “monekeer” was one's name; to “stall in the huey” was to lodge in a town; a “shant o' gutter” was a pot of beer, and a “teviss” a shilling. Beyond these, London recognized a slang for nearly every trade and profession — the drawing room, the Inns of Court, the mess table, the newsroom, the workshop, even Parliament — each as distinct, in its way, as the cant of the street corner, so that a practised ear could place a stranger's trade and rank almost as reliably from his vocabulary as from his coat.

To call London a “world,” then, is barely a figure of speech. Its people differ from each other in custom, creed, and manner of speech as much as if they belonged to separate nations, all crowded onto a single stretch of the Thames. Foreign visitors, arriving with expectations formed by their own capitals, almost invariably reported the same reaction: that no other city in Europe presented quite so extreme a range of human experience within so compact a space, nor demanded quite so much adjustment of a newcomer's assumptions about what a single city could reasonably contain.

But London is not merely a world — it is, in every sense, a great one. We are used to thinking of “worlds” as bodies thousands of miles across, yet astronomers had by this time catalogued a swarm of minor planets, orbiting between Mars and Jupiter, that seemed to overturn this assumption entirely. Humboldt, in his celebrated survey of the natural sciences, described these bodies as having a real surface no larger than half that of France, Madagascar, or Borneo; and Mr. Hind, one of the more careful observers of the group, put the diameter of the largest at scarcely 450 miles — smaller, that is, than Great Britain itself, and not much larger than London's own 120 square miles. If bodies of that modest size could properly be called worlds and given a

place in the solar system alongside the greater planets, the objection to calling London a world of its own — on grounds of size alone — rather loses its force.

Imagine, then, that some future convulsion were to shear the capital cleanly from the rest of the Earth and set it spinning independently through space: London would be amply large enough to serve as a minor planet in its own right, with Hampstead and Sydenham for poles, a six-month winter at each end, and a permanent torrid zone running the length of Oxford Street and Cheapside. It would be a strange sort of world — without an acre of farmland or a flock of sheep to its name, built almost solid with brick and threaded with streets as densely as the veins of a leaf, and carrying, packed within its narrow surface, two and a half million people, crowded together, as one contemporary put it, almost as closely as enslaved people in the hold of a slave ship — a comparison meant to shock, and one that still repays a moment's thought.

No other of the minor planets, whatever its geological interest, could rival that population, or the sheer variety of human types living within it. Ethnologists of the day divided humanity into a handful of broad racial types; London's own observers half-seriously suggested that its social classes were nearly as distinct from one another — that a West End clergyman and an East End prize-fighter, or a Westminster judge and a Petticoat Lane fence, differed in manner, dress, and even physiognomy nearly as much as any two of the recognized human varieties, without ever leaving the same square mile of the map. A visitor moving in a single afternoon from a fashionable West End drawing-room to a common lodging-house in Whitechapel would, on this reasoning, have covered a distance in social and cultural terms considerably greater than the same visitor would experience travelling by steamer from London to Rotterdam — a comparison contemporary writers were fond of making, and one that a single day's walking through the capital's more contrasting districts did little to disprove.

The comparison to the wider world could be extended almost indefinitely, and contemporary writers plainly enjoyed doing so. If Arabia had its nomadic tribes, London had its itinerant hawkers and vagrant hordes; if India had its Thugs, London had its garotters, the

street robbers whose method of half-strangling a victim from behind had lately become a subject of considerable public alarm. Even London's religious life offered a miniature of the world's variety: alongside its established and dissenting congregations, the city supported its own home-grown prophets and millenarian sects, no stranger, in their way, than any of the more exotic creeds reported by travellers from distant countries — a reminder, if one were needed, that credulity and enthusiasm were not confined to remote parts of the globe.

A Balloon View of London

There is, in most people, an instinctive wish to see a great city laid out beneath them in a single view, rather than pieced together street by street. Having already explored London from below — its slums, its rookeries, the plague districts of Jacob's Island during a cholera outbreak, the haunts of its beggars and thieves — the author took the opportunity of a seat in the car of the Royal Nassau balloon, ascending with the veteran aeronaut Mr. Green on one of his five-hundredth-odd flights. Green was by this time something of a public institution in his own right, having spent the better part of three decades demonstrating that ballooning, for all its early reputation as a reckless novelty, could be conducted with a degree of method and safety few of the sport's early pioneers had thought possible; his five hundredth ascent was itself treated as a minor public event, reported in advance in the London papers.

The ascent itself was disorienting in the way accounts of ballooning always promise and rarely deliver: rather than feeling the car rise, the ground seemed simply to drop away, the crowd below shrinking in an instant to a field of small pale faces and waving arms and a sudden ragged cheer of farewell. The car itself was little more than a large wicker basket, reaching only to the chest of a standing passenger, which did nothing to steady the nerves during the first startled minute of flight. Once clear of the trees, the balloon drifted out along the line of the Thames toward Richmond, and the world beneath took on the character of a child's toy model: houses no bigger than wooden blocks, streets like shallow ruts scored in the ground, hedgerows reduced to threads, the largest meadows no larger than a

card table's green baize covering. The river itself — normally so commanding at close range — dwindled to a thin grey ribbon, its barges no larger than water-beetles, its bridges like laid planks, and the distant line of the South-Western Railway traceable only by the small white plume of steam trailing a passing engine, no larger than the jet from a household kettle. As dusk came on, lamps below began to prick out one by one, scattered across the darkening ground like the small lights sometimes hung on a Christmas tree, or those set along the gravel paths of a suburban tea-garden, with the occasional red spark of a railway signal showing among them, and here and there a small cluster of brighter lights marking a village or hamlet, no larger from that height than a swarm of fireflies caught for a moment in one place.

Turning back toward the city itself, the view was of an altogether different order. London appeared as a single indistinct mass under its permanent canopy of coal smoke, its edges impossible to trace against the evening sky; from a height, roof after roof rolled away toward the horizon like a dull red sea in slow motion, pierced by church steeples and factory chimneys, the parks reduced to small green patches no larger than a coin, the grand squares to scarcely more than pale wafers. Buckingham Palace, seen from above, was no larger than an ornament; the dome of Bethlem Hospital had shrunk to the size of a bell; the crowds crossing the bridges moved with no more apparent motion than microorganisms under a microscope, and the streets themselves, radiating out from the centre in every direction, looked less like the work of engineers than like cracks spreading across a great sheet of dried mud.

It was, from that vantage, possible to grasp in a single glance what could never be grasped from street level — the whole strange, cramped, magnificent confusion of churches and prisons, palaces and workhouses, banks and refuges for the destitute, that together make up London: a city holding, within one smoking and indistinct outline, more wealth and more want, more virtue and more vice, brought together in one place than anywhere else on Earth. The low continuous hum rising from the streets below, audible even at that height, was the sound of two and a half million lives being lived out

simultaneously — a sound not unlike, it was often said, the murmur of the sea heard within a shell.

There was, too, a curious sense of release in the height itself — a temporary escape from the "great commercial world" below, where, as the author reflected afterward, men are treated as counters in a game, and every relationship is coloured by self-interest. Floating above the petty ambitions and rivalries of the city, if only for half an hour, offered a rare vantage from which London's endless competitive scramble could be seen for what it was: one part, and not even the largest part, of the great confusion below. There was, too, something almost religious in the sensation of drifting silently above the noise and grime that occupied most of the author's waking hours on the ground: a brief, involuntary holiday from the ordinary rules of commercial life, granted by nothing more than a few thousand feet of altitude and a favourable wind.

It is worth noting, too, how quickly the panorama could change character depending on the season and the hour of the ascent. A summer flight, made in full daylight, showed the suburbs as a patchwork of small gardens and market plots, the city itself only lightly hazed with smoke; the same journey undertaken in late autumn, as on the occasion described here, showed instead a city already dimmed by the smoke of a hundred thousand household fires, its outline softened into something closer to a natural landform than a man-made one. Balloonists of the day noted this seasonal variation as a matter of routine, but for a passenger seeing the effect for the first time, the sheer scale of London's own atmosphere — a weather system, in effect, of its own manufacture — was as striking as anything else witnessed on the flight.

Few other views available to a nineteenth-century traveller could bear comparison. The famous prospect from the summit of Vesuvius, or the panorama of Paris from Montmartre, showed a single city in a single unbroken sweep; London, by contrast, refused to be seen whole even from a balloon, its edges dissolving into haze and suburb long before any boundary became visible. This, more than sheer altitude, was what made the balloon view of London genuinely singular among the sights available to a traveller of the period: not that the city could

be seen from above, which many cities could, but that even from above, it could not quite be seen in its entirety.

SIZE AND POPULATION OF LONDON

The human mind copes poorly with very large numbers, and London's statistics, however precisely tabulated, do little on their own to convey the city's true scale. The last census recorded 78,029 acres — about 122 square miles — containing 327,391 houses and 2,362,236 people. Such figures inform without illuminating, in much the same way that knowing the total tonnage of salt in the world's oceans tells us little about the experience of standing at the edge of the sea. A savage who can count only to ten conveys a rough notion of twenty or thirty by pointing to the hairs of his own head; educated minds manage hundreds without difficulty; but once a figure passes into the thousands and millions, even a well-trained intellect loses any real grasp of the individual units that make it up — no clearer, in the end, than our sense of the separate stars composing a distant nebula, or of the countless microscopic shells said to be packed into a single cubic inch of certain fine-grained rock.

It is not even possible to say precisely where London begins and ends, since its suburbs shade into open country as gradually as the salt water of an estuary shades into fresh. Parliament has repeatedly tried to fix the boundary by statute — a project about as effective, in the long run, as King Canute's celebrated attempt to command the tide. In 1603, the legal City of London, within and without its walls, covered barely fifteen hundred acres. By the following century this had grown to upwards of twenty thousand acres; by the start of the nineteenth century, thirty thousand; by 1837, forty-six thousand; and by the time of writing, some seventy-eight thousand acres — an area that had, over two and a half centuries, absorbed one city, one borough, and more than forty formerly separate villages, and continued to swallow fresh ground every year. Some forty thousand new residents had to be housed annually merely to keep pace with growth, about half of them migrants arriving from elsewhere in Britain — a rate of immigration equivalent to the entire population of Guernsey relocating to London every twelve months. Four thousand new houses were commonly under construction at any given time, and the historian Maitland had

calculated, even a century earlier, that London had by then already absorbed one city, one borough, and forty-three villages into its body — a process that has continued, essentially unbroken, ever since, with successive Bills of Mortality forced to add fresh parishes to the metropolitan reckoning every few decades: St. Giles and Clerkenwell by the early seventeenth century; Hackney, Islington, Newington, and Rotherhithe by its end; and, more recently still, Kensington, Paddington, Hammersmith, Fulham, Camberwell, Wandsworth, Deptford, Greenwich, Plumstead, Lewisham, and Hampstead. The modern metropolis, in consequence, now covers ground that once made up four entirely separate Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

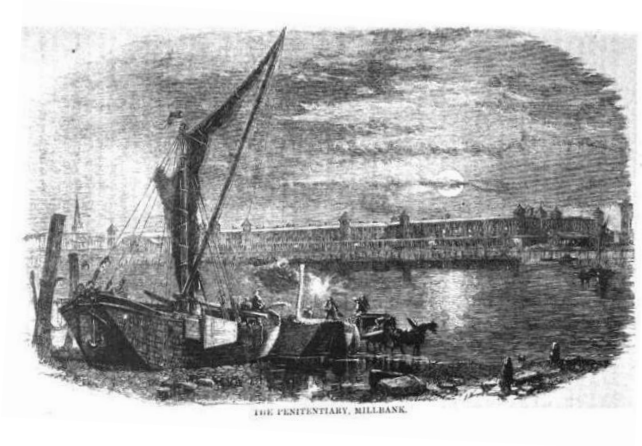
Given a frontage of roughly fifteen feet per house, the total length of London's buildings, set end to end, would run to nearly a thousand miles — far enough to stretch from York to the Pyrenees. The Post Office Directory of the day catalogued upwards of ten thousand distinct streets, squares, crescents, courts, and alleys; Oxford Street alone ran more than a mile and a third; and two great continuous thoroughfares parallel to the river — one running through Oxford Street, Holborn, Cheapside, and on to Mile End, the other through Piccadilly, the Strand, and Fleet Street to the docks — each measured upward of six miles from end to end. Dr. Johnson had made the same point a century before: that London's true immensity lay not in its grand avenues but in the sheer density of its smaller lanes and courts, which a visitor had to seek out deliberately to appreciate. An 1850 police survey put the aggregate length of London's streets, great and small, at some 1,750 miles — longer than the combined length of the five principal London railway lines, and more than three times the distance from London to Cologne by way of Calais and Ghent. Paving this network had cost some £14,000,000, with a further £1,800,000 spent annually on repairs and complete relaying every five years.

Comparisons to more familiar patches of ground may help fix the scale of the whole. London's built-up area came to roughly double that of the island of Jersey, more than twice the size of St. Helena, very nearly as large as Elba, and almost half the size of Madeira — comparisons that meant a good deal more to a contemporary reader, for whom these islands were familiar reference points, than any number of bare acres could.

The city's population resists easy visualization by any more conventional method, but one comparison then in common use may help: the crowd that turned out to watch the Duke of Wellington's funeral procession was estimated at a million and a half people, lining roughly three miles of route — itself one of the largest single gatherings London had ever seen, and one still spoken of, at the time of writing, as the benchmark against which any exceptionally large crowd was measured. On that basis, London's entire population, gathered into a single crowd, would form a mass of people nearly five miles long; arranged in marching order two abreast and moving at three miles an hour, the whole city would take more than nine days and nights to pass a single point. On an average day, 169 Londoners died, and a child was born within the city's boundaries roughly every five minutes — a rate of birth and death that meant the composition of London's population was, in a very literal sense, never quite the same from one week to the next.

London's physical extent matched its population. East to west, an almost continuous line of houses ran some fourteen miles, from Bow to Hammersmith on the Middlesex side and from Plumstead to Wandsworth on the Surrey side; north to south, the built-up area ran a further twelve miles, from Holloway to Camberwell. Measured only by its solid core — the district where houses stood packed nearly back to back — London's built-up area exceeded that of the entire island of Guernsey. The city straddled three counties, Middlesex, Surrey, and Kent, and the tidal Thames ran through the middle of it for some twenty miles between Hammersmith and Woolwich, absorbing along the way several once-navigable tributaries — the Ravensbourne, the Wandle, the Lea — long since built over and pressed into service as sewers, streams once substantial enough, within living memory, to have served as the scene of minor naval engagements. A traveller setting out to walk the full circuit of London's built-up boundary, rather than cut across it, would by this reckoning need to cover something approaching fifty miles — a distance greater than many a European principality could claim from end to end.

LONDON FROM DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW



The Penitentiary, Millbank.

London occupies, as the astronomer Sir John Herschel once observed, very nearly the centre of the terrestrial hemisphere — a geographical accident not unconnected, perhaps, with its commercial pre-eminence. Whether that eminence owes more to geography or to the mixed ancestry of the English themselves — Celtic, Roman, Saxon, Scandinavian, and Norman in turn — the name London calls up entirely different cities depending on who is asked. The word itself, to most people encountering it for the first time, conjures an image of the world's largest bazaar combined with its richest bank — a single association that, however crude, is not far from the truth. To the visitor arriving from the west, it is a city of palatial streets, private clubs, parks, and asylums for the indigent. Seen from the City, it is a maze of narrow lanes, counting-houses, and factory chimneys, its warehouses stacked floor upon floor, its docks crowded with shipping and choked with goods. Seen from the East End, it is a city of appalling want — barefoot children in the courts, the crowd gathered at the door of a gin-shop, mothers dosing infants with drink to quiet them. Dr. Johnson had made a similar observation of Londoners themselves: a politician sees only the seat of government; a merchant, only the Exchange; a man of pleasure, only its taverns and theatres. Only the more reflective visitor grasps that all these Londons coexist, superimposed on the same streets.

Curiously, native Londoners tend to feel the weakest attachment of all to their birthplace. Where the Swiss are famously homesick for their mountains — so strongly, it was said, that the French army once had to forbid the playing of a certain native air among its Swiss regiments, for fear of the desertions it provoked — and the German suffers a recognized, almost medical form of homesickness for his native soil, the lifelong Londoner is, if anything, eager to get away: to a watering-place for a fortnight each year, and, income permitting, to a quiet corner of the country or a cheap foreign town for retirement, rather than to any suburb within convenient reach of the Bank. It was a standing joke among genealogists that few London families remained settled in the capital for three full generations, a Londoner's grandfather having very often been born somewhere else entirely.

In the old coaching era, the approach to London by road was itself a spectacle no other country could match: smooth, hard-metalled highways in place of the rutted tracks common abroad; liveried coachmen, sometimes gentlemen by birth; blooded horses and polished harness. Crowds gathered nightly at the Angel at Islington, the White Horse Cellar in Piccadilly, and the Elephant and Castle simply to watch the mail coaches leave for the provinces, an occasion made still more festive on the King's birthday, when the inns were hung with coloured lamps, the coachmen wore fresh scarlet coats for the day, and each horse's head carried a rosette of ribbon to match its driver's buttonhole, the whole scene accompanied by the continual tinny note of post-horns from arriving and departing vehicles. None of this is offered in a spirit of regret for the railway, which has, on balance, been an unambiguous improvement; it is worth recording chiefly because it was so distinctly and recognizably English, in a way the railway terminus, however impressive in its own right, has not quite replaced. A foreign visitor who had travelled the poor, rutted post-roads of his own country arrived at one of these London coaching inns to find smoother, faster, and more punctual road travel than existed almost anywhere else in Europe — a fact that did as much, in its quiet way, to establish London's reputation for efficient organization as any grander monument the city could offer.

The railway has replaced this with a different, faster kind of spectacle. Arriving by the South-Western line, the traveller passes the

decaying pleasure gardens at Vauxhall, gasworks glowing like small volcanoes, potteries stacked with sample chimney-pots, and the unmistakable stench of the bone-boilers, before the train halts on the viaduct above Westminster Bridge Road for the collection of tickets, offering a strange bird's-eye view down into the ordinary traffic of the street below. Arriving from the south, the glass dome of the Crystal Palace flashes into view first, followed by a thicket of converging railway lines, distant trains gliding across the marshes at every angle, and finally a run through a dense wilderness of rooftops and back gardens before the terminus, the traveller catching glimpses along the way of tan-yards, hide-sheds, and the odd stone spire of a riverside church — Horsleydown among them, its steeple oddly capped with what looks, from a passing carriage, more like a stone pillar than a proper spire — rising above the surrounding slate roofs. On the line from the north, the train plunges without warning into the long tunnel beneath Primrose Hill, emerging among neat rows of villas, while shunting engines strain, slip, and shriek in the yards outside the station, men darting between them with furled signal flags — an altogether different, mechanical drama from the ordered ceremony of the old coaching inns, but a drama all the same, and one that struck most first-time visitors as no less remarkable in its way.

But no approach to London compares with the view of the river itself — in the author's judgment, the single sight best calculated to convey the wealth and commercial energy of the British capital. Seen from the Custom House's “long room,” the Thames, nearly three hundred yards wide at that point, lay almost solid with shipping, a narrow channel of open water left down the centre. Masts stood as thick as pine trunks in a forest; the far bank was in shadow beneath the warehouses; barges drifted past under half-raised sail, their long oars working like fins; a river steamer, decks crowded with passengers and a small band playing, threaded through the anchored fleet. Colliers rode low and black with cargo, coal-whippers labouring half-stripped in the rigging; foreign steamers with short thick funnels lay alongside Irish traders and lighters piled with barrels and sacks; and beyond them, the receiving ship Perseus towered over the water like a fortress wall, her masts struck down. Further along, the grey turret of the Tower looked out over its own crowd of foreign vessels,

cranes swinging bales of hemp and crates of hardware overhead, and beyond that again rose the immense, prison-like façade of St. Katharine's Dock, its hundreds of identical windows and doors repeating floor after floor.

At noon, the bells of a hundred City churches sounded within moments of one another, the deep note of St. Paul's booming over all, followed almost at once by the ship's bells striking eight bells across the crowded river below. The Port of London was, if anything, better appreciated by ear than by eye: the bell of the itinerant boatman selling drink to the coal-whippers; the sudden run of a chain being paid out; the chorus of sailors hauling on a rope; the click of a capstan pawl; the whistle of a departing steamer, all layered over the ordinary rumble of cart traffic on the streets behind. Every sight and sound spoke of the same fact — that the wealth of every corner of the world had been gathered, briefly, at this one stretch of river before being distributed across the rest of the country.

Nearer the Custom House quay itself, the scene took on a gentler, more domestic character: barefoot boys from the nearby charity school skipping along the gravel walk among the moored barges, nursemaids strolling with young children in their charge, watermen sculling small boats out from the stairs by working a single oar behind them, after the fashion of a fish's tail. Close by lay a tier of large steamers, brass fittings polished bright, one of them flying the blue departure pennant as a summons to her crew; a little further on, the old receiving-ship Perseus — a former warship, her masts struck down — rose from the water like a black rampart, long white ventilating funnels hanging over her open hatchways. It was a scene, in short, that shifted in character every few hundred yards — from the purely mercantile bustle of the main channel to these quieter domestic corners — without ever losing the same underlying note of ceaseless, organized activity.

From the top of St. Paul's, the city offered yet another, stranger prospect. On a clear winter's morning, the haze of coal smoke turned the whole panorama a uniform smudged grey, domes and steeples rising out of it like islands from a fog bank, distant hills reduced to faint smears of colour on the horizon. Visitors often found the effect more impressive, not less, for the obscurity: a city glimpsed only in

fragments through its own smoke seemed somehow to suggest a scale too vast for the eye to take in directly — the streets below reduced to black fissures, crawling almost imperceptibly with traffic, the whole scene carrying, as one observer put it, more sublimity from the mind's inability to grasp it whole than any clear view could have offered.

London's smoke was, in its way, as distinctive a feature of the city as its river or its docks — the visible by-product of several million household and factory chimneys burning coal simultaneously, thick enough on a still day to be seen, and smelled, from many miles outside the city boundary. Travellers arriving by sea sometimes reported sighting London's smoke on the horizon before any building came into view at all, a brown smear against the sky that experienced sailors learned to recognize as reliably as any lighthouse. Within the city itself, the same smoke blackened stone within a few years of construction, killed off all but the hardiest trees and shrubs in the smaller squares, and was blamed, with some justice, for a measurable share of the capital's respiratory illness — the price, evidently, of the very industry and commercial activity that made the city's wealth possible in the first place.

London by night offered a fourth, still more distinctive view of the city, best appreciated from a distance — from one of the surrounding hills on a clear winter evening. Against the stars, the city appeared as a second, lower firmament: streetlamps strung out along the main roads like trails of sparks, crossing and converging toward the centre, the whole mass of lights capped by a permanent dull red glow, as though the city itself were quietly smouldering. It was at night, too, that London's sharpest social contrasts came into view. As the shops closed and the crowds thinned, the homeless gathered on park benches, bridge recesses, and market litter; ragged figures clustered for warmth around the coke fires left burning by road-menders; and along the more disreputable streets, women in thin, worn finery waited for late-returning drunkards, while barefoot children who had failed to beg enough for a night's lodging settled instead into doorways. Toward dawn, as the sky lightened and the smoke had not yet thickened enough to blot it out, a different population emerged — rag-and-bone pickers setting out on their rounds, and the first coffee-

stalls opening at street corners, tin cans of coffee kept hot over glowing coals, ready for labourers on their way to an early shift.

Taken together, these several views — by balloon, by rail, by river, from the dome of St. Paul's, and by night from a distant hill — form a kind of composite portrait of the city that no single vantage point could supply on its own. Each reveals a different London: the balloon shows scale, the river shows commerce, the dome shows atmosphere, and the night view shows the human cost beneath all three. A visitor who saw only one of these views — as most visitors, pressed for time, inevitably did — could be forgiven for coming away with an entirely lopsided impression of the place; it was only by combining them, as this chapter has tried to do, that anything like a fair picture of London could be formed. It is this last, composite view, more than any single vantage point, that the chapters which follow will return to again and again.

OF THE RICHES AND POVERTY OF LONDON



Ticket-of-Leave Men.

The old country saying that London's streets are paved with gold is, on the evidence of the accounts, barely an exaggeration. Paving the streets alone had cost some £14,000,000, at an average of £8,000 a

mile. Beneath the pavement ran a further 1,900 miles of gas main and a comparable length of water main, worth perhaps half a million pounds in pipe alone, along with hundreds of miles of brick sewer tunnelled through the London clay — a network that, laid end to end, would itself have reached from London to well beyond the Scottish border, entirely invisible to anyone walking above it. The capital employed in London's gasworks — pipes, tanks, and gasholders — came to between £3,000,000 and £4,000,000, lighting some 360,000 street lamps and consuming thirteen million cubic feet of gas every night, at an annual cost exceeding half a million pounds. Merely to keep the city lit after dark, in other words, required an industrial undertaking on a scale that would, a century before, have counted as a major enterprise in its own right.

Above ground, the figures were larger still. Annual rental income from London's houses, as assessed for income tax, came to £12,500,000 — implying, at ten years' purchase, a total value for London's buildings of some £125,000,000. That sum accounted for the buildings alone; the contents, insured through the assurance companies, were valued at a further £166,000,000, a figure the compilers noted still covered only about two-fifths of London's houses, since a substantial share of homeowners carried no insurance at all — meaning the true value of the capital's furniture and household goods very likely exceeded £400,000,000. “London,” the elder Rothschild is reported to have said in 1832, “is the bank of the whole world — all transactions in India and China, in Germany and Russia, are guided and settled here.” The figures bear him out: London's bankers commanded some £64,000,000 in working capital, with a further £78,000,000 employed in discounting bills; the loans issued by a single London banking house in 1841 were said to have exceeded £30,000,000 for the year, occasionally as much as £700,000 in a single day. The City clearing-house — where checks and bills drawn on one bank were settled against those held on others — processed payments in excess of £950,000,000 in a single year, according to a Parliamentary return, with three banks alone accounting for more than £100,000,000 of that total; and it is worth noting that the return in question excluded, as a matter of course, any

sum under £100, meaning the true annual total handled by the clearing-house was certainly a good deal higher again.

A walk through the London docks did more than any figures to convey this wealth at first hand. The economist J. R. McCulloch reckoned the trade of the Port of London at some £65,000,000 a year, and the warehouses bore this out: acre upon acre of indigo and dye-stuffs stacked like ingots; vaults of wine casks lit by long rows of hanging lamps, the air thick with the smell of spirit and dry rot; bins of sulphur and lead-coloured copper ore; whole floors sticky underfoot where sugar had leaked from the tiers of hogsheads above. The air itself changed character from one warehouse to the next — pungent with stored tobacco in one building, heavy with the fumes of rum in another, sickly with hides and horn in a third, and fragrant, a few doors along, with coffee and imported spice. Along the quays moved a correspondingly mixed population — gaugers testing spirit fresh from the cask with long brass-tipped rules, German sailors, a black seaman with a red handkerchief knotted round his head, a butcher pushing through the crowd with meat for a ship's galley, an emigrant family waiting with new cooking-tins at their feet for a berth to the colonies. The noise was as considerable as the sights: coopers hammering at casks, chains running out with a rattle, a captain shouting orders through cupped hands, a goat bleating from some vessel in the basin, empty casks rolling along the stone quay with a hollow, drum-like note — the whole a kind of continuous, half-organized uproar that visitors nonetheless found strangely exhilarating.

Against this stood a poverty just as extreme, and no farther away than the nearest side street. At the Refuge for the Destitute in Playhouse Yard, four hundred people or more might be found waiting at dusk in winter for the doors to open — feet ulcerated from exposure, children crying with cold and hunger, men quarrelling over the prospect of a place by the fire and a ration of dry bread. Since the refuge had opened in 1820, more than 1,141,000 homeless people had passed through its doors, and some ten thousand tons of bread had been distributed to them — figures that, set against the institution's original modest ambitions, testify both to the scale of London's chronic destitution and to the sheer persistence required of any charity

attempting to address it on a citywide basis. Its registers recorded destitute men and women of virtually every European nationality, alongside a scattering of Americans and Africans, and covered nearly every trade — compositors, tailors, shoemakers, smiths, sailors, clerks, engineers, and servants among them; mothers arrived with infants at the breast, fathers with young sons clinging to their side, the shirtless and the shoeless standing side by side with men who, only months before, had run their own small businesses. Some of this destitution was undoubtedly self-inflicted, and professional begging was a recognized trade in its own right; but a substantial proportion consisted of seasonal outdoor workers — brickmakers, farm labourers, garden women — whose livelihood simply failed in the months when it was most needed, a class of the poor whose distress was, in a sense, no fault of their own but simply the predictable consequence of a trade that could not run through the winter.

Nowhere was the contrast between London's wealth and its want more starkly visible than at the gates of the London Docks each morning. At half past seven, a crowd of several hundred men gathered at the entrance — failed tradesmen, broken publicans, discharged clerks and soldiers, Polish refugees, out-of-work servants, and men with no trade at all — since dock labour was among the very few forms of employment in London that required no character reference and no prior experience. When the foremen appeared, book in hand, to call the day's names, the result was less a hiring than a scramble: men climbing onto each other's shoulders to catch the eye of the man with the work, shouting their own names or a foreman's, in Irish brogue and broken English alike. Those not chosen retired to a waiting yard behind the docks to sit out the day in hope of a later call, at wages as low as fourpence an hour for two or three hours' casual labour — a scene one dock official described as violent enough, on occasion, to sweep him bodily a quarter of a mile from where he had started. Those who failed to find work in the morning often lingered near the bridge outside the gates for the rest of the day, watching for any sign that a foreman was again in want of hands, and rushing forward the moment one appeared, even though no more than six or eight out of a hundred waiting men might be taken on. It was, by the account of those who witnessed it repeatedly, a strange and rather

sobering thing to watch: the same men who had been shouting and pleading only minutes before would turn on the departing foreman with open abuse the instant he had passed them over, before falling back into patient waiting for the next chance. As many as twenty thousand people in London depended, directly or indirectly, on dock labour for a living, with the London Docks alone employing anywhere from one thousand to three thousand hands depending on how many ships the wind brought up the estuary that week — a livelihood, in other words, as changeable as the weather itself, since an easterly wind that kept ships from entering the Port of London could, quite literally, take the bread from two thousand mouths in a single day.

This paradox of abundance and want extended to London's food supply, and the market returns compiled for a single year give some sense of its scale. In fish alone, London consumed something over three million pounds of salmon, nearly thirty-four million pounds of plaice, mackerel, and whiting between them, more than forty million fresh herrings and a quarter of a billion more "in bulk," together with lesser but still enormous quantities of cod, haddock, sprats, and eels imported from as far as Holland; oysters alone arrived by the hundreds of thousands of barrels. The green markets supplied vegetables on a similar scale — upwards of three hundred million pounds of potatoes, nearly ninety million cabbage plants, some seventeen million carrots, and correspondingly large quantities of peas, beans, onions, and turnips — while the fruit markets accounted for hundreds of thousands of bushels of apples, pears, and plums, and well over a million and a half "pottles" of strawberries in season. Leadenhall market alone dealt in more than two million tame fowls, geese, ducks, and turkeys, and a further million and a quarter head of game and wild birds, from grouse and pheasant down to lark and rabbit. Cattle-market returns showed a further 277,000 bullocks, 30,000 calves, 1,480,000 sheep, and 34,000 pigs slaughtered annually, worth between seven and eight million pounds, alongside 1,600,000 quarters of wheat for bread; and Londoners were said to get through, in addition, some 65,000 pipes of wine, two million gallons of spirits, and forty-three million gallons of porter and ale. The metropolis burned through some three million tons of coal annually

for heat and light, and drew on more than nineteen billion gallons of piped water. Such figures, multiplied across every branch of the food and drink trade, made it seem almost impossible that anyone in London should go hungry — and yet the scenes at Playhouse Yard, and at the docks each morning, told a different story only a few streets away.

It is worth pausing on the sheer disproportion these figures represent. The same city that consumed a million and a quarter head of game each year — grouse, pheasant, and snipe destined chiefly for the tables of the wealthy — supported, within a few streets of the same markets, a class of the population for whom a scrap of bread and a night indoors represented the full extent of ambition. No contradiction in London's character was more frequently remarked upon by visitors, and none, on the evidence gathered here, was more real.

At the very bottom of this economy of surplus and scarcity stood the trade in refuse itself. Even the man who earned his living picking rags and bones from the gutter had, in effect, his own market and his own exchange — the Old Clothes Exchange in Houndsditch, popularly called Rag Fair, a fenced acre of benches where old coats, broken tools, cracked crockery, worn-out boots, and scrap metal changed hands each afternoon among London's poorest traders. Before the Exchange was established, the same trade had simply been conducted in the open street; even afterward, the busiest hours — mid-afternoon in winter, a little later in summer — drew a crowd dense enough to block the surrounding lanes entirely. The atmosphere within was, by every account, overpowering — a mingled smell of old leather, mildew, and half-cured hare-skins — and the trade itself was conducted with a haggling intensity that struck visitors as out of all proportion to the value of the goods on offer. Rows of sellers sat with their stock spread on the ground before them: a dealer in old crockery beside a heap of cracked boots and greasy hats taken in part-exchange; a woman surrounded, in season, by piles of hare-skins, some stiff with age and others still bright as fresh tinsel, her stock-in-trade also running to old stays, whalebone busks, and a small bundle of worn parasols tied together like a quiver of arrows; a street mender polishing the handle of a second-hand saw; a bone-picker sorting the

contents of his sack into neat, separate lots of bone, iron, and rag while he waited for a buyer, chewing on a crust of bread given to him earlier on his rounds; a travelling tinker with a small pyramid of battered saucepans arranged before him; an umbrella-mender surrounded by loose whalebone ribs and pointed bone handles waiting to be fitted to new sticks.

Yet the melancholy fact behind most of what was sold there was rarely in doubt to anyone who thought about it for a moment. A working man's tools were, by long custom, the very last thing to be sold in hard times — after the watch, the Sunday suit, the wife's few trinkets, and finally the family's spare blankets had already gone the same way to pay for food or medicine during a spell of illness or unemployment. To part with the tools of one's trade was to give up the last means of earning a living at all, and observers who knew the district well made a point of not walking past its old tool-stalls without reflecting on the history behind each item: whose hands had used that plane or that set of chisels, and what had finally driven their owner to sell them. Not all of the trade told so sympathetic a story — a share of it, by common report, came from men who had drunk or gambled away their own livelihoods — but enough of it did to give the district a genuinely melancholy undertone beneath its noise and haggling. Alongside this traffic in domestic misery ran a smaller, brighter trade in cheap jewellery, sweets, and second-hand finery, together with a fried-fish trade serving the district's own residents — evidence, as much as anything else in London, that even its poorest quarter supported a class of traders who profited from poverty rather than shared it.

The streets adjoining the Old Clothes Exchange carried the same trade a stage further, given over almost entirely to second-hand furniture and second-hand tools. One shopfront displayed nothing but old carpenters' planes and foot-rules, polished with beeswax and arranged in neat rows; the next was piled with old deal chairs, imitation chests of drawers with their fronts removed, and bulky sofas stripped down to their canvas undersides. Further along stood the second-hand clothes dealers, their frontages hung with rows of washed fustian trousers and faded waistcoats, and finally the hatters, their counters stacked with brown-paper hat-shapes drying stiff as

biscuit. It made, taken as a whole, one of the more improbable retail districts in Europe — an entire street economy built, almost without exception, on goods that their original owners had once valued highly enough to keep.

Taken as a whole, the picture that emerges from these accounts of wealth and want is not one of simple contrast, still less of simple hypocrisy, but of two systems operating side by side, each largely indifferent to the other's existence. The same city that could clear £950,000,000 through its banking system in a single year supported, within a few streets of its grandest counting-houses, a population for whom the difference between a bed and the pavement depended on the wind direction that morning at the Port of London. It is against this background — not incidentally, but as its direct and necessary context — that the prison system described in the following chapters was built, and it is worth keeping this contrast in mind throughout: London's prisons did not arise in a vacuum, but as one institutional response, among several, to a poverty and criminality that the city's own extraordinary wealth did remarkably little, on its own, to prevent.

It is worth adding, finally, that this coexistence of extreme wealth and extreme want was not lost on contemporary observers, however little practical effect their observations had. Parliamentary committees, Poor Law Commissioners, and private charitable societies alike returned again and again to the same uncomfortable arithmetic: that a city capable of generating and moving such enormous sums of money seemed, for reasons no single report ever fully explained, unable to translate that wealth into anything approaching a general sufficiency for its poorest residents. Some blamed the sheer scale of migration into the capital, which constantly replenished the ranks of the unskilled and the unemployed faster than any charitable or municipal effort could absorb them; others blamed the casual, day-to-day nature of dock and market labour, which left tens of thousands of families with no reliable income from one week to the next; still others, more moralistically inclined, blamed drink, improvidence, or simple bad character among the poor themselves. The debate, in one form or another, continues to this day, and this book takes no firm position on its ultimate causes. What can be said with confidence is that the prison system described in the chapters

that follow developed directly out of this same unresolved tension — built, in large part, to manage the visible consequences of a poverty that London's own reformers could describe in exhaustive statistical detail, but had not yet found any reliable means of preventing.

The Charity and the Crime of London

If London's poverty was extreme, its organized charity was, in fairness, extreme as well, and represented one of the clearest differences between the present age and those before it. Where earlier generations of the wealthy had patronized prize-fights and bear-gardens, their successors funded hospitals and asylums. A contemporary survey of London charities counted 530 separate institutions in the capital, covering nearly every recognized form of distress: ninety-two medical charities, with a combined annual income of some £267,000; a dozen societies for the preservation of life and public morals; seventeen asylums for reclaiming the fallen; thirteen societies relieving street destitution and a further fourteen relieving specific distress; a hundred and twenty-six asylums for the aged; nine for the blind, deaf, and dumb; thirteen for orphans and fifteen more for children generally; twenty-one societies promoting schools; a dozen benevolent pension funds and fifteen clergy aid funds; and forty-three home mission societies alongside fourteen foreign ones, the latter alone disbursing close to £460,000 a year. Public charitable donations recorded through these societies came to roughly £1,800,000 a year; private charity, given directly and therefore unrecorded, was thought by those who studied London's professional beggars — and in particular the "screevers," or begging-letter writers, who made a business of soliciting it — to run at least as high again, if not higher — a combined total, on that reckoning, of some £3,500,000 annually.

Against this stood a criminal population whose habits contemporary reformers took seriously enough to attempt something like a formal natural history of crime, on the model of a zoological classification. The Poor Law Commissioners recorded 143,064 admissions of vagrants to the casual wards of London's workhouses over a single year — not all different individuals, since habitual tramps moved from one workhouse to the next, but representing, on

the best contemporary estimate, some four thousand habitual vagrants supported at a cost to the public of roughly £50,000 a year. The Commissioners themselves noted that a dangerous typhoid fever followed the vagrant population from workhouse to workhouse, a consequence, in their words, of the extreme filth in which such people commonly lived, and reported that scarcely a workhouse in London had escaped some outbreak of the disease, with several Union officers having lost their lives to it in the course of their duties. Observers who had visited the casual wards directly reported seeing groups of a dozen or more lodgers scratching at vermin together before settling down in the straw, lice being, by common report, all but universal among the class — conditions that made the casual ward as much a public health hazard as a charitable institution, and gave the reformers who studied it a second, more urgent reason, beyond simple humanity, to want the problem addressed at its root.

That vagrancy served as a training ground for more serious crime was widely accepted, and one meeting the author held with some hundred and fifty vagrant boys and young men bore this out in troubling detail. Before the meeting proper could begin, the assembled boys spent some time in a kind of organized uproar — braying like donkeys, crowing like cocks, and greeting the entrance of a Black attendant with a chorus of mock street-cries — behaviour the author likened to a menagerie at feeding time, and which made simply gathering the group's basic statistics a considerable undertaking in itself. When a police officer in plain clothes was recognized among the crowd, despite his disguise, the boys demanded his removal outright, and saw him to the door with jeers and mock applause.

Once order was restored, the facts elicited were troubling enough on their own account. The youngest present, a self-described beggar, was six years old; several ten-year-olds already called themselves thieves. Of those present, about a third had lost one or both parents; fifty admitted to begging as a trade and sixty-six to theft, the latter admission greeted, tellingly, with applause from the rest of the group. Asked how many times they had been imprisoned, answers ran as high as twenty-nine, for a boy of only nineteen — a fact that likewise drew cheers rather than embarrassment from his companions, several of whom had taken to chalking their personal totals on their own hats

as a kind of badge of standing. Sixty-three of the hundred and fifty could read, and of these, fifty said they had read popular serial accounts of the highwayman Dick Turpin and the thief Jack Sheppard, many crediting these stories directly with turning them toward theft, and several declaring themselves quite content to have lived the same life themselves, given the chance; those who could not read said the same stories were read aloud to them in the common lodging houses. Several had first learned to steal, by their own account, in exactly such lodging houses, from older and more experienced boys, and a number reported having been flogged in prison on more than one occasion without any apparent effect on their intentions.

Working from the returns of the Constabulary Commissioners, contemporary reformers classified London's known criminal population into three broad families — beggars, cheats, and thieves — each further subdivided by method and specialty in considerable and sometimes darkly comic detail. Beggars ranged from sham disabled ex-servicemen and “distressed” tradesmen down to families who deliberately kept their children clean and well-dressed to work on public sympathy, and professional letter-writers who drafted begging appeals for a fee. Cheats included smugglers and illicit distillers defrauding the revenue, confidence men and swindlers preying on the public directly, and the confederates — lookouts, decoys, and false character references — who supported them. Thieves were subdivided with particular care: those who used violence, such as burglars and highway robbers; those who worked by drugging or exploiting drunkenness; and the far larger category of those who stole by stealth or manual skill — pickpockets specializing in a particular pocket or article, shoplifters, servants who stole from employers, and petty thieves who specialized narrowly enough to steal only lead from roofs, or only linen left out to dry, or only pewter pots from area railings. The Constabulary Commissioners' own count put the total at 16,900 people known to the police across all these categories — among them 107 burglars, 773 pickpockets, 3,657 general thieves, 317 passers of counterfeit coin, 343 receivers of stolen goods, and 6,371 women recorded as prostitutes — or roughly one Londoner in every hundred and forty. Reported losses from these

activities came to nearly £42,000 in a single year, itemized down to categories as specific as goods stolen through doors left open, property taken by false messages, and small sums lifted from drunken passers-by.

The same year's figures broke this total down with a precision that itself says something about how closely the police monitored London's underworld: some £2,854 lost to burglary proper, £135 to breaking into dwelling-houses and £143 to breaking into shops, £1,158 to embezzlement, £579 to forgery, £1,615 to fraud, and comparatively modest sums — £46, £250, and £104 respectively — to highway robbery, horse-stealing, and cattle-stealing. Servants accounted for £8,866 stolen from their own employers, more than any other single category; lodgers took a further £2,936 from their landlords; £4,500 went missing simply because doors had been left open, and £2,848 through windows forced or broken outright. Pickpockets accounted for £3,018, prostitutes for £2,024, and children were relieved of a comparatively modest £48 — the full return running, in total, to £41,988 in reported losses for the year, a figure the compilers themselves noted was almost certainly an undercount, since it covered only those thefts that were both discovered and reported to the police.

Stolen goods moved, in turn, through their own recognized exchange, much as rags and bones moved through Houndsditch — centred on Petticoat Lane (by then officially renamed Middlesex Street), a narrow, crowded thoroughfare running north from Aldgate, where old clothes, second-hand furniture, and second-hand tools were bought and sold, largely among London's poorest, with little inquiry into where any particular item had come from. Much of what changed hands there told, on inspection, the same story of ordinary domestic misfortune as the trade in Houndsditch — a mechanic's tools, a family's last blankets, a wedding ring — alongside a smaller and more troubling traffic in items more obviously stolen, sold on for a fraction of their worth to dealers who asked no questions and kept a crucible ready on the fire for silver that needed melting down quickly. The lane's trade shifted character from one end to the other much as Houndsditch did: fried-fish sellers and butchers near the Aldgate end gave way, further up, to dealers in old furniture and second-hand

tools, and finally to the clothes-dealers proper, their shopfronts hung with rows of washed trousers and faded waistcoats, so that a walk from one end of the lane to the other amounted, in effect, to a walk through the entire economy of London's secondhand trade in miniature.

The typology drawn up by contemporary reformers is worth setting out in a little more detail, since it shaped much of the thinking behind the prison and reformatory system described in the chapters that follow. Beggars alone were divided into a dozen recognized types: naval and military beggars, trading on real or invented war service; distressed-operative beggars, posing as starved-out weavers or ruined tradesmen; "respectable" beggars, who dressed their children in clean pinafores precisely because neat poverty drew more sympathy than obvious destitution, or who covered their faces in feigned shame while holding out a written petition; disaster beggars, claiming to be shipwrecked sailors or burnt-out tradesmen; beggars trading on real or invented physical affliction — sores, blindness, deformity, fits; beggars who simply chalked "I am starving" on the pavement and stood beside it; foreign beggars, claiming destitution as shipwrecked Poles or Lascars; petty trading beggars, selling matches or bootlaces as a cover for begging outright; musical beggars, playing an instrument for the same purpose; and, supporting all of these, a class of professional "screevers," who wrote convincing begging letters for a fee, and referees, who supplied false character references to other beggars.

Cheats formed a second family, again finely subdivided: those who defrauded the government directly, running illicit stills or smuggling goods past the customs; those who cheated the public through swindling, sham insurance offices, rigged games, or fraudulent wagers; and "ring-droppers," who staged the discovery of a valuable ring or trinket in the street in order to sell it to a credulous passer-by. Beneath these worked a supporting cast of confederates — "bonnets," who attended gaming tables to draw in other players, and referees who vouched falsely for servants and tradesmen. It is worth noting that this entire second family — unlike the beggars and thieves described above and below — preyed almost exclusively on people with something to lose: the sham insurance office and the rigged

gaming table required a victim of at least middling means, which meant that London's cheats, as a class, tended to operate closer to the fashionable end of the social scale than either the beggars or the outright thieves, and were correspondingly harder for the ordinary police constable to identify or apprehend.

Thieves, the largest and most various family of all, were subdivided with particular care. Those who used violence included burglars, highway robbers, and men who robbed in the company of women who first lured or distracted the victim. Those who worked by exploiting intoxication drugged a victim's drink or simply robbed the already-drunk. Far larger, though, was the class who stole by stealth or manual skill: pickpockets specializing in a particular pocket or garment, wrenchers of watches, shoplifters, and a whole further class of petty, cowardly “sneaksmen” who specialized narrowly enough to steal only lead from roofs, or only linen left out to dry, or only pewter pots from area railings, or coal, rope, and wood from barges moored at the wharves, or, at the harder end of the same trade, who stripped children of their clothes in the street. A separate branch specialized in animals rather than goods — horse-thieves, sheep-stealers, deer-stealers, dog-stealers, and poachers. Yet another class, neither pickpockets nor housebreakers, worked purely by breach of trust: servants who stole from employers or let confederates into the house, embezzling clerks, and those who pawned goods, such as lodging-house blankets, that had merely been entrusted to their care rather than owned outright. Last came the counterfeiters, or “shoful-men,” who forged coin, notes, and cheques, and the receivers, or “fences,” who bought stolen goods knowing them to be stolen, and the “smashers” who passed the counterfeit coin on to the unsuspecting public.

Such specialization, reformers argued, developed only where crime had become a settled trade passed on within a lodging-house culture rather than a single desperate act — precisely the pattern the youngest vagrants described in their own interviews, and precisely the pattern the prison system, as later chapters describe, was increasingly designed to interrupt.

It is worth pausing, in a book concerned chiefly with prisons, on the scale of this population and its consequences: at any given time,

London supported not only tens of thousands of people living on the margins of destitution, but a recognized and self-perpetuating criminal class numbering in the tens of thousands, moving in a more or less continuous cycle between the casual ward, the street, and the gaol. Contemporary reformers were struck, above all, by how young this population skewed, and by how openly its younger members took pride in a record of arrests and convictions that respectable society regarded as shameful — a divergence in values that no amount of charitable giving, however generous, seemed able to close on its own. It was precisely this observation — that charity alone, however well organized, could not reach a population that had come to regard imprisonment as a badge of standing rather than a disgrace — that drove the more systematic thinking behind the prison reforms described in the chapters ahead. If the casual ward and the workhouse had failed to break the cycle of vagrancy and theft, something more deliberately designed would have to take their place: an institution built, from the ground up, around the specific aim of separating a young offender from the influences that had produced him, rather than simply housing and feeding him for a night before returning him to exactly the same lodging-house and exactly the same company. The chapters that follow describe the institutions London had by this time built to attempt precisely that — with what success, the reader may judge.

Of the Nomenclature of the London Streets

The naming of London's streets followed no plan whatsoever, to the lasting confusion of visitors, and one contemporary survey of the Post Office Directory catalogued the resulting chaos in some detail. Loyal titles predominated: seventy-three streets named King, seventy-eight Queen, forty-two Prince's, and four Princess's, twenty-six styled Duke and one solitary Duchess, twenty-eight Regent, along with thirty-one Crown Streets or Courts and a single Regina Villa. Noble houses supplied dozens more — eighty-nine streets called York, fifty-eight Gloucester, forty-four Brunswick, thirty-nine Bedford, thirty-six Portland, thirty-four Cambridge, twenty-eight Lansdowne, twenty-seven Montague, and lesser numbers of Cumberland, Claremont, Clarendon, Russell, and Norfolk, besides a scattering styled

Cavendish, Cecil, Buckingham, Northumberland, and Stanhope — while military and political heroes accounted for fifty-two Wellingtons, twenty-nine Marlboroughs, eleven Nelsons, twenty Waterloos, and fifteen Trafalgars, against a comparatively modest half-dozen honouring Prime Ministers by name, and a single street each for Cobden and the parliamentary reformer Burdett. Poets and philosophers fared little better in sheer numbers: one Shakespeare's Walk at Shadwell, one Ben Jonson's Fields, eight Milton Streets, and seven thoroughfares named for Addison. Common Christian names supplied fifty-eight Georges, forty Victorias, forty-three Alberts, forty-nine Charleses, and forty-seven Johns, while religious titles ran to Paternoster Row, Amen Corner, and some twenty streets named Trinity, alongside two large districts still known as Whitefriars and Blackfriars. A stranger carrying a letter addressed simply to “King Street, London” might, in principle, be sent in succession to any of forty-two identically named streets scattered across the capital before finding the right one.

Other names followed trade, produce, or plain topography rather than rank. Mincing Lane belonged to the wholesale grocers, Clerkenwell to the watchmakers, the Borough to the hatters, Bermondsey to the tanners, Spitalfields to the weavers, Long Acre to the coach-builders, and Lombard Street to the bankers who had congregated there since the Middle Ages; the bootmakers, less grandly, had a single Crispin Place, a Shoe Lane, and a Boot Street to their name, alongside Petticoat Lane, said to honour the ladies, and Rag Fair, which certainly did not. A wider trawl through the trade directories turned up a Butchers' Row or two, a pair of Fishmongers' Alleys, three Dyers' Courts, a single Barbers' Yard, three Saddlers' Buildings, one Stonecutters' Street, a scattering of Potters' Fields, two Weavers' Streets, a lone Ironmongers' Lane, and a single Ropemakers' Walk, alongside some thirty-three thoroughfares content with the general title Commercial. Materials supplied a further small category — eight Wood Streets, a Stone Buildings, an Iron Square, a Golden Square, seven Silver Streets, and two Diamond Rows — while public buildings supplied roughly a hundred streets prefixed Park, thirty-seven Bridge, nineteen Market, and lesser numbers of Palace, Castle, Tower, and Museum. Religious and mythological names sat oddly

side by side — Bishop's Walk and Mitre Court within a few streets of Neptune Street and Hercules Passage — while animals supplied a further, oddly extensive category: Fish Street, Cow Lane, Lamb Alley, Bear Street, Duck Lane, Swan Street, Eagle Street, and a solitary Sparrow Corner, alongside a Red Lion and a White Lion for the mythical beasts. Food and drink accounted for Milk Street, Bread Street, Vinegar Yard, Sugar-Loaf Court, and Pudding Corner, with Orange Street and Lemon Street nearby for those with a taste for fruit, and Pear-Tree Court, Cherry-Tree Lane, and Walnut-Tree Walk for those who preferred the orchard itself. Plants furnished a dozen Rose Villas and Willow Walks, a Lavender Hill, several Acacia Roads, and no fewer than fifty-four Groves, most of which, a visitor might note, had not seen a tree in living memory. Shape and size accounted for thirty-five High Streets against only three Narrow ones, half a dozen Long Lanes against an equal number of Short Buildings, and a stray Turnagain Lane; the compass points supplied some forty-eight Norths and a similar number of Souths, but, oddly, only a single North-East. Others still carried simple laudatory titles — a score of "Prospect Places" and "Mount Pleasants," most of which, by the time of writing, commonly overlooked nothing more scenic than a neighbouring wall — or nothing more than the surname of the original builder or landlord, however unmusical: an entire family of thoroughfares named Smith, Baker, Newman, and Perry, and at least one, in Rotherhithe, content to be known simply as Bugsby's Reach.

The overall effect, as the poet Robert Southey complained after studying a map of the city in preparation for a visit, was of a network with no more logic to it than a tangle of nerve fibres — impossible to navigate by any method except long personal familiarity, since the river itself offered a stranger no reliable landmark, running as it did without a continuous riverside street to orient by, and no rise of ground from which to take one's bearings. A comparable confusion attended the city's ancient gates — Newgate, Ludgate, Aldgate, Aldersgate, Bishopsgate, and Moorgate — whose names long outlived the gates themselves, and its more cosmopolitan corners, which ran to a Portugal Street, a Spanish Place, an America Square, a Greek Street, and a Denmark Hill, tucked in among older survivals such as Petty France and Little Britain.

Even London's hills, such as they were, had names of their own, and formed one further small category in this already crowded field: Snow Hill, Corn Hill, Ludgate Hill, Holborn Hill, Primrose Hill, Saffron Hill, and Mutton Hill among them — modest rises, most of them, that had nonetheless retained their old names through centuries of building, long after the ground itself had disappeared beneath brick and paving to the point where a stranger would scarcely notice any slope at all. A visitor determined to work through the full list — hills, gates, foreign place-names, trade streets, loyal titles, botanical names, zoological names, and the rest — would, by the end of the exercise, have amassed a fairly complete social and commercial history of the city, entirely by accident, simply by reading its street signs in order.

CHARACTER OF THE LONDON STREETS



CONVICTS EXERCISING AT PENTONVILLE PRISON.

Convicts Exercising at Pentonville Prison.

Different quarters of London were as recognizable, to a practised eye, as different countries, and the distinction showed as much in architecture as in the people themselves. Much as a trained observer might read character from a face, a longtime Londoner could read social rank from brickwork alone: the crisp, finely detailed stonework of a Belgravian square stood as far from its plainer City counterpart as an aristocrat's features from a common councilman's, with an entire

graded hierarchy of respectable middling styles — the sober, professional fronts favoured by bankers, lawyers, and physicians — filling the space between the two extremes. The East End showed its own equally consistent character, from the long weavers' windows of Spitalfields, built tall and shallow to let in the maximum working light, to the small pigeon-lofts perched on almost every roof in Bethnal Green — a district as distinct, in its own way, from Mayfair as any two neighbourhoods could be, though separated by only a few miles of the same city.

A walk through the streets around Fitzroy Square — high north-facing studio windows, colourmen's shops stocked with tubes of paint, plaster-cast warehouses displaying isolated arms and hands — announced the artists' quarter as plainly as a signboard. Savile Row, with its brass night-bells and idling carriages outside nearly every door, marked the physicians' district; Chancery Lane, thick with black-coated clerks carrying bundles tied in red tape, and stationers' windows hung with parchment and legal almanacs, could belong only to the law.

Further trades supplied their own recognized districts beyond the docks: Hatton Garden housed the Italian glass-workers, the Borough the hatters, Bermondsey the tanners, Lambeth the potters, Catherine Street the newsvendors, Paternoster Row the booksellers, Mincing Lane the wholesale grocers, and Holywell Street and Rosemary Lane the trade in old clothes — each district recognizable at a glance from the goods stacked in its shop windows alone, quite apart from any signboard.

The neighbourhood of the docks formed perhaps the most thoroughly specialized quarter of all. Nearly every shop had a maritime character: chandlers' windows filled with quadrants, brass sextants, and ship's compasses trembling on their gimbals with the passing traffic; a carved wooden naval officer, cocked hat and all, mounted permanently above a doorway, taking a perpetual sight on the houses opposite; public houses uniformly named for “Jack Tar” or some equivalent, most offering a free concert in the back room. Sailmakers' shops stood thick with coiled rope and the smell of tar; grocers styled themselves provision agents and stocked tinned meat guaranteed to keep in any climate; and slop-sellers' windows blazed

with the red and blue flannel shirts sold to outfit a man for a voyage, hammocks and oilskins crowding the doorway. Even the passers-by confirmed the district at a glance — a mate in a good coat, a customs officer in brass buttons, a foreign sailor in a fur cap — in a way no other trade quarter of London could quite match for consistency.

Beyond these recognizable trade and professional quarters, London's residential squares told the same story of rank at a slightly larger scale. Grosvenor Square and its near twin, Portman Square, led a tier of the most fashionable addresses, followed at a respectful distance by St. James's, Berkeley, Cavendish, and Hanover Squares, and then by the still grander Belgrave and Eaton Squares further west — buildings imposing enough, as visitors from the Continent sometimes remarked, that an equivalent structure abroad would ordinarily have housed a separate noble family on every floor, where in London it housed but one, with room to spare for a substantial household of servants besides. Below these ranked the merely respectable squares — Russell, Bedford, Bloomsbury, Tavistock, Euston — clustered in the district once considered, only half in jest, terra incognita by fashionable society. The old City squares, by contrast, had become oases of deliberate quiet, some employing a liveried beadle for no purpose beyond keeping street musicians and performing animals out; while south of Oxford Street and Holborn lay a scattering of once-fashionable squares — Soho, Leicester, Golden, Lincoln's Inn Fields — that had long since been given over to shops, exhibitions, and let-out chambers. Further out again, a newer and more aspirational tier of suburban squares had begun to appear on the fringes of the built-up area — Thurlow and Trevor Squares by Brompton, Sloane Square by Chelsea, Edwardes Square by Kensington, Oakley Square by Camden Town, Holford and Claremont Squares by Pentonville and Islington, and the Oval by Kennington — each aspiring, in its more modest way, to the same air of self-contained respectability as its grander West End counterparts. By one contemporary count, London by this time contained upwards of a hundred such squares in all, each generally regarded by its own residents as the natural centre of its particular district, however far in fact it stood from the fashionable West End; it had become something of a private joke among London's tradesmen that a man doing

business on the unfashionable end of Gower Street preferred to give his address as “Gower Street, Bedford Square” whenever he could get away with it.

London's streets showed the same fine gradation as its squares. The most fashionable included Arlington Street, Park Lane, Portland Place, and the terraces around Carlton House; a step below these came the respectable but unfashionable streets such as Clarges Street, Harley Street, and Woburn Place, favoured by professional families of comfortable but not showy means. The streets running off the Strand, by contrast, had become almost entirely given over to lodging-houses, catering to visitors and to bachelors of modest income; and the narrow commercial lanes crowding around the Bank mixed genuine wealth with genuine poverty at extraordinarily close quarters, merchants' counting-houses standing, in some cases, only a few doors from lodging-houses full of transient labourers and tramps — a juxtaposition that would have seemed extraordinary in almost any other European capital, but that longtime Londoners had come to regard as simply one more unremarkable feature of a city built, from the outset, without any very consistent plan for keeping its different social classes apart.

Traffic itself was one of the more calculable aspects of London's daily life. A count taken for the City Surveyor, Mr. Haywood, found the number of vehicles on the principal City thoroughfares rising steadily from nine in the morning to a first peak around eleven, easing slightly through the early afternoon, and rising to a second, slightly higher peak around five in the evening before falling away for the night. The gross count across the City's main streets came to roughly 125,000 vehicle-passages over twelve hours; allowing for vehicles counted more than once on different streets, the City's genuine daily traffic came to something over 60,000 vehicles — a figure borne out by the roughly three thousand licensed cabs, one thousand omnibuses, and ten thousand-odd private carriages and carts registered across the capital as a whole, whose combined annual mileage, by the Stamp Office's own reckoning, exceeded twenty-one million miles — nearly a quarter of the distance from the Earth to the Sun.

London's great wholesale markets kept an entirely different schedule from its evening street markets, and were, if anything, still

more remarkable for the sheer volume of trade conducted in a few early-morning hours. Smithfield's cattle market opened well before dawn, drovers bringing in livestock through streets otherwise still asleep, the animals penned in narrow rails barely adequate to the crowds of beasts driven through them — a scene of noise, mud, and confusion that had, by this time, begun to draw serious criticism as unsuitable for a market so close to the heart of a modern city. Billingsgate, similarly, came to life at first light, its approaches already crowded with handcarts and baskets of fish before most of London had risen for the day, the cries of its porters and salesmen every bit as distinctive, in their own register, as anything heard at the Saturday-night costermongers' markets across the city. Between them, London's various wholesale markets — for meat, fish, grain, vegetables, and hay — supplied the entire retail trade described earlier in this chapter, operating on a schedule almost the exact mirror image of the markets that depended on them, so that at almost any hour of the day or night, some part of London's food supply chain was in active motion somewhere within the city.

But nowhere was London's daily character more vividly on display than at its Saturday-night street markets, when the week's wages went furthest and the crowds were correspondingly dense. Whole streets given over to costermongers' stalls were lit by naphtha flame, tallow candle, or the new self-generating gas lamp, each stallholder shouting over his neighbour to be heard — fish, vegetables, crockery, cheap boots, and second-hand clothing all sold at a continuous, competing shout that visitors compared, not unfairly, to a public menagerie at feeding time. A boy sold roasted chestnuts a penny a score; a woman advertised herrings at three a penny; a bootmaker had strung a line of gas jets along his shopfront to draw trade after dark; a row of headless tailors' dummies stood dressed in cheap coats, each labelled with an exhortation to examine the quality. One stall stood green and white with bunches of turnips, its neighbour red with apples, the next yellow with onions and the one after that purple with pickling cabbage, so that the whole row, seen from a distance, took on the appearance of a long, crudely patterned carpet laid out under the gaslight. Housewives moved slowly through the crowd with market baskets on their arms, stopping to haggle over a

bunch of greens; small boys wormed between the stalls hawking a few onions each, calling out for custom in a whining, half-apologetic tone more suited to begging than to selling; and the noise of a hundred competing cries — for fish, for fruit, for bootlaces, for hot chestnuts, for cheap paper and shoe-blacking — blended into something closer to a continuous roar than any identifiable sequence of words.

Around the edges of the crowd worked a fringe of entertainers and beggars: a blind man reciting begging-rhymes beside an illuminated shop window, a peep-show operator narrating scenes of piracy and highway robbery to a knot of boys pressed against the little round viewing-holes, a street band, a circus barker promising that the show was just about to begin. A man stood at one corner with an umbrella turned inside-out and filled with cheap prints for sale; nearby, a group of boys fired percussion caps at a target set up for the purpose, and a missionary in thin white clothing, shivering visibly in the cold, held out religious tracts to anyone who would take one. A little further along stood a family begging in a manner altogether more studied than the rest — the father standing with his head deliberately lowered, as if too ashamed to meet a passer-by's eye, a box of matches held out in one hand; the mother beside him, neatly dressed with an infant at her breast; the children, in newly mended pinafores, standing quietly rather than clamouring for attention — a tableau of respectable poverty calculated, with some evident success, to draw more from passing sympathy than any amount of open pleading could have done. It was not, by most contemporary accounts, an elegant spectacle — but it was, by common agreement, one that no other capital in Europe could match for sheer chaotic vitality: the whole of London's daily scramble for a living, in effect, compressed into a few crowded hours each week, as hundreds of small traders competed, quite literally at the top of their voices, for the last few pence of a working family's Sunday dinner money.

Such, then, was the world in which the story that follows takes place — a city of almost unimaginable wealth existing alongside equally real poverty; of formal, well-organized charity existing alongside an equally well-organized criminal class; a city that had, by the time of writing, begun to build an increasingly deliberate and

systematic set of institutions to house, reform, and punish those among its two and a half million people who broke its laws. Every aspect of London surveyed in this chapter — its overwhelming scale, its violent contrasts of riches and want, its settled and self-perpetuating criminal trades, its equally settled machinery of charity — bears directly on the subject of the chapters that follow. A city built on this scale, and containing this degree of both wealth and desperation, was bound, sooner or later, to develop prisons on a scale to match. It is to those institutions — the prisons of London — that the chapters which follow are devoted.

CHAPTER II

Crime and the Prisons of London

PROFESSIONAL LONDON

Having surveyed London as a whole, this chapter turns to its component parts — much as a geographer, having shown the world in its two hemispheres, proceeds next to map each country in turn. Just as an atlas lays the northern and southern hemispheres side by side, so this account has already laid out its own opposite spheres of London life — the very rich and the very poor — in a single Mercator-like projection, bringing the antipodes of metropolitan society under one view. Having done so, this and the following chapters proceed in proper geographical order, dealing in turn with each distinct quarter of London's world.

The natural starting point is Professional London: that portion of society which lives by intellectual rather than manual labour — not only lawyers, doctors, and clergymen, but professors, teachers, authors, artists, and musicians, all those who, in the older and rather ungenerous phrase, “live by their wits.” A professional man, on this definition, is simply one whose income derives from the exercise of talent and judgment rather than manual skill — exactly as a skilled engineer acquires a practised dexterity of the hands, so a lawyer or physician acquires, through education, a practised quickness of perception and soundness of judgment, which those who lack it are willing to pay to borrow.

The professional class, even generously defined, is a small one. Across England, Wales, and Scotland, only around 230,000 people — barely one in ninety of the population — earned their living by intellectual rather than manual work: 30,047 clergymen and ministers, 18,422 lawyers, and 22,383 medical men among the traditional professions, alongside 2,981 authors, 9,148 artists, 491 professors of science, and 106,344 teachers. Even taken together with their subordinate staff, the three great learned professions numbered only

112,193 — fewer, as the Census Commissioners themselves noted with some feeling, than the tailors of the United Kingdom. London, however, concentrated this class far beyond its national share: of 2,362,236 Londoners, 47,746 — nearly one in fifty — lived by their talents, roughly double the national ratio of eleven per thousand.

It is worth pausing on the position of professional men in the national economy, since it bears directly on the theme of this chapter. Unlike merchants, farmers, or manufacturers, the professions produce no tradeable commodity — no wisdom or piety will feed a family or clothe a child — and strict political economy might therefore be tempted to class them among the nation's non-producers, supported out of the surplus generated by those who labour more directly. Yet this would badly understate their real contribution. Newton's work on navigation did more for maritime trade than any single merchant venture; Watt's steam engine and Stephenson's railway multiplied the productive power of ordinary labour many times over; Arkwright's spinning-jenny and the inventor of the power-loom did more for the manufacture of cloth than any conceivable number of individual weavers; and the physician who restores a workman to health preserves exactly the same productive capacity as any apprenticeship. The professions, in short, repay the nation indirectly for what they do not produce directly — a debt owed as much to the judge who protects a poor man's property from the powerful as to the clergyman who teaches charity above the bare rights of capital.

London's own professional population divided into 25,097 in the traditionally “learned” professions — 5,863 lawyers, 5,631 doctors, 2,393 clergy, and 11,210 subordinate staff — and a further 22,649 in the newer, unrecognized professions: 1,195 literary men, 17,241 teachers, 156 professors of science, and 4,057 artists and architects. This chapter deals first, and at greatest length, with the first of these divisions: Legal London.

LEGAL LONDON



Map of the Inns of Court and the districts inhabited by lawyers.

London has a legal quarter as distinct and self-contained as any foreign colony within the city — as clearly bounded, in its way, as the Italian district around Hatton Garden or the Irish quarter of St. Giles. Lincoln's Inn and Westminster stand to Legal London roughly as York and Canterbury stand to the ecclesiastical provinces of England: the two poles around which the entire legal population of the capital arranges itself. Legal London comprises not merely lawyers' chambers but the Inns of Court, the superior law courts, the county and police courts, and the prisons — the superior courts concentrated at Westminster and Guildhall, the Inns of Court clustered around Chancery Lane, and the prisons and lesser courts scattered throughout the metropolis. Lawyers themselves, like merchants, increasingly live

away from their place of business, so that their chambers form a dense mass around Chancery Lane, thinning gradually toward Guildhall and Westminster like connecting threads between the legal courts and the legal inns.

The Inns of Court themselves have an unmistakable character: bare, paved quadrangles flanked by grim, doorless-looking buildings, each entrance identified only by lists of names painted in stripes down the doorposts, more like the listings outside an estate agent's office than a barrister's chambers; a chapel-like dining hall devoted to feeding rather than praying, where students qualify for the bar chiefly, it seems, by eating a great many dinners and becoming, in due course, gastronomically rather than legally learned; trim, closely mown gardens threaded with gravel walks and thronged with nursemaids and law students; and, tucked between the grander Inns, a scatter of lesser "Inns of Chancery" — Lyon's, Barnard's, Clement's, Clifford's, Sergeants', and Staple among them — quieter, shabbier courts with a single lamp-post for ornament and grass struggling up between the paving stones like green fringe on a threadbare coat. One such court boasts nothing grander than the statue of a kneeling figure holding up a sundial, seeming forever to put the same silent question to the passing gentlemen in black; entry to nearly all of them is guarded by an archway with a bar set deliberately too narrow for a porter's cart, and a small lodge where a liveried keeper stands ready to chase off any boy tempted to turn the tranquil courtyard into a playground.

The various courts of law each have a character as distinct as the streets that lead to them. Westminster Hall, during term, fills with barristers and attorneys pacing in close conversation, provincial witnesses gawking up at the carved oak roof, and a small trade in refreshments — apples, ginger-beer, and sandwiches — for those waiting their turn to be heard, together with quiet old-fashioned hotels nearby for witnesses up from the country. The Central Criminal Court at the Old Bailey could not present a more different scene: a busy eating-house serving steaming rounds of beef to the crowd outside, policemen gathered at the doors, and within, aldermen in fur-trimmed gowns and heavy gold chains reading newspapers on the bench, under-sheriffs in laced court dress, barristers crowded around a table

littered with bags and briefs, a jury packed into a box barely larger than a back parlour, and, in the dock, the prisoner awaiting his fate with the Governor of Newgate seated at one corner and a turnkey at the other. The Insolvent Court in Portugal Street, with its shabby-genteel crowd of tipstaffs and sham attorneys; the quaint old tribunals of Doctors' Commons; the humble County Courts, distinguishable from private houses chiefly by the anxious crowd of debtors and creditors outside; and the still humbler Police Courts, with their sombre prison-vans — something between a hearse and an omnibus — waiting at the door, each carry their own equally distinct atmosphere.

Legal London's institutions also include its prisons — Newgate, handsome and grim in equal measure, a bunch of fetters carved over each doorway; the strange polygonal Penitentiary at Millbank, perched on the river bank like a rampart; the new prison at Pentonville with its noble portcullis gateway; the City Prison at Holloway, half castle and half asylum in appearance, with a tall central tower recalling some ancient stronghold; and the plainer Coldbath Fields, Tothill Fields, Horsemonger Lane, the House of Detention, Whitecross Street, the Queen's Bench, and the bare-walled prison hulks moored at Woolwich, their port-holes barred like the windows of some floating fortress. Around Chancery Lane itself, every trade serves the law: booksellers stock nothing but dry legal treatises, stationers sell parchment and will-forms and law-lists bound in bright calf, dining-rooms and “larders” cater to the pockets of lawyers' clerks, and modest “sponging-houses” — barred like small asylums, with a caged exercise-yard behind — hold debtors pending settlement. Beyond this legal capital radiate the legal suburbs: Bedford Row and its neighbours to the north, Essex Street and Whitehall Place linking Chancery Lane to Westminster, and outposts near Guildhall serving the City courts, the whole legal province stretching, by a series of such links, clear across the water to Wellington Street in the Borough.

The people of this legal district have, understandably, their own professional temperament: a settled habit of doubting first and trusting later, born of long acquaintance with the worst as well as the

best of human conduct. The true lawyer's creed, half in earnest, holds that speech was given to man to conceal his thoughts rather than express them, that no one's word should be taken as good as their bond, and that a wise correspondent closes even a friendly letter “without prejudice” rather than “sincerely,” lest an unguarded phrase later prove costly. It would, however, be as unfair to judge the whole profession by its “sharp practitioners” and pettifoggers — those who profit by delay and treat the law as an instrument of plunder rather than justice — as to judge medicine by its worst quacks; the same profession that produces the occasional sharp practitioner also produces the English judiciary, a body whose reputation for impartiality between prosecution and defence was, by common agreement, without serious rival among the courts of Europe, weighing the evidence on both sides with an almost instinctive generosity toward the accused in any case of real doubt.

By the last census, Legal London comprised 1,513 barristers, 3,418 solicitors, and 772 other lawyers such as advocates and proctors — 5,703 in all — together with 4,340 law clerks and 1,069 law-court officers and stationers, a further 5,409, for a total of 11,112 individuals directly engaged in the law. Allowing for their families, at the period's average of roughly 4.8 persons per household, Legal London's total population came to some 53,638 souls — almost exactly one forty-fourth of the entire metropolis.

Civil Law and Criminal Law

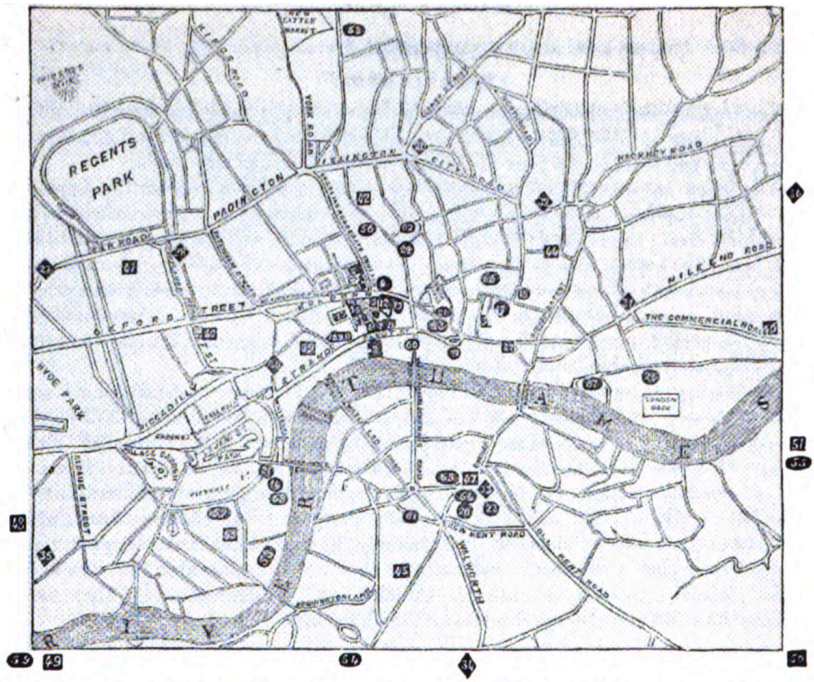
Having catalogued Legal London's people and places, some organizing principle is needed before proceeding further, since a simple list of courts, prisons, and functionaries has no logical shape of its own. The clearest division is into two heads: the institutions and people connected with the administration of the civil law, and those connected with the administration of the criminal law.

Under the civil law fall the Courts of Equity, the Courts of Common Law (both superior and local), the Courts of Bankruptcy and Insolvency, the debtors' prisons, and the ecclesiastical and admiralty courts, together with their various judges, advocates, and clerks. Under the criminal law fall the Criminal Courts and Sessions

Houses, the Police Courts, the Coroners' Courts, and — the subject to which this book is chiefly devoted — the Criminal Prisons of London, together with their governors, turnkeys, and staff. A handful of minor topics, such as the Patent Offices, the Lunacy Commission, and the various Sessions Houses connected with the licensing functions of the Lord Chancellor, sit awkwardly between these two heads, and are treated here, for the sake of convenience, under the criminal head, though their true connection with crime is slight.

Two paths present themselves for the treatment of this material: beginning at the top of the system and working down, or beginning at the bottom and working up. Most systematic writers take the first course, starting with the higher courts of law and descending, by way of the police courts, to the prisons at the very end. This book takes the second course instead, and not from mere caprice: the courts of law operate on fixed terms and sittings, which impose a periodical rather than a continuous character on legal business and make sustained attention to them, at any chosen moment, somewhat arbitrary, whereas a prison, unlike a court, is never out of session. There is also a more practical reason for beginning at the bottom: the more useful and interesting starting point is the institution the ordinary reader knows least about and fears most, rather than the courts and legal offices with which most readers already have at least a passing acquaintance. Accordingly, this account of Legal London's criminal side begins not with the judges or the courts, but with the Criminal Prisons of the Metropolis themselves — the destination, as it happens, toward which every other institution described in this chapter ultimately points.

THE CRIMINAL PRISONS AND PRISON POPULATION OF LONDON



MAP OF THE SUPERIOR LAW COURTS, COUNTY COURTS, SESSIONS HOUSES, POLICE COURTS, AND PRISONS THROUGHOUT LONDON.

The Circles represent Inns of Court and Law Courts; the Diamonds, County Courts; the Squares, Police Courts; and the Ovals, Prisons.

INNS OF COURT.
1. Lincoln's Inn.
2. Temple.
3. Gray's Inn
4. Furnival's Inn.
5. Staple Inn.
6. Serjeant's Inn.
7. Clifford's Inn.
8. Clement's Inn.
9. New Inn.
10. Lyon's Inn.
11. Symond's Inn.
12. Barnard's Inn
13. Thavies' Inn.

LAW COURTS.
14. Westminster Hall.
15. Lincoln's Inn.
16. Rolls Court.
17. Guildhall
18. Bankruptcy.
19. Insolvent Debtors'.
20. Ecclesiastical and Admiralty.
21. Central Criminal Court.
23. Middlesex Sessions House
23. Surrey Sessions House.
24. Westminster Sessions Ho.
25. Tower Liberty Sessions House.
26. Southwark Sessions Ho.

COUNTY COURTS.
27. Marylebone.
28. Bloomsbury.
29. Westminster.
30. Clerkenwell.
31. Whitechapel.
32. Shoreditch.
33. Southwark
34. Lambeth.
35. Brompton.
36. Bow.

POLICE COURTS
37 Mansion House.
38. Guildhall.
39. Bow Street.
40. Marlborough Street.
41. Marylebone.
42. Clerkenwell.
43. Westminster.
44. Worship Street.
45 Lambeth.
46. Thames.
47 Southwark.
48. Hammersmith.
49. Wandsworth.
50. Greenwich
51. Woolwich.

PRISONS.
52. Pentonville.
53. Millbank.
54 Female Convict, Brixton.
55. Hulks, Woolwich.
56. House of Correction.
57. Middlesex House of Correction.
58. City House of Correction, Holloway.
59. Surrey House of Correction.
60. Bridewell Hospital.
61. Bridewell House of Occupation, Saint George's Fields.
62. Middlesex House of Detention.
63. Newgate.
64. Surrey County Gaol.
65. Queen's Bench.
66. Whitecross Street
67. Tower.
68. Strong Room, House of Commons.

Map of the superior law courts, county courts, sessions houses, police courts, and prisons throughout London.

London's places of confinement, taken together, form a bewildering list — from the Tower down to the humblest station-house lock-up, by way of debtors' prisons, sponging-houses, and the state penitentiary. Sorted properly, however, they reduce to just three kinds: political or state prisons, such as the Tower and the strong-

room of the House of Commons; civil or debtors' prisons, such as the Queen's Bench and Whitecross Street; and criminal prisons proper, of which London had some dozen at the time of writing.

No one had previously attempted a systematic classification of these criminal prisons, which were loosely and inconsistently described as “convict” prisons, houses of correction, houses of detention, or bridewells — vague terms that did little to prevent one species of prison being confused with another. Until as recently as 1823, no legal steps had even been taken to separate different classes of prisoner: debtor, pickpocket, burglar, coiner, poacher, highwayman, vagrant, murderer, and prostitute were once routinely huddled together in a single common jail, and even the separation of vagrants and thieves into distinct houses of correction is a comparatively recent invention; separating individual prisoners from one another, rather than merely sorting them into broad classes, is a regulation of still more recent date. Since then, London had moved rapidly toward something like a criminal quarantine system, separating prisoners not merely for punishment but to prevent the moral contagion that mixing hardened and casual offenders was thought to spread — a contagion at least as real, in the view of contemporary reformers, as the spread of typhoid or any other epidemic disease. It is, indeed, one of the more striking features of the age that the old common jail is fast becoming as obsolete as bull-baiting, its single indiscriminate stronghold parcelled out into many distinct places of confinement, in which the reformation of the offender now receives, if anything, more attention than his punishment.

The first and most fundamental division is between prisons for offenders before conviction and prisons for offenders after conviction — a distinction resting on the principle, by then well established, that society has no right to treat a man as a criminal until the law has actually found him to be one. Prisons for the convicted split further into “convict” prisons, holding those sentenced to transportation or penal servitude — Pentonville, Millbank, the Female Convict Prison at Brixton, and the Hulks at Woolwich — and “correctional” prisons for shorter sentences (houses of correction taking sentences of up to two years, bridewells taking sentences of up to three months),

comprising the City House of Correction at Holloway, the Middlesex houses of correction at Coldbath Fields (for adult men) and Tothill Fields (for boys and women), and the Surrey House of Correction at Wandsworth. Prisons for the unconvicted, meanwhile, split into detentional prisons holding those already committed by a magistrate to await trial — the Middlesex House of Detention at Clerkenwell, Newgate, and Horsemonger Lane — and simple lock-ups, holding those merely awaiting a magistrate's decision, such as the cells at the Metropolitan and City police stations.

The number of offenders commonly said to pass through London's prisons each year — about 36,000 — rests on old and unreliable figures. A more careful reckoning, allowing for the many prisoners counted more than once as they moved from police cells to detention and on to a correctional or convict prison, puts the true annual total at around 20,000 individual offenders. At any single moment, by contrast, London's prisons held a far smaller population — roughly 6,000 people, almost exactly the population of the town of Folkestone. A fuller breakdown of prisoners “passing through” the London prisons in a single year put the convict establishments (Pentonville, Millbank, Brixton, and the Hulks) at 5,563 between them; the correctional prisons (the City House of Correction, Coldbath Fields, Tothill Fields, and Surrey) at 22,159; and the detentional prisons (the House of Detention, Newgate, and Horsemonger Lane) at 16,112 — a grand total of 43,834 passing through London's prisons proper, with a further 81,101 passing through the Metropolitan and City police stations, for an overall total of 124,935 across every kind of London lock-up and prison combined. The gross annual cost of London's criminal prisons alone came to some £170,000 — very nearly a third of the £385,000 spent on all the prisons of England and Wales together, a proportion considerably higher than London's own share of the national population, and a fair measure of the sheer concentration of criminal business the capital generates.

THE CHARACTER OF THE LONDON CRIMINALS



Convicts: a male convict at Pentonville Prison and a female convict at Millbank Prison.

The 1837 Report of the Constabulary Commissioners — still, by common consent, the most authoritative study of the subject, drawn from the testimony of the most experienced prison and police authorities of the day — offered a definition of habitual crime that cut through most of the sentimental theorizing on the subject: habitual dishonesty, it found, proceeds neither from ignorance, nor drunkenness, nor poverty, nor overcrowding, nor the temptation of surrounding wealth, but simply from a settled disposition to acquire property with less labour than honest industry requires. The predatory classes, in short, are simply those who prefer, in their own phrase, to "shake a free leg" rather than settle to any continuous employment.

This points to the single most useful distinction in the whole subject of crime: between habitual offenders, who live by crime as a trade, and casual offenders, who break the law only under the pressure of some particular circumstance. Crime itself, properly understood, is only one of three related kinds of transgression — crime being an offence against the social law, vice an offence against the moral law, and sin an offence against the religious law — and theft happens to violate all three simultaneously, since every code, social, moral, and religious alike, agrees in requiring respect for the property of others.

The official statistics of the day, unfortunately, ignore the habitual/casual distinction entirely, grouping offences by their legal category — offences against the person, offences against property (with or without violence), forgery and offences against the currency, and a residual class of "other offences" such as treason, poaching, and perjury — with the unhelpful result that a murderer is filed alongside a bigamist, a sheep-stealer alongside an embezzler, and a political traitor alongside the keeper of a disorderly house. The eminent French statistician M. Guerry offered a marginally more philosophical four-part scheme — crimes against the state, against personal safety, against morals, and against property — and still other writers proposed schemes distinguishing crimes of brutality and malice, of lust and indecency, of shame, of temptation or cupidity, of evil speaking, and of political prejudice. All such classifications, however elaborate, share the same defect: they sort crimes by their target rather than by the character and motive of the person committing them, functioning as little more than a system of criminal mnemonics, and telling us nothing whatsoever about who the criminals actually are or why they offend.

Sorting by cause rather than category, casual crime turns out to consist mainly of murder, assault, arson, bigamy, embezzlement, and treason — offences no one could plausibly make a trade of, since no repeatable method of committing murder or arson as a livelihood is available to anyone. Habitual crime, by contrast, consists of burglary, robbery, poaching, coining, smuggling, and picking pockets — all of them, in effect, skilled trades requiring almost as much apprenticeship, and almost as settled a body of technique passed from

master to novice, as any honest craft. Whether this second, professional category of crime is growing or shrinking from year to year is, in a real sense, the central question of criminal policy — whether the criminal class, considered as a distinct trade-based body of people, is advancing or retreating; casual crime, meanwhile, rises and falls with the pressures of the particular year, and tells us more about economic conditions than about character. It is worth noting that even some technically criminal acts of casual necessity — a slop-worker pawning the materials entrusted to her rather than starve during a bout of illness — belong more properly with the destitute than the criminal, whatever the letter of the law says, since such offenders would gladly work harder for more if the extra labour could actually secure them a living.

Habitual criminals, unlike casual offenders, form a genuinely distinct class — a recognizable type found, in one form or another, in every society from the most to the least civilized: the Hottentots have their "Sonquas" and the Kaffirs their "Fingoes" exactly as England has its "prigs" and its "cadgers." Every society, it seems, produces some members more averse to steady work than the rest, just as it produces some more infirm than the rest, or some more naturally thrifty; and since work is a condition of survival, those unwilling to labour for their own subsistence must necessarily live on the labour of others. The manner in which they do so is precisely what distinguishes one criminal type from the next, and the means by which the criminal classes obtain their living form, in effect, the working system of classification among the criminals themselves.

The professional thieves subdivide with real precision, and each type keeps almost entirely to its own kind, no more likely to mix socially than a barrister with an attorney. The "cracksman," or housebreaker, and the "rampsman," or highway robber, plunder by open violence, and regard the sneak-thief's caution as simple cowardice, being themselves marked by a kind of bulldog indifference to danger where the sneaksman is marked by low, cat-like cunning; the "drummer" plunders by first stupefying a victim, whether by drugging his drink or simply exploiting his drunkenness; the "mobsman" — a comparatively refined and often well-dressed pickpocket, working in a small coordinated gang for cover, and

frequently found at church charity sermons and public entertainments in search of a mark — plunders by manual dexterity; the “sneaksman” plunders by simple stealth, and further divides into those who steal goods (from carts, from shop-fronts, from area railings, from washing-lines) and those who steal only animals — horses, sheep, dogs, or poultry — who form, in effect, a distinct and more rural tribe of their own; and the “shofulman,” or coiner, plunders by counterfeit, supported at one remove by the “fence,” who receives what the others steal, and the “smasher,” who passes the counterfeit coin on to an unsuspecting public.

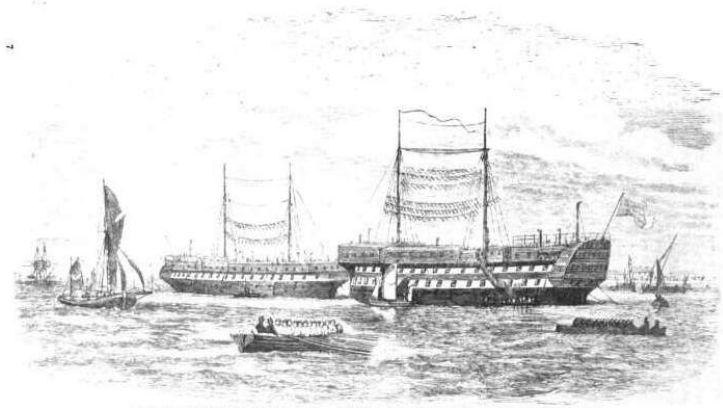
A second broad family lives not by taking what it wants but by persuading others to give it up voluntarily: the “flat-catcher,” who swindles by false pretences, sham insurance offices, and ring-dropping; the “hunter” and “charley pitcher,” who live by rigged games of chance such as the thimble-rig; the “bouncer” and “bester,” who live by intimidating or talking people out of their property through wagers; the “cadger,” who lives by begging and staged sympathy; and the vagrant proper, who lives simply by declaring himself destitute at the workhouse door. Of these, the flat-catchers are marked by genuine shrewdness and a working knowledge of human nature, and the charley pitchers by something closer to a conjuror's sleight of hand; the cadgers, by contrast, are to the family of cheats what the sneaksman is to the family of thieves — the least skilled and least respected of their kind, with the “shallow cove,” who begs by exhibiting himself half-clothed in the street, generally regarded as the most contemptible of all, since the trick requires neither courage, intellect, nor dexterity to carry out.

Prison registers commonly sort inmates into three classes by education: a well-educated first class, drawn mainly from casual offenders such as forgers and embezzlers; a middling second class of pickpockets, coiners, and confidence men; and a largely uneducated third class made up chiefly of low city thieves and agricultural labourers turned sheep-stealers. Reform proves most successful, curiously, at both extremes of this scale, and hardest in the middle class — which is, at the same time, the class most practised at feigning reform when none has actually occurred, precisely the

combination of cunning and moderate education that made its members skilled criminals in the first place.

Age matters more than almost any other single factor. Nationally, people aged fifteen to twenty-five make up only 19.0 percent of the population, yet they account for 48.7 percent of all prisoners in England and Wales, and 49.6 percent in London itself — meaning that a group forming barely a fifth of the population supplies very nearly half of its criminals. This is not a coincidence: fifteen is roughly the age at which a young person's will begins to assert itself against a parent's, and this same transitional period, for those who fall into bad company or possess an unusually reckless temperament, is precisely the period in which a habitually criminal life is most often begun. Boys convicted at this age are, by the general testimony of prison officers, the single most difficult class of prisoner to reform, and supply, disproportionately, the most refractory cases within the prison walls.

THE CONVICT PRISONS AND THE CONVICT POPULATION



The "Defence" hulk and the "Unité" convict hospital ship, off Woolwich.

London's four convict establishments — Pentonville, Millbank, Brixton, and the Hulks at Woolwich — differ almost as much from each other as from the correctional prisons proper, distinct not merely in their locations but in the very character of their construction and the discipline imposed on their inmates. Pentonville held its prisoners

under a modified version of the separate system, keeping men apart from one another for most of the sentence; Millbank ran a mixed system, permitting more contact between prisoners; the Hulks, though the men were arranged into wards, imposed comparatively little restraint on communication between them; and Brixton, reserved for female convicts, followed a regime of its own distinct from all three.

These institutions descend directly from the old system of transportation, whose roots stretch back to an Elizabethan statute for banishing "dangerous rogues and vagabonds," passed in the thirty-ninth year of her reign, and which James I invoked in a letter commanding that a hundred "dissolute persons" be delivered up and shipped to Virginia. Transportation is not mentioned by name in any Act of Parliament until the reign of Charles II, which empowered judges to sentence the moss-troopers of Cumberland and Northumberland to execution or transportation to America for life; the practice was not commonly resorted to, however, until an Act of 1718 gave judges discretionary power to transport felons entitled to benefit of clergy to the American plantations. Transportation to America continued under this and later Acts from 1718 until the outbreak of the War of Independence in 1775 — a policy that drew repeated foreign criticism for the triviality of some of the offences it punished: one gentleman of fortune, a Mr. John Eyre, was transported in November 1771 for stealing a few quires of paper, and the Reverend Dr. Halloran was transported as late as 1818 for forging a frank to avoid a tenpenny postage charge.

After the American colonies closed to transportation, Parliament briefly considered a plan for establishing penitentiaries, but pursued it without much vigour; instead, an Act of 1784 resumed transportation, empowering the King in council to transport offenders to any place beyond the seas, and an order in council two years later fixed on the eastern coast of Australia and its adjacent islands as the future penal colonies. The first fleet of transports sailed for Botany Bay in May 1787, founding the colony of New South Wales the following year. Over the next fifty years, some 100,000 convicts, including 13,000 women, were shipped to the Australian penal colonies — an average of 2,000 a year — until an Act of August 1853 restricted transportation to sentences of fourteen years or more, substituting

terms of penal servitude (four years in place of seven, six years in place of ten) for shorter sentences. The effect on the numbers actually transported was immediate and dramatic: from 2,224 embarked in 1851 and 2,345 in 1852, the figure fell to 700 in 1853, 280 in 1854, and 1,312 in 1855, even as the number of pardons — only 147 in 1851 and 125 in 1852 — rose to 560 in 1853, 1,826 in 1854, and 2,491 in 1855, and the number of prisoners released early on "ticket-of-leave," an item barely recorded in earlier returns, rose to 276 in 1853, 1,801 in 1854, and 2,459 in 1855.

This book takes no position on the relative merits of transportation and penal servitude; its purpose here is simply to establish the scale of the convict population housed, as a direct consequence of this policy shift, within the Metropolis itself. Great Britain's convict population as a whole averaged just over 9,000; London's own convict establishments held upwards of 3,000 — about a third of the national total, or roughly as many people as lived in the town of Epsom — with a further 2,000 to 3,000 fresh convicts received into the London establishments every year. Whatever one's view of transportation, an increasing number of convicted felons were, by the same policy, coming to be retained permanently at home rather than removed from the country, so that within a few years the resident body of convicted felons was bound to swell into a considerable standing population — a point offered here purely as a fact of demography, not as an argument for alarm: it is, in any case, no proper business of a wise nation to treat its overseas colonies as a moral dustbin for the population it does not wish to look at, on the comfortable assumption that removing the refuse of society from under its own nose is the same thing as curing it. It remains a sobering fact, despite the country's schools, prison chaplains, refined systems of penal discipline, growing police force, and ever-increasing number of churches and chapels, that the felon population continues to increase among us as readily as fungus in a rank and fetid atmosphere.

The cost of maintaining this population was considerable. Housing and guarding 8,359 convicts nationally cost close to £219,000 a year — about £26 per head — while the four London establishments alone cost some £86,600 a year, or roughly £24 13s. 2d. per prisoner, covering salaries of officers and staff, rations, uniforms, bedding,

fuel, and the incidental costs of clothing and travel for prisoners on their eventual release. Transporting and maintaining 100,000 convicts in the penal colonies over the full fifty years of the Australian system, by comparison, had cost the country close to £8,000,000 in total — an average of some £28 per convict transported — quite apart from the ongoing cost of the domestic establishments this chapter has just described, a reminder that whichever system the country chose, transportation or penal servitude, the criminal population of Britain was never, in fact, cheap to maintain.

CHAPTER III

Of Prison Discipline

THE PRISONS OF THE OLDEN TIME

Since each of London's prisons follows its own distinct system of discipline, a general reader cannot fairly judge the London prisons without first understanding what those systems are and where they came from. The history of prison reform in this country begins with John Howard, whose 1775 survey, The State of the Prisons in England and Wales, catalogued abuses that were partly physical — bad food, bad ventilation, bad drainage — and partly moral: an almost total absence of classification or separation among inmates, so that every prison doubled as a college for young criminals, in which the juvenile offender received a thorough education in vice from more experienced professors of the trade.

Prisons were, in Howard's day, commonly farmed out to private keepers, who took charge of inmates for an allowance of three or four pence a day and made up the balance of their income from compulsory fees extracted from the prisoners themselves — fees a man had to pay whether he left prison by expiry of sentence, acquittal, or royal pardon, on pain of continued confinement regardless of his legal right to leave. Committal to prison was, in many cases, tantamount to a death sentence by disease, and always meant exposure to extremes of hunger and cold. The disease bred by poor ventilation and worse food became known as jail fever, and killed hundreds every year; it was, on occasion, virulent enough that prisoners brought into the dock carried a contagion that sickened and killed people in the courtroom itself. Men and women shared common day-rooms in some jails; idleness, obscenity, and blasphemy went unchecked in nearly all of them; and the keeper's only real concern was keeping his charges secure and extracting whatever fees their relatives could be persuaded to pay.

This state of affairs persisted astonishingly late. As recently as 1829, Captain Chesterton, newly appointed Governor of Coldbath Fields Prison, found an institution run almost entirely for profit by its

own staff. Nearly every officer, he later wrote in his memoirs, was engaged in some form of extortion, and an entire illicit economy operated within the walls at rates of profit that only the most elastic conscience could sustain: new arrivals were assessed for whatever money or credit they possessed, and a system of compulsory fees — to the turnkey, to a prisoner-appointed "yardsman" who had himself purchased his post for five pounds or more, to a "passage-man" besides — stripped them of it. A prisoner who complained was branded a "nose" and forced to run a gauntlet of his fellow inmates armed with knotted handkerchiefs. When a magistrate visited, a rapid signal ensured he saw nothing but outward order, while every cell concealed a hidden store of tobacco, tea, butter, cheese, and sometimes wine and spirits, and the evenings brought smoking, drinking, singing, and a steady exchange of thievish reminiscence among prisoners sleeping three to a cell. Chesterton recorded overhearing one young man, imprisoned for a theft he blamed on illness rather than character, being mocked by two hardened companions for his scruples; one of them, asked whether he would really rob a poor countryman of his last few shillings, answered without hesitation that he would rob his own father for the same money.

The writer Hepworth Dixon documented conditions of similarly close and corrupting confinement elsewhere in the London prisons — men left through the night in darkness and idleness, packed into such narrow quarters that the ordinary offices of nature had to be performed within sight of one another, in conditions no animal would tolerate without resistance. At Newgate, Dixon found female wards holding, side by side, women of every degree of actual guilt and some who were entirely innocent: he recalled in particular a sixteen-year-old servant girl, freshly arrived from the country, charged by her employer with stealing a brooch, held for weeks before trial in the same room, day and night, as the most hardened women in the prison, with no work, no books beyond a few tracts for which they had no taste, and nothing to fill the time but the telling of their own criminal histories. The evidence against the girl proved weak, and she was acquitted — but Dixon doubted whether the state of mind in which

she left Newgate bore much resemblance to the state in which she had entered it.

The Several Kinds of Prison Discipline

As a remedy for this kind of prison economy, five distinct systems of discipline have, over the years, been proposed and tried: the classification of prisoners; the silent associated system; the separate system; the mixed system; and the mark system. To these must be added the original condition of indiscriminate association just described — sometimes called, not quite affectionately, the "city system," or simply no system at all, whose negative features, in Hepworth Dixon's summary, are no work, no instruction, and no superintendence, and whose positive features are idleness, illicit gambling, filth, unnatural crowding, and the universal corruption of each prisoner by his fellows.

The Classification of Prisoners

The first attempted remedy, classification, sought to prevent further moral contamination by separating prisoners into groups according to the offences with which they were charged or convicted. Left to their preferred company, the Inspectors of Prisons for the Home District observed, depraved prisoners would simply recreate outside association within the jail, turning what ought to be a place of reformation into the best-run academy for crime that could possibly be devised; classification, on this reasoning, required separating the young from the old, novices from practised offenders, and finer degrees of depravity within each of those groups again — distinguishing, in particular, the corrupters from those merely ready to be corrupted.

In practice, however, this approach ran into a difficulty its designers had not foreseen. Colonel Jebb, the Surveyor-General of Prisons, observed that classifying prisoners strictly by the offence of which they happened to be convicted produced strange and unstable groupings, since the same burglar might on one occasion be committed merely for begging, and the same professional London thief for showing fight at a country fair; such prisoners found

themselves housed for months alongside a class of offender entirely unlike their own, sometimes including a simple countryman guilty of nothing worse than a first petty theft. The prison chaplain Mr. Kingsmill observed that offenders shifted constantly between nominal categories — charged with felony one sessions, larceny or assault the next — undermining any real separation of the very bad from the merely unfortunate. The deeper problem, as the Home Inspectors put it, was that degrees of moral guilt are not directly observable, let alone precisely measurable: no two criminals are ever corrupted to exactly the same degree, and even supposing such fine gradations could somehow be identified, placing prisoners of similar depravity together would still allow each to corrupt the other further.

Despite these objections, classification attracted enormous capital investment in prison architecture some twenty or thirty years before the time of writing: a radiating design, with a central observation tower and four to eight wings extending spoke-fashion from it, became the standard model, each wing holding small cells (typically about eight feet by five) alongside common day-rooms where prisoners of the same class could sit together over the fire. As Colonel Jebb wryly noted, had the object been to design a compulsory school of criminal instruction, no better plan could have been devised — since nothing in the system prevented prisoners of a shared trade in crime from spending their leisure hours teaching one another its finer points.

The Silent Associated System

The silent system takes a different approach: rather than sorting prisoners into ever-finer classes, it prohibits all communication between them, by word, look, or sign, under the constant supervision of officers empowered to punish any attempt at contact. Its advocates reasoned that if jail association was the source of contamination, then cutting off communication entirely would remove the problem regardless of how prisoners happened to be grouped; on this logic, minute classification becomes largely unnecessary once silence itself is strictly enforced.

Coldbath Fields Prison carried the system to its fullest extent, introducing it without any organized resistance among 914 prisoners

on a single day in December 1834. Captain Chesterton, who had inherited the old corrupt regime described earlier in this chapter, recorded his heartfelt satisfaction at the change: morals, he felt, finally had some real protection, where before the innocent had simply been handed over to certain ruin. Eighteen years after its introduction, he remained convinced that a properly administered silent system did as much good as any penal measure could realistically achieve.

The objections to the system, however, are serious. It requires, first, an extraordinary number of supervising officers — at Coldbath Fields, 272 warders and a further 218 prisoners appointed as monitors were needed to oversee just 682 inmates, and even this heavy ratio of overseers to prisoners failed to prevent constant infractions, with punishments for talking actually increasing after the system's introduction: in one year alone, 6,794 separate punishments were recorded for this offence. Even where speech itself could be prevented, signalling proved almost impossible to stop: prisoners on the treadwheel, closely watched though they were, communicated by laying fingers against the wheel to signal the length of their sentence, or by pointing to inscriptions carved into the wheel by earlier prisoners recording their own terms. The stooping posture required for picking oakum gave ample cover for extended conversation; mealtimes and exercise periods, despite close supervision, offered similar opportunities, aided by the general noise of shuffling feet; and chapel — described by one chaplain as the true “golden hour” of the prisoner's day — allowed prisoners to hold their books before their faces, apparently absorbed in reading, while carrying on uninterrupted conversation beneath them.

Beyond its practical failures, the silent system carries a deeper cost: it keeps the prisoner's mind perpetually preoccupied not with genuine reflection on his own conduct, but with the constant, ingenious work of evading his overseers and finding ways to communicate regardless — deriving no benefit from religious instruction, which becomes simply another opportunity to outwit the warders, and suffering repeated punishment for offences that are, at bottom, entirely arbitrary. To place human beings together in society and then forbid all intercourse between them, punishing anyone who

yields to what may be the single most powerful of ordinary human impulses — the desire to speak with those among whom we find ourselves — amounts to a form of refined tyranny: unjust in principle, and in practice never fully enforceable in any case.

The Separate System



SEPARATE CELL IN PENTONVILLE PRISON.

WITH HAMMOCK SLUNG FOR SLEEPING, AND LOOM FOR DAY-WORK.

A separate cell at Pentonville Prison, with hammock slung for sleeping and loom for day-work.

Any system of prison discipline must, almost by definition, be associative, separative, or some combination of the two: prisoners may be allowed to associate and communicate freely; or they may be prevented from communicating, either by grouping them into classes or by separating each individual entirely from the rest; or they may be permitted silent association by day and isolated confinement by night, which constitutes the mixed system described further below.

The separate system, as defined by the Surveyor-General of Prisons, confines each individual prisoner to a single cell, serving as both workshop and bedroom, so effectively that he cannot communicate with, or even be recognized by, a fellow prisoner. Its purpose is twofold: not merely to prevent contact with other criminals, whose company experience has shown to be corrupting, but positively to compel the prisoner into sustained communion with his own conscience, since such self-examination is, on the evidence of its advocates, very often the necessary first step toward genuine moral improvement. No other system, its defenders argue, gives a prisoner any real occasion to reconsider his life; the silent system merely occupies his mind in evading detection, without prompting any settled resolution to change.

Under this discipline, as actually practised, the prisoner's cell is fitted for warmth, ventilation, and cleanliness, and his day includes supplied work, access to books, an hour's daily exercise in the open air, and daily attendance at both chapel and, if uneducated, school; he is visited regularly by the governor, chaplain, and other officers, and has means of summoning help in illness or emergency — a regime its administrators were careful to distinguish from mere solitary confinement, which by law could not be enforced for more than a month at a stretch, or three months in any year, and which typically meant simple lock-up on a bread-and-water diet with no further attention paid to the prisoner at all. Under separate confinement, by contrast, a prisoner is kept apart strictly from other criminals, while retaining as much contact with instructors and prison officers as sound administration allows. The Board of Commissioners overseeing Pentonville reported, after several years of operation, that they considered the moral results of the system “without parallel in the history of prison discipline,” and concluded that separating one prisoner from another was the only sound foundation on which a genuine reformatory could be built; Pentonville's own governor, after five years of direct experience, reported his early confidence in the system not merely undiminished but strengthened.

Against this stand two serious objections. The first holds the discipline unwarrantably severe — easily confused, in the public mind, with the dark, punitive solitary confinement of earlier centuries,

a comparison calculated to provoke real revulsion in any humane reader. Colonel Jebb insisted on a sharp legal distinction between the two: the Act that legalized separate confinement specifically required cells of adequate size, light, warmth, and ventilation, with means for the prisoner to summon an officer at any time, together with regular exercise, religious and moral instruction, books, and productive labour — provisions entirely absent from ordinary solitary confinement, which offered none of these safeguards and could be imposed with far less restriction.

The second and more troubling objection is that separate confinement damages prisoners' mental and physical health, forcing the mind to dwell continuously on its own guilt and isolation until, in prisoners of finer feeling and strong family attachment, the accumulated strain becomes more than the constitution can bear — destroying rather than reforming; while in more hardened or vacant natures, the same isolation, deprived of any human sympathy to develop sympathy in return, tends only to deepen indifference and brutality. Critics likened the practice to caging a dangerous animal, accessible only to its keeper, and argued that it violated a fundamental law of social existence, working so directly against nature that no real good could be expected from it.

This is not merely a matter for rhetorical dispute: the surviving records allow the question to be tested directly against the rate of criminal insanity. Across England and Wales generally, the Fifteenth Report of the Home District Prison Inspectors recorded 680 cases of lunacy over eight years among an average prison population of 144,520 — a rate of 5.8 cases per 10,000 prisoners, which may reasonably be taken as the normal background rate for a criminal population under ordinary discipline. Pentonville's own returns for a comparable eight-year period showed 22 cases of insanity among an average of 443 prisoners — a rate of 620 cases per 10,000, or more than ten times the national rate; on the same period's figures, ordinary discipline should have produced only 2 cases at Pentonville rather than 22, while applying Pentonville's own rate nationally would have produced not 680 lunacy cases across the whole prison system but more than 7,000. The same eight-year period at Pentonville also saw 26 cases of milder mental disturbance and 8 suicides. Millbank's

separate-confinement wards, examined independently by the visiting physician Dr. Baly, showed a broadly similar pattern: 65 cases of insanity among 7,393 prisoners over eight years, a rate of 87.5 per 10,000 — still many times the national background rate, though well below Pentonville's own. An early American experiment with solitary confinement at Auburn State Prison, beginning in 1821, produced comparably disastrous results within eighteen months, with the greater number of the convicts selected for the trial afflicted by mental disease.

Even convinced advocates of the system concede that separate confinement carries some genuine tendency to produce insanity, by withdrawing whatever rough psychological support ordinary prisoners drew from one another's company. The chaplain Mr. Burt observed that periods of transition between extremes of feeling are, as a matter of established medical fact, the most psychologically dangerous: a mind inured to steady suffering bears it without much risk, but the sudden onset of severe hardship either overwhelms the mind outright or forces an excessive effort of resistance likely to be followed by collapse and, in some cases, actual derangement — with the earliest months of separate confinement, on this reasoning, the period of greatest danger; a prisoner who survives that initial period intact will generally bear the remainder of his sentence without further difficulty. Prison authorities have responded cautiously but concretely to this evidence: the term of separation at Pentonville was reduced from an original eighteen months to nine, a change Colonel Jebb himself acknowledged as a tacit admission that the original period exceeded what ordinary human nature could bear without real risk of derangement. Kingsmill, Pentonville's own chaplain, agreed that no useful purpose was served by extending separation beyond fifteen to eighteen months, particularly for prisoners with strong family ties, whose sense of isolation from all they loved only intensified with time even as their capacity to benefit from further instruction declined; Jebb, concurring, distinguished carefully between the legitimate use of separate confinement and its abuse through excessive duration, and reported that shortening the period, increasing and varying the daily exercise, and improving cell ventilation had all measurably improved outcomes.

The Mixed System and the Mark System

The mixed system, practised at Millbank, combines the silent and separate methods: prisoners work together in silence during the day and sleep in separate cells by night. In practice it inherits most of the difficulties of the silent system — the same near-impossibility of genuinely preventing communication among prisoners kept in daily proximity — while gaining comparatively little of the benefit the separate system draws from sustained solitary reflection.

The mark system, though not in use in any English prison at the time of writing, deserves brief mention as, in Hepworth Dixon's judgment, the most comprehensive and philosophically interesting scheme of criminal treatment yet proposed. Devised by Captain Maconochie, it replaces a fixed term of imprisonment with a fixed quantity of required labour, measured in "marks" rather than money: instead of a fourteen-year sentence, a prisoner would be assigned a corresponding quantity of work, to be completed in one year or twenty depending entirely on his own industry. Its advocates argue that a labour sentence restores exactly the sense of personal responsibility that a time sentence removes: a prisoner serving a fixed term has no object beyond killing time, and naturally comes to associate time itself with suffering and restraint, with no incentive whatsoever to industry, since idle or industrious, he must serve the same number of months regardless; a labour sentence, by contrast, cultivates the habit of hard work, and that same habit, once it has earned the prisoner his liberty, tends to persist afterward as the means of keeping it. The mark system has so far been tried only on Norfolk Island, among transported convicts generally reckoned among the most thoroughly abandoned criminals on Earth — conditions, Dixon notes, under which almost no system could reasonably be expected to succeed, and under which this one, remarkably, did not fail.

Conclusion: Does Prison Discipline Actually Work?

Such, then, are the several systems that together make up the modern science of penology. Every one of them aims at two related goals: punishment, both as a penalty for the particular offence and as

a deterrent to future offenders, and reformation, aimed at correcting the habits of the offender already before the authorities. Since these are practical goals, they admit of a practical test: if our penal discipline genuinely deters and reforms, the criminal statistics themselves ought to show it.

They do not. Despite the spread of education, the multiplication of churches and chapels, growing ministerial activity across every denomination, and the rapid development of benevolent and religious societies, including home missions and reformatories, crime in England and Wales increased by some 20 percent over the twenty years preceding this account, a period in which population grew by only about 12 percent — crime, in other words, comfortably outpacing the growth of the population it was drawn from, considered over successive ten-year periods, even after allowing for population growth, offending still climbed by several percentage points. Given the vast external apparatus assembled over the same period for improving public morals and instructing the public mind, there is good reason to conclude that the internal economy of our prisons has made only a modest impression on the underlying body of criminals.

This is not, admittedly, the most precise possible test, since a large share of the offenders counted in these totals are first offenders, on whom prison discipline could not yet have had any direct effect one way or the other. The rate of recommittal offers sharper evidence. Figures compiled from the Fifth Report of the Home District Prison Inspectors show total criminal committals fluctuating between roughly 99,000 and 130,000 a year through the 1840s, with recommittals — prisoners already known to the system — consistently running at 30 percent or more of that total, and showing no meaningful improvement across the decade; and a further breakdown reveals that the proportion of habitual offenders recommitted four times or more actually rose, from 6 percent in 1842 to 7.7 percent in 1849. Old “jail-birds,” in short, are neither reformed nor deterred by their experience of prison, but return to it with almost mechanical regularity — evidence, on any fair reading, of some serious and fundamental error in the present penal system.

The most basic error, this book would argue, is that our silent and separate systems have simply substituted one extreme for another.

Having rightly discovered that unrestricted association turned the jail into an academy for young criminals, we swung immediately to the opposite pole, forbidding speech altogether and caging prisoners like animals in a menagerie, each in his own separate den. A taste for extremes belongs to the fanatical rather than the rational mind, and there is perhaps no worse form of bigotry than that of the disciplinarian who sacrifices ordinary common sense to a love of strictness for its own sake. All that discipline genuinely requires is enough supervision to prevent prisoners corrupting one another through vicious conversation; to go further, and forbid all communion whatsoever, is not only to overreach the actual purpose of the restriction but to suppress, quite needlessly, one of the most distinctively human of all faculties — speech itself, which some philosophers rank even above reason as the mark of our nature. The same end the silent system pursues so clumsily could be achieved far more humanely by placing an intelligent officer over each group of prisoners, charged not merely with preventing vicious talk but with actively reading to the men at their work from interesting and elevating books, and steering their conversation into better channels — with any officer whose prisoners grew inattentive properly regarded as having failed in his own duty of selection and delivery, exactly as a dull public speaker, rather than his audience, bears the blame for a restless house.

A second and still more basic flaw runs through every system so far described: each one treats labour itself as a punishment. This directly undermines the goal of reformation, since the one dependable definition of predatory crime — the Constabulary Commissioners' own, requiring neither an educational nor a moralizing theory — is simply a preference for acquiring property with less labour than ordinary industry demands: crime, at bottom, is an aversion to work. Fully ten thousand of the sixteen thousand habitual offenders known to the police at the time were also recorded as having distinctly wandering, unsettled habits of life — a restlessness of body that mirrors an equally genuine restlessness of mind, making it correspondingly difficult for such offenders to fix their attention on any single occupation for long. To sentence a man who already dislikes work to a term of hard labour, in the hope of curing his

dislike of work, is roughly as sound as punishing a child's dislike of medicine with a six-month course of the same medicine: so far from breaking the aversion, it reliably deepens it, confirming exactly the prejudice against honest industry the sentence was meant to cure.

If the aim is genuinely to instil habits of industry, labour must be made a pleasure rather than a scourge, and there are three natural ways of accomplishing this: variety of occupation, which prevents the monotony that exhausts restless minds faster than steadier ones; the cultivation of settled habit, which over time renders even irksome repetitive work not merely tolerable but, eventually, missed in its absence; and, most effective of all, association with some genuine purpose — since it is precisely the presence of a real object, whether feeding one's family or advancing one's own position, that makes the honest majority of the world work energetically, and precisely the absence of any settled purpose that leaves the habitual criminal wandering, purposeless, from one impulse to the next. Any system of prison discipline that hopes to succeed must accordingly abandon both silence and isolation, which run contrary to the basic social nature of human beings, and abandon equally the idea of labour as punishment, seeking instead to give the prisoner some object worth working toward — since, as with every other class of person, no one labours indefinitely for nothing, and criminals will not either. The mark system, whatever its flaws, at least grasps this much: it makes labour the direct means of a prisoner's own liberation. Its chief limitation is that the motive it supplies lasts only as long as the sentence itself, with no particular reason to expect the habit of industry to persist once liberty has actually been regained.

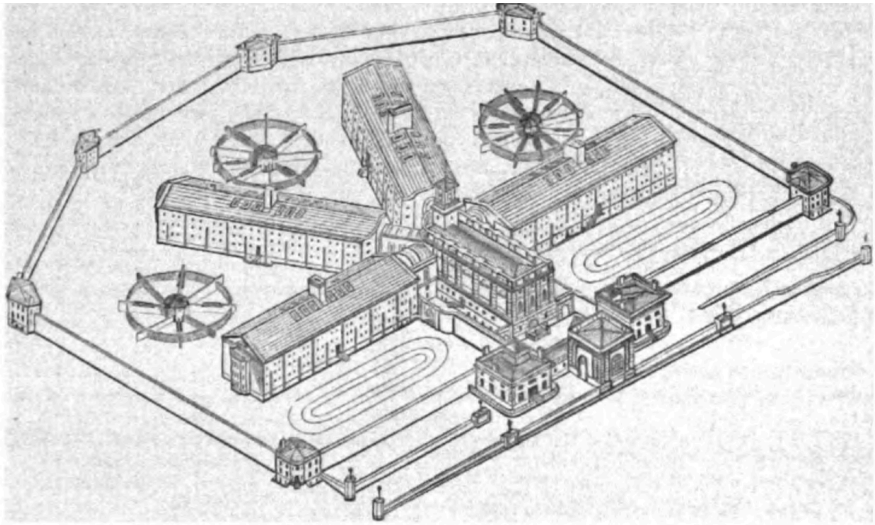
Some readers will object that this account neglects religion, the one force capable of genuinely transforming character. The Reverend Mr. Kingsmill, Pentonville's chaplain, put the religious case as forcefully as anyone: no human punishment, he argued, has ever by itself reformed a man from theft to honesty, or from vice to virtue, and no scheme of prison treatment yet devised can achieve what only divine grace, working through the teaching of scripture, can accomplish. This book does not dispute that such conversions occur, nor that they are, in the fullest sense, acts of grace — but it questions the wisdom, and indeed the piety, of building an entire system of

criminal treatment on the expectation of routine miracles, any more than sound agriculture should be built on the expectation of manna falling from heaven rather than on ordinary ploughing, manuring, and sowing. The plain fact is that the overwhelming majority of honest people keep to honest dealing for entirely worldly reasons — to protect their credit, their reputation, their livelihood — rather than from any conscious act of religious devotion; and a professional thief who can clear five pounds a week by picking pockets, when honest labour might earn him a fifth of that, is most unlikely to be argued out of his trade by preaching alone, however sincerely delivered. Supernatural conversions doubtless occur, but they are the exception rather than the rule, and a system of prison discipline built primarily around producing them will reliably produce, in far greater number, not genuine converts but practised hypocrites. The surer and more honest path is to demonstrate to the criminal, as plainly as the facts allow, that an honest life yields more real and lasting satisfaction, to himself and to those he loves, than a dishonest one ever can — and to build a prison system around making that demonstration convincing, rather than around waiting for grace to arrive unassisted.

CHAPTER IV

Pentonville Prison

APPROACHING THE MODEL PRISON



BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF PENTONVILLE PRISON.
(From a Drawing in the Report of the Surveyor-General of Prisons.)

Bird's-eye view of Pentonville Prison, from a drawing in the Report of the Surveyor-General of Prisons.

Halfway along the New Road, that long thoroughfare running roughly parallel to the Thames from Paddington to the City, stands King's Cross — named for a since-demolished statue of George IV that once stood there. Great Northern trains arrive here beneath twin glass archways; giant public houses and slop-shops selling cheap coats and trousers line the streets, their doorways ringed with sprucely dressed shop-dummies, gloved fingers spread like bunches of radishes, alongside grinning countrymen in wide-awake hats and red plush waistcoats. From this hub, streets radiate outward like spokes from a wheel, and the same loitering crowd of idlers can be found at almost any hour outside the public houses, waiting for a job or a share of some passing stranger's charity.

Heading north-east from King's Cross, past the Regent's Canal and its crowd of factory chimneys, past new suburban terraces each with

its small strip of garden, and beneath the railway viaduct with its signal posts, a large walled building comes into view, its windows barred like an asylum's, fronted by a remarkable portcullis-like gateway jutting out toward the road like a huge stone porch, a small clock tower peeping up behind it. This is Pentonville Prison — known to Londoners simply as "the Model" — standing in the Caledonian Road between Bagnigge Wells and Holloway.

It is a curious coincidence that separate confinement, the system Pentonville was built to test, had its earliest English trial at the House of Correction in Gloucester, championed by Sir George Onesiphorus Paul at the urging of Blackstone and the great prison reformer John Howard. An Act of Parliament authorized the approach in 1778, but the Gloucester experiment was never pursued far enough to yield a clear result. The idea was taken up more seriously in Philadelphia, and in 1834 the prison reformer William Crawford was sent to America to study the system firsthand. His report, and a companion report by fellow prison inspector Whitworth Russell, prompted Lord John Russell, then Home Secretary, to recommend separate confinement to the country's magistrates in 1837. Pentonville was built shortly afterward as a practical trial of the system — the "Model Prison, on the separate system" — intended, if it proved successful, to serve as the pattern for prisons nationwide.

Construction began on 10 April 1840 and finished in 1842, at a cost of some £85,000, to plans by Lieutenant-Colonel Jebb. The prison opened that December under the direction of the Home Secretary, Sir James Graham, who wrote a remarkably candid letter of instruction to the Commissioners appointed to oversee the experiment — a letter worth summarizing at some length, since it captures precisely what Pentonville was meant to achieve. Given the country's oversupply of labour and its harsh rejection of anyone with a criminal record, Graham reasoned, there was little point admitting to Pentonville any prisoner who was not already destined for transportation; a man reformed by the discipline but returned to English society would still be branded a criminal, with poor prospects of an honest living. Every prisoner, therefore, was to enter Pentonville knowing it was the gateway to the penal colonies, and that he was bidding a final farewell to home and family. But from that same day

of entry, Graham wanted each man to understand precisely how much control he retained over his own future: his eighteen months of separate confinement (later reduced, first to twelve months and then to nine) would be a genuine period of probation, in which he would learn a trade under skilled instruction and receive moral and religious teaching, with his conduct throughout directly determining what awaited him on arrival in Van Diemen's Land — immediate freedom on a ticket-of-leave for good behaviour, a restricted probationary pass for indifferent conduct, or unpaid labour in a penal gang for the worst cases. Eighteen months, Graham's medical advisers assured him, was ample time for a man's true character to reveal itself under the discipline; in that time, he wrote, “the real character will be developed … or else the heart will have been hardened, and the case desperate.”

Pentonville's early prisoners, from 1843 to 1848, were carefully selected convicts of good physical constitution. This careful selection lapsed thereafter, and the results showed: the Commissioners' 1848 report noted a marked rise in deaths and cases of insanity, which they attributed frankly to the relaxation of the earlier physical screening. The discipline was modified accordingly, the term of confinement shortened, and by 1852 — following another spike in mental illness — the prison introduced brisk, Wakefield-style exercise in the open air, improved cell ventilation, and a policy of transferring any prisoner showing signs of strain from separate confinement into associated labour. The following year saw not a single removal to Bethlem for insanity, a result the authorities considered decisive vindication of the changes.

It is worth dwelling a little on Sir James Graham's original letter, since so much of what makes Pentonville distinctive as an institution traces directly back to it. Graham was explicit that the discipline was meant to function as genuine probation rather than simple punishment: a man's conduct during his months of separation would be weighed, precisely and consequentially, against three sharply different outcomes on arrival in the colonies. Good conduct earned an immediate ticket-of-leave — freedom in all but name, with the certainty of an honest living from his own labour. Indifferent conduct earned only a restricted probationary pass, a fraction of his earnings withheld and his personal liberty closely limited. And conduct bad



CORRIDOR AT PENTONVILLE PRISON.
(From a Drawing in the Report of the Surveyor-General of Prisons.)

Corridor at Pentonville Prison.

enough to defeat the discipline altogether earned transportation to the harshest of the penal stations, unpaid labour in a probationary gang, and the status of an abject convict with nothing left to hope for. The entire architecture of the prison — its careful record-keeping, its

system of badges and privileges, its emphasis on trade instruction — follows directly from this founding logic: that a convict's future should lie, as far as possible, in his own hands.

As for the building itself: it occupies six acres, behind a curtain wall with a grand entrance gateway designed by the architect Barry, its arches filled with ornamental portcullis-work, an Italianate clock tower rising above the main building. Four wings radiate from a central corridor like the spokes of a half-wheel, each containing 130 cells arranged across three galleries. Each cell measures thirteen feet by seven and a half, nine feet high, fitted with a water closet, a copper wash-basin, a three-legged stool, a table, a shaded gas burner, and a hammock with mattress and blankets for sleeping — each cell said to have cost upwards of £150 to build. An eyelet hole in each door lets the officer on duty observe the interior without entering. The building is heated by hot water from the basement and ventilated through a great shaft in the roof of each wing; it has its own chapel fitted with some four hundred separate stalls, exercising yards for both individual and group use, artesian wells, and its own gasworks — built, in short, according to every refinement contemporary engineering could offer, a building that cost, all told, very nearly as much as a substantial parish church, and considerably more thought in its planning than most.

First Impressions of the Interior

The popular imagination pictures a prison governor as something like a modern Cerberus, and the jailer as grim and pitiless as an officer of the Inquisition, keys jangling at his belt like the clink of fetters. The reality, in our experience, is very different: the executioner Calcraft, whom we once had occasion to meet at Newgate, proved on introduction to be a mild, respectable-looking gentleman we mistook at first for a visiting clergyman — broad-brimmed hat, bushy iron-grey hair, hands resting quietly on the knob of a Malacca cane — and the typical modern prison governor is, more often than not, a person of quiet, almost paternal concern for those in his charge, a far cry from the sadistic turnkey of popular imagination. It is worth pausing on this point, since it says something about the difference between artistic “ideals” and the plainer truth of things: an

idealized engraving of a hangman we once saw gave the man an overhanging brow and small sunken eyes like gun embrasures, a purely imaginative type with almost no relation to any hangman we ever actually met.

Pentonville confirms the pattern entirely. The gate is answered promptly and courteously; the entrance hall is as tidy and welcoming as the lodge of a country estate, complete with the same capacious hooded porter's chair one might expect in a gentleman's hallway; the officer who receives visitors salutes smartly and briskly, replying "Yes, sir" in a soldier's clipped tone, and the passage beyond is cleaner than most private homes — the asphalt floor polished by continual sweeping until it shines, every moulding of the stuccoed walls entirely free of dust, to a standard no private housemaid could hope to match. Visitors sign a register in a small waiting room, its stove polished to the same mirror-like gleam as everything else, before being handed over to a warder for the tour proper.

The interior itself defies every preconception of what a prison should look like. Four long corridors radiate from a central point like the ribs of a half-opened fan, each lined, floor upon floor, three storeys high, with rows of small doors — not unlike the boxes of an opera house stacked one atop another — connected by narrow iron galleries and, halfway down each wing, a light bridge spanning from one side to the other. What strikes a visitor most, though, is not the architecture but the atmosphere: bright, airy, and cheerful rather than gloomy, more reminiscent of the Crystal Palace stripped of its exhibits than of any conventional jail. There are no visible bars — the window frames are simply built of iron, small-paned, serving as both safeguard and sash — and the ventilation is so effective that the air inside, even with some four hundred men confined day and night in their separate cells, feels no less fresh than open countryside.

Each cell, roughly the size of a roomy omnibus interior but taller, is fitted for both living and working: a bright copper basin against one wall, a water closet at the far end, a shaded gas jet, a small stack of shelves holding the prisoner's spoon, plate, mug, and soap, with the rolled hammock and bedding stowed above like a great muff, and a small table and stool, on which we occasionally found a prison-library book left open — on one visit, a volume of moral essays and a recent

issue of a popular weekly journal. A card on the wall records the prisoner's registered number, former occupation, sentence, and date of conviction; a small button, when turned, rings a gong in the corridor outside and flips a metal indicator against the door, so that a warder summoned by the bell knows exactly which cell called him. Two large bright eyelet holes, set into the wall on either side some three feet from the ground, hold the hammock's ropes when it is slung for the night, and a printed notice of the prison's rules and regulations hangs beside the prisoner's card on the opposite wall.

Down each corridor, above the entrance to every arcade, a large painted letter marks the ward, and beside each door a numbered metal indicator lies flat against the wall except when its occupant has rung — the same letters and numbers that, as already noted, have effectively replaced the men's own names for the duration of their sentence.

Names, in fact, cease to exist at Pentonville. Whatever a man was called before conviction — however humble or however distinguished — he becomes, from the moment he enters, simply the occupant of a given corridor, gallery, and cell number: D3, 4, or B2, 10, as the case may be, the number stamped on a small brass badge worn on the breast. Warders address prisoners accordingly, calling out across the gallery, “Now step out there, will you — Number 6!” rather than by any name.

Before Dawn: A Departure for Portsmouth

To understand Pentonville's routine properly requires spending a full day within its walls, from opening to closing — eighteen hours, on the day of our visit, since a batch of convicts was due to leave for the public works at Portsmouth. We had been told the departure was set for a quarter past five in the morning, and left home while the stars still shone in a cold grey sky, walking through streets nearly empty but for a policeman making his rounds, a coffee-stall keeper setting up his cans, a butcher's cart hurrying to market, and the occasional bone-picker sorting through the night's refuse. It was a strange, almost unsettling silence to walk through — a silence broken only by a chimney-sweep's cry at some distant door, or the tramp of an early

workman's boots on the pavement long before we could see him coming.

The figures who did pass, in that half-light, told their trades before their faces were visible: a smith with tools slung in an old basket over one shoulder, a bricklayer carrying his long wooden level and a nail-bag full of trowels, a carpenter in flannel jacket and rolled apron with the end of a saw and jack-plane peeping from his tool-basket, a railway porter hurrying toward King's Cross for the first trains. A tall brewer's drayman in a dirty flushing jacket — always among the first abroad, it seemed — passed us on his way to the brewery, and, some distance behind him, an old woman bent nearly double under a battered shallow basket, making her way toward the Farringdon watercress market, her frayed shawl drawn tight against the cold.

Walking through the cold half-dark, it was hard not to wonder what those thirty-odd men, confined for nine months with no company but prison officers, would give for even half an hour of such a walk themselves — and harder still not to reflect on the perversity that would see many of them return to their old ways almost as soon as they were free again. Some, no doubt, would go straight if society simply stopped treating them as permanent outcasts; others, the evidence suggests, are close to incapable of genuine reform. But even that fact, itself apparently governed by something like a fixed statistical law, seemed to us less a cause for indignation than for a kind of sober pity — a reminder that whatever we do in punishing the guilty, we inevitably punish the innocent alongside them: the families waiting outside the walls.

Reaching the prison ahead of the warders, we sheltered briefly in a coffee-shop nearby before the gate opened and some two dozen officers filed in for the day, checked carefully against the clock, since a fine awaited anyone late. Once inside, a large iron safe was unlocked to reveal twenty-eight bunches of keys, distributed to officers throughout the building; the gas still burned in the corridors, the first blue light of dawn only just visible through the skylights, when the half-past-five bell rang to summon the staff and breakfast for the departing men began its rounds — bread and cocoa carried cell to cell, the little trap in each door opening and shutting with brisk, practised speed.

"You see those clothes and chairs left outside that cell door?" a warder explained as we walked. "Those belong to men who've tried to break out of other prisons — we leave them nothing but a bed and bare walls for the night. That one there, though, is a bricklayer who works out in the grounds; we trust him with nothing but his flannel drawers overnight all the same, since the men are given tools for their work, and a notoriously determined prison-breaker isn't even allowed a tin soup-can, for fear he'll turn the wire rim into a pick-lock. Convicts are remarkably ingenious about such things, sir." At the end of each ward stood a small desk with a "tell-tale" clock, its dial marked with pegs at every quarter-hour; a night officer failing to pull the correct peg at the correct moment left a visible record of neglected duty — one of several small mechanical checks built into the prison's routine.

At a quarter to six, the wake-up bell sounded, followed shortly by "Turn down!" from the chief warder, and a stream of brown-clad convicts poured from their cells and formed up, cards in hand, in the central corridor — among them the Portsmouth-bound men, smiling openly at the prospect of a change after nine months in one place. A second gang, marching in from the southern corridor, drew up briskly behind the first, and the chief warder called the registered number and name of each man from his list, a principal officer checking each card as it was read, before ordering the whole assembly to "face" and march through the glass doors into the entrance hall. Names were called against the roll, and the men marched through to the entrance hall, where warders fitted steel handcuffs to their right wrists and chained ten or a dozen together at a time, the convicts pulling awkwardly against one another like coupled hounds as the party shuffled toward the door, the chain grating with each uneven step.

"Are you pleased to go away, my man?" we asked the nearest prisoner as we watched. "Oh, yes!" he answered in a broad country accent — a sheep-stealer, and, by the near-universal testimony of prison staff, agricultural convicts are among the best-behaved of all the men who pass through their hands; his eyes lit visibly at the thought of open fields again. Another carried a bundle wrapped in a handkerchief. "What have you got there?" an officer demanded. "They're books, sir — hymn-books and tracts the chaplain let me

have," came the meek reply. A warder pointed out one older man in the line: thirty-eight of his forty-seven years, we were told, had been spent in prison.

"Remember, men," the chief warder told them before the doors opened, "the officer travelling with you can speak well of you or ill, and the first question at Portsmouth will be how you behaved on the way down. See you earn a good character — it'll serve you where you're going." Then the gates swung back, and the three waiting omnibuses — ordinary public vehicles of the kind that carry passengers to the Bank every day, a numbered placard pasted over the usual fare-notice — received their chained cargo, an officer entering each to sit near the door and a senior warder riding up on the box of the first "to clear the bridges," as our guide put it, once the chief warder had confirmed the count in each vehicle in turn — "Ten!" called from one, "Twelve!" from another. At the cry of "All right — go on!" the great gates were thrown back, the light of early morning glinting through the squares of the portcullis, and the vehicles clattered away over the stones, prisoners craning at the windows both to look back at the prison and forward to whatever new scene awaited them outside its walls. Not one man in that departing party showed the least sign of regret; every face we saw was, if anything, alight with the simple pleasure of leaving.

It would have been instructive, we could not help thinking, to travel with them the whole way — to watch each face as the train carried them past open fields, rivers, grazing cattle, after nine months walled off from every such ordinary sight. And yet it would likely be sentimental to imagine such men moved exactly as we would be: long confinement and a hard life before it often leave a genuine dullness of feeling, a kind of waking numbness that blunts the finer impressions of the world. Even so, we have seen such men reduced to tears by a chaplain's mention of their own families, and there is no doubting the pure animal delight, at the very least, of a caged creature finally let loose — whatever else may or may not stir in a heart so long shut away from ordinary human contact and beauty. We have watched a dog, chained day and night until it grew half-frantic against its own collar, burst free at last and go bounding and wheeling across open ground, gasping with what could only be called joy; anyone who has

seen that and felt nothing for these men passing out through the same gates into the same free world has, we suspect, a harder heart than the convicts themselves.

Anyone who has lain on a sick-bed for weeks, staring at the same four walls, and felt the ache to be outside again, has felt some faint shadow of what separate confinement must mean to men whose natures are, if anything, more restless and self-willed than most, and whose minds have none of the resources that make solitude bearable for the more fortunate. Consider what it means to have one's whole world reduced to four blank walls, to see no face but a warder's, hear no voice but a command, and be permitted no exercise of will whatsoever — and then consider that the men enduring this are, by the near-universal testimony of those who study them, among the most self-willed of all human types, and the least equipped by education or habit to find any resource in solitude itself. Whatever their crimes, it takes very little imagination to guess how much some of them must suffer under a discipline expressly designed, if imperfectly executed, to press exactly on that weakness.

Cleaning the Prison and the Convicts' Breakfast

By six o'clock the prison had roused itself entirely. At the chief warder's cry of “Unlock!” officers moved rapidly from cell to cell, the click of turning locks echoing down the long corridors like a volley of musket-triggers; doors banged, pails jangled, and within minutes the building hummed with activity. Cleaners, cooks, and bakers were called out by name of trade and dispersed to their duties, while the general body of prisoners scrubbed cell floors, polished the black asphalt corridors, and hearth-stoned the steps of the central hall until they gleamed like biscuit-china — all of it, our guide explained, timed with exacting precision: twelve to fifteen minutes allowed to wash each side of the building, with cleaners on opposite sides of the galleries kept carefully apart in time, so that no communication might pass between them. Each gallery contributed five men per side to the cleaning; each ward, one man to the central corridor; each corridor, four men to sweep below.

Watching from an elevated vantage point our guide found for us, the whole scene took on a strange, almost theatrical quality: long

arcade-like corridors half-fogged with dust thrown up by dozens of sweepers' brooms, warders posted on every mid-air bridge and gallery to keep watch, the combined noise of rattling pails, banging doors, scouring stone, and rumbling trucks blending into a single continuous roar that echoed the length of each tunnel-like wing. “Everything's done to a precise schedule here, sir,” the warder told us; “the moment the clock reaches twenty-five past six, we start unlocking the opposite side of each corridor, and a fresh set of cleaners comes out while the first lot goes back to their cells — that's to stop the two sides working at once, which would make communication between them almost impossible to prevent.” Sure enough, the moment the clock reached the stated time, the first set of cleaners vanished and a second wave emerged with the same rapid, well-drilled efficiency.

The half-past-six bell called the general body of prisoners to their cell labour — looms rattling, shoemakers' hammers tapping, the whole building briefly taking on the character of a large working factory — while a final, remarkably rapid process gathered the dust from every cell: a convict carrying a large tin-lined basket walked ahead of an officer holding a dust-pan, each cell door opened only long enough for its occupant to empty his collected dust into the pan before the door closed again, the whole operation moving faster than it can be described, the corridor ringing continuously with the twang of dust-pans being thrust in and withdrawn one after another. By seven, with a final bell for “double-locking” securing every door and outlet for the sake of security, the warders came thronging down the spiral staircases, one after another, to their own breakfast in the mess-room below, leaving the building briefly and eerily quiet but for the clack of looms and the occasional gong.

Below, in the prison kitchen and bakehouse, the same exacting cleanliness prevailed: sacks of flour, prisoners dusted white to the eyebrows working alongside a single free “master baker,” and bread so good — unfermented, since there was no way to work the sponge overnight, but genuinely fresh — that a German visitor, given a taste, pronounced it better than anything the King of Prussia himself ate, exclaiming “Wunderschön!” in evident astonishment at English prison prodigality. “The allowance for breakfast,” the master cook told us, “is ten ounces of bread and three-quarters of a pint of cocoa,

made with three-quarters of an ounce of the solid flake, two ounces of pure milk, and six drachms of molasses — taste it, sir; the berries are ground here by steam, and the water comes from an artesian well hundreds of feet down, not the Thames, so we can vouch for it being perfectly pure." It struck us as a strange feature of modern civilization that, in an age of watered milk and adulterated bread outside, only the pauper and the convict could be entirely sure of what they were eating — the best porter we ever drank, similarly, was at a parish workhouse, where only the pauper enjoys a truly honest brew of malt and hops.

Dinner, the cook continued, was half a pint of soup, four ounces of boneless meat (beef and mutton on alternate days), five ounces of bread, and a pound of potatoes — two pounds for men working in association; supper, a pint of gruel sweetened with molasses and a further five ounces of bread, for twenty ounces of bread across the day in total. A large chalked board tracked exactly how many rations each ward required, with extras — an egg, two ounces of butter, even fish or jelly — dispensed strictly at the medical officer's order for prisoners in the infirmary. Men under punishment received a starkly different diet: sixteen ounces of bread a day and nothing else but water, a regime the cook estimated could strip three to five pounds from a man in as little as three days, though a stubborn few held out for surprisingly long — one prisoner, we were told, had sworn the day before that no food would pass his lips, only to give in and take his gruel by nightfall. "The belly can tame every man in the end," as the cook put it. "Just dock a man's food, and it hurts him worse than any lash across his back."

The breakfast distribution itself, at half-past seven, was a small marvel of organization: trays of cocoa and bread rose through the central hall on a lifting apparatus, seized by waiting warders and instructors, wheeled along each corridor on small tram-like carriages running along the gallery rails, and served through the trap in each cell door — bread placed on the ledge, the prisoner's mug filled and passed back through, the trap slammed shut — with the whole building's nearly four hundred breakfasts served, floor by floor, in well under ten minutes: as fine an instance of pure division of labour as one could hope to witness.

The Refractory Wards and Prison Punishments

The building falls briefly silent again once breakfast is cleared, until the governor arrives on his morning round, a warder striding ahead of him calling "Governor-r-r!" at each door, prisoners standing rigidly to salute as he passes with a brief "All right! — all right!" before the door bangs shut again. This round eventually leads to the refractory, or "dark," cells in the basement of corridor C — a line of heavy black doors, each turning on its hinge with the hollow sound of a safe, opening onto absolute, total darkness. Stepping inside at the warder's invitation and having the door closed behind us, we found the blackness genuinely oppressive — the eyes straining uselessly for any point of light, the mind, after a few minutes, beginning to manufacture its own imagined terrors out of sheer sensory deprivation. The only furniture was a narrow raised bench with a sloping headpiece, the sole permitted bedding a rug laid over bare wood.

"We have about three or four percent of the prison in some kind of refractory state at any time," a warder told us afterward, "mostly boys, and what we call second-probation men — those sent back from the public works for failing to keep discipline there. The Glasgow boys are about the worst of the lot, in my experience — half Scotch, half Irish, and a bad mixture in my opinion, though I couldn't tell you why exactly. The sheep-stealers and farm labourers, on the other hand, are about the easiest of all to manage. The well-educated first-class men — clerks, forgers, embezzlers — give little trouble either, and the old jail-birds generally settle into the discipline readily enough, since they know there's no use knocking their heads against a wall. It's the boys new to it all who cause us the worst trouble, and it takes a good deal of punishment before their temper breaks."

We saw the same cells twice that day: once at six in the morning, when a boy punished for talking in chapel was let out briefly to wash and fold his bedding before being shut in again without complaint — asked whether he had any complaint to make, he answered simply "none," and a warder flashed his lantern round the walls to check nothing had been damaged before locking him in once more; and once during the governor's formal round, when each of the four men then confined was addressed in turn. "Please release me, sir, and I'll

promise not to do it again," the first pleaded. "We never remit punishment here," the governor answered, and the door closed. A second man showed signs of genuine contrition and was told kindly that he was welcome to it. A third, described to us as "a bad fellow," was serving six days; the fourth had been returned from the public works at Portland as incorrigible, and neither said a word as the doors shut on them again.

Warders had no shortage of stories about the more determined cases. One told us of a batch of forty hardened convicts — "the forty thieves," as the staff nicknamed them — transferred together from the hulks and various public works, some of them sent back before their sentences ended from as far as Gibraltar. One of the men, in chains, was reckoned so dangerous that the governor was warned it would not be safe to trust him with anything but a wooden spoon to eat with. Rather than escalate matters, the governor simply had the man's irons struck off and told the group plainly that they would be treated exactly as well as any other prisoners, provided they kept the same discipline — and the dangerous man's whole character altered as a result, though the staff kept extra officers quietly on standby whenever the group gathered in numbers, such as at chapel, in case of a coordinated escape attempt. In the end, most of the forty left with genuinely good characters, and only a handful were ever punished at all.

A returned convict from Norfolk Island proved harder still to manage. Confined to a refractory cell, he swore, loudly enough for the whole ward to hear, that he would murder the first man who came down to fetch him out, and very nearly made good on the threat, springing at the nearest officer with enough force that only a hurried retreat up the stairs saved the man from losing his nose to the prisoner's teeth. "We knew we could master him easily enough once we had him up in the corridor," one warder told us, "but we couldn't risk our lives getting him up from down there in the first place." The governor's eventual solution was almost comic in its ingenuity: cayenne pepper, burned in a fumigating bellows and blown steadily down into the ward below, until the man, coughing, sneezing, and streaming tears from eyes and nose alike, surrendered without another blow struck, sobbing "like a little child," as the warder put it. He

never tried the same trick again — "one dose of cayenne pepper smoke was quite enough for him, I can assure you."

In earlier years, subduing a genuinely violent prisoner in his own cell had required a small coordinated operation of its own: one officer advancing behind a large leather-covered wicker shield stuffed thick enough to screen his whole body, others following close behind with long padded crutches, not unlike enormous pitchforks, to pin the man's upper body and then his legs against the wall in turn before the rest of the warders closed in to overpower him — a method required, in part, because convicts working as shoemakers are necessarily trusted with knives and hammers for their labour, and occasionally threatened, with every apparent sincerity, to use them on any officer who came too close. "We've done away with all that now," the same warder told us, "for we find a man's much sooner brought to himself by a spell on low diet than by any amount of fetters. Only stop his meat and potatoes, as the cook said to you this morning, and he'll soon give in, I'll warrant you."

We were present, too, when two prisoners were brought before the governor for formal examination — one for refusing to wash and attend chapel, the other for disrupting the service by clapping loudly during prayers. The first, little more than a boy, admitted the charge sullenly and was marched straight back to the dark cell. The second, one of the "Glasgow boys" already mentioned, denied the charge outright despite the reporting officer's certainty; the governor, having heard both sides, sentenced him to three days on punishment diet in the refractory ward, with loss of his good-conduct stripe and removal from the privileged division reserved for well-behaved long-term prisoners. "I'm obliged to support my officers," the governor told us simply, once the boy had gone.

Punishment at Pentonville, though, has its counterpart in reward, and the modern penal wisdom, as one turnkey elsewhere told us, holds that withdrawing privileges — letters, visits, association — achieves far more than any of the old physical cruelties ever did. We once put the question directly to a turnkey at Newgate, standing in the old "press-yard" where prisoners who once refused to plead had been pressed to death under the ancient law: did the modern jailer really hold as much power over his prisoners now as in the days of thumb-

screws, gags, and branding? “I think we have greater power over them, sir,” he answered, “for nowadays we can cut off a man's right to send and receive letters, and stop his friends' visits altogether — and a man feels the loss of those things far more keenly than he'd feel any torture we could put him through.” Accordingly, alongside the reduction to bread and water and the loss of the good-conduct stripe, one of the most severe punishments available at Pentonville is simply the withdrawal of a man's work, forcing him to sit idle in his cell all day — a striking inversion, given that these are men notoriously averse to labour outside prison walls, but for whom work inside becomes, under the pressure of solitary confinement, one of the few available reliefs from monotony. Only prisoners who have earned their stripe through six months of good conduct receive a small labour gratuity; only the very best-conducted, at the time of our visit some 8 percent of the prison population, are permitted to work in association with other prisoners rather than alone — a privilege so highly prized that a return to separate confinement functions, in practice, as a serious punishment in its own right. Only well-conducted prisoners, similarly, are permitted visits from friends or family.

Exercise, Health, and the Convict's Mask

By eight in the morning the prison is at its noisiest and busiest: the bell for morning chapel sends prisoners streaming from their cells throughout the building at once, warders calling “Step out there, step out!” as lines of brown-clad men hurry along every corridor and gallery, each some four or five yards behind the next, the combined noise of feet, slamming doors, rattling iron staircases, and the tolling bell almost overwhelming to a visitor unused to it; the whole prison, holding some four hundred men, takes seven or eight minutes to empty completely, the streaming lines of convicts seeming, from a distance, almost endless. Every prisoner at this hour wears the low-hanging cloth peak of his cap pulled down as a mask, eyes alone visible through two cut holes — a costume that lends the men, on first sight, a strange, almost spectral solemnity, the eyes glinting through the apertures like some phosphoric light shining through the sockets of a skull, quite unlike their ordinary appearance once unmasked in chapel. There is something genuinely striking, before the novelty

wears off, in the tragic solemnity the mask lends even the most ordinary and unremarkable face — nothing vulgar or brutal about the men so disguised, whatever their actual crimes.

Whatever thoughtful purpose the mask originally served — designed, in fairness to its inventors, with real consideration for the men's own shame and future prospects — in practice it strikes a visitor, after the novelty wears off, as somewhat theatrical: since every Pentonville prisoner is bound either for transportation or for public works elsewhere, where no such disguise is used, the effort to prevent later recognition seems largely wasted by the time it might actually matter, given that the very same men will shortly be labouring bare-faced alongside hundreds of fellow convicts at Portsmouth, Woolwich, or Portland.

Exercise begins at the same hour as chapel, with two of the four corridors sent to the yards while the other two attend prayers, the whole prison thus emptied at once but for the sick. Of Pentonville's five exercising yards, two larger ones flank the entrance hall for group exercise, marked out in concentric rings; three smaller wheel-shaped yards, positioned between the radiating wings, allow individual exercise in narrow walled compartments radiating from a central observation post. In the large yards, men take up position along a knotted rope, one man to each knot, and at the command “Forward!” some 130 convicts begin moving briskly around the circles in step, warders calling “Step out, move on!” to any who flag, until “Halt!” and “Face about!” send the whole formation abruptly the other way.

This brisk pace, borrowed from the prison at Wakefield, is deliberate: Colonel Jebb's own reports acknowledge that strict separate confinement requires real precautions against depressing the prisoners' mental and physical energies, and the exercise is designed less as a pleasant airing than as a way of shaking off the torpor of solitary confinement — rousing sluggish circulation the way a sharp dose might rouse a man drugged with opiates. Medical instructions at Pentonville go so far as to authorize physically prompting a listless prisoner into movement if necessary, on the reasoning that vigorous exercise is as much a medical necessity here as any prescribed draught. The prison's own medical returns bear this concern out: of 1,732 cases requiring treatment in a given period, well over half

involved digestive complaints of exactly the kind associated with insufficient exercise and confinement. Whatever the underlying statistics, the men we watched leaving for Portsmouth that morning appeared entirely healthy and in good spirits.

Walking past a detachment of associated convicts at work with barrows and spades in the prison grounds, an officer keeping watch over them, we came in due course to the private exercising yards — each a series of eight narrow, stall-like compartments radiating from a small central watch-house, not unlike the elongated stalls of a stable, reserved for invalids and for refractory or dangerous prisoners kept apart even from the ordinary body of convicts.

Walking later past the smaller private yards, reserved for invalids and for refractory or dangerous prisoners, our guide pointed out, in one narrow enclosure, a red-haired man convicted of murder at Carlisle, whose reprieve had arrived only the Saturday before an execution set for the following Monday; he returned our glance with a hard, appraising stare that seemed, fairly or not, to confirm every assumption his crime invited. In another yard we passed a prisoner of visibly different class and bearing — silver-haired, more refined in feature than the ordinary convict — whose case we chose not to describe further here, both because it forms no part of a decent writer's business to gratify idle curiosity about how a titled man bears prison, and out of some remaining sympathy for the innocent relatives such a case inevitably touches.

By nine, with exercise and chapel finished and the corridors briefly full again as prisoners return to their cells, the day's second great ritual unfolds: the officers' own parade, called to order with “Fall in!” and inspected rank by rank in the central corridor before the day's regulations are read aloud and the men dismissed to their posts. It happened, by coincidence, that our visit fell on a day when a fresh convict transfer from Millbank was also expected — Millbank now serving chiefly as a holding depot for convicts sentenced elsewhere, from which men are drafted on to Pentonville for their probationary term, in place of the old arrangement under which Pentonville prisoners, in the early days of transportation proper, were fitted out in sailors' costume and mustered for direct embarkation to the convict ships.

THE ARRIVAL OF NEW CONVICTS



CHIEF WARDER AT THE PENTONVILLE PRISON. | PRINCIPAL MATRON AT THE FEMALE CONVICT PRISON, BRIXTON.

(From Photographs by Herbert Watkins, 179, Regent Street.

Chief warder at the Pentonville Prison; principal matron at the female convict prison, Brixton.

The new arrivals came by omnibus under guard, chained together as we had seen the departing men chained that morning, dressed in snuff-brown or grey convict suits with the government's telltale red stripe worked into every garment down to the stockings, small bundles of Bibles and hymn-books tied under their arms. Drawn up in rows in the courtyard, they ranged from mere boys to men in their fifties, their faces showing every degree of hardness and mildness one could imagine — some with the unmistakable sharp, watchful look of the practised town thief, others with the broad, open features of a simple agricultural offender who seemed almost bewildered to find himself there at all; it took no great skill in reading character to pick the habitual offender from the merely unlucky, or the plain, broad face of the farm labourer from the sharp, pale look of the seasoned city thief. “That's the youngest boy I've ever seen in this prison,” one warder remarked, pointing to a convict who looked barely fourteen. “No wonder,” the chief warder answered, “I saw three boys just last

night, sleeping in a hole under the railway arch where a man roasts chestnuts by day — it's about the only warm spot around there after dark."

A senior officer from Millbank delivered each man's papers — sentence, court order, and conduct certificate — to the Pentonville authorities, a formal receipt exchanged against the Home Secretary's warrant, before the chains were struck off and the roll called by name for the last time. The prison surgeon then examined each man in turn, however thorough the paperwork already certifying him free of infectious disease: "Are you in good health?" asked of each in succession, most answering yes, though one arrival that day was, in the surgeon's blunt phrase, "a ghastly, featureless spectacle" from advanced syphilis. Of another man, plainly of limited intelligence, the surgeon asked whether he could read. "No, sir, but I know my letters," came the answer. "And he never will know more," the surgeon told us afterward, quietly, "no teaching on earth could take him any further." Asked whether convicts generally struck him as people of inferior understanding, the surgeon answered cautiously that, with exceptions, he considered them on the whole poorly developed — gesturing, as he said it, toward one clear exception in the line: a man of notably intelligent, high-browed appearance (baldness being, oddly, almost unheard of among the convict population generally), who turned out to be a German physician from Berlin, convicted of stealing a portmanteau at a railway station under a false name, and unwilling to identify his family to anyone. The same batch, we learned, included three Frenchmen besides, and the prison already held a Spanish-speaking convict who communicated with the surgeon in a rough dog-Latin.

Once the medical examination was complete, the governor addressed the new arrivals directly — dignified but not unkind, explaining plainly that the prison's rules, including the total prohibition on communication between prisoners, would be enforced without exception, but that good conduct would be rewarded exactly as strictly as bad conduct punished, and that a good character earned at Pentonville would follow and benefit a man wherever he was sent next. He hoped, he told them, that they would spare him the painful duty of punishment and allow him instead the pleasanter one of

reward, so that each might leave with as good a character as his conduct could honestly earn. The chaplain followed with a gentler, more personal address — acknowledging the grief such men brought upon families they could no longer see, urging them toward genuine repentance, and promising that whatever else the world thought of them now, they retained one unfailing advocate in the mercy of God, ready to receive and welcome them still, however completely the rest of the world might have turned away. Several men visibly fought back tears as he spoke; more than one murmured "Bless you, sir" as he left.

The men were then permitted a brief, final period of open conversation — their last chance to speak freely for the next nine months — and we found the reception room afterward loud with the chatter of men talking as eagerly as schoolboys on the last day before term, while an officer collected any letters, keepsakes, or locks of hair they wished kept safe rather than confiscated and destroyed. "Have any of you got letters, or locks of hair, or anything else to give up?" the officer called into the room; "if they're found on you inside, they'll be destroyed." One man produced a folded letter, and the officer noted the owner's name on the back before filing it away; several small paper packets, tied like confectioner's favours, were already waiting in the collection tray from earlier arrivals — evidently a good many men enter Pentonville carrying some small keepsake of exactly this kind.

Then came the preliminary search: each man stripped entirely, made to open his mouth and lift his tongue, raise his arms, bend his head so the roots of his hair could be checked, and finally go down on all fours so the soles of his feet could be examined — precautions warders considered essential, having on past occasions found coins, keys, and even pick-locks concealed in remarkably inventive places. "We can't be too careful, sir," one officer told us, shaking out the pages of a surrendered Bible to check nothing had been slipped between them; silver coin, he added, had more than once turned up hidden inside a man's own mouth. A warm bath followed for each man in turn, then a change into prison flannels; on the far side of the passage, the governor's clerk and an assistant were already at work

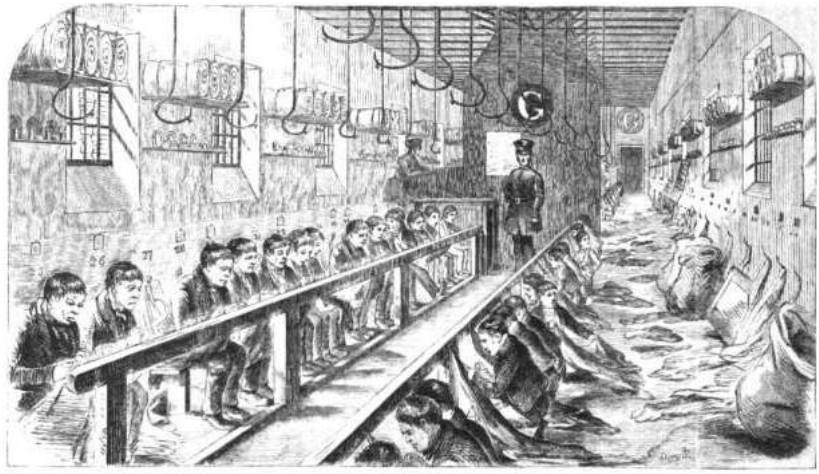
assigning each new arrival his register number and his trade, according mostly to physical build and apparent aptitude.

The youngest boy we had noticed earlier, officially recorded as sixteen though he looked barely fourteen, turned out to have already served twelve separate short sentences and was now beginning four years' penal servitude for stealing a handkerchief worth a shilling; he answered questions with a studied, unconvincing simplicity that seemed always on the verge of breaking into a smirk. Another new arrival, a gardener by trade, answered questions about his history and skills in a brief, timid monotone before being assigned, tentatively, to mat-making. Trades at Pentonville — weaving and mat-making, tailoring, shoemaking, with a handful of carpenters, blacksmiths, cooks, bakers, and grounds labourers besides — are assigned chiefly by physical build, the stronger and broader-shouldered men set to weaving and mat-work, the more slightly built to tailoring.

Pentonville sorts its prisoners along several distinct axes at once: dangerous men and habitual prison-breakers in one category; "second-probation" men returned from public works for indiscipline in another; ordinary first-timers serving out their standard nine months in a third; and the small, privileged class permitted associated labour in a fourth. Separately again, prisoners are graded first, second, or third class by conduct — the largest group, first class, comprising both the well-educated embezzlers and forgers and the more simply honest agricultural men and first offenders together — and, separately still, by education: some 14 percent fully literate and numerate, a further 8 percent moderately so, and fully 80 percent only imperfectly educated at best.

Labour begins at half-past six each morning and continues, with breaks for meals, chapel, and exercise, until seven in the evening — weaving and mat-making chiefly in the lower wards, tailoring on the first tier, shoemaking on the upper, with a small number of carpenters and blacksmiths working in basement workshops, and cooks, bakers, cleaners, and outdoor bricklayers besides. Given the monotony of separate confinement, work at Pentonville functions less as punishment than as genuine relief — hence its withdrawal, described earlier, as one of the prison's more severe penalties.

PRISON WORK AND GRATUITIES



THE WORKSHOP UNDER THE "SILENT SYSTEM" AT MILLBANK PRISON.

The workshop under the "silent system" at Millbank Prison.

"Some men are naturally so averse to any kind of work that they'd rather lie about like pigs than be put to labour," one warder told us. "Threaten to report such a man for idleness and he'll tell you that's exactly what he wants — a bit of rest. But most of the men take a real pride in what they learn to make, even if it's only a pair of shoes or a length of cloth — a man starts to think more of himself the moment he knows he's got a trade at his fingertips that could earn him a living once he's out."

The trade instructors, going cell to cell to check on supplies and progress, showed us genuinely impressive work: hearth-rug-style mats in tasteful patterns, produced by a man only four months into learning the trade — "he's only been four months at mat-making, sir," the trade warder told us, "and yet he's very clever at it now, isn't he?" — spread out on the corridor pavement for our inspection, one on a blue ground with a red and white pattern, the other chocolate-brown with red and blue figures, both worked by the same prisoner and clearly a source of some pride to his instructor. At the shoemaker's corner shop, thick with the smell of leather and stacked with lasts and soles, we were shown a pair of high-lows made by an agricultural labourer who had never put stitch to leather before his sentence, and a

heavier pair of hobnailed convict boots, worth some twelve shillings, made by a farm servant capable, the officer told us, of finishing a full pair inside a single working day despite the prison's constant interruptions to routine. “It's strange,” the warder repeated, “how some men pick up a trade. We always find farm servants learn quickest, simply because they aren't above doing as they're told, unlike some of the well-educated clerks and others we get in here.” A further pair, with patent-leather trim, had been made by a man who arrived a poor hand at the trade and improved steadily under instruction; another, with elastic sides, had been closed by a farm-labouring lad and finished by a proper shoemaker already serving time in the prison.

The scale of production, on the storekeeper's own figures, was considerable: some 50,000 yards of the distinctive red-striped convict cloth woven annually, supplying every government prison in the country — “we not only weave the cloth, sir, we make up the clothes as well,” the storekeeper told us, pulling down bundle after bundle to show us; in 1853 alone the prison's tailors, barely 150 of them, turned out more than 5,000 jackets, 4,000 waistcoats, and nearly 7,000 trousers, besides repairing 4,500 older garments. Roughly 5,000 pairs of boots and shoes were produced in a typical year, alongside some 4,000 patterned mats and rugs — “uncommon tasty things, some of those,” as the storekeeper put it, “such as no regular factory need be ashamed of” — and a further 2,000 of a plainer, coarser sort. Five hundred hammocks with straps and girths complete were made up for the Hulks and for Chatham in a single year, the shoemakers making the frames and the tailors the fittings, alongside thousands of yards of shirting, sheeting, and towelling, and the same distinctive red-striped counterpanes supplied to every convict prison in the country. “A man gets to see his own value once he starts turning out work like that,” the storekeeper told us, with evident pride in his pupils' output; asked how long it typically took a new prisoner to learn a trade, he answered that a man could usually manage simple weaving work within two months, and be fully competent at shoemaking within three, “though some take less time, and some never manage it at all.” Twelve trade instructors work the wards in rotation, each responsible not only for

teaching the men their craft but for reporting on their progress and conduct as part of the ordinary discipline of the place.

A man who has held his good-conduct badge for six months earns a small weekly gratuity — fourpence to eightpence, depending on output — credited to his account and carried forward to whatever institution he moves to next; long-serving men, we were told, sometimes accumulate as much as £20 by the time they are released, along with a proper suit of clothing suited to their former station, so that they might have a fair start on release. The storekeeper showed us some of this "liberty clothing" with evident satisfaction — a genteel-looking coat, of the kind given to former clerks and better-class mechanics, bought in ready-made at around fifteen shillings the suit, quite unlike anything that would mark its wearer as fresh from a convict prison; and, for men who had been labourers, a roll of plain moleskin fustian made up in-house, intended chiefly for those due to be released on ticket-of-leave. "I know a man who did seven years for forgery," one warder added, "got out on ticket-of-leave, and is now earning three pounds a week in a respectable trade. It's remarkable how many ticket-of-leave men do come back to honest life, whatever people may say to the contrary."

From the storerooms we passed into the workshops reserved for the small body of associated prisoners — the well-behaved minority permitted to labour together rather than alone, chosen, our guide explained, almost entirely from men who had never once been formally reported for a breach of discipline, with only occasional medical exceptions made to the rule. In the tailors' cutting-room, three convicts worked amid bales of brown convict cloth: one seated cross-legged on the shop-board in the traditional tailor's fashion, stitching at a waistcoat; two others cutting cloth with shears that gnashed at every snip, the familiar close, faintly scorched smell of a tailor's workroom hanging over the whole room. One of the men, who had formerly cut garments at a large outfitting warehouse, showed us an American sewing machine occasionally used there to stitch the seams of convict trousers. In the weavers' shop nearby, four men prepared warp for a run of prison handkerchiefs amid baskets of red and brown thread and skeins of blue and white yarn — one of them, we were told, a man of "noble family" convicted of forging his employer's signature in a

merchant's office. In the mat-makers' shop, three prisoners fed finished mats through a shearing machine to trim the pile to a uniform length, the air thick with fibre dust by the time the operation was done.

The D division alone among the prison's four wings holds a fourth ward, an underground chamber that once served as the old refractory block before the modification of the separate system opened associated labour to a small number of the best-conducted men — some thirty of them housed there at the time of our visit. The A division, by contrast, houses convicts who have completed at least nine months of strict separation, permitted to work with their cell doors standing open from nine until one and from two until five each day but Sunday — a middle privilege, short of full association, granted as a further step in the graduated system of reward that runs through every part of Pentonville's discipline.

Despite this genuine productivity, the prison remained far from self-supporting: the estimated value of all prisoner labour at Pentonville in 1854 came to some £2,850, against a gross running cost for the establishment of nearly £17,000 — the convicts' labour covering not quite a sixth of the prison's own expense, and worth, by the same reckoning, barely half what their food alone cost to provide.

Closing the Prison for the Night

The remaining routine of the day largely repeats what has already been described. Dinner at one o'clock follows the same distribution method as breakfast, served in divided wooden trays from the kitchen, each portion carefully weighed — the soup, we can vouch from tasting it ourselves, genuinely tasting of meat rather than flour, and infirmary patients allowed a mug of porter alongside whatever chop or fish the surgeon had ordered them. Supper of gruel and bread follows at half-past five, after which two warders pass along each ward, one turning on the gas at each cell and the other lowering the trap of each door to pass in a small lantern for the prisoner to light his own jet.

At six, the day officers muster once more — "Fall in!" and "'Tention!" — for a final roll call and briefing before handing in their keys, all but eight sets collected and locked away in the chief warder's

safe, the remainder held back for the closing rounds at ten; the chief officer reads out, in addition to the usual regulations, the register numbers of any prisoner requiring special watch on account of a known history of attempted escape elsewhere. Work ceases at seven, and from then until nine the prisoners are permitted to read from whatever books they have drawn from the prison library — walking the corridors with our guide, drawing back the small metal screen over each cell's peephole, we found nearly every man seated close to his gas jet, absorbed in a book or periodical, precisely as advertised.

At eight, tools, table, and washing tub are set outside the doors of prisoners under special watch, exactly as at night; the same hour brings the ordinary tools and brooms of every other convict out into the corridor as well, so that the building briefly rings again with a hundred slamming doors, followed at once by the rapid click of the warders double-locking every cell in turn. At a quarter to nine the final bell sends the rest of the prison to bed, cell lights are extinguished, the sailor-style cutlasses worn by the night warders are brought out and laid ready in the central corridor, and the officers don felt overshoes for silent night rounds — by nine, the building is as still as a catacomb, the corridor lights lowered to a dim yellow line along the black pavement, the only sound the faint jangle of a warder's keys and, occasionally, the prison's sole resident cat crossing a corridor unaccompanied by anything human.

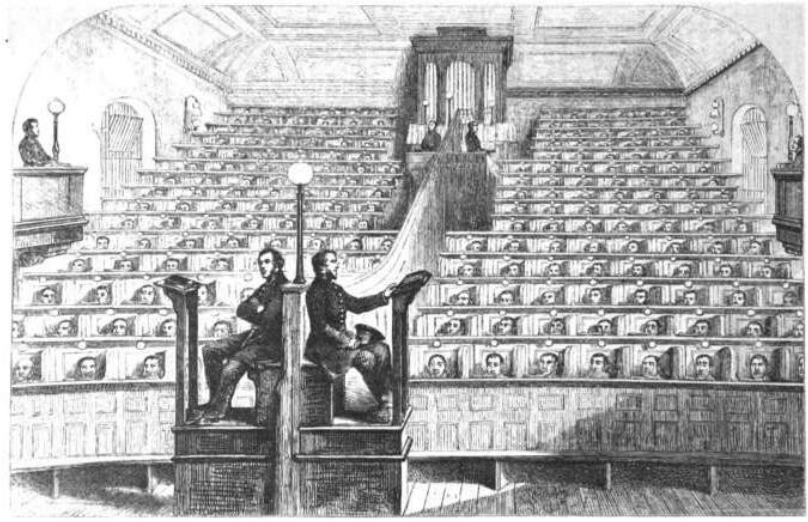
We joined the principal warder for the full nightly inspection — some sixty separate doors and outlets to check across the entire building, cells excepted, within the space of about an hour. First to the warders' own sleeping quarters, where an alarum on the wall, its pendulums marked A, B, C, and D for each division of the prison, stood ready to be rung by the officer on duty in case of trouble; then, by bull's-eye lantern alone, up the dark stairs to the chapel — pitch black, every corner swept by the lantern's beam to be sure no one was concealed there — and on up to the chapel roof itself. Our guides told stories along the way of past escape attempts: one convict named Hackett who had cut a passage through the floor of his chapel stall during divine service and escaped through a small ventilation hole in the wall; another who had cast a key to fit his own cell door from a

scrap of water-pipe, only to be caught when the metal proved too soft to withdraw once turned in the lock.

From the chapel we passed along the corridors to try every gate and side-door leading to the exercise grounds, then down the spiral stairs to the associated ward below, where the principal warder locked each passage door in turn, the bolts sounding with a doubled intensity in the underground quiet. Back above, we checked the remaining exercise-yard exits, then descended again to the basement of corridor C to confirm the carpenters' and blacksmiths' shops secure and their ladders duly chained for the night, before moving on to the refractory ward, where a warder opened the door of the single occupied dark cell. “All right, boy, eh?” he called, the lantern's beam full on the face of the boy huddled in his rug on the wooden couch, who made no answer at all. “He'll be up in the morning,” the other warder said, closing the door again with a deep metallic clang. “He's the only one we've got in tonight.”

We continued through the central corridor's side offices, where warders raked out the last embers of fires used earlier in the day, then up to the infirmary, where two invalid prisoners slept with an infirmary warder seated quietly at their side, and down again through the reception wards, checked corner to corner. Outside in the grounds, the gravel crunching underfoot in the near-total stillness, we passed through the steward's offices, the stores — cloth, leather, and yarn each announcing themselves by smell alone in the dark — the kitchen, still warm and faintly scented with the day's cooking, and the bakehouse, thick with the smell of bread and flour, before a final circuit of the exterior grounds. Here the officers deliberately left their own lamps behind, standing back on the grass to scan every window of the building for any unauthorized light — prisoners, we were told, had on occasion improvised candles from meat fat and thread saved from their work — before trying every external entrance in turn. A final return to the warders' mess, and the last four sets of keys still outstanding were handed over to the night's principal officer for locking away, the fire annihilators in the corner checked, and the prison formally reported to the governor as “all secure” — the whole search, brisk as it was, having taken very nearly an hour to complete.

A SUNDAY MORNING AT PENTONVILLE



THE CHAPEL, ON THE "SEPARATE SYSTEM," IN PENTONVILLE PRISON, DURING DIVINE SERVICE.

The chapel, on the "separate system," in Pentonville Prison, during divine service.

Interesting as an ordinary weekday is at the Model Prison, nothing there matches the strangeness and power of Sunday service in the chapel — a judgment we make after several separate visits, not one. The chapel itself resembles a modest lecture theatre more than a church: no aisles or pillars, simply tiered rows of individual box-like stalls rising toward the back, each holding exactly one prisoner, some 270 in all, with partitions doubling as doors so that men enter and leave without ever passing close to a neighbour — the prisoner seated nearest the wall in each row entering first, the one nearest the centre aisle last, so that no man need cross another's path. Warders occupy raised, elevated seats positioned to look directly down into the stalls nearest them, with two more stationed high beneath the organ to

survey the upper rows, ensuring that no communication passes undetected even here.

The filling of the chapel is itself a small marvel of organization: several hundred men converge from every part of the building at once, each knowing his exact row and seat, and yet the whole process unfolds with barely more noise or disorder than a Quaker meeting, every man in his place within minutes, each closing his own stall door behind him before the next man in line has time to reach the same row. Once seated, only the heads are visible above the stall fronts, each marked with its owner's brass register number on the ledge behind him — rows of faces that, contrary to every stock caricature of the brutal criminal type, run the full range of ordinary human variety, from plainly hard and coarse features to others frank, mild, and entirely unremarkable. Scarcely a bald head is to be seen among them, and only one or two streaked with grey, and those from an evidently different class of prisoner than the general run. Assemble an equivalent number of honest labourers, cabmen, and mechanics from the same social ranks that supply most of our criminals, and a photograph of the two congregations would very likely prove impossible to tell apart — whatever the phrenologists and physiognomists might claim to the contrary.

There is something genuinely moving, whatever one's own faith, in hearing hundreds of voices confessing fault and pleading for mercy together — and something considerably more moving still when those voices belong to men the world has formally cast out for wrongs done to their fellow creatures. Hearing the assembled convicts cry that they had “erred and strayed” like lost sheep, and beg to be allowed to live a better life, we confess the effect on us was considerable enough to bring genuine tears; and the honest self-examination such a scene provokes cuts, if approached seriously, in an uncomfortable direction — for how much of the gap between “us” and “them” truly reflects our own merit, rather than simply the good fortune of a start in life free of the want and temptation that shaped theirs? Did any of us choose the family, the education, or the circumstances that kept us from crime, any more than these men chose the circumstances that led them into it? What, honestly, have we ourselves done or given, out of

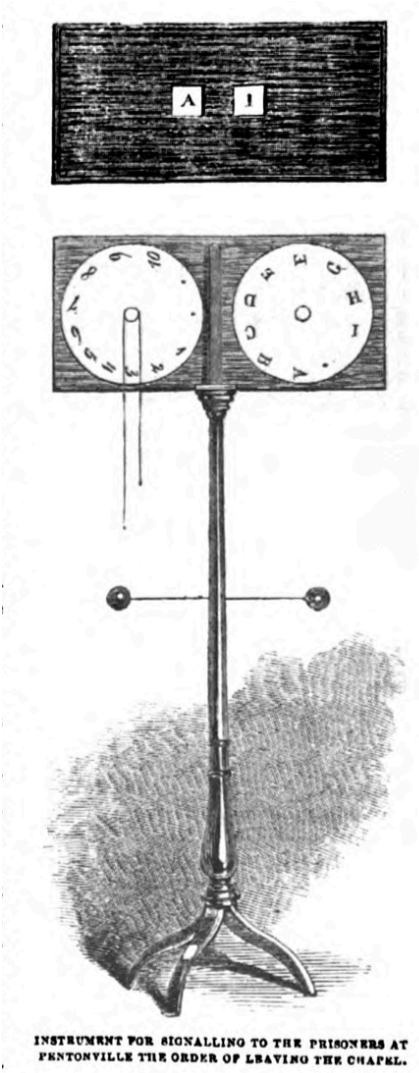
gifts we did nothing to earn, to make their lot, or that of people like them, any less wretched than we found it?

The men's attention during the service is, by every account we could gather, genuine rather than performed — Bibles turned in unison at the reading with a sound like a sudden gust through a forest, hands raised in prayer, eyes fixed on the page throughout the litany's responses, one convict we noted keeping his hands raised and clasped continuously through an entire prayer. On one visit, the assistant chaplain closed his sermon with an account of a father who had walked many miles to reach the graveside of a daughter and her infant, both dead through the daughter's ruin and shame, delaying the burial itself until nightfall so the old man could arrive in time; and who, weeping as the coffin was lowered by torchlight, told the sexton he would rather see her dead in the ground, her child in her arms, than living still in her disgrace. We watched grown, hardened men lean forward from their stalls as the story built, straining to catch every word, and when it ended there was scarcely a dry eye in the chapel — several burying their faces outright, others sobbing openly for the grief they too had brought on some parent of their own.

One convict later put the same sermon into verse of his own, a poem we do not reproduce here but which captured, more plainly than any official report could, exactly the mixture of shame and momentary sincerity such occasions provoke in men otherwise assumed incapable of either.

When the service ends, an ingenious mechanical signal — an oblong board mounted on a tall stand, with two rotating discs behind it showing a letter and a number through small apertures — governs the order of departure, row by row and stall by stall: each row of seats corresponds to a letter, each stall within it to a number, so that as the warder turns first one wheel and then the other, only the men in the currently indicated row and seat rise, pull down their cap-peaks, and leave, clearing the way for the next in sequence. In this way several hundred men empty from the chapel with the same remarkable absence of noise or confusion with which they had entered it, the whole process governed by nothing more than two turning wooden discs and a length of string.

THE MORAL EFFECTS OF THE DISCIPLINE



Instrument for signalling to the prisoners at Pentonville the order of leaving the chapel.

We have already touched on the mental cost of separate confinement at Pentonville: against a national background rate of roughly 0.6 lunacy cases per thousand prisoners, Pentonville's own rate ran at ten times that level in its earliest years — 60 cases in the prison's first thousand admissions, easing to 10 in the second

thousand, 4 in the third, and 9 in the fourth as the discipline was progressively modified. Applied across the whole national prison population, the original Pentonville rate would have produced not the roughly 85 lunacy cases a year the country actually saw, but upward of 850. Credit is due to the authorities for relaxing the discipline as soon as the danger became clear — driving a man mad was never part of any sentence handed down by a court — and the combination of brisker outdoor exercise, better ventilation, and a shortened term of confinement has since cut the rate roughly sixfold. Even so, by the prison's own medical officer's admission, the limits of safety have not yet been fully reached; Pentonville's rate, though vastly improved, still runs well above the national average.

Setting that serious drawback aside, the separate system has real claims to being the most effective form of prison discipline yet devised — more effective than the silent system, whose only advantage is preventing direct communication among prisoners, and more effective than the untested mark system, which ties release to completed labour but has never been shown to make labour genuinely pleasurable to a man who dislikes it. Separate confinement, uniquely among the available systems, both prevents corrupting association more thoroughly than silence alone ever could, and makes ordinary work into a positive relief rather than a burden — precisely because idleness, under solitary confinement, becomes so unbearable that labour is experienced as a genuine mercy. Above all, only separation compels a prisoner into real communion with his own conscience, turning imprisonment into something closer to penance than to mere retribution — exactly the effect described in Sir James Graham's original letter, quoted at the start of this chapter, and exactly the effect the records of Pentonville's own chaplains claim, with real consistency, to have observed.

Sceptics argue that the apparent reformations separate confinement produces are simply temporary depressions of spirit brought on by physical hardship — digestive derangement and low spirits mistaken for genuine remorse, in the spirit of the old joke about mistaking bilious symptoms for piety. Others argue, more cynically still, that professed religious conversion is simply a calculated performance aimed at an early ticket-of-leave, and warders

confirm that prisoners privately mock devout fellow inmates as "Joeys," dropping to their knees the instant they hear the chaplain's step and abandoning the pretence the moment he is gone.

We are inclined, on balance, to take a middle view. Genuine grief over a wasted life can hardly be expected to produce cheerful spirits — depression and remorse naturally feed each other — so it is no real objection to the system that the low spirits separate confinement produces should coincide with, and even help produce, real contrition; that state of humbled reflection is, after all, precisely the necessary precondition for any lasting change of character, whether or not it later proves durable. Criminals, moreover, are by nature creatures of impulse, capable of being moved intensely in the moment while remaining largely incapable of sustained resolve — which is itself, arguably, the central and defining feature of the criminal character. It is entirely consistent with that nature that a man under the pressure of separate confinement should feel and express real sorrow, and mean every word of it at the time, only to be found within months mocking his own earlier weakness and pursuing exactly the course he had renounced. That such relapses occur does not, in itself, prove the earlier contrition to have been false — only that it was, like much else in the criminal temperament, genuine but short-lived.

Genuine and lasting cases do occur, however, and are worth recording alongside the more common failures. One young prisoner, writing shortly before his own departure for Australia, described in his own words the state in which he had entered Pentonville — without religion, morality, or any wish to acquire either, a self-described "child of the Devil" fully given over to mischief — and the gradual change worked in him through instruction and reflection during his sentence: a growing understanding of scripture, a settled love of the very rules of conduct that had once seemed burdensome to him, and a firm intention to keep God's commandments and deal honestly with his fellow men for the rest of his life. He credited his officers with genuine kindness throughout his sentence, and his schoolmasters with teaching him grammar, arithmetic as far as simple algebra, and a smattering of geography and astronomy besides — skills, he noted with evident pride, he had entirely lacked on arrival. His later history, so far as it could be traced, appears to have fully

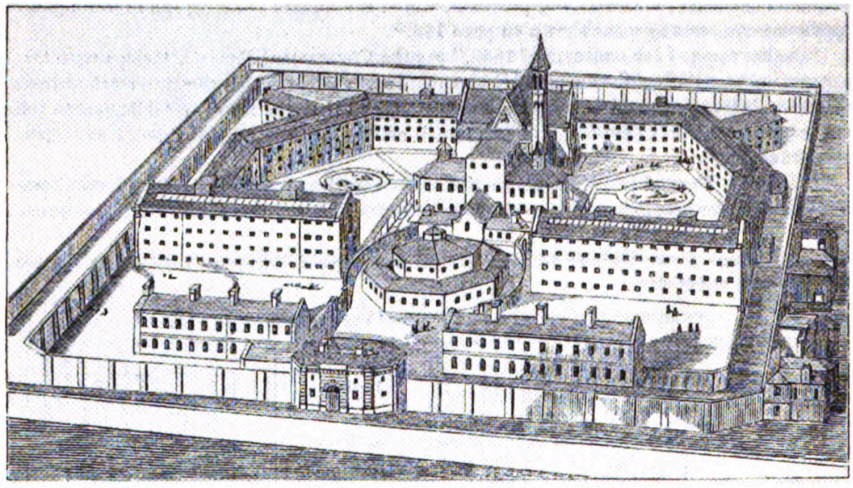
confirmed the sincerity of what he wrote as a boy of twenty-one: he is understood to have returned from the colonies some years later a prosperous and genuinely reformed man, having made a considerable fortune, and to have continued leading exactly the sober, upright life his letter had promised.

Cases like his do not disprove the more common pattern of relapse and performance so much as sit alongside it — a reminder that separate confinement, whatever its very real costs, is at least capable of producing the kind of settled inward change that no amount of mere physical punishment, by itself, has ever reliably achieved. Whether such change comes about through genuine grace, as the chaplains would have it, or through the simple, secular mechanism of forced self-examination stripped of every ordinary distraction, is a question this book does not propose to settle; what the Pentonville records do establish, beyond much reasonable doubt, is that some meaningful fraction of the men who pass through the Model Prison leave it changed in ways that last well beyond the walls — a modest but real return on a system that, as this chapter has also shown, extracts a genuine and sometimes severe cost from the minds of those subjected to it.

CHAPTER V

The Female Convict Prison at Brixton

THE ROAD TO BRIXTON



BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF THE FEMALE CONVICT PRISON AT BRIXTON.

Bird's-eye view of the Female Convict Prison at Brixton.

The Female Convict Prison at Brixton lies some six miles south of Pentonville, on the opposite side of the Thames and, in every practical sense, the opposite side of London's character. It is a pleasant enough drive out to the old House of Correction on Brixton Hill, particularly on a clear spring morning before the day's smoke has thickened the London air — a season announced everywhere along the route by street-sellers crying bunches of violets and sweetbriar, barrows heaped with primroses and trailing musk-plants, and hawkers balancing baskets of rhubarb and spring salad on their heads. Crossing Westminster Bridge before six, with the Houses of Parliament sharp against a clear morning sky and lines of workmen already streaming to their labour, the road passes through a belt of hospitals, asylums, and charitable institutions, then into a suburban

world of small front gardens and semi-detached villas straining to look grander than they are — a district of commercial, evangelical respectability, its gentlemen bound daily for the Stock Exchange, its ladies occupied with district-visiting societies and tract depots — before finally climbing Brixton Hill itself, past taverns marking the start of the City and West End omnibus routes, to a narrow dead-end lane fittingly named Prison Road.

The building at its end was once the Surrey House of Correction, built some sixty years ago in the standard crescent plan of the period — the governor's house at the centre, his drawing-room window commanding every yard — and, in the prison historian Hepworth Dixon's phrase, "par excellence a hard-labour prison": the treadmill itself, now standard equipment at correctional prisons everywhere, was first installed here in 1817, invented by a Mr. Cubitt of Ipswich. Originally built for 175 prisoners in 149 separate cells and 12 double ones, each separate cell a cramped and barely ventilated 360 cubic feet — well under half the size of a Pentonville cell — the prison was nonetheless routinely packed with three prisoners to a cell through a legal quibble that evaded the statutory ban on housing two prisoners together, bedding supplied for two but a third crammed in regardless. The result was chronic overcrowding: of 4,043 people passing through in a single year, 1,085 fell sick, 249 of them with fevers the prison surgeon attributed directly to the overcrowded conditions, despite the site's otherwise healthy situation.

When the Surrey House of Correction relocated to a new prison at Wandsworth, the Brixton building was slated for demolition — until the 1853 Act substituting penal servitude at home for transportation abroad created sudden demand for a dedicated female convict prison. The Surveyor-General purchased the site from the county for £13,000, added two new wings at either end of the old crescent along with a chapel, laundry, and staff housing, and brought the total capacity to around 700: 158 separate cells, 12 punishment cells, 424 separate sleeping cells, and two sets of association rooms holding roughly 120 prisoners between them. The first 75 female convicts, selected from Millbank for good behaviour and familiarity with prison discipline, transferred to the new establishment in November

1853, as Millbank's female wing was gradually run down and its usable fittings transferred across.

Brixton's discipline runs through four stages of steadily loosening restriction: an initial period of separate confinement as probation, followed by "silent association" — working together without speaking — and finally full association and conversation by day, though prisoners still sleep apart at night. The reasoning behind this graduated approach, as the prison authorities themselves explained it, follows directly from the change in policy already described: female convicts under the old transportation system had at least the certainty of eventual, near-total freedom in a colony to reconcile them to strict discipline, however hard; convicts now facing eventual release back into English society need, instead, active and deliberate preparation for the world they will re-enter, hence a system beginning in penal coercion and advancing, by demonstrated good conduct, toward increasing liberty and responsibility.

Concretely, this means four classes: Probation, Third, Second, and First. Every new arrival begins in the Probation class, typically for four months, confined to her cell and permitted no visits. Good conduct promotes her to the Third class, where after two months she may receive visitors; six further months of good conduct in Third class promotes her to Second class, with a badge marked "2," a small weekly gratuity of sixpence to eightpence, and the funds accruing toward her eventual release. A further six months of good conduct in Second class earns promotion to First class, a badge marked "1," and a gratuity rising to eightpence or a shilling a week. Misconduct can demote a prisoner at any stage, though she may regain lost ground more quickly than she earned it the first time; only once a woman has demonstrated genuine trustworthiness is she recommended for release on license. As the prison directors themselves acknowledged, however, good discipline inside the walls solves only part of the problem: without some refuge or asylum to receive a woman on release, the ordinary difficulties facing a former convict trying to return to respectable life are usually enough, on their own, to drive her back to her old company and old ways.

INSIDE THE WALLS



SEPARATE CELL IN THE OLD PART OF THE PRISON AT BRIXTON.

Separate cell in the old part of the prison at Brixton.

Our day at Brixton began shortly after six. The gateway itself is plain and ordinary where Pentonville's is picturesque — a simple old-fashioned arch studded with heavy nails — and beyond it, in place of Pentonville's uniformed male warders, the great majority of the staff are women: matrons in dove-coloured woollen dresses trimmed with white ribbon (for the principal matrons) or deep blue (for ordinary matrons), their large green plaid cloaks worn in the exercise grounds giving the whole institution a character utterly unlike any other prison in London. Even the superintendent's and chaplain's clerks are women, a fact some visitors apparently find faintly comic until they actually witness how capably the entire establishment is run.

The building itself shows little of Pentonville's architectural ambition. At the centre of the courtyard stands a squat octagonal building, once the governor's residence and observation post — an "argus," in the old terminology — now given over to stores and offices. The two newer wings, built onto either horn of the original crescent, consist of long corridors more reminiscent of a narrow railway terminus than a cathedral-like arcade: stoves and tables run down the centre, and the cell doors, packed close together along each gallery, resemble nothing so much as cabins aboard a ship. Despite their comparative plainness next to Pentonville's grander design, these newer corridors feel considerably less gloomy than the older parts of the building.

Those older sections, by contrast, are unmistakably a jail in the old style: long, flattened, tunnel-like passages running the length of each floor, heavy cumbersome cell doors fitted with a large perforated metal disc for spying on the occupant, and walls washed in a lime-white so relentless and uniform that the whole space seems to stretch on without end. The cells themselves resemble whitewashed cellars, unvaulted, lit by a small "long-light" window near the ceiling, fitted with a gas jet, chimney, triangular shelves, a stool, a table, and a hammock slung wall to wall exactly as at Pentonville. The glare of the lime-white walls, we were told, had driven at least one prisoner — a Traveller woman, unaccustomed to any four walls at all, let alone walls of such blinding whiteness — to real violence and evident mental distress during her confinement; it takes little imagination to grasp how someone raised entirely in the open air might suffer under walls that offer the eye no relief whatsoever, not even the blue of the sky.

The newer cells in the east and west wings, smaller but considerably less oppressive, are built of corrugated iron and fitted with the same basic furniture, but their ship-cabin resemblance extends to genuinely superior ventilation — about as good, our guide noted, as circumstances allow. According to the prison's own governing directors, the inmates of Brixton divide sharply into two extremes rather than any real middle ground: the many who are simply good, and the few who are consistently bad, with almost no one settled comfortably in between. Oddly, a woman who has

behaved outrageously for months, seemingly immune to shame, kindness, or punishment alike, will sometimes reform overnight and finish her sentence without a single further reprimand; just as often, a woman promoted all the way to First class, seemingly beyond any real risk, will suddenly break into uncontrollable passion and commit a rapid string of offences, almost as if bent on punishing herself. Among the worst-behaved, the directors noted, were women originally sentenced to transportation just before the law changed — some of whom had reportedly pleaded guilty specifically hoping to be sent abroad — who reacted to the news of prolonged domestic imprisonment instead with a reckless, almost self-destructive despair: destroying their own clothing and bedding, smashing windows, and occasionally threatening staff, though rarely following through, and just as often, among the most difficult women, stepping in to physically protect an officer from another prisoner's violence.

The prison's medical officer, in his 1854 report, offered a further observation worth recording: in his experience, women bear imprisonment considerably worse than men, growing more anxious, restless, and quick to irritation, with markedly less hope of ever regaining their former position in life. Male prisoners, he noted, get at least the relief of moving between institutions over the course of a sentence, and the concrete prospect of eventual outdoor labour on public works to look forward to; women serve out a sentence of uncertain duration in comparatively sedentary work, with far more time and opportunity to dwell on their situation, making an equivalent sentence considerably harder to bear for a woman than for a man. The chaplain's own figures on the women's education and background were equally telling: of 664 prisoners admitted over a roughly year-long period, not one had received more than the most rudimentary education — 104 could not read at all, a further 53 could manage only a few syllables, and 192 read only imperfectly, with the remainder able to read tolerably only because they had learned, or relearned, to do so in prison itself; not a single woman in the entire group counted as even moderately educated. Asked to what they themselves attributed their downfall, 453 of the 664 blamed drink, bad company, or both together; 97 had run away from home or from domestic service; 84 gave various other causes; a small handful — six —

described themselves as suddenly tempted into a single crime; eight cited simple want; and sixteen maintained they were innocent altogether.

A DAY AT BRIXTON

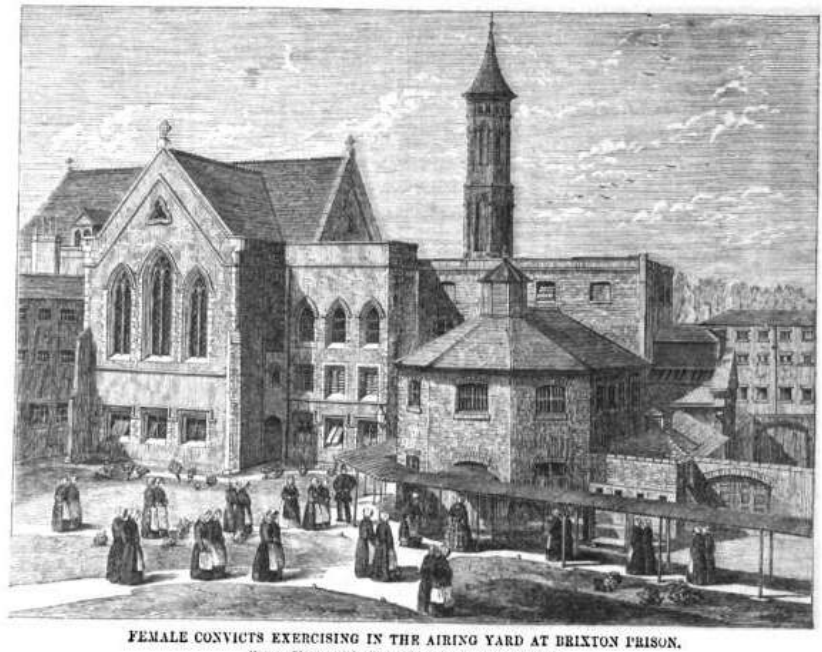
Crossing the gravelled courtyard for our first real look at the prisoners themselves, we were struck by how far their appearance departed from the grim uniforms we had grown used to elsewhere: no brown masks, no grey pauper look, simply a loose claret-brown gown, blue check apron and neckerchief, and a small close white muslin cap not unlike a French nursemaid's — a genuinely handsome combination of colour, each woman's brass register number worn on her arm, with a black-and-white badge marked “1” or “2” for those who had earned promotion. Women working in the laundry wore a plainer light-blue over-dress instead, practical if less becoming.

Our first stop was the bakery, a bright, spacious room adjoining the kitchen where women in light blue worked an enormous mass of dough at a long dresser — kneading it, weighing off portions, and moulding them into loaves under the eye of the one free “master baker” on staff, the dough itself yielding to a woman's press like a great drab feather-bed — followed by the kitchen itself, where cocoa steamed in large coppers ahead of the half-past-seven breakfast hour, dispensed by more prisoners into tin cans not unlike those used by London's pot-boys for carrying porter, and dinner-cans stood ready in trays inscribed with the letters of the wards they were bound for.

We watched the full dinner service later that day, a process handled with real military precision by an almost entirely female staff. At a few minutes before one, loaves were counted into wicker baskets and divided cans of soup, meat, and potatoes loaded onto trays marked by ward; at the stroke of one, matrons entered in rotation, each with four prisoners in tow to carry the trays and bread-baskets off to the wings by handcart. “That's ours!” one officer called as her tray arrived, and a brief grace — shouted the length of the ward by a warder — preceded the meal itself: officers moving cell to cell, opening each door only long enough to pass in bread and a can of soup before locking it again, the whole arcade ringing continuously with opening and closing doors until a final bell called for silence,

any prisoner caught talking afterward liable to be reported. Knives, distributed before the meal, were collected afterward with particular care — counted, locked away, and if even one came up short, no prisoner was released from her cell until every cell had been individually searched and the missing knife recovered. In the infirmary kitchen, meanwhile, sick prisoners fared considerably better than most working women outside the walls: boiled cod, mutton chops, poached eggs, batter pudding, and rice milk, according to what the medical officer had prescribed.

THE EXERCISING YARD



FEMALE CONVICTS EXERCISING IN THE AIRING YARD AT BRIXTON PRISON.
(From a Photograph by Herbert Watkins, 179, Regent Street.)

Female convicts exercising in the airing yard at Brixton Prison.

Brixton's exercise yards, unlike the bare gravel of most prisons, include grass plots and flower beds, and but for the barred, asylum-like windows overlooking them would pass for a perfectly pleasant garden walk. Most prisoners exercise for a full hour, from eight to nine; laundry-women, whose work is already physically demanding, walk for only half that time. Watching some two hundred women

pace round the yard in couples, chattering as freely as a schoolyard, the whole enclosure ringing with conversation, the scene bore a stronger resemblance to a column of charity-school children on parade than to anything resembling a conventional prison exercise yard — the same plain straw bonnets, the same neat, well-kept shoes and stockings.

The matron accompanying us offered a running commentary as different women passed. “That one there, walking with the invalids — she's in for life, for the murder of her own child. You wouldn't think it to look at her, would you? Her conduct here has been excellent throughout; she's as gentle as a lamb, and I do believe she's genuinely sorry.” Of another, approaching with a pleasant smile: “That one's actually one of the worst-tempered girls in the whole prison — you'd never guess it from her face.” A third, in for biting off a man's ear, turned out by the matron's account to be one of the better-behaved women in the prison, the injury inflicted only after considerable provocation. “Most of them are in for thieving,” she added, “and generally speaking they've led thoroughly abandoned lives” — a claim borne out, we had to admit, by the frank, unembarrassed stares several women gave us as they passed, even those whose faces were otherwise almost pretty enough to make the claim hard to credit.

“It's remarkable, the vanity in some of these women,” the matron told us, lowering her voice. “They hate the straw bonnets and will do almost anything to avoid wearing them — they think they look far better in their caps. One woman took the ropes from her own hammock and tied them round the bottom of her skirt to make it look fuller; another stuffed her gown with coal for the same effect. Others have used wire stripped from the dinner cans to stiffen their stays, or made a ring from the tinfoil under a button. I've even known women scrape whitewash powder off the cell walls to whiten their complexion. There's hardly a trick they won't try if we don't watch closely.”

THE CHAPEL AND THE CHAPLAIN

Brixton's chapel is simple but genuinely handsome, its oak roof echoing, in miniature, the hammer-beam and collar-beam construction of Westminster Hall; filled with the convict congregation

in their dark claret gowns and clean white caps, it makes, we confess, a rather touching sight — more touching, if we are honest, than the equivalent scene at Pentonville, where a lingering suspicion of performance rather than genuine feeling tends to blunt the visitor's sympathy. Women are, on the whole, both less practised at simulation than men and naturally more religiously inclined, and hearing this particular congregation's confessions and pleas for mercy, it becomes genuinely difficult to withhold real sympathy — our own presence as a stranger and, but for the chaplain, the only man in the room seemed to draw no attention away from their books whatsoever, their eyes fixed throughout on the chaplain as he spoke, following his discourse with what looked like genuine, rather than performed, attention.

That devotion is easily explained by the relationship we watched unfold between the chaplain and his congregation throughout the day. Long before the service itself, it was clear he was regarded by every woman in the building as a genuine friend rather than merely an official — greeted with visible warmth wherever he walked, consulted on family news, asked after this or that relative by name. His own household shared the same close acquaintance with the prisoners: his children knew the individual histories of many of the women, his sons took a lively interest in their father's work, and his daughter spoke of the "poor fallen women" with real tenderness, delighting in recounting particular cases of genuine reform. We have rarely encountered a finer example of practical Christian charity, quietly and consistently practised, than we found in this one family's daily work at Brixton.

REPORTS, PUNISHMENTS, AND THE REFRACTORY CELLS

We asked, and received, permission from the superintendent, Mrs. Martin, to sit in on her examination of prisoners reported for misconduct that day. The first case, she explained as she waited for the prisoner to be brought in, was "a case of quarrelling and fighting between two of the prisoners — by no means unusual here, I'm sorry to say." The woman herself, of evidently mixed West Indian descent and dressed in the laundry's blue, arrived visibly distressed. "Well, mum," she said, drawing close to the desk, "I couldn't stand it no

longer! She offered to strike me three times before I ever touched a hair of her head, and I know, mum —" "Yes, I know, and I make great allowance for you," the superintendent interrupted gently, cutting off what promised to be a lengthy retelling of the exact insult exchanged. "I shan't punish you until I've looked properly into the matter — you may go back to your work." The woman curtseyed and thanked her.

A second prisoner received considerably less leniency: reported reliably for provoking a quarrel despite her own denial — "I don't like as quarrelling," she insisted — she was punished with the loss of her dinner, the superintendent noting drily that her name appeared in the misconduct book "rather often." Three further women then asked to see the superintendent directly. The first, a young Scottish girl, complained that letters from her mother had been withheld; a quick check with the female clerk revealed she had actually received three letters within the permitted two-month period, more than her entitlement, and she left still muttering that no one had any right to keep her letters from her. "That girl's got ten years and is very excitable," the superintendent remarked once she'd gone. "I sometimes think the women invent grievances simply for the sake of a little variety in their day." The second, an older Scottish woman, asked permission to write to her son, recently returned from the Crimea and posted on to Bombay — permission was granted, the letter collected for forwarding, and the old woman left with repeated grateful curtseys. The third asked about her prospects for a ticket-of-leave, noting that other women promoted alongside her had already been released; assured that her sister would take her in and find her domestic service, the superintendent promised to forward her recommendation at the next opportunity.

"We've sent out upwards of two hundred women on ticket-of-leave," the superintendent told us once the interviews were finished, "and only four have ever come back to us — and even with those four, I can hardly believe all of them were really guilty; the police are dreadfully quick to suspect these women once they're known to have a record. When they do come back, they're generally ashamed beyond words. One, the mother of twins, has tried to take her own life more than once since her return; I had to have her handcuffed only last

night after she started breaking her cell windows and threatening an officer, and I don't mind telling you her state of mind worries me considerably now." She went on, with evident feeling: "When I first came here, it was like arriving on another planet entirely — as a clergyman's wife, I'd met all manner of people, but never anyone quite like these women. Many of them are subject to fits of the most ungovernable fury, very often over nothing at all — a letter that hasn't come, some imagined slight — and they'll work themselves up until the officer arrives and they simply give way entirely. Sometimes they know a fit is coming on and ask to be locked in the refractory ward themselves, before it happens."

"When they're in that state they're genuinely violent," she continued. "Just the other day, one woman broke every window in her cell, tore her bedclothes to ribbons, pulled her bedding apart and scattered the stuffing across the floor, wrenched off the gas fitting, and pulled the iron shelf clean out of the wall — we generally have to call in male officers when they get that far. The worst age for it, in my experience, is somewhere between seventeen and twenty-three; they're like young devils at that age, though I can't speak with much certainty, the work being still new to me. Curiously, a woman who behaves dreadfully in one prison will sometimes behave quite differently after a transfer — a fresh start seems to give some of them the chance to turn over a new leaf, real or imagined. And for all their violence, I find them remarkably sensitive about family — that old Scottish woman's son writes her the most beautiful letters, and sends her every penny he can spare. Most of them have been convicted more than once before, and it's often the very worst characters outside these walls who behave best once they're in here — which makes it correspondingly hard to place them in service once they're released."

The prison surgeon, asked separately whether any physical cause could account for these violent outbursts, found no organic explanation: roughly 4 percent of the whole prison population, some 20 to 24 women out of 600, were subject to such fits, almost invariably between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. Older women, he added, were often just as bad-tempered by nature, if not worse, but broke prison rules far less often as a result. Even at their most furious, he noted, the women rarely injured themselves or those nearby,

generally directing their violence at windows, furniture, and clothing rather than at people. A friend of ours, of an unusually gentle disposition herself, offered what struck us as a genuinely shrewd explanation when we later described these scenes to her: men, being physically stronger, vent their tempers on the people around them; women, lacking that option, vent theirs instead on the tables, chairs, and crockery that cannot fight back — much as some husbands, she noted pointedly, vent their own tempers on wives unable to defend themselves. "Temper," she concluded, "is always cowardly, and wreaks itself only on whatever it believes it can master."

The refractory cells themselves, six in number and situated in the old part of the prison, are not quite fully dark — the window screens are pierced with small holes, so that after a few minutes' adjustment the eye can make out shapes within: the same rough wooden couch and sloping headpiece as elsewhere, and a small air-hole near the ceiling for ventilation. A further set of "hoppered" cells, named for their slanting iron window-screens (shaped, like a mill hopper, to funnel grain), house women prone to breaking or looking out through their windows; several have no glass at all, and one newer design uses a perforated zinc screen to prevent window-breaking altogether. As the prison chaplain summarized the matter in his 1854 report, the punishments recorded may look numerous on paper, but close examination of the misconduct book shows most of them falling on the same small handful of repeat offenders, with the great body of prisoners never punished at all — violent temper being, in his assessment, the single greatest disciplinary problem among female prisoners generally, and a source, he added, of real and needless misery to the women themselves.

The Convict Nursery

Nothing distinguishes Brixton so sharply from every prison built for male convicts as its nursery. Anyone inclined to dismiss sympathy for hereditary criminals as mere sentimentality — anyone who has heard how a habitual thief is very often born among thieves, raised among thieves, taught from infancy by light-fingered relations exactly as honest children are taught virtue, schooled to admire cunning and raw courage as the only real virtues worth having — need only visit

this nursery and watch the small children there clinging to their convict mothers' skirts, or playing with rag dolls on the floor, before deciding whether the same easy dismissal still holds. What future realistically awaits children whose first years are spent inside prison walls? Will society extend them, in adulthood, anything like the same chance at an honest life it grants children born under happier circumstances — or will the same prejudice that condemns their mothers simply be inherited alongside everything else, denying these children, in practice, the very means of proving that honesty really is the best policy?

The matron introduced us to the children one by one. Little Eliza, not yet two and a half, born in York prison, buried her face against her mother's skirts and shrank further away the closer we came, long accustomed to seeing no male face but the chaplain's and the surgeon's. Jeanie, nearly two and a half, had been born in Glasgow prison to an unmarried mother serving four years. Sarah, a pale, sickly seven-month-old struggling with teething, had been born at Brixton itself; her mother, serving four years, was married to a private in the Fusilier Guards who had not written since her conviction. A boy named Thomas, born at Brixton in February of that year, had an unmarried mother serving four years. Martha, a fair-haired, apple-cheeked two-year-old asleep in her cot, had been born in Lincoln Castle prison to an unmarried mother serving ten years' transportation, with more than seven years still remaining. Annie, a laughing, flaxen-haired toddler of just over two, born in Lewes jail, clung to her unmarried mother's finger as she tottered across the floor.

The chaplain arrived partway through our visit, and several of the children toddled straight toward him to be lifted and kissed in turn — clearly a familiar and welcome presence. “I saw Tommy's mother the other day,” he told one of the women, of a former prisoner already released; “she's doing very nicely, though Tommy's been a little poorly. I hope to find her another situation soon.” He showed us the nursery's simple breakfast — a pint of milk for each child, tea for the mothers — and we learned that the framed pictures on the nursery walls, and later a set of new frocks the mothers were busy sewing for the children, had all been gifts from the chaplain's own family.

The chaplain told us later that the nursery had once held as many as thirty children, until the Home Secretary restricted admission to children actually born at Brixton itself; a child born elsewhere before its mother's transfer is now sent instead to the parish workhouse. No child has ever remained past the age of four, though at Millbank, under the old arrangement, one child kept in prison long enough eventually called a horse a cat on finally being let outside — a detail the chaplain's own children, who took a four-year-old former nursery resident along to Sunday school for exactly this reason, found by turns funny and quietly troubling: the same child, taken out onto an ordinary road and shown a passing horse, exclaimed only, “Look at that great big doggie.” There is, we came away convinced, no better place to learn a certain kind of practical charity and humility than the convict nursery at Brixton.

The Delivery of Letters

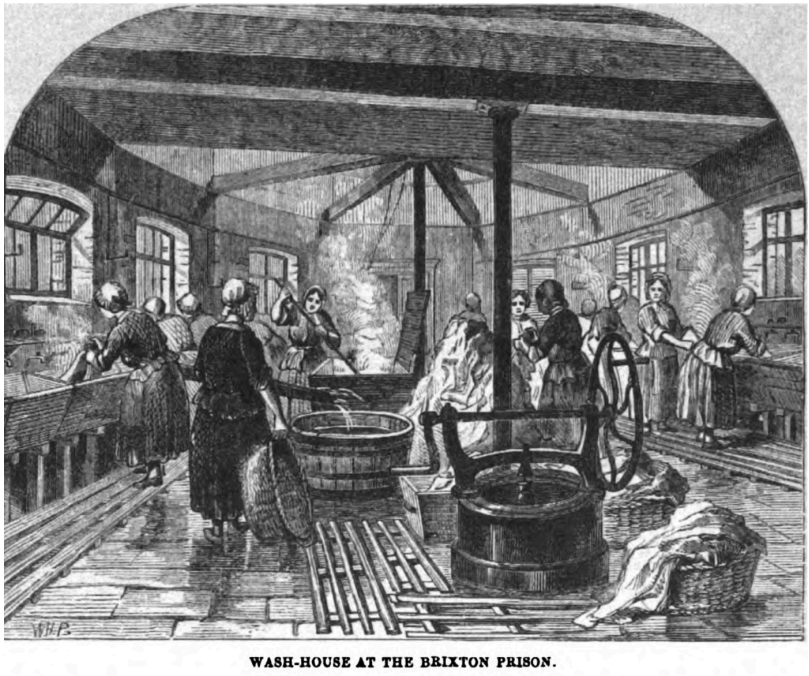
A letter means more to a woman prisoner than to a man, if only because women's correspondence tends to carry affection rather than mere business, and the mere sight of a familiar hand on an envelope can set off real and immediate emotion. Late in the day of our visit, the chaplain's clerk — not a solemn gentleman in dark clothes, as the title might suggest, but a cheerful young woman who combines the clerk's duties with those of the prison's postal carrier — invited us to accompany her on her rounds with a bundle of letters. “It's one of the pleasant duties here, sir,” she told us; “you've no idea how eagerly the poor things wait for their post. Day after day they ask me to be sure and bring one soon, as if I could make the letters come any faster than the post itself allows.”

At the first cell, she called the prisoner's name through the door and slid the letter underneath; a moment later came an unmistakable cry of delight, followed by the sound of paper tearing open and a woman half-reading aloud to herself in evident excitement. At the next cell, a woman named Sheridan answered almost before her name was fully spoken, as though she had somehow anticipated the visit; a simple, heartfelt “Oh, thank you, mum!” followed the letter under the door. A third recipient, found working in the laundry, tucked her letter straight into her dress rather than open it in company, retreating to the

far end of the wash-house to read it in private. “I never deliver letters to the infirmary myself,” the clerk told us as we finished the round there, handing the last letter to the head nurse instead; “I don't always know the state of health the patients are in, and I'm afraid of exciting them too much.”

The value these women place on correspondence shows in smaller ways too: scarcely a cell lacks some homemade fabric letter-pouch, fashioned like a large watch-pocket, in which a woman's small store of letters is kept and, we were assured, reread perhaps a hundred times over in moments of loneliness — treasured, in every meaningful sense, like ready money.

FEMALE CONVICT LABOUR



WASH-HOUSE AT THE BRIXTON PRISON.

Wash-house at the Brixton Prison.

Work at Brixton naturally differs from the trades practised at Pentonville or the hulks: tailoring gives way to shirt-making, flannel-hemming, and stay-stitching, and the arsenal or dockyard labour of male convicts gives way to the laundry. The laundry itself is a

substantial operation in its own right: women in light-blue check stand at wooden troughs scrubbing flannels against grooved washing-boards, the trough-tops white with suds, while two women turn the handle of a centrifugal wringing machine to drain newly washed linen; a large steam-heated boiler and tubs of wet sheets and blankets complete a scene thick with steam and, by the day's end, floors as wet as a Dutch street on washing day. The drying room upstairs holds an enormous rack, drawn out from what looks like a huge press, hung with unbleached towels and blankets, a blast of hot air rushing out the moment its door opens; the ironing room beyond announces itself by the smell of scorched flannel alone, gas-heated irons (too hot in summer for the usual coal stoves) tapping steadily against their metal rests as women in clean white aprons work at a long blanketed dresser, finished linen stacked in baskets nearby, folded to look almost like moulded snow.

From eleven until noon, women housed in the wings sew in complete silence at their cell doors — a genuinely striking sight, some two hundred women ranged along three tiers of gallery, all dressed identically in white cap and claret gown, working in total quiet broken only by the occasional rap of a matron's hammer against a stove and a sharp "Silence there! Keep silence, women!" directed at any pair caught whispering. Each woman rose and curtseyed as we passed down the ward examining their work: some making flannels, some shirts ("we make all the shirts for Portland, Pentonville, and Millbank," the matron told us, along with a substantial contract for a well-known outfitter — hardly surprising, we could not help thinking, that honest seamstresses struggle to compete against workers who pay no rent and buy no food). One woman, serving a life sentence, worked at delicate open embroidery; another produced a crochet collar so finely raised in pattern that it looked carved from ivory rather than worked in cotton; a third, evidently of better birth than her fellow prisoners, cut a dress pattern for one of the matrons. "That one's a genuinely beautiful worker," our guide told us of a woman finishing an elaborate crochet sleeve, light and rich as point lace — "it's taken me nearly three weeks," the prisoner herself said, "but then I've a room to clean, and chapel twice a day besides."

EVENING AT BRIXTON



FEMALE CONVICTS AT WORK, DURING THE SILENT HOUR, IN BRIXTON PRISON.
(From a Photograph by Herbert Watkins, 179, Regent Street.)

Female convicts at work, during the silent hour, in Brixton Prison.

From seven until eight in the evening, the same silent work continues, though now within individual cells rather than along the gallery; the chaplain made his own round of the building at this hour, prisoners in the lower cells rising to curtsey as he passed while those above leaned out to watch. Passing later through the older part of the building, gently sliding back each cell's inspection plate to observe the occupants unnoticed, we found every woman either working or reading — not one idling.

The matron was particularly keen for us to witness what happens at precisely eight o'clock in the west wing, when silence gives way, all at once, to open conversation. We waited in a corridor so still, as

our guide put it, that “no one would believe there were a hundred and ninety-nine women at work within it” — heads visible here and there craning to check the corridor clock — until the first stroke of eight sent every woman pouring from her cell at once, stool in hand, to sit in pairs between doorways and begin talking rapidly, lamps set on the pavement at their feet. The transformation was so sudden and complete that it looked more like a piece of stage business than ordinary prison routine, the silence of a moment before replaced instantly by the combined chatter of two hundred voices — evidence, if any were needed, of just how real a restraint the preceding silence had actually been.

Shortly afterward came the collection of sewing scissors, strung one by one onto a large wire loop like herrings on a rush and locked away for the night, amid continued tapping from the matrons' hammers and calls of “You're talking too loud, women — make less noise there!” The west wing then continued in open conversation until bedtime; the east wing, by contrast, observes a further quarter-hour of required silence before the bell. Returning to the east wing just as its own bell began ringing, we found the arcade full of shifting stools as women who had been sitting together retreated instead to sit alone just inside their own doorways, reading until the silence became total again — broken finally by the prison's outer bell, at which every woman rose at once, gathered her stool, and withdrew into her cell, doors closing in a single ringing volley down the length of the corridor. Within minutes the principal matron was making her own round, double-locking every door in person.

It would be wrong to close this account without directly praising the manner in which every woman on Brixton's staff, from the superintendent down to the young clerk who delivers the letters, carries out her work — with a gentleness that in no way undermines its effectiveness. We left Brixton with a genuinely high opinion of the female authorities' conduct toward the women in their charge; discipline here is managed, on the whole, more feelingly and with no less real effect than in any of the male establishments this book has so far described — the same qualities that make a good nurse proving, evidently, just as valuable in a prison matron.

CHAPTER VI

The Hulks at Woolwich

APPROACHING THE HULKS

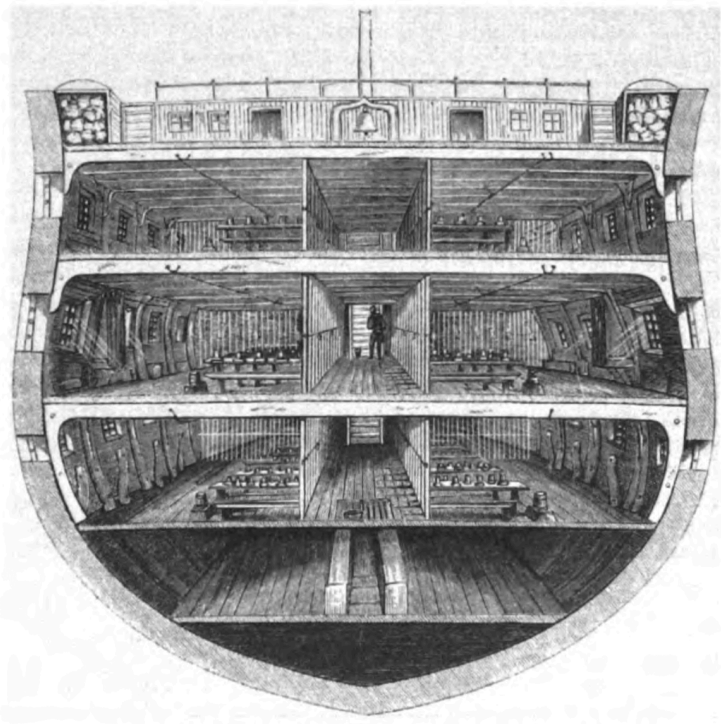
Half an hour's journey along the North Kent Railway, past the rising meadows near Charlton and Blackheath and through a long dark tunnel, deposits the traveller within five minutes' walk of the Dockyard gates at Woolwich. A public house called The Warrior, its gaudy sign visible from the station, announces the neighbourhood's business before anything else does — that, and the lazy men lounging in doorways in cotton-velvet waistcoats, the crowds of grubby children, the remarkably cheap shops selling goods of every description, and street after street of small houses whose parlour windows advertise the trades of dock labourers' wives. Opposite the Dockyard entrance stands another aptly named tavern, The Old Sheer Hulk, before the road passes the high dark yard walls, lined with little shops and beer-houses, toward the arsenal. From the churchyard on the rise, crowded with graves half-hidden in uncut grass, the river comes into view for the first time, with the flat Essex marshes beyond, and directly opposite the yard rises the bulky black-and-white hull of the Warrior — a hulk the authorities themselves say can barely hold together — her bare spars reduced to nothing more than clothes-props for the convicts aboard, an odd, stationary contrast to the light steamers and store-laden sloops bound for Sheerness or Portsmouth that pass beneath her stern like summer flies on the water.

Further along, past shop windows full of tea-things and a theatre bill advertising a melodrama called The Chain of Crime, or, The Inn on Hounslow Heath, the road reaches the arsenal gates, guarded by several stern policemen and a long gun pointed directly through the portal, with a double row of women selling the freshest and reddest radishes to the workmen who will shortly stream out for their midday break. Inside the gate, a visitor gives name, address, and profession at a small lodge before being directed to the water's edge, where a policeman hails the hulk on the visitor's behalf. From the flagstaff near the arsenal pier, past groves of tumbled wheels and great

buildings breathing steam and firelight, the Defence and the Unité — moored head to head, their decks crowded with hammock-houses, their portholes barred, convict linen strung between their stunted masts — present a suitably sombre picture against the marsh mist, with the Warrior and the small washing-hulk Sulphur visible nearly a mile further down the river.

A signal from the shore brings a long gig, rowed by four convicts in brown dress and glazed hats, across to collect the visitor, one of the crew laying a small mat over the cushioned seat as he steps aboard; the convict crew handle the boat with real precision, obeying the officer's orders exactly, and within a few minutes the visitor is aboard and being shown, past a warder whose heavy bunch of keys jangles at every step, to the governor's drawing-room — a genuinely pleasant cabin, with a fine view of the river through the stern windows.

THE HISTORY OF THE HULKS



SECTIONAL VIEW OF THE INTERIOR OF THE "DEFENCE" HULK.

Sectional view of the interior of the "Defence" hulk.

Converting old ships into prisons began when the American War of Independence made transportation to the colonies briefly impossible, offering an immediate if temporary relief to overcrowded jails; every writer on prison discipline since has condemned the practice, even as it persisted for the better part of a century. The old East Indiaman Justitia and the frigate Censor were the first English floating prisons, and though the scheme was criticized from the outset by reformers like Howard and Blackstone, it not only continued but expanded: by January 1841, 3,552 convicts were confined aboard hulks across England; by 1854, the number had fallen to 1,298.

The sanitary state of these vessels, even as late as 1841, was genuinely alarming. The surgeon of the Warrior hulk reported 400 hospital admissions and 38 deaths among just 638 convicts aboard in a single year. Officers still serving at Woolwich remember the old Justitia, which once held 700 convicts locked in with a single warder on board through the night — conditions that bred exactly the moral catastrophe one would expect. One veteran warder recalled prisoners' shirts, hung out on the rigging, so thick with vermin they looked as though they had been sprinkled with pepper; and when cholera first struck the convict ships, the chaplain reportedly refused to bury the dead individually, waiting instead until several bodies had accumulated before having them rowed out to the marshes half a dozen at a time for burial at his signal — conducting the service itself from the safety of the ship's poop, a mile off, and dropping a handkerchief at the words “ashes to ashes” as the cue to lower each body into the ground.

Such conditions could not last indefinitely, and successive reports from the directors of convict prisons pressed for reform or outright abandonment of the system, adding to the ordinary difficulties of prison discipline the further burden of managing five hundred convicts aboard vessels that were, quite literally, rotting beneath them. The opening of the Portsmouth convict prison in 1852 finally allowed a real reduction in the hulk fleet: the York was broken up, the Defence moved to Woolwich to replace two unserviceable vessels, and the Warrior — still, remarkably, in service — was formally reported unsound. The directors' 1852 and 1854 reports both single out the Warrior for particular concern, the ship's own governor stating

flatly that she was “rotten and unsound from stem to stern,” kept from immediate danger only by temporary repairs. She remains in service nonetheless, canvas stretched over her worst leaks, holding 436 convicts at the time of writing.

The directors' own summary judgment, from their most recent report, could hardly be plainer: the disadvantages of the hulk system are “radical and irremediable,” and every opportunity to replace them with proper shore-based prisons, built with individual sleeping cells as at Portland and Portsmouth, ought to be taken as soon as it arises. It is worth noting, in fairness to the much-criticized ticket-of-leave system, that of 650 convicts discharged from the Woolwich hulks up to and during 1854, only six were ever returned to custody for having their licenses revoked — a genuinely striking record, whatever one thinks of the institution that produced it. Even so, the hulks are doomed: only the Warrior, the Sulphur washing-hulk, the Defence, the Unité (serving as hospital ship), and the hospital and invalid depots at Portsmouth remain in service, at a combined annual cost, as of the last returns, of some £43,545 — roughly £14,000 in staff salaries, rations, and uniforms, £20,000 in feeding and clothing the prisoners, and the remainder in gratuities, release expenses, medical care, fuel, and light. Even the mighty Warrior, we should add, now floats free of the mud only once a fortnight, at the very top of the tide.

The hulk system, condemned from the date of its origin, has been the despair of every serious penal reformer since. Adopted originally as a stopgap under pressing wartime circumstances, these old men-of-war have remained, for the better part of half a century, the receiving-ground for the very worst class of prisoner from every jail in the United Kingdom — a fairly striking monument, taken all together, to government inertia, and to a certain settled indifference to the fate or reform of the criminals it has processed through them.

The system's most serious flaw, though, is neither expense nor decay but its effect on the men themselves. A convict who has been through the reformatory discipline of Millbank or Pentonville arrives at the hulks and finds himself thrown in among offenders who have undergone no such discipline whatsoever, sharing a “mess” of forty or fifty men — officially permitted only “rational” conversation, but in practice impossible to prevent from talking as freely as they like,

crowded together at work and swung elbow to elbow in hammocks at night. Whatever good Millbank and Pentonville achieve, in other words, is substantially undone at Woolwich: a man who spent months learning shoemaking or tailoring finds that trade set aside entirely, put instead to scraping rust from shells or stacking timber under the muzzle of a guard's carbine, surrounded by exactly the company the separate system was designed to remove him from, and given every reason to believe that the sheer unpleasantness of the labour, rather than any more constructive discipline, is now the whole of his punishment.

Convict Labour, Gratuities, and Badges

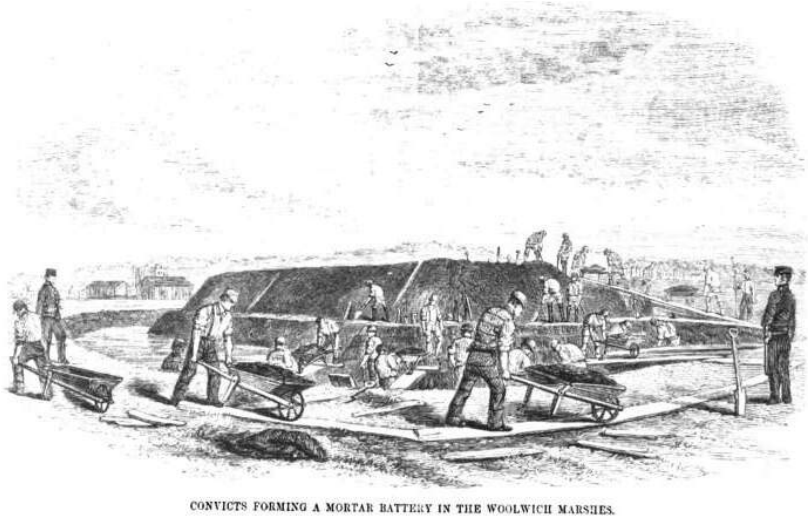
Whatever its faults, the hulk system persists chiefly because convict labour is genuinely useful to the government — a good reason to keep employing convicts on public works, though no reason at all, as the prison historian Hepworth Dixon pointedly observed, to keep the hulks themselves in their present wretched condition; a thing that only stagnates, debases, and corrupts, he added, can hardly be said to "flourish," whatever its practical usefulness elsewhere. The 1854 returns valued the labour of convicts confined to the Woolwich hulks alone at £19,736, exclusive of the further, unvalued work of cooks, bakers, washermen, and others engaged purely in running the prisons themselves. At the Dockyard, prisoners are chiefly occupied loading and unloading vessels, moving timber and stores, and cleaning ships; at the Arsenal, similar labouring work is supplemented by cleaning guns and shot and excavating for the engineer's department, with 329 of the Defence's daily average of 515 prisoners so employed, while only a small proportion of the men ever get the chance to practise anything like a genuine skilled trade, mostly confined to small repair jobs about the hulks themselves. The directors describe the men as generally willing workers, "considering the disadvantage inseparable from their being occasionally mixed with numbers of free labourers" — a willingness better described, in truth, as resignation, or simple anxiety to avoid punishment, though the Warrior's own governor reported in 1854 that convict labour compared favourably with an equal number of free workmen, and punishments for idleness, though always inflicted where proven, were by no means frequent.

The value placed on this labour is calculated with real precision: dockyard convict labour at 2s. 5¼d. a day per man, arsenal labour at 2s. 4d., skilled tradesmen — carpenters, blacksmiths, painters, plumbers, coopers — at 2s. 6d., and general prison labour such as shoemaking, tailoring, washing, and cooking at 1s. 6d. By this reckoning, the 951 convicts on the two Woolwich hulks performed very nearly 180,000 days' labour in the course of 1854, earning collectively some £20,000 — almost twenty guineas a head.

Gratuities split into two kinds: a fixed "conduct gratuity," paid according to class regardless of output (ninepence weekly for First Class prisoners, sixpence for Second, fourpence for Third), and a variable "industry gratuity" reflecting the quantity of work actually done, from threepence for a good day's output to sixpence for a very good one. The governor's account books, which we examined at the Defence, are kept with real precision: a glance at a prisoner's character-book tells the governor exactly how that man has behaved every week of his time aboard, and on discharge, his accumulated conduct and industry credits are totalled into a final settlement — part paid in cash and the remainder by post-office order, payable at his declared destination, with any balance over £8 held back for two or three further months, released only once the prisoner has furnished written proof, from a clergyman or other responsible local figure, that he is genuinely leading an honest life. Every discharged prisoner also receives a new suit of clothes and a change of linen; total gratuities paid out across the hulks in 1854 came to upwards of £2,950, with a further £1,650 spent on release clothing and travel expenses.

The prisoners' progress through this system is tracked by a set of black leather badges, edged in red, worn on the left arm, supplemented by rings worn on the right. A badge reading "7 / V.G. / 8," for instance, indicates a man serving a seven-year sentence, eight months into his time on the hulk, rated "very good" throughout; a blue ring on the right arm marks the second stage of a penal-servitude sentence, and red rings mark class — two for First Class, one for Second, none at all for Third. Badges are collected and reviewed monthly against the character-book, with three months of consistently good reports earning a "very good" rating that advances a man three months toward his next stage of servitude; misconduct, by the same

logic, costs him ground already gained. The system is designed, we were assured, to make it nearly impossible for a prisoner to be dealt with unfairly, since every gain and every setback is documented in writing as it happens.



CONVICTS FORMING A MORTAR BATTERY IN THE WOOLWICH MARSHES.

Convicts forming a mortar battery in the Woolwich marshes.

THE LIBRARY AND SCHOOLROOM

Between the morning's work and the midday search, we were shown the ship's meat store — an enormous leg of beef being weighed against the steward's scale to confirm its value, the deputy governor checking its quality personally — and, on deck, the continual business of keeping a five-hundred-man ship supplied with water: convicts in a boat alongside pumping water drawn from the arsenal's artesian well into the Defence's twenty tanks, each holding two tons.

The ship's chapel and schoolroom, a single square apartment cleverly split across two deck levels so that prisoners from each deck can reach their section directly from their own ward, doubles as the schoolroom outside service hours, its floor fitted with the same rows of black slanting desks, inkwells and all, that every former schoolboy remembers with a certain dread. The library shelved alongside it runs to 1,099 volumes, and the selection says a good deal about what the

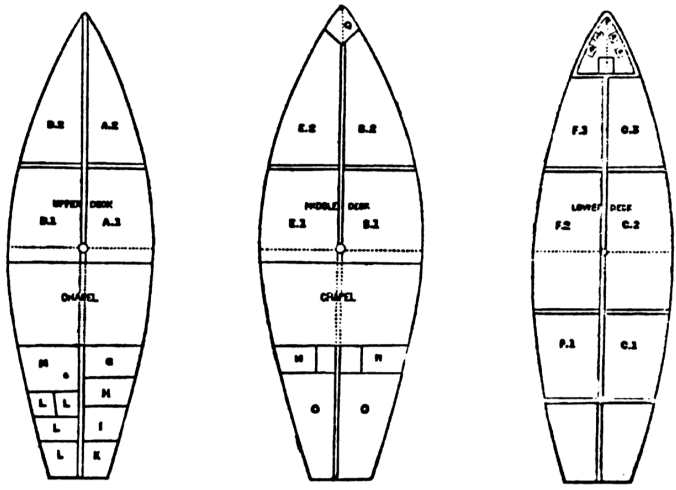
authorities imagined a convict ought to read: Joyce's Conversations on Natural Philosophy, The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties, Paley's collected works, Sturm's Reflections on the Works of God, alongside rather more approachable fare — Persian tales, popular histories of Rome, Spain, and Scotland, and assorted "Stories for Summer Days and Winter Evenings." Each prisoner may keep a book for ten days, generally renewable on request; by far the most popular items, we were told, are Chambers's Miscellany, The Leisure Hour, and Papers for the People, with Paley's Moral Philosophy scarcely ever requested at all — a preference educators of the day had already learned to expect, since heavy theological and philosophical works simply fail to reach readers of limited education and habit, however edifying they might be in principle. It is worth asking, in fact, what a man who has spent the day scraping rust from cannon-shot is realistically meant to make of Paley by lamplight; the likelier result of such a mismatch, we suspect, is a settled distaste for reading generally rather than any genuine enthusiasm for it — and books offering plainer, kindlier lessons drawn from ordinary life, which almost anyone could read and take something from, are curiously hard to find on the chaplain's own shelves.

The school itself divides into nine graded divisions, the largest holding 110 men, each division taking its turn aboard roughly once every nine or ten days; some convicts, we were candidly told, cannot be taught to read at all, whatever method is tried. Instruction covers reading, writing, and basic arithmetic. We watched the third division at their lessons one morning — clean, neatly brushed men in blue-and-white neckerchiefs, the session opening with two psalms and a prayer, the schoolmaster reading a verse at a time for the class to repeat back to him, a genuinely melancholy sight in places: old, balding agricultural labourers working alongside sharp-featured, dog-tired young men clearly better suited, at that hour, to sleep than to schooling. Few of the men, we suspected, valued the lesson itself half so much as the hour's physical rest it guaranteed them.

Elsewhere aboard, small cabins along the weather deck housed the ship's own tradesmen: a bookbinder rebinding worn library volumes in black leather, a lamp-man trimming the night lanterns for each ward, an elderly carpenter planing a deal board with a visibly weary

expression, and a rope-maker twisting cord for the hammocks that two further prisoners kept in constant repair nearby. Linen, we learned, is changed weekly and flannels fortnightly — a real improvement, worth pausing on, from the filth that prevailed aboard the hulks only a few years earlier. Every prisoner we passed came to attention and saluted as we approached, holding the position until told, invariably, to "go on with your work" — officers standing over each gang throughout, book in hand, recording industry or its absence as they went, firm without ever seeming needlessly harsh.

A DAY ABOARD THE DEFENCE: TURNING OUT



PLANS OF THE DECKS OF THE "DEFENCE" HULK
(The letters and figures A 1, A 2, D 1, D 2, &c., refer to the several wards on the different decks; G indicates the Schoolmaster, H Chief Warder, I Clerk, K Steward, L L L L Deputy Governor, M Chaplain, N N Principal Warder, O O Warders' Mess-room.)

Plans of the decks of the "Defence" hulk.

We boarded the Defence at five in the morning, intending to spend a full day among her five hundred-odd inmates, and are indebted throughout to the governor, Mr. Byrne, for his patient explanations. In the cold grey half-light, with only the tide gurgling past the hull and a single warder pacing the deck for company, the ship gave none of the impression its reputation might suggest — the cook's galley already glowing, cocoa steaming in a great copper kettle, ready for the five hundred mouths still asleep below. Bread stores, officers' galley, hammock-houses bulging over the gunwale, small cabins where the ship's own tradesmen work, drying-houses for wet-weather linen —

the ship's daytime economy, we discovered, was already stirring well before her prisoners.

Descending through the hatchway to see the men still in their hammocks, we found the top deck divided, cage-like, into two long compartments not unlike the animal enclosures at the zoological gardens, a warder pacing the passage between them with a bull's-eye lantern to check that all remained quiet. A hundred and five convicts slept there that morning, packed so closely in their slung hammocks that the two rows formed something close to a solid floor of canvas from one end of the deck to the other — a strange sight, and one that invited a certain amount of unavoidable speculation about the dreams passing behind those closed eyes: which men, we wondered, were with their families again in sleep; which were planning some fresh crime; which were suffering, in imagination, whatever penalty still awaited them; and to how many was sleep simply a blank, merciful escape from an otherwise wretched existence.

The top deck houses First Class men specifically, following the medical finding that the upper deck offers real advantages over the two below; the middle deck, arranged identically but with a wider central passage, held a further 129 sleepers that morning, an officer patrolling with buckets of chloride of lime to control the air, which was close and stale but no worse than one would expect after a full night's breath from so many men. The lower deck, broader still and built to hold 240, held only 190 that morning, benefiting from constant fresh air drawn through openings at bow and stern despite its lower headroom; in total, 424 convicts were sleeping between the three decks. Off the lower deck, a whitewashed passage led to five solitary cells — no hammocks permitted, prisoners sleeping instead on the bare floor wrapped in a single brown rug — one holding a man forty-eight hours into his confinement, another a man serving three days on bread and water for refusing to work in the boats.

At half-past five, the ship's bell rang three times, and the effect was immediate: within a minute, scores of men had tumbled out of their hammocks and were dressing at speed, officers calling “All up! Turn out, men!” along the deck. Hammocks were lashed into tight sausage-rolls and carried up to the hammock-houses, each man's name stitched onto his own canvas, officers directing the stowage —

"Shove that forward there — now then, stow away, do you belong here? Any more C? Move up!" — with the whole ship's company up, dressed, and their bedding stowed within half an hour of the bell, exactly as promised: "the bell went at half-past five," one warder told us, "and you'll see, sir, we'll have all the hammocks up and stowed by six." Long lines of men wound along the decks, some carrying two hammocks apiece — their own, and that of a fellow prisoner kept below to help with other early work — some already in their full brown convict suits, others still in shirtsleeves.

Below, men washed at buckets set out overnight, combed their hair by the reflected light of a porthole, scrubbed the mess tables and covered them with painted canvas cloths, and polished the tin breakfast-things some had prepared the night before, tied up in a handkerchief, to save a few precious minutes in the morning — the whole ship undergoing, in the space of half an hour, a thorough and evidently well-drilled cleansing. Men knelt to brush their boots; messmen, one per table of eight, called out "Where's your plates? Where's your plates?" as the tables filled; and for water, prisoners were let out of each ward one at a time, a second permitted out only once the first had returned. By six o'clock the chief warder's inquiry — "All up?" — met with a single answering shout and a military salute along the line, the men's costume, now fully dressed, identical to the rusty brown and red stripe worn at Pentonville. The first order of the morning done, many prisoners settled to read while waiting for the next bell — more than one, we noted with some surprise, opening a Bible with what looked like real earnestness — until the doctor's mate appeared with his tray of bottles and salves, an officer at his side checking names against the invalid list.

OFFICERS, MUSTER, AND BREAKFAST

The ship's staff work punishing hours by any standard. Officers divide into two rotating divisions of about twenty men each, one division coming on duty at seven in the morning and remaining until six that evening — on their feet the entire time, with no more than twenty or twenty-five minutes allowed for their own dinner — while the night watch splits into four shifts of roughly two and a half hours apiece, the last relieved only a quarter of an hour before the full

muster at a quarter past six. “They're on their legs all day long,” our attendant told us, “not allowed to sit down — and it's not just today, it's every day the same.” One principal warder and the deputy governor command the first division; the chief warder and a second principal command the other, the two alternating responsibility night by night. The relieved night watch gets barely a quarter of an hour to wash and shave before the full parade, and breakfast itself must be eaten, uniforms brushed, and buttons polished, all within the same narrow half-hour window before the quarter-past-seven parade.

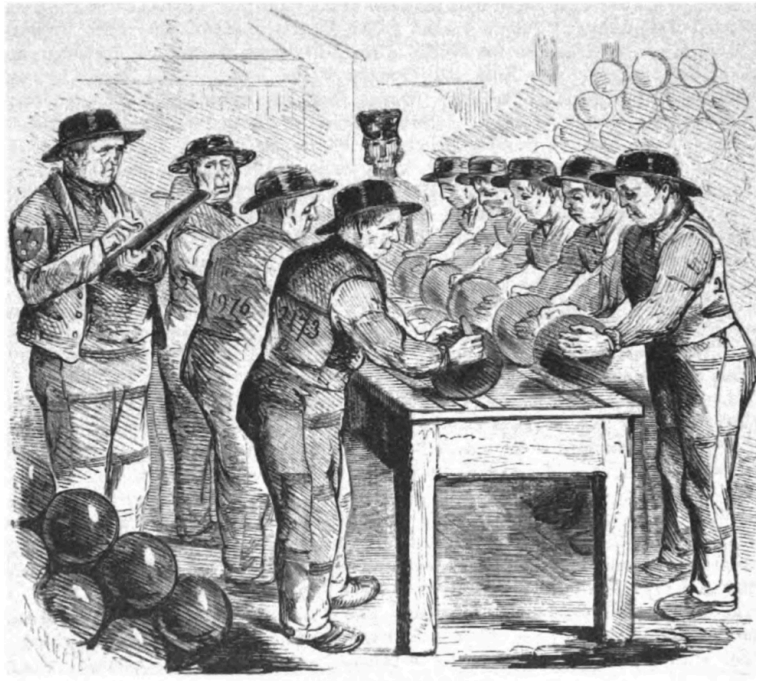
The prisoners' own muster followed a similarly brisk routine: officers calling the roll ward by ward, each man answering “Yes, sir!” with a military salute, absentees — cooks, bakers, and other men on special duty — mustered separately and just as precisely, each stepping forward from his temporary post to answer and then returning to it. “There, you see,” our attendant told us once the count was done, “every man in the ship has answered to his name.” “All correct, sir!” the registering warder confirmed to his chief. Breakfast came next, messmen from each ward summoned by name — “A ward! ... B ward!” — down the appropriate hatchway to collect cocoa in large cans and bread in baskets from the galley, each deck served through its own dedicated hatch; at half-past six the doctor came aboard, an officer going round the wards calling for any man wishing to see him. Six answered that morning, formed into line outside the little surgery and seen one by one, with a trapdoor and small room below reserved for anything judged genuinely serious. Nine-tenths of such requests, we were told, are viewed with real suspicion as an attempt to dodge a day's labour in the arsenal, while a further group of men, reported for rule-breaking the previous day, waited separately in line to answer for it before the governor. Breakfast itself — a tin of cocoa and dry bread at every place — was eaten in near-total silence, broken only by the sound of hundreds of jaws working through dry bread at once.

The convict boat crews, meanwhile, were already busy: a hospital cutter rowed two prisoners and several warders out to the Unité; the governor's own gig, cushioned and smartly kept, waited to carry the doctor ashore; and a further boat, its crew in guernseys marked “DEFENCE” and glazed hats stamped with their numbers, was sent to

fetch the long boats needed for the general crossing. “Be as quick as you can — it's only five minutes,” one officer called after the departing crew, watching the clock; the boats, he explained, must have every prisoner aboard at the very first stroke of seven, or they push off without him.

By seven o'clock, tin mugs were cleaned and stacked for the day, and the prisoners' guard was mustered on the quarter-deck: four armed men, cartouche boxes slung behind them, stationed near the gangway with carbines loaded and ready as the boats prepared to carry the working parties ashore. Twelve extra guards, several veterans of the Crimea, filed down to join them, and the long line of convicts began streaming up from the hatchways toward the gangway — an oddly compelling sight, the seemingly endless brown column rattling down the steps into the waiting boats to cries of “Come, look sharp there, men!”

WORKING PARTIES IN THE ARSENAL



CONVICTS SCRAPING SHOT.

Convicts scraping shot.

The boats — carrying up to 110 men apiece in good weather — make a genuinely striking picture crossing to the arsenal pier, their dense brown-clad cargo dotted here and there with the darker uniforms of the accompanying officers; ashore, the men fall in with real precision, are sorted by the chief officer into working parties, and march off in long brown files to the day's labour, each party under a single warder's charge. We crossed with the deputy governor in his own gig, the convict oarsmen obeying his brisk commands — "Hold water, all of you! Pull all! Hard a-starboard!" — with real skill.

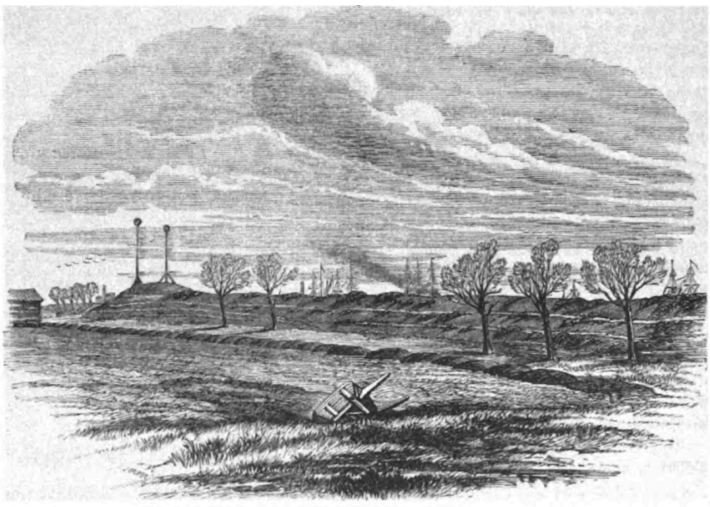
Before work began, officers searched every man — checking waistcoats and neckcloths for concealed clothing that might allow a prisoner to disguise himself and slip out among the arsenal's free labourers — a genuine and recurring concern: seventeen escape attempts were made from the Defence's convicts in a single year, of which only three succeeded; in 1854, five attempts produced just one success. Once searched and organized, each gang wheeled off at the command "Cover! — Face forward!" the officer in charge calling out his party's number and strength as he passed — "Two, eight!" meaning party No. 2, eight men — so that a simple running tally kept the deputy governor constantly informed of exactly how many men were where.

The arsenal itself, in full activity, presented a scene of considerable industry: tall chimneys pouring black smoke, hammers ringing on metal, shells rolling along miniature railways laid for the purpose, gangs of convicts loading barges, digging out shot, and breaking granite by the bushel in the stone-yard — each man's task carefully measured through a wooden gauge, since a convict breaking stone fine enough for garden paths need only fill two bushels a day, where one breaking it coarser must fill four to six. Elsewhere, convict labour had stacked huge quantities of valuable timber, polished rows of rusty shells, and raised, entirely by hand, an extensive earthwork for a new mortar battery out on the marshes — the governor visibly proud of his men's evident good health as we watched them dig, several stripped to the waist despite the season, watched over by two armed guards and a pair of non-commissioned sappers directing the actual engineering.

"See — they're not ill-looking men," the governor told us. "I have to punish them very seldom. Some of the men in the stone-yard are old offenders, and they're the best-behaved of the lot — there's a fine young fellow there, stripped to the buff and working away hard." Officers here face their own sharp incentive toward vigilance: a shilling fine for every man caught idling, and outright dismissal should one escape on their watch. Even so, escapes happen, generally with the covert help of free labourers who leave a change of clothes somewhere convenient for a convict to slip into before walking out with the crowd at the gates — no small risk, given that some 14,000 free labourers passed through the arsenal in a single year, taken on with little or no reference to character — or through a sudden dash past the sentries, across the canal, and into the marshes beyond. We were told of one recent case, a long day's hunt after two men who had squeezed into a drainage culvert leading out toward the marshes, eventually caught only when they emerged again near the Plumstead road; the governor had since had the drain itself sealed for good measure. Whenever an escape does occur, the guard whose party lost the man must hurry back to the hulk to report it while a colleague takes charge of the rest of his gang, triggering a telegraphed alert to the surrounding police stations — Bow Street, Erith, Guildford, Ilford, Bexley Heath, Shooter's Hill — to close the net as quickly as possible. Such attempts occasionally defeat even the most careful supervision, and no system can entirely stop the men talking together after dark; but whatever its imperfections, the current mixed arrangement is a considerable improvement on the old regime, when six or seven hundred prisoners were crammed aboard a single hulk with only one officer standing watch through the entire night.

We were shown, too, the guard posted permanently at the corner of the arsenal wall against the Plumstead high road, a spot from which escape over the wall would otherwise be dangerously easy. "I'll know at once whether all's right," the governor said, raising his hand toward the sentry, who instantly halted, presented arms, and raised his own hand in acknowledgment — the recognized "all clear" signal, we learned, as distinct from the alarm signal of a raised carbine held horizontally overhead, which would summon every patrolling guard within sight at a run.

The Convicts' Burial Ground



THE CONVICTS' BURIAL-GROUND.

The convicts' burial-ground.

Beyond the working parties, out past a rifle range where a solitary marker walked out after each shot to record the hit, minie balls occasionally whistling overhead as we passed, we came to a stretch of ground entirely indistinguishable from the rest of the marsh — no fence, no marker, nothing but a patch of recently turned grass and an abandoned wheelbarrow lying nearby to show that anything at all had happened there. Heavy clouds rolled overhead, and a few drops of rain fell as we stood taking it in; it struck us, without exaggeration, as one of the bleakest places we had ever seen.

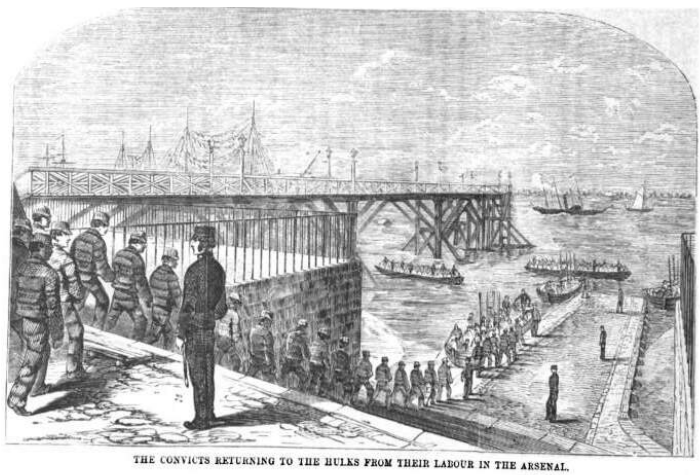
"This," the governor told us simply, "is the convicts' burial ground."

We could just make out the rough outline of disturbed earth at our feet — the most recent grave, not yet a month old, already beginning to disappear beneath the returning grass, with not so much as a number to mark it. Nearby stood a rough shed used by cattle for shelter in bad weather, and beyond it the ground rose gently between the marsh and the river. There is, perhaps, a kind of mercy in leaving such graves unmarked and their occupants unnamed; but the feeling the place itself provokes is not easily set aside. Walking back along the ridge that separates the marsh from the river, we learned that the ground beneath our feet was itself densely packed with earlier burials — dense enough,

in fact, that the ridge had been abandoned in favour of the lower ground only in the last five or six years, once it could hold no more.

There is an old local legend, worth recording if only for its gentleness, that a small pale flower with purple-tinged leaves grows only over a convict's grave — an unlikely kindness for the legend to grant men so thoroughly excluded from the world's ordinary sympathy, though any botanist consulted will tell you, rather less romantically, that the plant in question is nothing more than a stunted form of the common red dead-nettle. We passed a patrolling guard on our way back from the grounds, who signalled "all right" with a raised hand and salute — his duty, we learned, being to relay news of any escape at a run, waving his carbine horizontally overhead, to the sentries stationed out across the marshes. Our route back to the boat took us past the rocket sheds, a spot with something of a reputation for accidents — "you'll occasionally see the men there come running out with their clothes on fire and dive straight into the canal," the governor told us; "only a month or so ago two or three of the sheds went up, and rockets were flying about among my men" — and past the low, windowless powder-boats moored nearby, their gilding stripped and windows blocked for safety, with the fire engines kept permanently at the water's edge, hose already run out, against exactly such an emergency.

DINNER, EVENING, AND LIGHTS OUT



THE CONVICTS RETURNING TO THE HULKS FROM THEIR LABOUR IN THE ARSENAL.

The convicts returning to the hulks from their labour in the arsenal.

By half-past eleven, working parties across the arsenal began filing back toward the parade ground, since every man must be aboard the hulk for dinner at noon precisely; each party knew its exact place, and a further search — waistcoats opened, cravats loosened, exactly as in the morning — preceded the return crossing. Two hundred men returning to the Defence at once produced, we noted, something close to a rolling thunder underfoot as they descended to their wards, tin mugs and plates already set upside down on the mess tables in readiness.

Dinner itself followed a now-familiar rhythm: bread distributed by mess number, meat and potatoes fetched by messmen from the galley, grace said standing, and the meat then divided into equal portions and pushed to the centre of the table for each man to take the piece nearest him — a system that produces, we were assured, remarkably little quarrelling. “Not too much talking there — silence!” remained the standing rule even at meals. At one o'clock precisely the men returned to their afternoon labour, the same boats, the same search, the same brisk military rhythm as the morning, continuing until a quarter past five, when the day's work ends early enough to have every man back aboard, searched, and clear of the arsenal before the free labourers themselves leave for the night.

Visits from friends or family are permitted once every three months under the poop, with letters allowed on the same rough schedule, though the authorities send for a man at his labour if a visitor happens to call while he is ashore — a degree of flexibility we found genuinely creditable, and one carried out, so far as we could judge, with real consideration. On returning aboard for the evening, prisoners receive gruel and rest until chapel at half-past six; after chapel, at eight, a final muster locks the wards for the night, hammocks are retrieved from the corners where they were stowed during the day by prisoners kept back for that purpose, and conversation is permitted until nine o'clock precisely — at which point, by all accounts, it stops absolutely. “The fourth division is for school tomorrow,” we heard one officer call out as the men settled for the night, an ordinary piece of housekeeping amid the general bustle of hammocks going up.

Two officers per deck are relieved at nine by a single night officer apiece, and four armed guards rotate through the night watch at the gangway; the governor issues a nightly countersign — “Smyrna,” on the night of our visit — passed down through the chief warder to the watch, without which no one may move about the ship after dark. By ten, the hatches are padlocked, the principal warder has tried every lock on his own final round, and the ship falls silent but for the tide and the occasional tread of a sentry overhead — the men in their hammocks, from a passing glance, looking for all the world like a long row of huge, motionless cocoons, the shore beyond glittering faintly with lights like scattered jewels across the dark water.

Not every attempt at escape happens ashore. We were told of one convict, employed for a time in the chaplain's own room, who quietly cut up a spare black gown and stitched it into a pair of dark trousers; wearing nothing else, he slipped overboard on a suitably dark and blustery night, swam clear of the ship, and made it as far as a bed of reeds in the marshes before losing his nerve and shouting for help — rescued, ironically, by bargemen who suspected exactly what he was and delivered him straight back to the prison officers.

THE HOSPITAL SHIP, THE WASHING HULK, AND THE WARRIOR



The convict's flower.

While the working parties were out in the arsenal that afternoon, we took the opportunity to visit the Unité, the convicts' hospital ship moored alongside the Defence — a captured French frigate of thirty-six guns, handsomely built (the officers who rowed us across were plainly proud of her lines) and, by the standards of the hulk fleet, genuinely well arranged: broad, airy decks, iron bedsteads spaced generously apart with a small shelf for books at the head of each, a temperature kept, even in winter, at a steady sixty degrees, and thorough ventilation maintained by tubes running the length of the ship. A handful of healthy convicts, in their odd pale-blue gowns and comical nightcaps, keep the ship clean and serve as nurses; two healthy convicts serve as nurse on each deck, another as barber, easily identified by the belt of razors and sheaths at his waist. The patients we passed included a man coughing through advanced consumption, chloride of lime hung around him to control the smell of his own expectoration; another with heart disease, his head propped on a pillow set upon a chair beside the bed, coughing blood; a third, capped and marked "Hospital," recovering from a broken leg; a fourth simply "asthmatical, sir," as he put it himself when we asked. Twenty-four patients were aboard on the day of our visit, five having been discharged that same morning; the 1854 returns for the year showed 675 admissions, 658 discharges, two medical pardons, twenty-five deaths, and thirty-six patients remaining at year's end. A Bible and Testament rest at the head of every bed, and we found one convalescent absorbed in a volume titled Recreations in Astronomy. The healthy staff aboard — boatmen, cooks, washermen, and orderlies together — number twenty, under nine warders, an infirmary warder, and a principal officer, with a resident surgeon and half the officers relieved each evening at half-past five, returning again by seven the next morning.

From the Unité we crossed to the Sulphur, a small, dingy former sloop of thirty guns reduced to service as a floating laundry for the Warrior and Defence alike — fifteen convicts under a single master, comprising three washermen, a blacksmith, and two stocking-menders, washing and mending clothing amid large water tanks, a corrugated-iron blacksmith's shop where an old convict filed away at his bench, and a gloom-shrouded lower deck thick with steam, drying

linen, and stacked rolls of finished washing, the whole place damp and faintly spectral in the half-light below. The convicts working there return each night to sleep aboard the Warrior; only the master himself remains on the Sulphur overnight, with a single soldier standing guard on deck.

The Warrior herself — a seventy-four-gun ship well over sixty years old, the subject of repeated official alarm about her structural soundness — differs little in its daily routine from the Defence already described, and is remarkable chiefly for being lit throughout by gas, very possibly the only prison ship anywhere so equipped, a distinction owed simply to her closeness to the shore main. Her time is divided, in summer, into two hours for meals, just over nine hours for work, and four and a half hours for indoor occupation; in winter, meals stretch slightly longer and work shortens to just under eight hours. She holds 449 men at the time of writing against a capacity of 450, with only ten in her own hospital; her wards, somewhat more generously appointed than the Defence's, each keep a small library and issue every prisoner his own Bible, prayer book, hymn book, and library book, with solid bulkheads dividing each ward to prevent too large a body of prisoners from ever being grouped together, and gas-lights arranged so that two wards can be lit from a single fitting while the connecting passage itself stays dark — letting the officer on duty see the men without being seen in turn.

Her refractory cells, seven in number, each carry a small chalked label recording the occupant's offence and sentence — one reading simply “In for 4 days; B and W; in 19th, out 23rd,” another serving seven days for attempted escape, a third serving the same term for extreme insolence to the governor and warders. Her schoolroom, like the Defence's, does what it can with men of wildly uneven ability, divided into eleven divisions by ability rather than the Defence's nine, each man receiving half a day's schooling weekly across an hour each of reading, writing, and arithmetic; one convict we watched labouring visibly over a letter that began, with evident effort, “Dear brother.” Among the ship's clerks, silver-haired men of evidently better birth than the general run of convicts, who write letters and petitions for prisoners unable to do so themselves, were a former physician of twenty-five years' practice, serving four years' penal servitude, and a

former Post Office clerk serving fourteen years' transportation — a reminder, if any were needed, that the hulks hold men from every station a life can begin in, brought finally to exactly the same brown uniform and the same daily muster, breaking coal, testing chain cables amid deafening hammering, and hauling timber alongside gangs of the arsenal's own free labourers, some of whom, we noted passing one gun-boat under repair, had themselves just struck work over a pay dispute — an odd, pointed contrast, glimpsed only in passing, between the free man's right to withdraw his own labour and the convict's total want of any such choice.

CHAPTER VII

Millbank Prison: The Convict Depot

APPROACHING MILLBANK

Millbank Prison can only be reached by land, in the case of the unfortunate convicts actually taken there; a visitor, by contrast, does better to avoid the dreary route down Horseferry Road and go by river instead, boarding at Hungerford Stairs. The old Hungerford Market, once famous for periwinkles, has by this time run through a whole sequence of failed second acts — a hall of waxworks, a mesmeric saloon, a registration agency — each less successful than the last, while the surrounding arcade still does brisk trade in penny ices, hot pies, and fresh fish, its fishmongers calling “Winks, winks!” to hurrying passengers, and small boys scooping frozen syrup from tiny glasses while dark-eyed Italian confectioners work waffle-irons over a portable stove nearby.

The steamer threads under Hungerford Bridge and past Westminster Bridge, itself half-rebuilt and latticed with scaffolding, before the New Houses of Parliament come into view — the clock tower still hollow-socketed, awaiting its clocks, the Abbey's dark roofline behind, and, further along, the four turrets of St. John's Church, popularly compared to an upturned table. On the Lambeth shore, boat-builders' yards give way to the Archbishop's palace — itself an odd architectural patchwork of grey Gothic stonework at one end and dark, worm-eaten Tudor brick at the other — and then to the frank industrial stench of bone-crushing works and potteries that have made Lambeth notorious even among London's less fragrant districts; six days a week the smell is merely nauseating, but on Fridays, when the potteries do their glazing, the combined effluvium from the whole south bank verges on genuinely overpowering. The riverbank beyond crowds with distilleries, gasworks, and factories of every kind, their chimneys competing for height, whiting-racks gleaming white against pitch-black drying bars, and barges piled high with paving-stone stacked like loaves of bread at the water's edge.

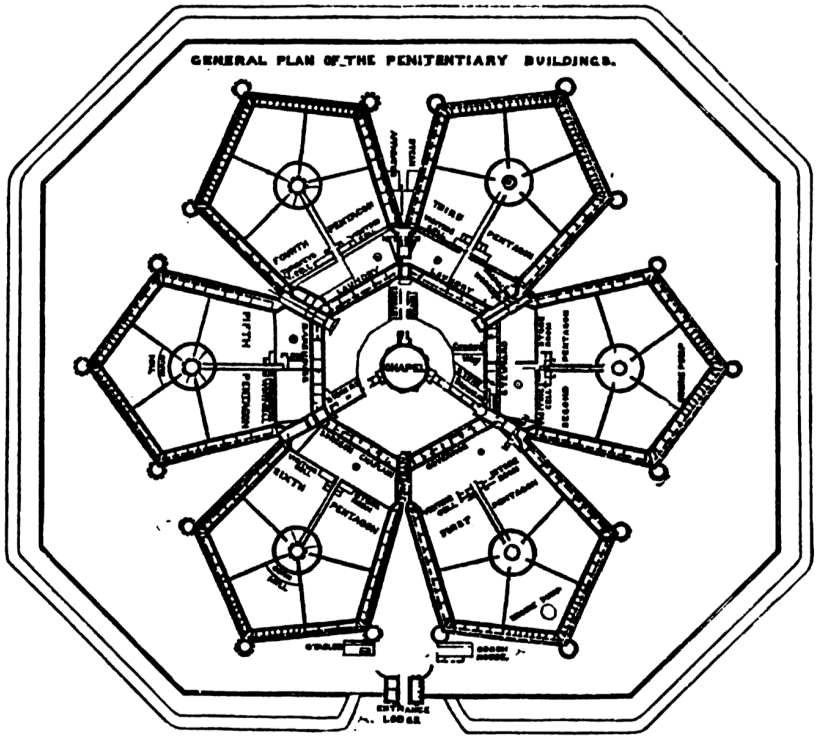
Ahead, past Vauxhall Bridge, at the back of the dismal Horseferry Road, lies Millbank Prison itself: an immense mass of yellow-brown brickwork, ringed by a low wall of the same material, its multitude of small square windows and slate-topped turrets giving the whole structure the character of some vast, ungainly puzzle — an odd hybrid of madhouse and fortress, its many Martello-like corner towers recalling a design once genuinely surrounded by its own moat, its long rows of narrow, barred windows echoing the same institutional severity found at Bedlam or St. Luke's. At night, lit only by the yellow glimmer of its own windows, the building all but disappears into a single dark, shapeless mass against the sky, the river beside it running black and spangled with reflected light from Vauxhall Bridge and the prison's own deep red lamps, which dart their reflections downstream like a reversed trail of rocket-sparks — the eye drawn on, past clusters of lit riverside taverns, until it settles finally on Westminster Bridge itself, where each surviving navigable arch glows with its own red lamp, like so many bloodshot eyes set along the parapet.

Plan, History, and Discipline of the Prison

Millbank's old defensive moat has long since been filled in, leaving only a narrow ring of rank, graveyard-like grass that now serves as grazing for an occasional stray cow. The ground-plan itself resembles a great wheel: the governor's house occupies the central hub, while six long pentagonal wings radiate outward like spokes, each ending in a turreted tower with narrow vertical window-slits, the whole structure a direct, if much modified, descendant of Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon," or Inspection House.

The site was bought from the Marquis of Salisbury in 1799 for £12,000; construction began in 1812 and cost half a million pounds all told, making Millbank not only the largest prison in London but the general holding depot for every convict under sentence of transportation or awaiting transfer elsewhere. The grounds cover sixteen acres, seven of them occupied by the prison buildings themselves and the remainder given over to gardens worked by the convicts; built originally for 1,200 prisoners in fully separate cells, the

prison had by this time relaxed that standard enough to hold some 1,300.



General plan of the Penitentiary buildings.

Bentham's original scheme envisioned the penitentiary as a genuine convict workshop — prisoners employed at various trades, permitted to keep a share of their own earnings — policed by constant central surveillance: a governor's room from which every part of the building could, in principle, be observed at once, with a mechanical device even intended to allow night-time observation of the cells and direct oral communication with any prisoner. The mechanism itself proved a practical failure from the outset, and Parliament formally rejected the whole panopticon principle in 1810. Two years later, a more conventional design for 1,200 separate cells was approved instead, built between 1813 and 1821, under a regime that divided each convict's sentence into two portions: an initial period of full

separation, followed by transfer into a second, associated class for common labour. The separation, even at its strictest, was never quite complete — prisoners inevitably mixed at the treadwheel, the water-machines, or during exercise — and the associated second class proved so corrosive to whatever good the separate period achieved that it was abolished outright in 1832, with new regulations tightening the separation considerably.

During the years when Millbank operated as a true "penitentiary" under a reverend governor who placed excessive faith in religious observance alone, prisoners were flooded with tracts and scripture, required to attend chapel constantly, and even had prayers read to them in their own cells by the warders — a regime that succeeded chiefly in teaching the convicts to feign devotion, since the most convincing performance of piety reliably earned the best treatment. The most hardened prisoners in the building, predictably, became the most accomplished hypocrites; the practice ended along with the reverend governor's tenure. Under the Act of 1843, the establishment was formally renamed Millbank Prison and repurposed as a receiving depot for convicts under sentence of transportation from England, Wales, and Scotland — though not Ireland, which maintains its own separate convict system — to be held until transported, pardoned, freed, or transferred elsewhere by order of the Secretary of State.

Today's discipline mixes separation and association: every prisoner receives moral and religious instruction, works a twelve-hour day exclusive of meals (Sundays, Christmas, Good Friday, and fast days excepted), and has conduct carefully tracked toward a good-conduct badge. The prison's six pentagons each serve a distinct function — the first houses the reception ward, where every new arrival is held separately; the second, prisoners working various trades in separate cells; the third, the female convicts, mostly in separation; the fourth, a mix of separate and associated labour alongside the infirmary; the fifth, further separate cells plus the "general ward," four cells combined into one large room prized by old hands chiefly for the conversation it allows, silent system or no; and the sixth completes the circle back toward the entrance. Each pentagon runs three floors of four wards apiece, thirty cells to a ward, one officer to every two wards, with only tailoring taught as standard — prisoners

wanting a different trade must arrange to enter a ward where an officer capable of teaching it happens to be posted. For all its scrupulous cleanliness, the prison's low, marshy site makes it markedly less healthy than its counterparts: comparative sickness returns for 1854 showed more than twice as many cases of illness per head at Millbank as at Pentonville, and correspondingly higher rates of insanity, though still well below the Hulks. The majority of Millbank's convicts are employed making soldiers' clothing, biscuit-bags, hammocks, and miscellaneous army and navy supplies, along with the prisoners' own shirts, coats, and trousers; others work the prison gardens. At the time of our visit, the prison held 828 prisoners — 655 men and 173 women — against a full capacity of 1,300.

A Conversation with the Governor

Millbank's sole entrance faces the Thames. Admitted by the gatekeeper into a small triangular hall lined with labelled letter-boxes — one each for male officers, female officers, prisoners, and the Clerk of the Works — we crossed the long wedge-shaped outer yard to the inner gate, where the gatekeeper logs every person entering or leaving and admits no junior officer without the governor's express order. The governor's own room, in the range of buildings forming one side of the hexagonal court around the central chapel, proved a plain, businesslike space, its barred end window flanked by two doors through which prisoners are brought in for reception or for disciplinary hearings — a rope stretched across the room on such occasions to mark the line a convict may not cross.

The governor gave us a principal warder to guide us through the wards, but not before answering a number of our own questions directly. “Millbank,” he told us, “is the receptacle for all the convicts of England, Wales, and Scotland — not Ireland, which has its own convict establishment. Men and women of every age are received here. When someone is convicted and sentenced to transportation or penal servitude, he stays in the prison where he was tried until the Secretary of State's removal order arrives, and then he's transferred to us, with his 'caption paper' — the nature of his offence, date of conviction, length of sentence — sent along with him. From here, after a time, he goes on to a probationary prison such as Pentonville

for a term of separate confinement, and from there to public works at Portland, Portsmouth, or the Hulks, or else he's transported to Gibraltar, Bermuda, or Western Australia to serve out his sentence there."

New arrivals are examined by the surgeon and, if free of contagious disease, placed in the reception ward, bathed, and examined naked exactly as at Pentonville, before being distributed through the prison according to circumstances — six months in a separate cell as standard, unless a doctor certifies a prisoner unfit for it, in which case the order goes into the book in red ink and he is placed directly into association. Every new prisoner has his hair cut and the prison rules read to him, both repeated weekly thereafter. Young convicts are sent, where possible, to Parkhurst; the very youngest, on royal pardon, to the Philanthropic Farm School at Redhill. "One boy left us on Tuesday," the governor told us, "not yet twelve, sentenced for stealing some lead after a previous conviction. We have another here now, between twelve and thirteen, a former clerk who embezzled between ten and twelve thousand pounds from his employer" — a boy who had, we later learned, grown frightened and returned the money himself, though a relative pressed charges anyway in hopes of getting him into a reformatory. "I remember a child of not more than nine," the governor added, "who had already been in prison twelve times." Very few young girls have passed through Millbank; the two youngest on record were fifteen. Females generally move on to Brixton after nine to twelve months; males to Pentonville. "In fact," the governor said, "we keep Pentonville up." Older prisoners fit only for light labour go to Dartmoor; those fit for none at all, to the invalid hulk Stirling Castle at Portsmouth.

"We pursue the separate system for the first six months," the governor continued, "unless the medical officer certifies a man can't bear it, in which case we move him into association at once. Once men are together, we try to enforce the silent system — though I needn't tell you that when seventy or eighty men share a space, they will talk, whatever we do to stop them." He drew back a curtain to show us a large plan of the prison hanging on the wall, normally kept covered. "The prisoners' eyes are sharp," he explained. "They'd take in the whole arrangement at a glance, find the weak points, and try to

escape. We had a man here named Ralph, a regular Jack Sheppard, who melted down his own pewter cocoa mug over his cell gaslight and cast false keys from it — I'll show you." He produced several crudely cast keys from his desk. "With these," he said, "he could have opened every door in the prison." The man had, by all accounts, been genuinely dangerous and universally feared outside prison walls; inside, he was, in the governor's own words, "as quiet as could be — always well-behaved, never abused anyone." "You'd have thought butter wouldn't melt in his mouth," the warder added; "quite uneducated — what little schooling he had, he picked up from having been transported before."

The governor produced further relics from his desk: a heavy iron hammock-ring, once used to nearly murder a fellow prisoner; a hinged iron rod, not unlike a lady's folding parasol handle, pushed through a keyhole to feel out and force back a bolt. "I've been connected with prisons for years," he told us, "and there's something new to learn every day. How they take an impression of a lock will surprise you — they do it with a piece of soap." Asked about teaching trades, he explained that Millbank formally teaches only tailoring, though shoemakers continue their own trade, and men with no trade at all, or who have attempted suicide, are set to picking coir — work requiring no tools, knives, or needles capable of doing harm. "It's a great thing to make a prisoner feel he's employed at something useful," he said. "Nothing disgusts a man more, or makes him more sullen, than knowing he's labouring at something pointless, the way the treadwheel does. I believe work a man can see the use of does far more for his character and his chances of reform than any other kind — every other sort of labour only irritates and hardens him. After twenty thousand prisoners have passed through one's hands, one picks up a little experience in these matters." Millbank's own treadwheel, reserved for penal-class men, had by this time gone unused for months.

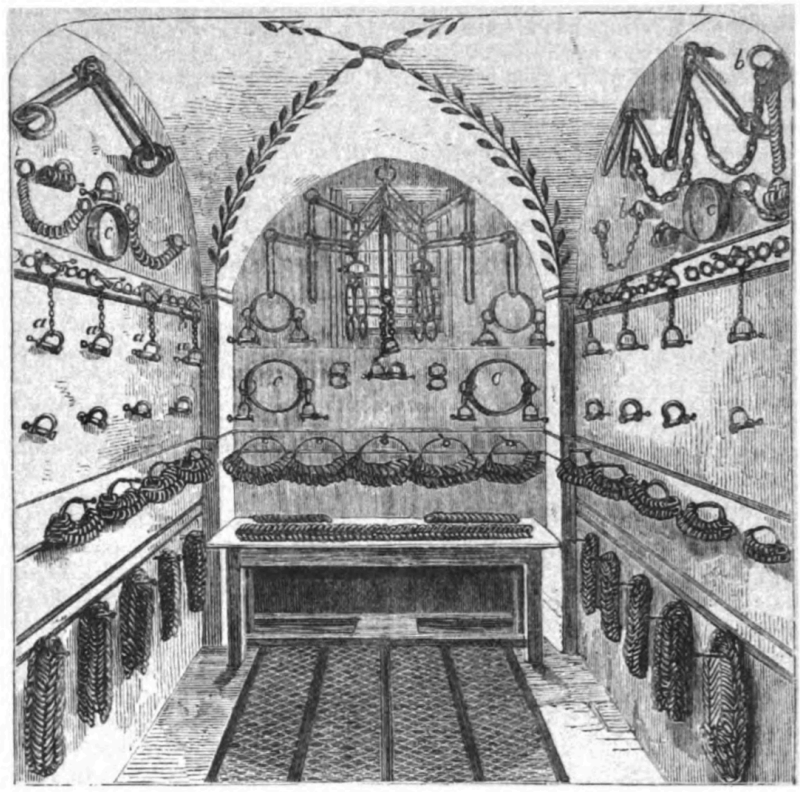
Prisoners of long sentence or known desperate character are housed on the middle floor of each pentagon, considered the most secure; a conduct-book, reviewed monthly, tracks every man's reports toward his badge, since a prisoner discharged without one, in the third class, loses a further six months before his name can even be

submitted for a ticket-of-leave. “It's a great thing to a man to get his badge,” the warder put in; “they think a great deal of it, and feel its loss keenly.” Prisoners are classed first, second, or third by conduct before leaving for public works — though, curiously, by education the first class represents the least educated — and even a man who has behaved badly earns a first-class character if he genuinely reforms before leaving, since sending him off embittered and hopeless only makes trouble for the next governor down the line. Asked which class of criminal caused the most difficulty, the governor was direct: “Sometimes the most desperate characters outside are the best-conducted inside. It's your petty London pickpocket, bred to bad habits his whole life, who gives us the most trouble — up to every kind of roguery and mischief, and we find just the same from the manufacturing districts. Your men with heavy sentences won't try to escape — most have never offended before and never will again. But the professional thief has been at it since childhood, and the moment he's out, he's straight back among his old pals and off on some new job that same night. Those habitual thieves are no good either in prison or out of it — but they're safest in.”

“There aren't many cases of escape now,” the governor added as our conversation wound down, “but I remember two at Dartmoor, years back, where the men actually got clear. One of them blundered into a bog out on the moor and stood there sunk to his neck, quite unable to move, while the search party walked past close enough to have touched him, never once suspecting he was there.”

The Reception Ward and the Chain-Room

Beyond a double-shotted door, the reception ward opens into a long, lofty, cloister-like passage, exterior windows on one side and an apparently endless line of cell doors on the other, each doubled — an inner wooden door and an outer iron grating. Each ward runs two such passages, fifteen cells apiece, some fifty yards long and lime-washed with just enough blue tint to soften the glare. The inner door stands open from nine until five, so that separately confined prisoners retain at least the semblance of contact with the world outside; at night, or after misconduct, it is bolted, though the jailer can still observe the occupant through a narrow vertical slit.



THE FETTER-ROOM AT MILLBANK.
a, Handcuffs; *b*, Shackles for the legs, fastened round the ankle, and secured to *c*, an Iron Ring for the waist.

The fetter-room at Millbank: handcuffs, leg-shackles, and waist irons.

Each cell carries a two-toned signal stick, black at one end and red at the other, pushed through this same slit to summon a warder — black for a specific request, red for a general one. Halfway down one passage stood an open wooden rack our guide identified, with a touch of local history, as an old arms-rack: “That's from the Chartist riots of '48 — we handed over the whole pentagon to the Guards then, and that's where their arms stood. Some of the same men were quartered here again for the Duke of Wellington's funeral, but the racks have never come down since.”

At the end of the reception ward, new arrivals are bathed and examined naked in the surgeon's room, asked whether they or any family member have a history of insanity, and have their description — height, hair, complexion, eye colour, and any distinguishing marks

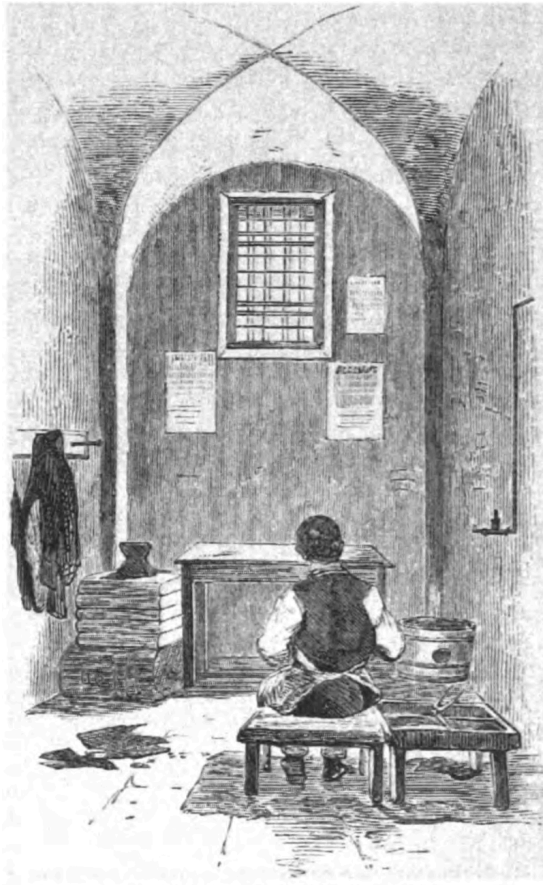
— entered in a register very much like a passport, though with rather more “marques particulières” than the ordinary traveller carries. “Most persons of bad character have private marks tattooed on them,” the warder told us — mermaids, naked figures, and stranger things besides — “marked like savages, some of them; and a good many of the regular thieves carry five dots between thumb and forefinger, a mark of belonging to what they call the 'forty thieves.'”

Nearby, in one of the lower cells of pentagon 1, our guide threw back a door to reveal what he called the chain-room, or armoury: an ordinary cell hung floor to ceiling with fetters arranged in decorative festoons — leg-irons patterned, almost mockingly, after the ornamental ironwork over Newgate's own gate, swivel handcuffs and linked chains glittering like the contents of a saddler's shop, alongside far heavier ironmongery that looked built for giants. Some manacles were as thick as a spade handle; a pair of massive ankle-cuffs, chained together, weighed better than twenty-eight pounds; certain neck-pieces looked heavy enough to break a man's collarbone outright. Scattered among this oversized ironmongery, more disturbingly, were tiny handcuffs no bigger than a child's bracelet — a reminder that eighteenth-century justice had, on occasion, seen fit to manacle infants. “They showed little enough mercy to prisoners in those days,” the warder told us, “and I remember a time, in my own career, when the authorities weren't much better. I've seen a boy of six and a half sentenced to transportation — and the sentence carried out, too, though the poor child could barely speak plainly yet.”

“We never use anything now but a single cuff and chain,” the warder added. “With one cuff, I'd take the most desperate criminal in England anywhere I liked.” We could not help expressing relief at the abandonment of such deliberately punishing ironmongery, whose sheer weight alone tortured a man with every movement. “Yes, it's given up everywhere now,” he agreed, “except Scotland — they still do it there. Prisoners who come to us from Scotland arrive in leg-irons and ankle-cuffs riveted on so tight that our men have to hammer the rivets out, and now and then the hammer misses and catches the man's own ankle instead.” The most dangerous prisoners once went to Norfolk Island, he told us, though none had been sent there in some years — the last being one Mark Jeffrey, remembered as the most

daring man Millbank had ever held, eventually shipped off after nearly murdering the chief mate of a hulk at Woolwich. Another man, William “Punch” Howard, had once escaped by cutting through a window pivot ninety feet above ground while ostensibly confined to the infirmary, lowering himself on knotted bedclothes and scaling the outer wall entirely undetected before making straight for his mother's house at Uxbridge — where the same warder, avoiding a direct confrontation among Howard's friends, had his employer call him outside on a pretext and slipped the cuffs on him there.

Cells, Schoolroom, and Workshops



PRISONER AT WORK MAKING SHOES
IN SEPARATE CELL.

A prisoner at work making shoes in a separate cell.

A typical separate cell held a small wooden table stacked with a Bible, prayer book, hymn book, arithmetic primer, and a volume of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge titled Home and Common Things, alongside a slate and pencil, wooden platter, two tin cups, salt cellar, wooden spoon, and signal stick; beneath the table, a broom, combs, hairbrush, soap, and washbasin; to one side, a washing tub and stool, to the other, a neatly folded hammock and bedding — folded, we were told, into five precise layers with the nightcap centred on the middle fold, the whole parcel scarcely larger than a soldier's knapsack. Refractory cells, reserved for penal-class men returned from public works for violent or mutinous conduct, replaced the hammock with an iron grating on stone supports and kept the wooden outer door permanently shut over the iron grating within, windows nearly blocked to admit only the barest light; one occupant we spoke with, confined for abusive language to an officer, admitted candidly, "I knew it was my temper — they took me up short. I mean to do better if I can," on a diet of half a pound of bread morning and night and nothing to drink but cold water.

The schoolroom attached to every two pentagons divides into four classes, decorated with world maps, a table of biblical chronology, and a somewhat improbable tableau of the animal kingdom dominated by an oversized whale. We found the third division at their books on a visit, chalked arithmetic on the board (interest on £272 6s. 1d. at four and a half percent over three years and 154 days), one grown man staring blankly as the schoolmaster tried, without much success, to walk him through simple subtraction.

The workshops themselves shift character floor by floor. On the top floor of pentagon 2, tailors worked at cell tables doubling as combined bed-frame and shop-board, the arrangement giving each man, as one warder put it, "a bedstead and a shop-board at the same time"; a furnace at the end of the passage kept irons hot for finishing seams. One old man, judged past any real capacity for tailoring, sat picking coir instead, a heap of loose brown fibre before him — work reserved, as the governor had told us, for men incapable of anything more demanding. Elsewhere, boys as young

as sixteen worked competently at coats after only four months' instruction — “and you can make a coat now, eh?” one warder asked a boy at his needle; “I think I can, sir,” came the modest answer — while in the shoemakers' ward, one instructing officer proudly displayed a nearly finished Wellington boot: “That's as good a boot as could be found in London — the man who made it used to work at a West End house.” A single ward earned upwards of £4 in a week's work, and one cell, its occupants judged trustworthy enough, held five men working together, permitted quiet conversation as a reward for consistent good conduct — “but we have to work very hard,” one of them pointed out as we left. In another cell, a chaplain sat reading scripture aloud to a single prisoner, who answered the responses in a low, solemn voice as we passed by.

The mechanics' ward on the middle floor of pentagon 2 held painters, glaziers, coopers, blacksmiths, carpenters, masons, and bricklayers, all at work under supervision, the passage windows here deliberately darkened to prevent any view into the neighbouring female pentagon. One prisoner pointed out to us, a penal-class man now working unshackled among the others, had earned that trust by going to an officer's aid when four convicts attacked him coming off the treadwheel. Another, a mild, educated-seeming man fluent in French, German, and Latin, had once held a comfortable clerkship at the India House on £150 a year before murdering his wife while blind drunk on Christmas Day — reprieved from the gallows, by his own account, only through the intercession of the Sheriffs and the East India Company, and now, the warder believed, sincerely repentant, though we found him, on a later visit to his cell, dull, sallow, and entirely unremarkable to look at; asked about the murder itself, he told us only that it felt “all like a dream to me,” since he had been dead drunk at the time and knew he must have done it chiefly because everyone told him so. It was in this same ward, at the junction of two passages, that an officer named Hall had been beaten to death some years before by a prisoner named Francis, using nothing more than the metal utensil he had been let out to empty — a killing carried out, by the warder's account, with a calculation that left little room for any plea of

madness, whatever became of the man afterward in Bethlem. “He told me himself he meant to murder someone,” the warder said. “He put the black end of his signal-stick out to say he wanted the closet, and the officer let him out and thought nothing more of it — and the moment the man's back was turned, over the trough, he came up behind him and beat his brains out right where we're standing. Some of those utensils weigh close to ten pounds; I've weighed them myself, so I know it for a fact.”

Beyond the cells, the prison's larger workshops handle the heavier trades: a spacious, iron-roofed artisans' shop for coopering and polishing, a carpenters' shop upstairs thick with the smell of fresh deal, and, in the manufacturing department proper, warerooms stacked with bales of blue cloth for officers' uniforms, shirting, sheeting, hammock canvas, and rolls of the distinctive brown convict cloth. “We supply nearly all the public works from here,” the department's manufacturer told us — greatcoats for the Warrior hulk, uniforms for Chatham and Dartmoor, five hundred pairs of shoes and five hundred full suits of clothing and bedding standing ready to ship the moment Chatham's new prison called for them. Female prisoners' work, meanwhile, goes largely to the City's slop-shops — Jackson's in Leadenhall Street, Early and Smith of Houndsditch, Stephens and Clark, Favell and Bousfield — some £3,000 a year in contracts, a thousand soldiers' coats in a single week at the height of demand during the war, shirts made up at fourpence apiece and trousers at two-pence-halfpenny, a rate the manufacturer admitted frankly “didn't pay.” The steward's own office handles every payment and account for the establishment — some £1,200 a month on average — down to the smallest detail: a prisoner's account on discharge might read simply “Amount of private cash, sixpence; gratuity, none; property, one hairbrush, one toothbrush, two combs,” though the man convicted of murdering his wife, awaiting transfer, was recorded as owning seven books and nothing else of value.

Peculiar Wards, Refractory and Dark Cells



PRISONER IN REFRACTORY CELL.
(The outer door being supposed to be thrown back.)

A prisoner in a refractory cell, the outer door thrown back.

The penal-class ward, in pentagon 4, keeps two officers on permanent duty and its cells continually bolted, though gutta-percha utensils replace the usual metal ones, judged too dangerous to trust to men already returned once for violence. Through the inspection slit of one cell we watched a young man pacing with the same restless energy as a caged animal; another, spoken to directly, admitted readily enough to having kicked an officer during a fit of temper — "I don't want to come here again, that's all" — while a third paced his cell with arms folded, visibly furious, and was left undisturbed.

Millbank's Catholic wards, in pentagon 5, hold what our guide bluntly called "the worst class of prisoners" — generally, in his account, the most itinerant and poorly educated of all the convicts passing through, some supporting five or six dependents outside the walls entirely through picking pockets, occasionally clearing as much as forty pounds a week with the help of confederates who "stall" for them, receiving the stolen property the instant it changes hands. One small Irish boy, in tears at the end of a passage, begged to know whether he might leave before serving his full time; told that good behaviour might yet see him sent to the Isle of Wight to learn a trade, he managed a smile through his tears and a grateful "thank you, sir." Catholic prisoners attend school twice weekly and receive instruction from their own priest on Sundays and Wednesdays, in a small confession room adjoining the schoolroom; the general Protestant chapel, a polygonal building at the very centre of the prison, is reached by covered walkways radiating out to the surrounding pentagons, prisoners from pentagons 1, 2, 5, and 6 filling the floor and pentagon 4's convalescents occupying the gallery.

Millbank's refractory cells — one to a pentagon, always on the top floor, admitting a little light — are supplemented by nine genuinely dark cells in the basement of pentagon 5 (a further nine exist in pentagon 6 but are judged unhealthy and left unused). Reaching them meant a low, narrow staircase, a passage close enough to require walking sideways, and a doorway low enough to force a stoop — the cell beyond a windowless, fungus-scented chamber lit only by our guide's candle, the throb of the weavers' looms overhead the sole sound reaching it. "There's a fellow down here pretending to be mad," the warder told us of one occupant, "claims we've put something in

his soup and that there's a dreadful smell in his cell." Asked whether the cell was truly pitch dark, he was unequivocal: "Dark! No dungeon was ever darker than this." And yet, he added, a week of it rarely breaks even the most stubborn temper — "the men say they could do a month of it standing on their heads; that's a common boast of theirs. Our punishment here is nothing to what I've seen in years past — the governor's a lenient, kind man, to prisoners and officers alike, and it shows." Prisoners in the dark cells are checked hourly, in case of illness or worse, through small ventilation holes; the bed, as at Pentonville, is a bare wooden couch a foot off the ground. One occupant, addressed kindly by the warder — "why not try to be a better fellow? You gave me your word last time" — answered that he had kept that word for three full weeks before falling back among men he simply couldn't get on with, muttering darkly that they had tried to kill him once at Dartmoor and meant to finish the job now. We left him pacing in the dark, his hands in his pockets.

Night Guard, Cleaning, and Exercise

Millbank's staff runs to 103 officers — 2 chief warders, 9 principal warders, 30 warders, 62 assistant warders — against a full complement of 1,100 male prisoners, a ratio of roughly one officer to eleven men, considerably heavier than Pentonville's one to eighteen. Half the staff sleeps in the prison each night, the other half the next, one officer holding the keys to the pentagon's warder's tower against fire or alarm, the rest sleeping in a barracks-style guardroom, with a bell connecting every pentagon to this central point. An outer guardroom near the main gate keeps a rack of carbines and a chained string of cutlasses for the night sergeant, an old soldier who patrols the garden sentries at set hours and does not stand them down until every prisoner has been confirmed present the next morning — confirmed by a genuinely elaborate relay: warders knock at each cell for prisoners to display their signal sticks shortly before six, count them, report "all correct" up through the principal warders to the sergeant of the guard, who finally releases the garden sentries once every pentagon has checked in. A further arms-store sits, deliberately awkward to reach, in a loft above the inner gatekeeper's own bedroom

— rows of blunderbusses, bayonets, and horse-pistols kept ready loaded.

At six, a second bell begins the day's cleaning: prisoners emerge three at a time to empty their slops and sweep cells into the passage, short-sentence men — anything under ten years counted "short" at Millbank — assigned to the outer courtyards under an armed guard, since the prison permits no prisoner beyond the inner gate unescorted. We watched one such gang rolling the gravel with a heavy metal cylinder until the ground lay as neatly combed as a freshly washed head of hair, while elsewhere prisoners scoured the stone passages on their knees with sand and holystone. Breakfast preparation runs on a similarly precise schedule: by twenty-five past seven the cook-houses, one to every two pentagons, are dispatching cocoa and bread ward by ward, male and female prisoners entering the kitchen from opposite sides of a dividing partition, each ward's messmen calling in turn to collect their allotted cans and loaves, counted out in the dozens as they go.

Exercise begins after morning chapel, around a quarter past nine, each pentagon sending one or occasionally two of its six wards out at a time, three before dinner and three after, an hour apiece. Where a yard is fitted with a pump, sixteen men work its crank-handles in relays of fifteen minutes, jackets off, while the rest walk the gravelled circuit at whatever pace they choose, so long as they keep the required distance — six feet at minimum — from the man ahead; lame prisoners walk nearer the centre, under a warder's closer eye. We later found the prison's own bakers exercising in the general ward's yard, their clothes still dusted flour-white, the master baker watching from one side in his own whites.

The Associated Rooms, Infirmary, and Prison Garden

One of Millbank's genuine peculiarities is its system of large associated rooms — four of them, one per floor of pentagon 4, each formed by knocking a full passage of fifteen cells into a single chamber, holding up to eighty-three men though rarely more than fifty-six in practice.



CONVICTS WORKING IN THE GARDEN GROUND, ATTENDED BY AN ARMED WARDER.

Convicts working in the garden ground, attended by an armed warder.

Men are moved here after six months in separation — Millbank's separate term running a third shorter than Pentonville's, at the governor's own discretion — to sleep, eat, and work together under a single warder's watch, seated on either side of a central hot-air shaft that lets him see half the room at a glance. “Stand on one side!” our guide called as we entered one such room at breakfast, the air remarkably fresh despite some fifty men confined within it, not the least trace of the effluvium we had half expected. We watched the room at breakfast: newly washed men, hair combed as neatly as the gravel outside, silent but for the occasional clink of tin mug against table, grace said standing before a single voice led the room in “Bless, O Lord, these Thy good creatures,” answered by a chorused “Amen” before the tables were swept, stowed, and turned instantly into shop-boards for tailoring or biscuit-bag making — the prison having turned out as many as 20,000 navy biscuit-bags in a single week at capacity, weaving a good share of the cloth itself besides. Passing from one large room to the next, we found some men absorbed in library books while waiting for the officers to return from their own breakfast — one deep in a treatise titled Infidelity: its Aspects, Causes, and

Agencies, another in a weekly miscellany called the Home Friend, a third in the Saturday Magazine, a fourth working through a History of Redemption. One boy, asked to show whether he belonged to “the forty,” held out his hand to reveal the five telltale blue dots between thumb and forefinger; left unwatched, our guide told us, such men will scratch their outside nicknames and sentence length onto their own tin cans, so that any old associate transferred through later will know exactly who is inside, and for how long.

The infirmary, built to the same dimensions as the associated rooms, held fourteen iron beds the day we visited, curtained in blue check, its floor spotlessly white. A man with erysipelas wore a ring of black caustic round his cheek to check the disease's spread; an Italian prisoner suffered a suspected venereal abscess; another, propped up in bed, bound a bandaged knee himself; a small dark-skinned boy nursed a poulticed cheek. One patient's knee, swollen to the size of a football beneath scarred, parchment-pale skin, marked a case of “white swelling” the infirmary warder identified without hesitation; another, coughing sharp and dry with inflammation of the lungs, we were told quietly afterward had once been a collector of inland revenue in Yorkshire, now serving time for embezzling several thousand pounds of public money. A third man, paralyzed for a long stretch and given up for dead, had recovered his body only to lose, by the warder's account, most of his mind along with it.

The general ward, Millbank's other large room, occupies its own separate building within pentagon 5's courtyard — originally built for juvenile prisoners under eighteen, later converted, as the supply of transportable boys declined, into an associated ward for adults. Ranged around its skylighted, railway-terminus-like interior are a series of open-fronted “bays,” each housing six men who eat, work, and sleep there together, three in hammocks below and three above, the meal table folding up flat against the wall each evening to double as a tailor's shop-board. Up to 180 men can be housed here at full capacity, working, we were assured, in such genuine silence that a dropped pin would be audible across the room; on Sundays, the same hall serves as the Catholic chapel.

Millbank keeps a small “garden class” of convalescent prisoners — men recovering from scrofula or general wasting, given extra

rations of milk, bread, and mutton broth and permitted two hours daily in the outer grounds. Among them, we could not help noticing, walked a once-prominent City merchant now serving a transportation sentence for large-scale fraud, recognizable even in prison brown; he hurried past, evidently aware we had placed him. “The change must come hard for a man like that,” the warder observed, “used to dealing in a quarter of a million at a time — though some prisoners here are better off, in a manner of speaking, than they ever were outside.” The merchant, we learned, found his own consolation in studying French and German. Elsewhere in the grounds, an old ornamental reservoir, once meant to filter Thames water for the prison's use, had long since been abandoned in favour of the artesian wells at Trafalgar Square after the 1854 cholera outbreak, its unfiltered water a shade closer to weak absinthe than to anything drinkable; beyond it, neat kitchen gardens divided among the governor, chaplain, and deputy governor employ a gardener and three prisoners, one of whom, we were startled to learn, had until recently owned an estate worth £25,000, and was now found hoeing quietly between rows of beans under an armed guard's watch.

At the edge of the grounds, fenced with a low iron rail and shaded by a single elder tree, lies the old prison churchyard — unused as a burial ground since the cholera outbreak of 1848 made the authorities judge it unhealthy to continue; convicts who die at Millbank are buried now at the Victoria Cemetery in Mile End, a single prison officer generally the only mourner present. Within the old enclosure, the ground rises in unmarked mounds thick with marigolds, their bright orange heads catching the light; only three headstones stand, all raised to former prison officers, with not a single record anywhere of the convicts who share the same ground. It seemed to us, on reflection, no bad thing that their stories go unmarked — and yet a genuinely sad one that so many men should have left the world with so little trace of having been in it at all.

The Female Convict Prison at Millbank



FEMALE CONVICT IN CANVAS DRESS
(UNDER PUNISHMENT FOR TEARING HER CLOTHES).

Female convict in canvas dress, under punishment for tearing her clothes.

The female prison occupies pentagon 3 entirely, a fully separate establishment with its own staff and its own entrance — the female counterpart, in effect, of what Pentonville is to the male system, a holding depot forwarding prisoners on to Brixton as vacancies arise.

At the time of our visit it held 173 women, some in separation, others working in association, under Miss Cosgrove, the principal matron, whose uniform differed from the male officers' only in a white rather than grey straw bonnet.

“This yard,” Miss Cosgrove told us, opening onto a narrow enclosure where a single heavyset woman paced alone, “is for those too troublesome to exercise with the others — that one's been behaving obscenely and impudently at Brixton. When they're bad, they're bad indeed.” The warder accompanying us added that female discipline, in his experience, required if anything more determination and energy from the officers than the male wards did. Female cells matched the male pattern closely — rolled bedding, small table, gas jet, tin cups, books, signal stick — though the gates here, while equally strong, were noticeably lighter in construction.

“Most of the women are in for common larceny,” the matron told us as we walked, “and a great many have been in service — some for gentlemen's households, many more as farm servants; oddly, the fewest of all come from the unfortunate class off the streets.” As at Brixton, the pattern held that the women who had behaved worst outside prison often proved the best workers and best conduct within, and that the longest sentences — mostly for murder, very often the killing of their own infants — were disproportionately held by first offenders, while shorter, repeat sentences produced the prison's true habitual troublemakers. New female arrivals pick coir for their first two months before being promoted to needlework if well-behaved, their doors bolted for the first four months of confinement.

The female laundry, empty on the day of our visit (washing finished by Friday, the space cleaned Saturday for Monday's resumption), now serves only the female prisoners and their own officers, down from a much larger service in years past — ten women washing weekly, where the establishment once employed thirty-six or forty. Miss Cosgrove's own staff numbered five matrons, ten assistant matrons, one infirmary cook, and herself. In the first probation ward, women under three months' confinement worked at coir; over two months, needlework, exactly as the matron's own account had it.

Punishment cells here matched their male counterparts in severity if not always in silence. “What can the women do in there?” we

asked. “Do!” the matron answered. “Why, they sing, dance, whistle, and use the most profane language you can imagine.” One woman, confined and audibly singing “Buffalo Gals” as we passed, had, we were told, composed whole verses of doggerel mocking the prison's own directors, governor, and matrons by name. A double cell nearby, its windows entirely smashed, had been wrecked by a woman using nothing more than a tin cup; a heap of splintered wood in the corner, we learned, was all that remained of her table, only prompt intervention having saved the bedstead as well.

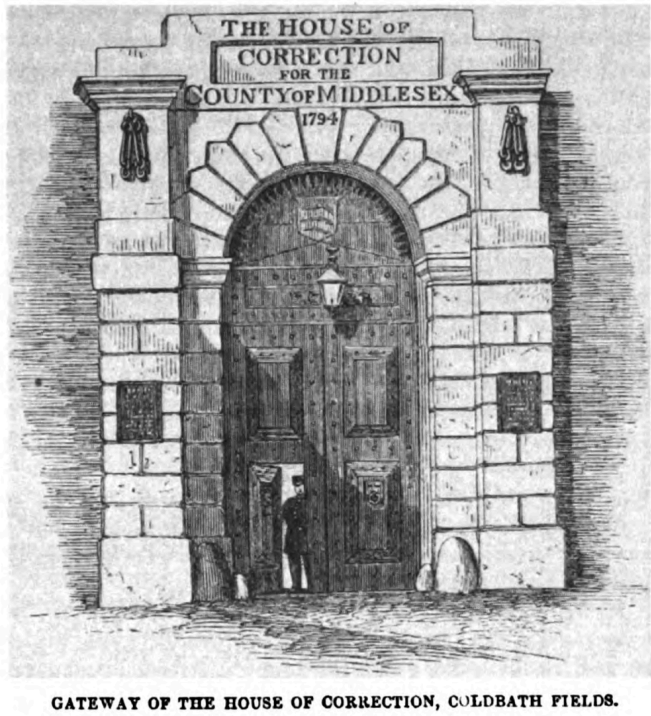
Persistent clothes-tearing earns a coarse canvas dress, fastened at the waist not with an ordinary buckle but a small screw requiring a key to release — the women having previously taken to breaking their windows using whalebone stays pushed through the bars once ordinary glass-breaking implements were removed. A matching straitjacket, canvas with closed leather sleeves strapped up the arm, stood ready for more extreme cases. Cropping the hair, we were assured, is never practised on entry — “they'd sooner lose their lives than their hair,” as one warder put it — though a lock may be sent home to a child, sister, or parent with the chaplain's approval, stitched securely to the accompanying letter so it cannot be lost in the post.

Our final conversation at the gate, as we prepared to leave, was cut abruptly short by a shouted “You're a liar!” ringing out from one of the nearby wards — at which the young matron, barely pausing to wish us good morning, hurried straight back inside to see to it.

CHAPTER VIII

The Middlesex House of Correction, Coldbath Fields

APPROACHING COLDBATH FIELDS



GATEWAY OF THE HOUSE OF CORRECTION, COLDBATH FIELDS.

Gateway of the House of Correction, Coldbath Fields.

We set out early on a dull summer morning to visit Coldbath Fields, the sky lead-coloured with an approaching storm, the streets still asleep but for a caged lark greeting the dawn over a seedman's shop and a chorus of cocks crowing in cellar coops behind the greengrocers' and barbers', while overhead the birds in a hairdresser's window-cages set up such a din it seemed to pour from the shutter-holes in positive gusts of noise. Bakers' chimneys alone sent up smoke at that hour, their night's fires already dying to grey; milk-maids waited on doorsteps with their bright drum-shaped cans; policemen made their way to the different stations, capes rolled like

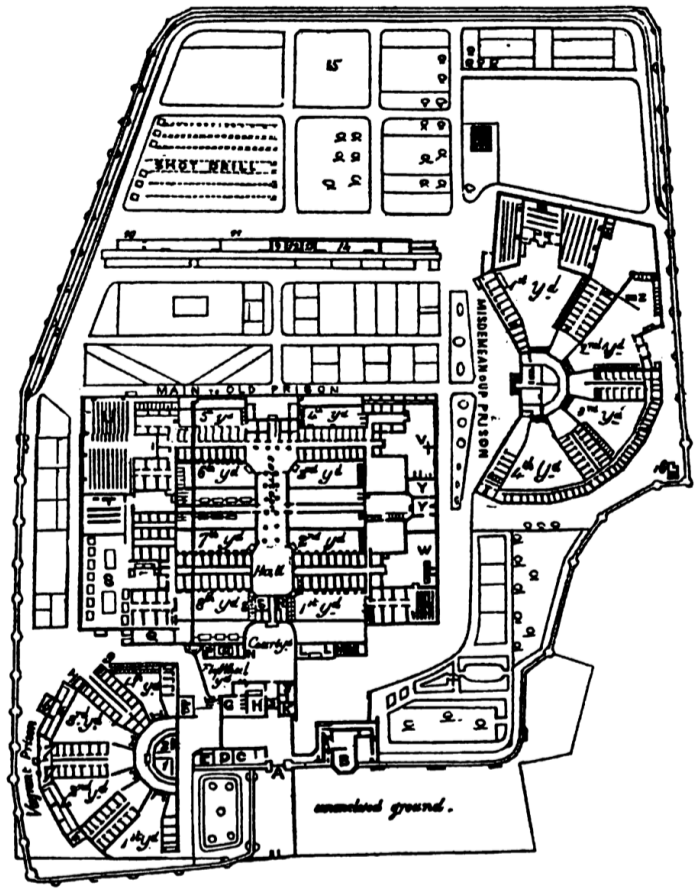
black quivers under their arms; a newspaper express-cart dashed past toward Euston Square, and butchers' carts came rattling over the stones behind horses with freshly greased hooves. Past the Foundling, rows of hansom cabs stood still dirty from the night's work, and a few streets on, past Gray's Inn Road, the dull brick wall of the House of Correction came into view.

Few people of comfortable means choose to live within sight of a prison, and the streets around Coldbath Fields show it: once-respectable red-brick houses in Baynes Row and Cobham Row, their old-fashioned brickwork, heavy white sashes, and quaint carved lettering still faintly dignified, have sunk to lodging-houses and furniture stores for single men who care nothing where they lay their heads so long as the rent is cheap. Clerkenwell itself, though, is one of London's hardest-working districts, and industry presses close against the prison walls regardless — brass-founders in Dorrington Street, canister-makers, a small colony of saw-mills in Phoenix Place, their steam jets bursting from tiled sheds and the grating hiss of machinery audible from the street, one dingy cottage given over entirely to “Fancy Brushboard Makers,” and, incongruously, a cut-price undertaker advertising “Genteel Funerals” at a guinea apiece on a closed-up shopfront nearby. Behind the prison, a builder's yard bristles with scaffold poles, flagstones, and broken sculpture amid rusting cog-wheels and old machinery; on the waste, unpaved ground about the walls, boys have made their own playground, absorbed in marbles, pitch-the-hole, and games of tossing for buttons, or swinging themselves gymnastically along the rude wooden rails meant to keep cabs and cattle out.

The prison itself occupies nine acres behind a tall brick wall that hides every glimpse of the buildings within, save for the steady dark blur of the tread-wheel's governing fan, visible darting past the coping-stones from certain angles — a detail whose meaning is obvious only to those who have already been inside. Half an acre of unfenced grass opposite the main wall, lush enough to graze a small flock of sheep, faces the back of the governor's house, a narrow two-storey dwelling barred like the rest. The prison's main doorway carries a genuine period charm: black-lettered stone reading “The House of Correction for the County of Middlesex, 1794,” flanked by

gigantic knockers, an iron-grated wicket no larger than a gridiron, ornamental fetters mounted above each side pillar, and notice-boards setting out the terms of imprisonment and the rules for visiting — the whole entrance topped by the Middlesex county crest, three crossed sabres hanging over the head of everyone who passes beneath.

HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE PRISON



GROUND-PLAN OF COLDBATH FIELDS PRISON.
(References to the Letters and Numbers in the Engraving.)

A. Entrance Gate.
B. Governor's House.
C. Gate Warder's House.
D. Engineer's Office.
E. Blacksmith's Shop.
F. Cocoa Mill and Shed.
G. Governor's House.
H. Gate Warder's Lodge
J. Clerk's Office.
K. Cashier's Office.
L. Warder's Lodge and Bed-room
M. Coach-house and Stable.
N. Chaplain's Clerk's Room
O. Sub-Warder's Rooms.
P. Engineer's Stores.
Q. Plumber's Shop.
R. Governor's Report Officers.
S. Mat Room.
T. School Room.
U. Oakum Room.
V. Cook's House & Larder.
W. Reception Room and Yard.
X. Clothing Room.
Y. Store Rooms.
Z. Laundry.
1. Gardener's Room.
2. Lampman's Room.
3. Visiting Places.
4. Tread-wheels.
5. Dead-house.
6. Lime Shed.
7. Refractory Cells.
8. Male Washing-house.
9. Water Closets.
10. Van sheds.
11. Coal Shed.
12. Wood Shed.
13. Dresser Shed.
14. Oakum Shed.
15. Dust & Rubbish Heap.

Ground-plan of Coldbath Fields Prison.

The district takes its name from a once-celebrated well, now covered over, its site occupied today by the prison's own tread-wheel. An earlier House of Correction stood here from the reign of James I, built after the old City Bridewell could no longer contain the district's growing population of vagrants; the present building, however, dates only from 1794, erected at a cost of £65,656 on nine acres bought for £4,350 — a genuinely prodigal outlay, as the prison's own former governor, Captain Chesterton, later observed, for a structure holding just 232 cells. Successive additions since — a vagrants' ward in 1830, a female ward (now the misdemeanants' prison) in 1832 — brought total capacity to around 1,450, split between 919 fully separate cells and 534 shared ones, under the joint charge of fourteen rotating county magistrates and a staff of 112 officers, roughly one to every thirteen prisoners.

Today's discipline is the silent associated system: prisoners labour together by day under a strict ban on speech or gesture, some 920 of them returning to separate cells at night, the remainder to closely watched general dormitories where officers must remain through the night to prevent disorder — a compromise forced, as one prison writer put it, by the plain shortage of separate cells to go round, whatever the system's designers might otherwise have preferred. Coldbath Fields treats labour explicitly as punishment rather than trade instruction, the bulk of it worked out on the tread-wheel or picking oakum and coir unless a prisoner's labour happens to be needed for some task connected with running the jail itself; the prison runs six separate tread-wheel yards, two of them driving four wheels off a single long axis, the remaining four driving three wheels apiece. For all this severity, the prison enjoys a genuinely enviable health record — rarely more than three or four men in the infirmary at any time out of an average 1,200 to 1,400 inmates, a sickness rate actually lower than Brixton's and well below Millbank's or Pentonville's, credited chiefly to the ample space, light, and air the layout affords.

The main or old prison, standing behind the entrance in a quadrangle with two attached wings, is reserved for convicted felons; the radiating vagrants' ward, built on a half-wheel plan much like Pentonville's, houses those committed as rogues and reputed thieves; the former female ward now holds those convicted of misdemeanours.

At the last returns before our visit, the prison held 1,325 adult males — 697 felons, 496 misdemeanants, and 182 vagrants.

The Old Regime and the Coming of Reform

The corrupt old regime that once prevailed here — the extortionate yardsmen and passage-men, the letters destroyed rather than delivered to prisoners too poor to pay for their passage, the governor Aris denounced as a virtual tyrant until Sir Francis Burdett's campaigning earned the prison its lasting underworld nickname of "the Bastile," still abbreviated by thieves today to "the steel" — has already been described in this book in connection with Captain Chesterton's own arrival to reform the institution in 1829. It is enough to say here that the abuses were, if anything, worse than elsewhere: a genuine black market in tobacco, spirits, tea, coffee, and even pickles and fish sauce operated out of hollowed cell walls and false-bottomed lime-washings renewed just often enough to hide the traffic beneath, telegraphed warning systems that could clear every trace of contraband and set the tread-wheels innocently spinning again before any inspecting magistrate had crossed the yard, and a poor or friendless prisoner faced daily indignities — branded a "nose" and made to run a gauntlet of knotted handkerchiefs for the crime of complaining — that a man with money in his pocket could simply pay his way around, at a standing rate of seven or eight shillings withheld from every pound sent in by a prisoner's family.

Two changes, in particular, mark Coldbath Fields' transition to its present system, and are worth recording here in the reforming governor's own words. The silent system arrived only after Chesterton, acting on a report from the prison inspector Mr. Crawford praising the results already achieved at Wakefield and the Glasgow Bridewell, travelled north himself in December 1834 to study both institutions directly, concluding that Coldbath Fields lacked the cells for genuine separation but could adopt the silent associated system instead. On the 29th of December that year, 914 prisoners were simply informed that all communication by word, gesture, or sign was thenceforth forbidden — and, remarkably, the new rule took hold without a single act of open resistance.

The tread-wheel's own origin, as Chesterton told it, was rather more accidental. Its inventor, a Suffolk engineer named Cubitt, had been standing in conversation with a magistrate in the yard of Bury St. Edmunds jail, watching prisoners lounge idly about, when the magistrate remarked, half in jest, “I wish to God, Mr. Cubitt, you could suggest some way of employing those fellows — could nothing like a wheel be made to answer?” The word “wheel” alone was enough to set Cubitt's mind working; he excused himself with a vague promise to think it over, and the tread-wheel, elaborated over the following weeks, was the result — rapidly adopted across the country as the standard instrument of hard labour. Early requirements were punishing in the extreme: 12,000 feet of ascent daily on a restricted diet, a regime so debilitating that the Royal Artillery reportedly stopped sending offending soldiers to Coldbath Fields altogether, having noticed the lasting physical harm it did them. The daily requirement now stands at 1,200 feet.

Morning Muster and the Main Prison

We arrived before the official half-past-six opening, and watched the warders gather outside — dark-blue uniforms, leather cross-belts, brass-numbered pouches, some wearing gilt and others silver collar-plates bearing the Middlesex arms to distinguish full warders from sub-warders. At twenty-five past six, a gun's report (startling a nearby peacock into screaming) sent pipes clattering to the ground and the whole crowd hurrying for the gate. The deputy governor, in full uniform with crimson shield and gold sabre badge, reviewed the assembled ranks before the day began — inspecting boots and dress, marching down the files, and only then unlocking the inner gratings to admit us to the flag-stoned yard facing the main felons' prison, a squat, whitewashed, thoroughly unornamented building whose small barred windows offered the only relief from an otherwise blank facade.

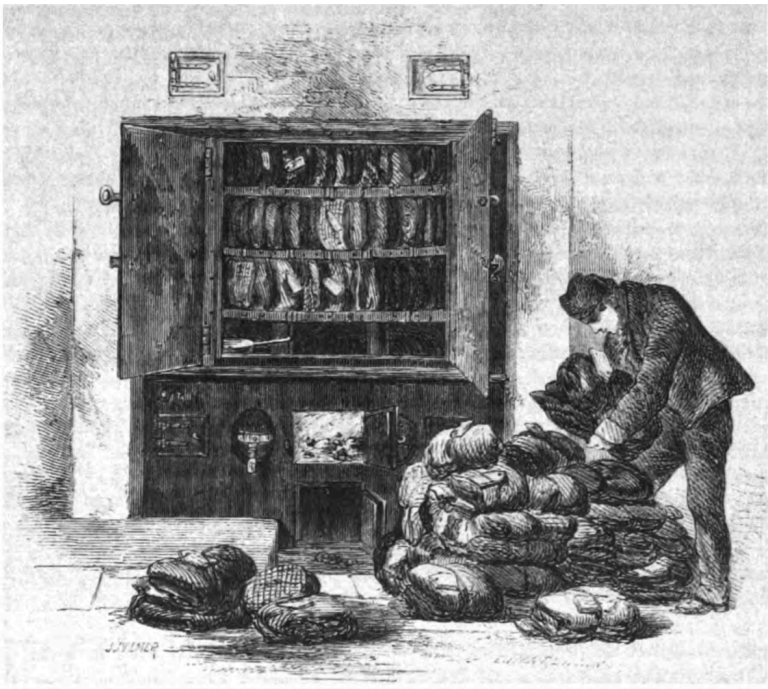
A gang of prisoners in dusty grey, vagrants and reputed thieves who had been sleeping in the felons' cells for want of room elsewhere, crossed the yard as we entered, each touching his cap to the deputy governor in a half-military salute. “They are vagrants and reputed thieves,” the officer accompanying us explained, “but for want of

room in the vagrant ward they have been sleeping in the felons' cells. We're waiting now until the different cells are unlocked, and then my duty is to make the rounds and count the prisoners." Inside the main hall — a bright, iron-pillared vestibule supporting the chapel above, its walls hung with religious texts whose placement struck us as occasionally unfortunate for a prison run on strict silence ("Swear Not At All") or association ("Behold How Good and How Pleasant It Is For Brethren To Dwell Together In Unity") — a long, pillared corridor nearly a hundred feet in length, its squat two-foot columns scarcely six feet high yet forming a genuinely pleasing perspective down its near-hundred-foot length, led to the eight main yards, each holding a hundred to a hundred and fifteen felons.

We watched the morning count proceed yard by yard: prisoners filing from their cells with wash-tubs to empty at a central sink, then into the meal-shed for washing and dressing under an officer's watch from an elevated stool, silence enforced throughout. Twelve at a time, the men rose from the shed to wash at slate lavatories or tubs set on the paved ground, soaping neck and face until white with lather before returning, within their allotted few minutes, to comb their hair and dress. The transformation from prison grey to bare flesh at the washstands was oddly striking — stripped of their uniform colour, the men looked briefly, simply human again. While the washing went on, an infirmary warder passed through the yard with a can of poultices, calling out "Any want dressings?" — one lad with sores on his neck stepped forward for a bottle of grey wash to treat them himself. Among the ranks that morning were a boy of no more than fifteen and several genuinely old men, both plainly out of place among the general run of prisoners; one elderly man, a tall, bloodshot-eyed Black prisoner who had given a false name, was rumoured by the deputy governor to have once held high military rank, now serving time for an offence our guide declined to name — he had put on his spectacles and bent immediately to his book the moment he saw us enter, as if to hide his face in what looked like plain shame. The count confirmed against the previous night's locking-up tally, the deputy governor moved on to check the prison's "tell-tale" clocks — Mr. Fillary's own invention, the prison engineer — to verify the night

warders had made their rounds on schedule throughout every yard we visited.

THE CLOTHES STORE AND FUMIGATING ROOM



FUMIGATING PRISONERS' CLOTHES AT COLDBATH FIELDS PRISON.

Fumigating prisoners' clothes at Coldbath Fields Prison.

A narrow staircase, its low beam a genuine hazard to the unwary — “mind you don't knock your head,” the officer warned as we climbed — led up to the loft where prisoners' own clothes are stored on arrival: a scene that called Rag Fair immediately to mind, dirty bundles tied tight as boiled puddings and labelled by wooden tag, the air thick with the particular glue-like smell of old moleskin and corduroy. A countryman's heavily nailed and rusted boots, a costermonger's brass-buttoned corduroy waistcoat, soldiers' uniforms with their canvas linings and big brass hooks and eyes showing through, smock-frocks and straw hats from the agricultural districts, and, on occasion, a genuinely dandy suit stripped from some well-dressed “swell mobsman” complete with jewellery — the whole

collection sorted, our guide pointed out, by an unmistakable preference among felons generally for red-patterned pocket handkerchiefs, so consistent that red might fairly be called the felon's favourite colour. Some hats, limp as nightcaps and rusty as coconut fibre, were plainly "shockingly bad" ones; others, carefully wrapped in handkerchiefs with clean, showy linings and a certain greasy gloss, told their own story of better days.

Before storage, every suit is fumigated against vermin: rolled tight and racked in a brick oven holding up to 150 suits at once, a pan of lit brimstone sealed in with them, the temperature carefully watched to stay under 212 degrees lest the clothes scorch outright or the whole batch be, as our guide put it, literally done to rags. The garments emerge smelling powerfully of spent matches — not an altogether pleasant change, but by every account a considerable improvement on what preceded it.

The Liberation of Prisoners

Coldbath Fields being a short-term prison, discharges run to some 150 prisoners a week, and we were invited to watch a gang of twenty leave on the morning of our visit. "Now, my men, stand forward one at a time, and call out your names," the deputy governor instructed, a paper in hand; each man in turn cried his name and stepped from the rank at the word "Go on." Called forward one by one to confirm their names against the release list, the men showed a striking absence of any visible excitement at their approaching freedom — answering questions with the same flat calm they might have shown a warder any other day, staring vacantly about them as if nothing of any consequence were happening at all. Once dressed again in their own clothes, ragged as many were, the men looked briefly more human than they had in prison grey; the governor addressed them directly before they left — "Now that you are going to have your liberty, I hope I shall not see you again. Seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and you will prosper" — before the inevitable round of departure-day begging began: a barefoot bricklayer, bare feet showing clean through his burst and mouldy boots, pleading for an old pair of prison shoes for the long walk to Edmonton, where a wife and family waited ("A bad way to help them, coming here," the governor

observed, granting the request anyway); another man, his clothes barely holding together in a ragged mass not unlike the cobwebs seen clinging to old wine bottles in a merchant's window, asking for socks and a little money for his own long journey. “It's curious,” the governor remarked drily, “how far they all seem to have to walk.”

At the gate, a parish officer waited to hand one departing prisoner — seven days for drunkenness — his wife and infant, thrown onto parish relief during his sentence and now formally returned to his custody the moment he crossed the threshold; he took them with a simple “all right” and walked off, the woman following. A second such reunion involved three small children, delivered by cab and handed over at the gate. We had expected some show of emotion from the crowd gathered outside to meet the newly freed, but found instead a striking, almost businesslike indifference — old associates greeting released men with no more ceremony than a nod, women trailing silently after husbands who never once looked back, one impatient voice in the crowd simply calling “Now, Jim, can't you come on!” to a lanky youth barely through the gate.

THE ARRIVAL OF NEW PRISONERS

Word of an approaching prison van draws its own crowd outside the gates — butchers with joints wanted in a hurry, fishmongers' errand boys, nursemaids with perambulators, costerwomen with their shallow baskets, all pushing for a good place at the railings to catch a glimpse of the prisoners stepping down; on the day of our own visit the watchers went disappointed, since the great outer gates simply swung open and the huge, hearse-like prison omnibus rolled straight into the yard, horses sputtering as they hauled the heavy vehicle in. “As full as we can cram!” the conductor called out, climbing down from his small perch, and sure enough, when the door was unlocked, even the narrow passage between the closet-like cells lining the vehicle's interior stood packed with standing men — nineteen felons in all, fresh from the Newgate sessions.

The batch made for a striking cross-section: unshaven, dishevelled, plainly up all night, among them a soldier still in uniform, a stout, respectable-looking man in silver spectacles who might have passed for the party's one gentleman despite his dusty

boots and rumpled clothes, a dark-eyed youth in fashionably cut clothes after the casino style, and a nervous boy with an oddly conical head, endlessly buttoning and unbuttoning his coat. As the newcomers waited to be called, a file of prisoners already in prison suits passed through the yard, each side eyeing the other with open curiosity — the men in grey sizing up their new companions-to-be on the tread-wheel, the new arrivals staring back just as hard.

Registration proceeded briskly: "Name?" "Age?" "Read and write?" "Ever here before?" "Trade?" "What were you tried for?" — the silver-spectacled clerk, thirty-nine, tried for embezzlement, visibly deflated on learning his sentence carried hard labour after all, having evidently hoped otherwise. A well-dressed lad claimed he'd been committed merely "on suspicion" until pressed — "didn't you steal some tools?" — into a franker answer; another, giving the name "Smith," prompted a knowing aside from the warder once he'd left: "all the Smiths are doubtful." One closely cropped youth swore, with an entirely convincing show of innocence, that he had never been imprisoned before — "I know," the warder answered, unmoved — and folded the moment he was told the other officers would recognize him regardless.

A lame man on a crutch, committed for highway robbery despite his obvious disability, explained his method with disarming simplicity ("Three pound, I think, she said I took off her") and, flustered by the questioning, answered "What religion?" with "Carpenter." Among the rest: a soldier and two companions in for stealing a watch in a skittle-alley, the soldier having conveniently forgotten his own age and made himself a year older than his last committal at Newgate; a man in a brown Holland smock who had stolen a sheep; the conical-headed boy, who had taken photographic lenses and answered every question with a coolness that left the clerks remarking afterward they had never seen anybody quite so cool; and the fashionable dark-eyed youth, indicted alongside his own brothers for perjury. One further boy, modest and well-spoken, kept his eyes fixed on the ground throughout and answered in a voice barely above a whisper, giving the name "Smith" in a tone that convinced no one in the room it was genuine. Once registration was complete, the governor addressed the whole intake directly — "We shall be some time together, and I hope

you'll attend to the rules; you'll find it more comfortable to obey the officers" — before the men were led off to bathe and exchange their own clothes for prison grey.

VISITS FROM FRIENDS



Friends visiting prisoners: compartments for visitors and for prisoners.

Prison rules permit two relations or respectable friends to visit a prisoner once every three months, between ten and noon, always under an officer's eye. Prisoners are known here purely by number rather than name; a huge zinc tablet in the gate office, numbered one to fifteen hundred with small moveable brass labels, tracks exactly which yard and prison each man currently occupies — a label reading "2 V 60," for instance, meaning the sixtieth prisoner in the second yard of the vagrant prison — allowing a visitor's inquiry to be answered at a glance. Two separate arrangements handle the actual visits — one at the double gate near the main entrance, the other in the vagrants' yard, where a row of narrow niches lets prisoner and visitor converse through grating almost as fine as netting, close

enough to stop anything at all being passed through, separated by a patrolled passage where a warder walks continuously up and down. Each interview is timed strictly to fifteen minutes by a small hourglass mounted over the niche and turned the moment the visit begins; the instant the sand runs out, conversation must cease and the visitors depart, whatever remained unsaid.

We watched one such visit between a prisoner — imprisoned, with his son, for abducting and forcibly marrying off a young woman of property — and his evidently comfortable, well-dressed wife and daughter, the family conversation turning entirely on ordinary domestic matters: which children should be sent to school, how another son was getting on in his position. A second visit, between a far poorer prisoner and his wife, closed with a simple "Goodbye, love — and get something for your rheumatism, dear," the woman dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief rolled tight as a small orange, pausing at the gate for one last look before turning quietly for home.

A rarer and more painful scene followed that same afternoon: a clearly wealthy, educated woman arrived in evident distress, asking the governor to hold her son past his scheduled release until she herself could come to collect him, for fear his old companions would lead him straight back into trouble. "I am his mother," she told the governor, her voice breaking, "I am sorry to say." Told that two of the boy's associates had already been to visit him, she seemed to feel the news like a physical blow, promising to be at the gate herself by ten the next morning. The governor, plainly moved by the case, saw her out personally, and we noticed him draw a long breath afterward, as though relieved to have got through what he clearly found among the hardest duties of his post. The boy, we learned, came from a genuinely respectable family, led astray entirely by the company he had fallen into.

PRISONERS' LETTERS

Every letter a prisoner sends passes across the governor's own desk before leaving the jail, screened for anything beyond ordinary family or personal business — and, as at every prison, more than a few are composed with at least half an eye on the reader, prisoners cultivating a suitably repentant and religious tone in hopes of a more

sympathetic hearing. One such correspondent, a former cab driver whose fawning, ingratiating manner toward the governor gave no real sign of genuine reform whatever his letters claimed, wrote to ask after his son's schooling and to declare, in halting spelling, that the sentence had taught him a lesson he meant never to forget, and that he hoped, once free, to become “an altered man” and never again neglect his churchgoing.

A second letter from the same man ran into verse — a rough, heartfelt set of rhyming lines bidding farewell to family and friends, lamenting his own folly, and longing for the liberty of a bird on the wing — verse we do not reproduce here in full, though its plain sincerity, whatever its literary merit, was hard to entirely dismiss. A third letter, from an evidently more seasoned offender, offered a confession of repentance grounded in reasoning a good deal more convincing than most: the labour here, he wrote, was considerably harder than at Holloway, where he had never had to work the tread-wheel, and the experience had taught him a lesson he did not intend to repeat — an admission that reads less like genuine moral awakening than like simple, practical aversion to hard labour, though perhaps, in the end, the distinction matters less than the result.

Taken together, the day's scenes — the businesslike indifference at the gate, the mother's genuine anguish, the letters equal parts calculation and real feeling — leave an impression of Coldbath Fields not so very different from any of the other institutions this book has described: a machine built, with real ingenuity and real humanity in roughly equal measure, to process an unbroken stream of ordinary human failure, most of it neither wholly wicked nor wholly innocent, and to send it back out into the city, a little older and no more certain than before whether the experience has done any lasting good at all.

CHAPTER IX

Coldbath Fields: Labour, Discipline, and Diet

Of "Hard" and Useless Labour



BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF COLDBATH FIELDS PRISON.

Bird's-eye view of Coldbath Fields Prison.

At the correctional prisons, labour — especially the kind officially called "hard" — forms part of the punishment itself. Of the 7,743 people who passed through Coldbath Fields in the year of our visit,

4,511, or just over 58 percent, were officially recorded as employed at hard labour; the remainder at ordinary work. We have already given our view, in an earlier chapter, on the folly of trying to cure a habit of idleness by turning industry itself into a penalty, and it remains here only to describe the actual forms this hard labour takes, and to set out more fully why we think the whole approach mistaken.

We want to be clear that nothing here is meant as criticism of Coldbath Fields' own authorities, who enforce this system, in our judgment, with every possible regard for both the public and the prisoners in their charge; our objection is to the system of useless labour generally, applicable to every correctional prison in the country bar one. We recognize, too, the genuine difficulty of the problem: it would plainly be wrong to let prisoners lounge in idleness, as they did before the tread-wheel's invention, and in a short-term prison, where some men serve only a few days, there is little practical hope of teaching most of them any real trade. We recognize as well how hard it is to give physical exertion any real economic value inside a city, where land is too scarce and dear for market gardening or farm labour on any scale. Weighing the two evils against each other, though, we would frankly rather see idleness itself than industry rendered so useless, and therefore so hateful, in every prisoner's eyes. And we cannot help asking why correctional prisons need stand in the middle of cities at all, where they sit as awkwardly as a churchyard, and where prisoners are set to "grind the wind" simply because there is no land to till.

The former governor of Millbank, a man whose prison experience by then spanned nearly a quarter of a century, told us directly that it is "a great thing to make a prisoner feel he is employed on some useful work. Nothing disgusts a man, or makes him so sullen, as knowing that he is labouring and yet doing nothing" — work whose usefulness a man can actually see, he believed, does more for his character and his chances of reform than any other kind, while every other sort of labour merely irritates and hardens him. A tread-wheel had once stood at Millbank itself, reserved for penal-class second-probation men, but had by then gone unused for months, largely, we understood, at this same governor's own urging.

All human beings, we freely admit, have a natural aversion to labour — Scripture itself tells us the necessity of working for our bread was made a curse: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.” Were labour naturally pleasant, men would pay wages to be allowed to work, rather than paying others to work for them. There are exceptions — people happily pay considerable sums to go dancing, rowing, or playing cricket — but these activities have earned the name “amusements” precisely because they please us; ordinary labour does not. It is almost always the object or usefulness of work that makes it agreeable. Even a bricklayer's hodman, we suspect, would resent having his bricks thrown down from the scaffold faster than he could carry them up, purposelessness alone being the irritant. Men generally work not for delight in the labour itself but to obtain food, educate their children, and provide for their families; and even in the rare cases where work is done for its own sake — gardening, amateur carpentry, painting — the pleasure comes from the finished product or the pride of creating something, not from the labour in isolation. No one but a child builds a wall for the pure pleasure of knocking it down again, and there are few punishments more irritating than being made to work hard at something that leads nowhere. We cannot but regard the tread-wheel, built to grind nothing; the crank, made to scoop up sand and drop it again; and shot drill, which consists of moving cannon balls from one spot to another for no purpose whatsoever, as inventions resting on the same principle that instituted the tortures of the Inquisition, rather than as any genuinely enlightened or reforming punishment.

This uselessness springs from two causes. First, houses of correction are built in cities rather than the countryside, where land might otherwise allow prisoners to be profitably set to market-gardening or field labour — healthful, invigorating work requiring no prior apprenticeship. Second, and more fundamentally, prison labour can hardly be otherwise than profitless to the workman, because the ordinary laws governing life outside the walls are simply suspended within them. In society, everyone without independent means must labour for subsistence, and the great daily anxieties of the poor are securing tomorrow's dinner and Saturday's rent. But the moment a man enters prison, all such anxiety ceases. There, the rule is no

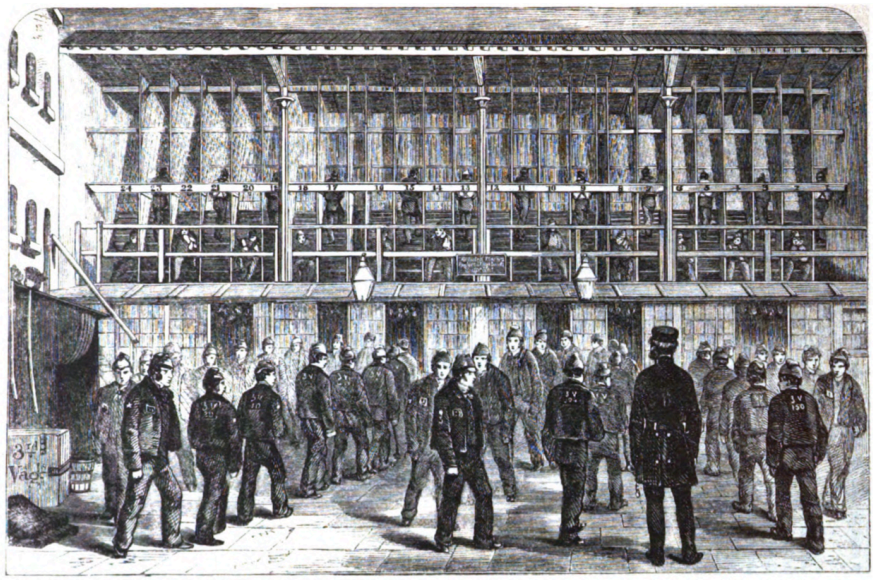
longer, as St. Paul had it, that if a man will not work, neither shall he eat; a prisoner soon learns that his food comes to him regardless of his labour. He is given a warm suit of clothes, his dinner arrives at the appointed hour, and a bed is found for him at night, none of it contingent on the smallest exertion on his part — for tread-wheel work, crank work, and shot drill have nothing whatsoever to do with procuring his food, and are not worth, in themselves, so much as the salt he consumes. If the Almighty made labour a curse, He at least attached to it the blessing of bread as its reward; in prison, the sweat of the brow brings no such reward, and so the labour becomes intolerably irksome, and the prisoner's whole nature rebels against it. By the time of his release, he has learned not only to expect food without labouring for it, but to regard industry itself as a punishment to be avoided — exactly the opposite lesson a prison ought to teach.

"But, sir," the governor of Coldbath Fields said to us, "you must deter these idle fellows somehow." Our forefathers thought so too, and in 1536 enacted that a sturdy beggar should be whipped for a first offence, have his right ear cropped for a second, and be executed as a felon for a third — and yet, in spite of such deterrents, "mendicity and vagabondage not only continued, but increased." "Deter!" exclaimed the chief warder, when we raised the subject with him some time later. "If you went out into the streets with a gallows following you, sir, and hanged every thief and rogue you met along the way, you wouldn't deter one of them out of his evil courses." And indeed, Coldbath Fields' own recommitment rate — 32.5 percent of the entire prison population — is proof enough that rendering labour repulsive and useless has, after two and a half centuries' trial, simply failed.

There is, in our view, only one way out of this folly: returning to the natural law that governs the rest of human life, and making a prisoner's food and comforts depend on the amount of work he actually does, exactly as they do for every free labourer outside the walls. We would place every new prisoner, on first entering, upon the plainest punishment diet — a pound of bread and water daily — and let him earn every additional comfort by the labour he performs, rather than granting comforts freely and only afterward threatening to withdraw them as punishment. Such a system would make the prisoner's own enjoyments the fruit of his labour, and so teach him its

value rather than confirming him in his hatred of it. This strikes us as the only natural, self-sustaining foundation for prison discipline; until the authorities find the courage — and, we would add, the humanity — to adopt it, the barbarism of grinding the wind, turning the crank, and hauling shot from place to place will continue, and continue to no purpose whatsoever.

THE TREAD-WHEEL



PRISONERS WORKING AT THE TREAD-WHEEL, AND OTHERS EXERCISING, IN THE 3RD YARD OF THE VAGRANTS' PRISON, COLDBATH FIELDS.
(From a Photograph by Herbert Watkins, 179, Regent Street.)

Prisoners working at the tread-wheel, and others exercising, in the vagrants' prison, Coldbath Fields.

The tread-wheel was introduced into English prisons more than forty years before our visit, and with only rare exceptions has never once, in all that time, been applied to any genuinely useful purpose; the prisoners themselves call the occupation, more accurately than any official term, simply “grinding the wind.” Coldbath Fields runs six tread-wheels, four in the felons' prison and two in the vagrants'. Each is built to employ twenty-four men, though under the present arrangement only twelve work at any one time; every quarter hour the twelve on the wheel are relieved by the twelve resting, who may read

or do as they please during their rest, so long as they do not speak. Each wheel carries twenty-four steps set eight inches apart, giving the cylinder a circumference of sixteen feet; the wheel makes two revolutions a minute, a bell ringing at every thirtieth revolution to mark the end of a spell. Every man is put to the wheel for a full four and three-quarter hours of labour each day.

The wheel itself, seen up close, resembles a great garden roller stood on end, divided along its length into twenty-four narrow compartments separated by high wooden partitions not unlike the stalls of a public urinal, the barrel of the wheel protruding through an open gap at the back, striped with steps like the floats of a paddle-wheel. Standing on the topmost step, a prisoner somewhat resembles a circus acrobat balanced on a rolling cask. The men work with their backs to the warder, steadying themselves on a handrail, moving their legs as if climbing a staircase — except that, instead of the steps rising to meet their tread, the steps sink away beneath them, which is precisely what makes the labour so exhausting: there is never a firm foothold. Watching the ranks of prisoners at work put us in mind of squirrels labouring on the outside, rather than the inside, of their cage.

While we watched, the bell rang for the thirtieth revolution and the wheel stopped at once, the resting hands changing places with those coming off: the relieved men climbed down with faces flushed and wet with exertion, wiping their necks with their handkerchiefs, while the fresh hands shed their coats and mounted the steps in turn, waiting for the word of command before the whole line pressed down together and the great barrel began turning again. One man, having unbuttoned his collar to cool himself, was sharply corrected by the warder — “Fasten up your collar, and throw your coat over your shoulders” — who explained to us afterward that the men were liable to catch cold if they sat exposed after such heavy exertion. Asked whether the labour was truly so hard, the warder explained: “The men can get no firm tread, the steps always sinking away under their feet, and that's what makes it so tiring. The compartments are small too, and the air grows very hot, so that by the end of the quarter-hour it's difficult even to breathe.”

We were assured that only the initial effort is needed to set the wheel's regulating fan in motion; once moving, the fan itself requires

almost no further force to keep turning. But the continuous effort required of the prisoners, simply to avoid being carried down with the sinking steps, is equivalent to lifting one's own body weight — some 140 pounds — and the men's exhausted appearance after a mere quarter-hour bore this out entirely. A further, grimmer proof of the labour's severity lies in the sheer number of prisoners who resort to feigned illness or self-injury to escape it: the prison surgeon's own printed report recorded no fewer than 3,972 such cases of "feigned complaints" in a single year. Captain Chesterton, the prison's former governor, described the lengths some men would go to: soap pinched into pills and swallowed to simulate diarrhoea; limewash applied to the tongue; and, among the more daring youths, deliberately self-inflicted wounds, or an intentional fall against the revolving wheel itself, designed to look accidental. That any rational person would voluntarily court such torture rather than simply perform an honest day's work says, we think, everything that needs saying about the wheel's actual effect on the men subjected to it.

The gross exertion required for a single day's work at Coldbath Fields — a man of average weight raising himself the equivalent of 7,200 feet, or well over a mile in vertical distance — exceeds even the labour of a bricklayer's hodman on his hardest day, though the hodman at least ends his day with wages in his pocket. Few men can continue at the wheel much past the age of forty, and we knew of at least two liberated prisoners laid up afterward with fever from the excessive labour. The very rule forbidding prisoners to loosen their collars after coming off the wheel is itself an admission by the authorities that the work carries real risk to health.

Beyond the yard, at the paved court connecting the felons' and vagrants' prisons, stands the tread-wheel's regulating fan — a massive iron shaft topped by a twenty-foot horizontal beam with Venetian-blind-like fans at either end, spinning fast enough that the rush of air it created blew the hair back from our temples as it passed. This regulator supplies the resistance that makes the wheel's labour "hard" at all; without it, the wheel would turn freely and offer no exercise whatsoever, since the power it generates is applied, as the prisoners themselves put it, to grinding nothing but the wind. A further mechanism, styled by engineers a "governor," closes the fans

automatically whenever the wheel turns too fast, exactly as the governor on a steam engine limits its speed — increasing the wind's resistance, and with it the prisoners' labour, whenever the machine threatens to turn too easily.

Crank Labour and Shot Drill

A prisoner grown tired of the tread-wheel, or weary of the monotony of tailoring or shoemaking, will sometimes complain of pains in the back or chest, hoping for a change of occupation. Sent to the surgeon, a man found genuinely unwell is prescribed rest; one merely shamming is generally sent straight back to his former work. Should he continue to complain, he is set instead to crank labour — a punishment that, in most cases, a couple of days is enough to cure even the most stubborn malingerer of wanting to repeat.

The crank itself resembles an oversized version of a knife-cleaning machine: a narrow iron drum on legs, fitted with a long handle that, when turned, causes a series of internal cups to scoop up a thick layer of sand from the bottom of the drum, carry it round, and empty it out again at the top, on the same principle as a dredging machine. A dial fixed to the front of the drum records the number of revolutions completed; the whole exercise is made doubly disagreeable by being performed alone in a locked cell, though prisoners have occasionally been caught smashing the dial's glass to tamper with the recorded count. The labour is genuinely severe, though rarely resorted to except as a test for suspected malingering: a man working at ordinary speed, some twenty revolutions a minute, would need eight hours and twenty minutes to complete the required 10,000 turns.

Shot drill takes place daily from a quarter past three until half-past four, in an open square of ground set aside for the purpose near the prison's vegetable plots, its rows of cannon balls piled in pyramids along three sides, held from rolling by wooden frames. We picked one up ourselves out of curiosity; smaller than a coconut, it required real effort to lift. Fifty-seven prisoners, generally the youngest and healthiest, take part at any one time — men over forty-five are excused, as are any specially exempted by the surgeon, marked by a yellow badge on the sleeve — arranged three deep along three sides

of a square, each man three yards from his neighbour, all facing a warder stationed at the centre of the open side.

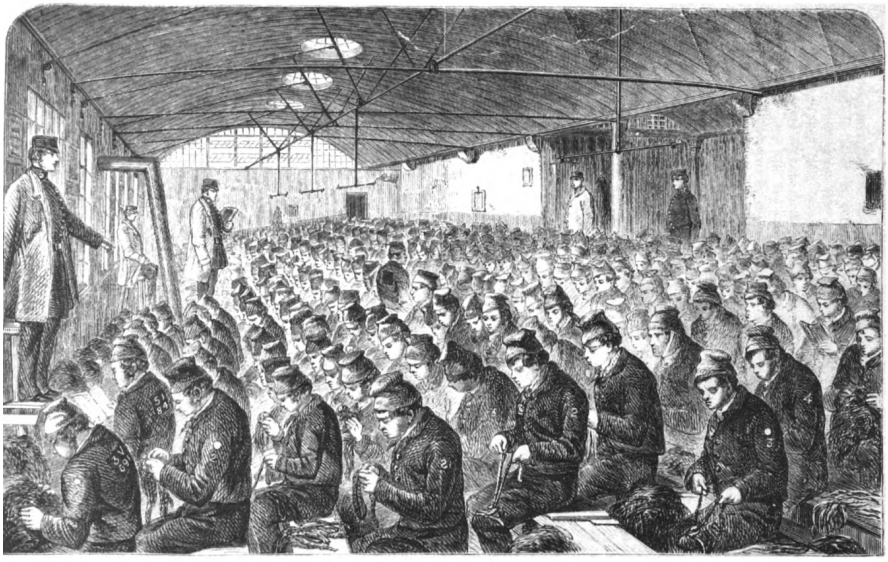
The exercise itself consists of passing the shot down the length of each rank of men, from one pyramid to the other, and then reversing the process; but its real labour lies in the requirement that every prisoner, at the word of command, stoop to set his shot carefully down in a fixed spot, then stoop again to lift it. "One!" the warder called, and every man bent to take up his shot; "Two!" and the whole line shifted three yards sideways; "Three!" and each man stooped to set his shot down; "Four!" and the line shifted back empty-handed to its original place — a continuous, purposeless see-saw, the shot travelling the full circuit of the square only to be sent back again the way it came. It is difficult to imagine a more deliberately useless form of hard labour.

The men we watched worked at first with real military precision, some stripped to shirtsleeves, moving in step to the warder's repeated count; but as the exercise wore on, the pace slackened and the count grew more urgently repeated — "A little quicker, you in the second row!" — while faces reddened and breath grew short. One boy of seventeen, pink with exertion, drew a sharp rebuke for lagging, though it struck us that a boy of that age was no better suited to such punishing labour than the men over forty-five who are specifically excused it. "It tries them worse taking up than putting down," one warder explained, "because there's nothing to lay hold of, and the hands get hot and slippery with sweat, so the ball goes greasy in the fingers. It stiffens the shoulders badly too." Over the hour and a quarter the drill lasts, we calculated that each man covers something like a mile and three-quarters in total, stooping and lifting a twenty-four-pound weight at every alternate three yards — exhausting, depressing labour, and, like the tread-wheel, entirely without object beyond the exhaustion itself.

Oakum Picking

Three separate rooms at Coldbath Fields are given over to oakum-picking, the largest of them, in the felons' prison, seating nearly 500 men — a vast, corrugated-iron-roofed hall some ninety feet long,

pierced with eight great chapel-like windows and six skylights, built along much the same lines as a railway shed for spare carriages.



LARGE OAKUM-ROOM (UNDER THE SILENT SYSTEM) AT THE MIDDLESEX HOUSE OF CORRECTION, COLDBATH FIELDS.

The large oakum-room (under the silent system) at the Middlesex House of Correction.

Warders sit on raised stools along the window side, eyes moving constantly across the packed rows of bent heads and busy hands, alert for any sign of talking; any prisoner who pauses and looks up finds only a row of printed texts on the whitewashed walls to occupy his eyes — "It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth," "Godliness with contentment is great gain," "Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways, and be wise."

The silence of the place is, in our experience, genuinely appalling — more affecting, we think, than the equivalent stillness of a hospital for the deaf and mute, since we know, watching this room, that the men working in it would speak if only they dared, so that we cannot help sensing the pent-up frustration in every one of the several hundred bodies before us. Either the men have been cowed by discipline into a kind of living automatism, or else there is real suppressed anger simmering in most of them at having their tongues effectively cut out — for to leave a man his tongue and yet forbid him ever to use it, when every event of daily life naturally prompts some

word or exclamation, must surely constitute a continuous, low-grade torment more refined, if less bloody, than anything devised by less civilized ages. We are well aware of the harm unrestricted criminal association can do; but the fact that thieves corrupt one another through conversation on bad subjects is no reason to deny them speech altogether, and so cut off the one means by which any person's mind can be improved — conversation and communion with other minds.

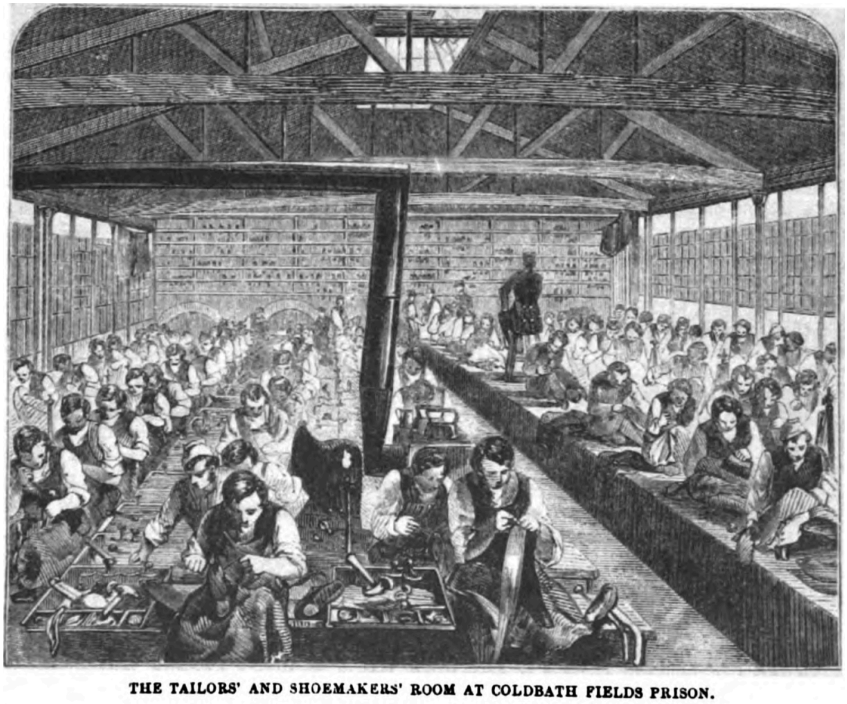
Each picker is issued a weighed quantity of old rope, cut into short lengths: three to six pounds for men sentenced to hard labour, two pounds for the rest, the exact weight depending on how tightly the rope was originally twisted. The prisoner unwinds a length into its component strands, working it back and forth across his knee to loosen the fibres, then draws it over a hook fastened at his knee and saws it briskly to and fro to strip away the tar and separate the fibres further, before finally teasing the loosened hemp apart by hand like cotton wool. Sunlight through the tall windows shows the whole room thick with fine brown dust, settling on the men's shoulders as heavily as snuff on a snuff-taker's coat; a prisoner with a tin water-can makes his rounds, and the men gulp down their allotted drink as if half-choked by the dust they have been breathing all morning.

We witnessed one man collapse in an epileptic fit during our visit, his face flushed deep red, a bundle of picked oakum propping his head while a warder loosened his collar; the other prisoners, forbidden to react, continued working as though nothing at all had happened. “We often have such cases,” the warder told us afterward. “After half an hour's rest they're generally all right again, and go back to their oakum as well as ever.”

By the end of the day, the pile of raw rope beside each man has dwindled to nothing, replaced by a growing ball of treacle-brown oakum at his feet, until at last each prisoner sits holding his finished bundle, waiting his turn at the scales. The warder's call of “The first three men!” breaks the room's long silence like a sudden shout in the night, and the prisoners rise in obedient groups of three to have their day's work weighed. A prisoner whose oakum comes up light is reported on the spot — “This won't do,” the warder told one such man, “it's half a pound short” — whatever protest of innocence

follows. “Not to the old hands,” one warder told us, asked whether the work was difficult; “we've men here who'll finish three or four pounds in a couple of hours, while a fresh prisoner is still struggling through his first pound. They learn the knack of it. But to a new arrival it's hard work indeed — most thieves' hands are soft, and the coarse rope cuts and blisters their fingers something dreadful until the skin toughens up.” The prison picks, on average, some three and a half tons of oakum weekly — worth, at the current market rate of £5 a ton, some £17 10s.

The Tailors', Shoemakers', and Printing Rooms



THE TAILORS' AND SHOEMAKERS' ROOM AT COLDBATH FIELDS PRISON.

The tailors' and shoemakers' room at Coldbath Fields Prison.

A prisoner not sentenced to hard labour is set instead to picking oakum at the lighter rate, or to a trade, and Coldbath Fields maintains, as a result, a substantial staff of tailors and shoemakers — 160 of them, supervised by three officers, working in a room as large as a factory floor. After the grim spectacle of the tread-wheel yards and

the shot-drill ground, it is genuinely a relief to enter this workshop and see men occupied at something useful, and, to judge from their faces, neither exhausting nor degrading.

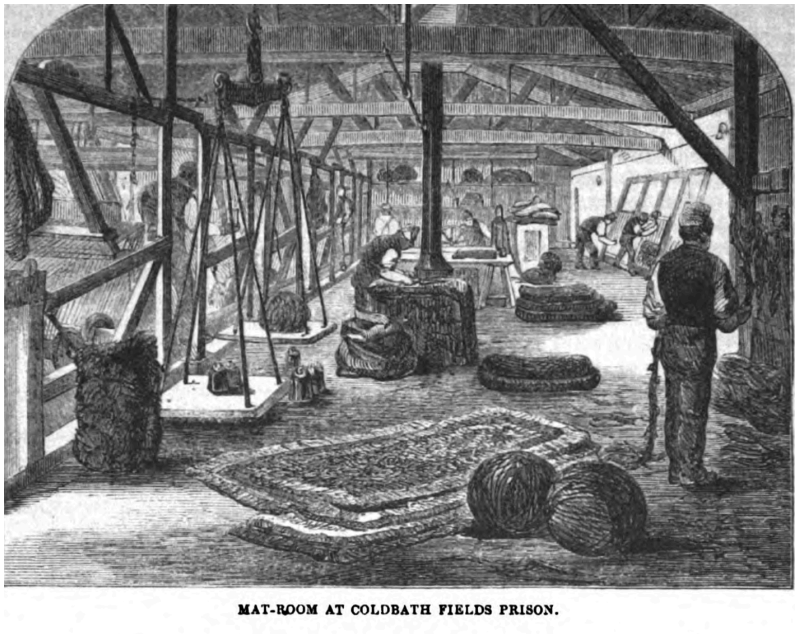
One side of the room is given over to a raised platform where the tailors sit cross-legged, shoeless, in the traditional style, gas-lamps among them now doing double duty in summer as pegs for hanging thread or unfinished garments. The men progress by grade: repairing fellow prisoners' clothes first, then making up new suits of grey and blue for incoming arrivals, and finally, as the mark of real proficiency, working on the officers' own cloth uniforms. Earnings, calculated at what the labour would have cost if paid for outside the walls, range from threepence to as much as five shillings a day depending on skill, and a considerable share of the clothing sent to Hanwell Lunatic Asylum and the House of Detention is made here. The men work with an unmistakable air of relief from the silent monotony of the rest of the jail, their expressions markedly less dejected than those we saw elsewhere in the building.

The other half of the room belongs to some eighty shoemakers, seated on rows of forms in heavy leather aprons, hammering at their lapstones, stretching black leather over the last with nippers, boring awl-holes with pursed lips of concentration, or drawing out waxed thread with wide, sweeping motions of the arm; a few lads near the wall burnish finished boots with a smooth piece of wood.

To see the prison's printing office — where the lesson-books used throughout the jail are set in type and printed off — we crossed to the misdemeanants' side, where it shares a cramped room with the "needle-men," the printing trade employing only three hands and so not justifying a separate workshop of its own. Female prisoners once did all the needlework here before their removal to Tothill Fields; the men who have taken over the task sat darning old flannel jackets and mending bed-ticks, one bespectacled prisoner patching a counterpane with the deliberate, ungainly stitches of a shoemaker rather than a tailor. Against the wall stood a small printing press, crudely built of thick wood and unpolished iron — evidently made within the prison itself — where a cheerful-looking lad printed off sheets titled "A Few Texts from the Bible," the same texts we had seen pasted on cell walls throughout the building, while another, working a compositor's stick,

set type with the quick, practised motion of a pigeon pecking peas. This office prints every form the prison itself requires — meal tickets, lock-up counts, the letter-paper prisoners use to write home — and we believe Coldbath Fields is the only prison in the country to have introduced printing as a form of labour, a thoughtful and genuinely refining occupation that does the prison's own business a real service while, in its more skilled forms, quietly cultivating exactness of thought in the men who practise it.

The Mat-Room and Other Prison Trades



MAT-ROOM AT COLDBATH FIELDS PRISON.

Mat-room at Coldbath Fields Prison.

The mat-room, a large stone-floored workshop as light as a photographer's studio, employs thirty-three prisoners directly and a further thirty or so in dressing flax and coir and spinning cordage. Unlike the eerie silence of the oakum-room next door, this workshop rings with the clatter of looms and tools, so busy a scene that the absence of talk seems, here, simply the natural quiet of close application rather than an imposed prison hush. Long rows of looms, not unlike overturned bedsteads, line one wall, weaving coconut-fibre

matting and cheap hearth-rugs on the same basic principle as silk-weaving, though coarse brown twine and a shuttle the size of a boot-jack stand in for silk thread and its more delicate counterpart. Younger prisoners work spinning-wheels, twirling coarse rope into balls; older hands make the heavier rope door-mats, working needles like skewers or hammering design patterns level with wooden mallets. “This is a diamond sennit mat,” one officer told us, holding up a stiff brown specimen with its cords crossed in a lozenge pattern, and pointed out finer work besides — rugs with an ornamental rose worked in crimson worsted, and, as the finest example on hand, a rug bearing a full-length tiger.

Beyond these principal trades, Coldbath Fields' own maintenance runs largely on prison labour: plasterers laid the whitewash on its walls, bricklayers and masons built parts of the structure itself, painters keep its woodwork in colour, and tinmen make the very mugs prisoners drink their gruel from. Valued in the prison's own books — tradesmen's labour at five shillings a day, gardeners at two shillings, general labourers at a shilling — the prison's returns list some 25 artificers, 19 gardeners, and 18 general labourers beyond the tailors, shoemakers, and mat-makers, though we suspect these valuations run rather generous compared to what unskilled prison-taught men could actually command outside; by comparison, equivalent trades on the Woolwich Hulks are valued at barely a third the Coldbath Fields rate, a discrepancy of some 25 percent that seems to us to want reconciling one way or the other.

Education and the Chapel

School hours run from half-past seven in the morning until half-past five in the evening, each class of twenty-four scholars changing hourly; every prisoner unable to read or write is required to attend. The schoolroom itself, no larger than an ordinary artist's studio, holds twelve desks meant for three scholars apiece but limited to two, one at each end, the middle place left empty to prevent talking — the desks themselves as unmarked and clean as a butter-seller's counter, quite unlike the carved and inked desks of an ordinary school. Faded wall maps of the world, England and Wales, and the Holy Land hang against the whitewash, and a printed maxim over the master's desk

reads, somewhat pointedly for a room full of convicted men, “A Place for Everything and Everything in its Place.”

We watched one class enter in a silent, orderly line, each man finding his own seat as readily as a horse finding its own stall, then bending over copy-books with the same laboured concentration one might expect of much younger pupils — tongues poked from the corners of mouths, heavy heads wobbling over half-inch letters scrawled clumsily across the page. It was a genuinely curious sight: grown men with heavy whiskers labouring over lessons a village schoolboy would find beneath him. Two trusted prisoners, promoted for good conduct and proficiency, serve as “hearers,” receiving copy-books in silence and correcting mistakes with a pointed finger rather than a word; one reader, working through a passage on charity, stumbled only once, and a lad with a speech impediment was gently corrected by the schoolmaster himself — “Do try and pronounce your r's better” — the other pupils' only means of laughing, under the silent system, being a discreet shuffling of feet.

The prison's own printers produce all three of its lesson-books: the first teaching letters and simple words; the second built deliberately around nonsense sentences and improbable little puzzles, meant to force careful reading rather than allow pupils to guess the sense from the opening words and skip the rest; the third drawing its lessons from the Gospels, completion of which marks the effective end of a prisoner's formal education so far as reading and writing are concerned.

The chapel sits directly above the entrance hall of the felons' prison, a curious, kite-shaped triangular room that seems to have been fitted into whatever space was left over rather than purpose-built — a small desk and armchair serving as pulpit at the apex of a small gallery, the body of the congregation seated below toward the base, with room in all for about 500 men. Three compartments occupy the ground floor and three the gallery, divided by tall wooden partitions into something resembling a huge three-stalled stable, stout iron bars standing in for the panelling found in an ordinary chapel. The governor sits in a comfortable armchair in the gallery beside the chaplain's desk, with a further row of chairs arranged as neatly as

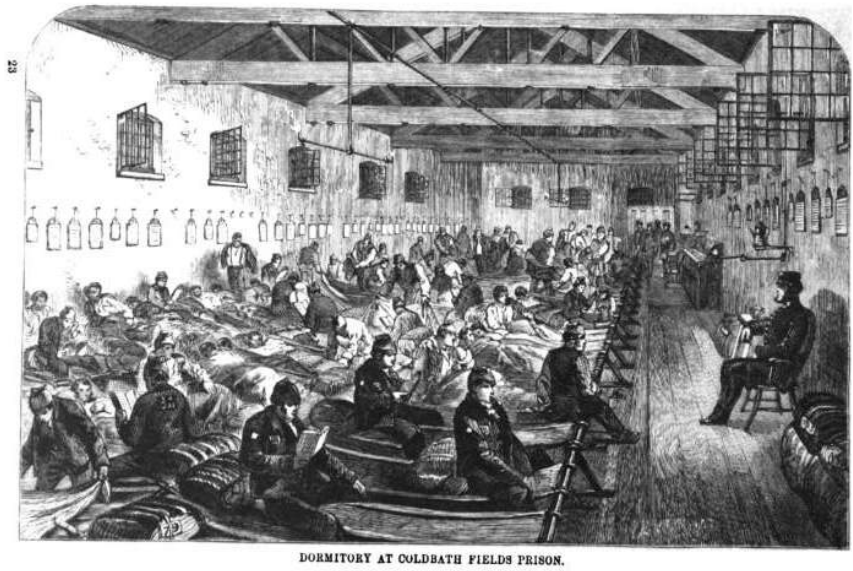
against a drawing-room wall for visitors and principal warders; below, on the ground floor, stands the communion table.

The congregation, packed as tightly into their caged compartments as the gallery of a cheap theatre, showed every variety of face and background — among them, on the day of our visit, a broad-shouldered Black prisoner whose white eyes seemed to flash from his dark skin, and a Malay with slanting eyes and dried, leathery skin, his straight hair hanging like the tassel of a fez. Most of the congregation looked young; only here and there a bald or white head marked an older man. When the prayer ended, the sudden, unified shout of "Amen!" from five hundred throats, released for one instant from their enforced silence, was startling enough to make us turn in our seats — no opera chorus, we thought, could have kept better time in its responses, evidence enough that the men took real pleasure in this one sanctioned moment of collective voice, whatever else they understood or failed to understand of the service itself.

The lesson that day was the seventh chapter of St. Luke, and the men listened with the rapt attention of children hearing a story for the first time — many, we suspect, hearing it for the very first time in their lives. At the account of the widow's son restored to life, a visible current of wonder passed through the room; at the story of the sinful woman anointing Christ's feet with ointment and drying them with her hair, the congregation seemed to strain to understand what could have moved her to do it, and to hope for some similarly dramatic reward in return for their own repentance.

Because the chapel seats barely half the prison's usual population, attendance is split between morning and afternoon services; those left behind are not left without instruction, however — three trusted prisoners in each yard, appointed by the chaplain, take turns reading aloud from The Penny Sunday Reader or similar tracts, relieving one another every half hour. The governor told us that boys placed in solitary confinement for some breach of discipline not infrequently ask permission simply to be present in their yard while this reading goes on — a genuine appetite for something to listen to that might, we cannot help thinking, be put to equally good use on ordinary weekdays in the oakum-room, turning some part of that long enforced silence toward positive benefit rather than simple, wasted stillness.

CELLS AND DORMITORIES



Dormitory at Coldbath Fields Prison.

The prison holds, all told, 1,453 people, of whom 919 — not quite two-thirds — can be accommodated in separate sleeping cells, the remainder in shared dormitories. The daily average through the year of our visit was 1,388, with the highest single-day count reaching 1,495, meaning the prison periodically holds some 3 percent more people than it has proper room for. Cells differ in size across the prison's three constituent buildings: the largest, in the original 1794 structure, are reserved for felons; smaller cells in the 1830 vagrants' building come next; the smallest of all belong to the misdemeanants, built in 1832.

A typical felon's cell measures eight feet two inches by six feet two inches, its groined roof rising from six feet at the sides to ten feet at its highest point — without that height, the room would be little larger than an ordinary coal cellar. Walls and roof are brilliantly whitewashed, the stone floor holy-stoned to the cleanliness of a well-kept doorstep; a hammock of coconut fibre hangs across the far end, bedding folded tight as a carpet-bag, printed prayers and Bible texts pinned to the wall, and a single wooden stool completing the furniture.

We found the cell distinctly cold on entering, and asked the accompanying warder whether this troubled the men. “Not at all,” he told us. “In summer the men like being in the cells; in winter they prefer the dormitories” — an answer that prompted us to ask whether the cells were heated at all in cold weather. They are not. Nor, we learned, are they lit with gas, meaning that once winter darkness falls — well before the men are locked up for the night — a prisoner in separate confinement simply goes to bed in the dark, while his counterpart in a dormitory, where gas is laid on, may read until ten. Nor is any cell fitted with a means of summoning help in case of sudden illness during the night; a man taken ill after lock-up has no recourse beyond making enough noise, unassisted, to attract a passing watchman's attention.

It was not the intention of the law, in depriving these men of their liberty, that they should also be deprived of warmth, light, and assistance in sickness; exclusion from society forms their sentence, not exposure to winter cold or the risk of a fit going unanswered through a long, dark night. The statute governing separate confinement explicitly requires that any cell so used be properly sized, lit, warmed, ventilated, and fitted with some means for the prisoner to summon an officer — and yet, because Coldbath Fields runs on the silent associated system rather than full separate confinement, with prisoners locked in their cells for only twelve of the twenty-four hours rather than continuously, the Act's requirements are held not to apply, leaving men to pass, in some cases, years of a sentence in accommodation scarcely superior to a coal cellar. Either Pentonville's cells are needlessly luxurious, or Coldbath Fields' are genuinely deficient — and if the older felons' cells, built in 1794, might be excused their defects as a relic of a less enlightened age, no such excuse applies to the vagrants' and misdemeanants' cells, built decades later on the very same flawed model, and smaller still.

The prison authorities point, in their own defence, to Coldbath Fields' genuinely excellent health returns — among the best of any London prison. But a short-term prison, where sentences run from a few days to at most a few years, cannot fairly be judged by average daily sickness figures alone: of the 7,743 prisoners committed in the year of our visit, 1,796 served under a fortnight, a further 1,424 under

a month, 2,342 under three months, and 974 under six — 6,536 men, in other words, whose stay was too brief for the cumulative effect of a cold, dark, poorly ventilated cell to register in the statistics at all. A closed felon's cell in winter holds 502 cubic feet of air; a sleeping man consumes roughly sixty cubic feet of that air over twelve hours, exhaling in return some twelve cubic feet of carbonic acid gas — a substance that, even in small concentrations, is known to act as a narcotic poison, producing drowsiness and, in sufficient quantity, a death so gradual and tranquil that it accounts, by medical report, for a share of recorded suicides. The scientific commission that set cell sizes at Pentonville concluded that 911 cubic feet of air was the minimum consistent with health, and even then found it necessary to improve the ventilation further. Is it not, then, a genuine injustice that men sentenced to "hard labour" should pass twelve hours nightly in an atmosphere calculated to induce exactly the drowsiness and insensibility that would leave them unfit for that same labour the next day?

We were assured, further, that the cold itself does the men no real harm — that a man leaving a heated room is more liable to catch a chill than one who has never been warmed at all, and that the warders themselves feel the cold worst after leaving a fire. That the prisoners themselves feel the chill acutely, though, is proven by their habit of stuffing clothing into the cracks around their cell doors; some years before our visit, a man was found dead in his cell during a severe winter, apparently of cold. Cold forms no part of any prisoner's sentence, and until the air of Coldbath Fields' stone cells is kept above freezing, we do not think the point can fairly be considered settled. The surgeon's own printed report records that seventeen of the twenty-nine deaths in the preceding year — more than 58 percent — were attributed to diseases of the lungs and bronchial passages, in plain language, to the effects of cold.

As for lighting, the authorities offer no defence at all: in winter, the cells are dark both when the men are locked in and when they rise, some twelve hours passed in total obscurity, and even by summer daylight some of the gallery cells are too dim to make out anything beyond the whitewashed walls. It seems a strange inconsistency to issue prisoners library books and then confine them, for the very

hours they might read them, to complete darkness — we should think it absurd to stock a library for a school of the blind, and the parallel here seems to us not far off. Confinement in a dark cell is, elsewhere in this same prison, treated as the single severest punishment available to the governor; and yet an unlit cell is the ordinary nightly accommodation of every unoffending prisoner in separate confinement. As for calling for help in the night, we were told a watchman patrols each yard once every half hour — hardly reassuring, given the sudden deaths already on record, and no substitute for the signal system installed at Pentonville for exactly this purpose. We understand a railway company's planned line may before long require the prison's demolition and rebuilding elsewhere; until then, in fairness to the present governor, we note that these are defects of an older and less humane school of prison-building, not of any negligence on his own part, who does everything the limited resources of a county rate allow to make the House of Correction as comfortable as present circumstances permit.

Where cells run short, five great dormitories — all in the older part of the building, the smallest holding 82 beds and the largest 101 — house the overflow, allowing the felons' prison, with only 356 cells of its own, to accommodate 889 men in total. Each dormitory runs eighty-three feet long by twenty-five wide, hammocks slung from four iron bars running the full length of the room, arranged in three tight rows with a five-foot patrol passage left along one side for the night warders. We paid a night visit to one such room and found it a genuinely striking sight: men lying two by two, heads to each other's feet, some already asleep, others simply staring up at the timber roof, the whole room as still and silent as a morgue, not a single book in any hand despite the gaslight still burning — the men, we supposed, too exhausted by the day's hard labour to want anything but rest. Peering later through the small inspection-hole in the dormitory door, we caught two men conducting a whispered conversation while feigning sleep, one man's near eye shut and the other wide open and fixed on his neighbour — proof enough, if any were needed, that herding a hundred men together under a rule of silence, however closely watched, creates exactly the conditions most favourable to the very communication it is meant to prevent.

Of the Silent System

Coldbath Fields makes an instructive study precisely because it is generally agreed to represent the silent associated system in its purest and most fully developed form, and we deliberately withheld judgment on that system's merits, discussed already in connection with Millbank and Brixton, until we had seen it here, where all agree it operates with its greatest force. As we have said elsewhere in this book, every system of prison discipline touching prisoners' liberty to communicate must be associative, separative, or some mixture of the two — and the two great experiments tried in this country, Pentonville's separate system (introduced 1842) and Coldbath Fields' silent associated system (introduced 1834), differ essentially even in their underlying aims. The silent system seeks only to prevent prisoners corrupting one another by stopping communication outright; the separate system seeks that same negative good, but adds to it a positive aim — bringing about genuine self-examination and reform through enforced solitude.

The two systems differ, too, in what they demand architecturally and financially. Pure separation requires a specially built prison with an individual cell for every inmate, each cell large enough to serve as workshop by day and bedroom by night; the silent system, while it still requires separate sleeping cells in its fullest form, can make do, as at Coldbath Fields, with large closely supervised dormitories supplemented by spacious associated workrooms — an arrangement adaptable to older buildings whose cells are too few or too small for genuine individual separation. New prisons, accordingly, tend to be built on the separate plan, while older ones generally continue under the silent associated system, partly from a natural disinclination to demolish and rebuild what can, with some patching, still be made to serve.

That the separate system achieves its own aim more completely than the silent system achieves its more modest one can hardly be doubted, since preventing intercommunication is most surely accomplished by preventing association altogether; but a prison built on the separate plan costs considerably more — each cell at Pentonville cost some £150 on average, against roughly £88 per cell in the older Coldbath Fields buildings — and a prison run on the

silent system requires, in addition, a much heavier ongoing outlay in warders' salaries to maintain the constant supervision the system depends on: Pentonville manages one warder to every 18 prisoners, where Coldbath Fields requires one to every 13, meaning each Pentonville officer effectively oversees some 38 percent more prisoners than his Coldbath Fields counterpart.

It would scarcely take a moment's deliberation to prefer the separate system on these grounds alone, were it not that separation has proven genuinely dangerous to the mental health of those subjected to it — dangerous enough that the authorities have found it necessary to shorten its term and considerably relax its original severity. We have shown elsewhere that against a national average of 5.8 lunacy cases per 10,000 prisoners, Pentonville's own rate ran as high as 62 per 10,000 in its early years; had the whole prison system of England and Wales been subjected to equally strict discipline, the national lunacy figures would very likely have risen more than tenfold. It is plainly beyond any prison authority's proper power to submit a man to discipline that costs him his reason, whatever the length of his sentence, and we can only agree with the physicians Sir B. Brodie and Dr. Ferguson that nothing short of the utmost watchfulness on the part of governor, chaplain, and medical officer alike can make Pentonville's regime safe to administer at all.

The silent associated system, as practised at Coldbath Fields, is open to no such objection: in the year of our visit, only four cases of lunacy occurred among a gross prison population of 9,180, a rate of 4.3 per 10,000, actually below the national average. Let us, then, set prejudice aside and weigh this system's advantages and drawbacks on their own merits. Captain Chesterton, the system's own principal advocate in this country, wrote that the silent system “has never yet been attempted in this country with the space necessary for its perfect development” — conceding that professional thieves can and do communicate to a limited extent through signs comprehensible only to themselves, but arguing that even unlimited communication among such men could scarcely corrupt them any further, while the system does at least protect less hardened prisoners, ignorant of such signs, from their more experienced neighbours' influence. He maintained, too, that the system does no harm to health, however long the

sentence, and that the daily demands it makes on speech — chapel responses, communications with the governor, chaplain, schoolmaster, and various officers — keep the faculty of speech itself in healthy use, restricting only communication between prisoner and prisoner. “We do all we can to prevent contamination,” he told a Parliamentary committee in 1850, “and in my opinion the associated silent system, properly carried out, is as effectual for all purposes of prison discipline as any that can be devised. The prisoners do communicate, but I find that all the communications are of a very trifling description, and that nothing like contamination generally takes place among them.”

Here, then, is the system's whole claimed merit — and it is no small one, to anyone who recalls what English prisons were like in the old indiscriminate days: purely negative in character. It does not corrupt one prisoner through another, and it does not injure the health of those subjected to it. Let us now ask, in fairness, at what cost these advantages are purchased, continuing to draw on Chesterton's own evidence. Asked before the House of Commons whether he had compared the number of punishments under his system with those at a prison run on the separate plan, he answered plainly: “Yes; I know that our punishments are very great.” Asked whether he punished for anything so slight as a sign passed between prisoners, or even an attempt to communicate, he answered yes to both — and the punishments themselves, in 1848, numbered as many as 11,624, a figure Chesterton himself defended on the grounds that punishment, in general, tends to soften and benefit a prisoner's character.

Comparing the two prisons' own returns for 1854–1855 makes the point more precisely. Though the proportion of prisoners who broke discipline and required punishment at all was similar at both prisons — 25 percent at Coldbath Fields, 28 percent at Pentonville — the actual rate of punishment required was very different: only 65 percent of Pentonville's gross prison population needed punishing over the year, against 98 percent at Coldbath Fields — fully 33 percent more punishment required to enforce the silent system than to enforce separation. That this excess belongs to the demands of the silent system itself, rather than to any excessive severity on the present governor's part, is borne out by the trend over time: the daily

proportion of prisoners punished, which stood at 3 percent under Chesterton, had fallen to just 1 percent by the year of our own visit.

It is worth remembering, too, that this excess of punishment covers offences the law never contemplated and no jury ever tried — breaches of a purely internal, arbitrary discipline unknown outside the prison walls, for which nothing short of the most compelling necessity and the clearest moral benefit could serve as justification. Speech, after all, proceeds from a natural human impulse to give voice to one's own thoughts and feelings, and the silent system not only forbids that impulse outright but places prisoners in precisely the circumstances most likely to provoke it — surrounded by hundreds of fellow-sufferers, many of them former companions, all sharing the same predicament, and yet forbidden the smallest word of sympathy between them, with a retinue of warders watching for the least infraction. Small wonder, then, that punishments under such a system run, even after considerable improvement, some 33 percent above what discipline requires elsewhere.

The silent system, we think, can only work on prisoners' natures in one of two ways: cowing the more timid into rapid submission through simple dread of punishment, or wearing down the more restless and wayward through prolonged suffering into eventual, grudging compliance. Neither process bears any real relation to genuine reform of character. Mere obedience to arbitrary rules cannot by itself elevate a criminal soul mired in moral turpitude; and a continuous state of irritation under galling restraint is far more likely to breed deceit and cunning than either contrition for the past or resolve for the future — the mind occupied not with remorse but with scheming how to communicate secretly, or else driven into sullen, taciturn withdrawal.

The silent system, as we have said before in this book of other extreme measures, springs from that same love of extremes that belongs to the fanatical rather than the rational mind. Because unrestricted speech among criminals produces real harm, some have concluded that all speech between them, even harmless or improving speech, must therefore be forbidden — rather as the old woman who would not let her son near water until he had already learned to swim. But speech is not the only human faculty capable of misuse: sight

serves the murderer as readily as the honest man, yet no one proposes blinding criminals on that account, though blindness would certainly render a bad man more harmless still. The proper aim of prison discipline is not merely to prevent men becoming more corrupt, but actively to make them better; and mere enforced silence, especially silence in the midst of a crowd, seems to us calculated to produce distraction and secret scheming rather than any genuine self-communion.

Consider how much profitably usable time is wasted daily in sheer, moody silence under this system. At Coldbath Fields we see gathered together some 500 of the most ignorant and unfortunate members of society — people who need instruction in the plainest principles of morality and worldly prudence more than any other class, and who are nonetheless left, for eight hours out of every twelve-hour prison day, in a state of complete mental idleness. Such waste seems to us genuinely indefensible in an age that owes more than any before it to the power of communication — an age of railways, steamships, penny postage, the electric telegraph, and cheap printed literature — a positive marvel of inconsistency that its leading minds should simultaneously tolerate a system of prison government premised on stopping all communication whatsoever. It is only through communion with other minds that human faculties develop at all; a person left entirely to themselves grows up, like the celebrated wild boy of the German forests, an unreflective and essentially hopeless creature, where an educated mind, through contact with the accumulated wisdom of the greatest thinkers living and dead, carries within it something of the wisdom of the ages. Anyone who grasps this, and grasps what a remarkable faculty speech truly is, must see in the silent system a wilful rejection of one of humanity's greatest gifts.

All that is truly necessary to prevent criminals corrupting one another is to stop communication on depraved subjects specifically. To go further, and forbid even the exchange of good and useful thoughts by enjoining total silence, is not only to overreach the actual aim but to waste, quite needlessly, a great deal of otherwise recoverable intellectual and moral capacity. In the better tailoring workshops of the West End, it is common practice for journeymen to pay one of their own number to read aloud while the rest work; under

the silent system, no such arrangement is permitted, and the men's minds lie fallow for two-thirds of every day, or else busy themselves, for want of any better occupation, devising fresh tricks for illicit communication under the warders' very noses.

We would rather see the oakum-room's terrible, wasted silence put to some genuine use — someone appointed to read aloud from a book both elevating and genuinely interesting, with punishment reserved only for those who actually interrupted the reading. Exactly this plan, as already described, is already practised on Sundays at Coldbath Fields, and, as noted, even refractory prisoners have been known to request permission to attend it. Were this instructive extension of the silent associated system carried out more fully, the eight hours now spent in barren, unprofitable silence might be turned to positive account — planting a few honourable and righteous principles in the men's minds, occupying their attention usefully enough to divert them from petty scheming, and thereby, in time, reducing the extraordinary volume of punishment the present arrangement makes necessary.

Stars and the Report Office

To encourage good conduct, Coldbath Fields awards a red star, stitched to the sleeve, for every three months a prisoner passes without being reported for misbehaviour; one man, we were told, had once accumulated eleven such stars over a long confinement, and half a crown is paid out for each star on the day of release. Asked whether these rewards had any real effect on reform, one warder was doubtful: “The best-behaved men are the old offenders — those who've been in before. They know the rules and keep to them.” He pointed out a prisoner in the yard wearing four stars, more than any other man present, who was nonetheless serving his third recorded sentence, as a white figure on his other sleeve confirmed. Prison authorities questioned before the 1850 Parliamentary Committee agreed, almost without exception, that the very worst characters outside prison walls generally make the best-behaved prisoners within them.

Any prisoner who dies during confinement is buried at the county's expense; an undertaker contracts to handle every funeral at 28 shillings each, supplying a one-horse hearse and a grave at

Victoria Cemetery, Bethnal Green, with friends of the deceased notified and permitted to attend if they choose.

Whenever a warder catches a man speaking, laughing, or otherwise breaking discipline in his yard, he records the offender's number in a report-book; the following morning, every prisoner so reported over the preceding day — or, on a Monday, the preceding weekend — is marched into the entrance hall and arranged in rows to await the governor's judgment. We watched a Monday session that drew together some fifty such offenders, standing spaced out like chess pieces while warders waited with their japanned report-books tucked under their arms like tea-trays.

The governor's court occupied a room not unlike a solicitor's back office — a long desk, a couple of glass-fronted cupboards, and, oddly, a model of the new oakum-picking building hung over the fireplace as decoration. “Bring in the first case,” the governor ordered, and a sub-warder led in a pale, tight-lipped youth accused of insolence — moving a table loudly after being told not to, and laughing when reprimanded. “Guv'nor, I did no such thing,” the boy protested; “he's been down on me ever since I've been in prison.” Asked whether the boy had in fact laughed, the warder confirmed it, and the governor, checking the record, found this the third report that month: half the day's dinner docked.

A second case involved a prisoner who had given away part of his bread ration to another man; proven guilty despite his denials, he meanly implicated two further prisoners in an exchange of gruel and cocoa, both of whom denied the charge with considerable indignation — “If you tell me a lie I'll punish you worse than for the offence,” the governor warned, and a short investigation proved them guilty regardless: three days at half rations. “You'll find that all the prisoners are innocent,” the governor remarked drily to us as the next case was brought in.

A handsome, bright-eyed lad was accused of pilfering pepper from the kitchen where he worked, apparently for no purpose beyond the simple habit of theft; he lost one of his two stars and half a day's dinner. A second boy, well-spoken and evidently of gentler upbringing, stood accused of tearing his own bedding, but kept his eyes down and said nothing, blushing visibly when addressed — a

first offender, we learned afterward, from a genuinely respectable family, and we felt something like personal relief when the charge against him could not be fully proven, and no small gratitude for the kindness with which the governor spoke to him regardless.

More than half the day's complaints were for talking, each prisoner protesting his innocence with equal vehemence and equal futility against evidence that was, in every case we saw, entirely convincing; one man was sentenced to three days on bread and water, most others to the loss of half a dinner. The worst-behaved of the lot was the youngest — a narrow-jawed boy of no more than fifteen or sixteen, caught talking, then laughing when caught, then dancing outright when reprimanded, defiance enough to draw a pointed rebuke even from the chief warder, who called him the worst-behaved boy in the prison. The boy began crying the moment he entered the office, then, sensing the case going against him, stiffened with sudden fury and grew abusive; sentenced to three days' solitary confinement on bread and water, warned that a repeat would mean referral to the magistrates for a further whipping, he answered only, “I don't care for that!” as he was led out. Two sub-warders were brought in after the prisoners, both fined for having fallen asleep in chapel during the sermon.

The punishments finished, those with requests of their own were admitted in turn. One man sought special permission to write an extra letter concerning bail for a friend, granted on condition the letter touched on nothing else. Two others, having gone three months without a single report against them, successfully applied for their stars. Another, plainly delighted simply to be allowed to talk, exhausted his own breath recounting an entire letter from his wife concerning three missing postage stamps, and had to be told a good ten times that the matter would be looked into before he would leave. A short, agitated man, whom the chief warder had already quietly flagged as “not quite right in the head,” begged tearfully to be confined in a dark cell, launching into a rambling account of service in the Crimean land transport corps and a horror of being stared at; he was handed over to the doctor. The last applicant, an elderly man with swollen eyes and an obsequious manner, asked with excessive gratitude to send word to a respectable acquaintance that he wished to

give up rooms he had taken at that gentleman's house — thanking the governor three times over, his voice growing more effusive with each repetition. He was in for swindling.

The Different Prisons Within the Prison, and Imprisonment for Fines

Coldbath Fields still maintains the old classification, laid down by statute under George IV, of separate prisons for felons, misdemeanants, and vagrants — a distinction that serves little practical purpose, since the same man who leaves the felons' prison today may well return next year as a reputed thief among the vagrants, and the year after as a misdemeanant for assault. Were the branches of criminal practice genuinely as distinct as law, medicine, and divinity, such a division might carry real scientific value; as it stands, it accomplishes about as much toward preventing cross-contamination as sorting prisoners alphabetically by their aliases, since the John Smith of one sessions becomes the William Brown of the next.

The vagrants' prison, built in 1830 on the same half-wheel plan as Pentonville, now holds 177 cells, its central tower giving it the half-ecclesiastical look of a chapel crossed with a granary. Its cells match the felons' in furniture but run a foot smaller in every dimension, and, like the felons' cells, are neither heated, lit, nor properly ventilated. Attached to it is a single strong cell for unruly or apparently insane prisoners, fronted by iron grating rather than a solid door; on the day of our visit it held a man who had stabbed a warder in the back with a knife stolen from an officer's locker — an attack that could not have happened had Millbank's tin knives been in use here instead. Vagrancy itself, under the law, covers a remarkably broad range of conduct — begging, sleeping in the open air, indecent exposure, obtaining money by false pretences, prostitution, fortune-telling, gaming, and simply being a reputed thief or suspected person — and we have shown elsewhere that London alone supports perhaps 4,000 habitual vagrants, at a public cost approaching £50,000 a year, and that vagrancy remains the great nursery of more serious crime: of 16,901 known criminals recorded by London police in 1837, nearly two-thirds were classed as of “migratory habits.”

"I have never been able to comprehend," wrote Captain Chesterton of the vagrant class, "the preference given by hale, able-bodied men who, rather than face creditable industry, will stand shivering in the cold with garments purposely torn to provoke a sympathy but rarely excited." Yet one such tramp assured him that the life genuinely suited him — he enjoyed the open country, found pleasing variety in it, and managed, one way or another, always to have his wants supplied.

The misdemeanants' prison, facing the kitchen at the Bagnigge Wells corner, is by some distance the handsomest of the three buildings, its brick front and white stone window-copings giving it something of the look of a barracks, the deputy governor's comfortable dwelling at its centre with muslin curtains and a little balustraded terrace. Its cells, smaller again than the vagrants', are likewise unheated and unlit. Taking a random sample of a hundred consecutive cases from the prison's own books, we found forty classed as misdemeanants, convicted variously of assault, attempted rape, cutting and wounding, fraud, obtaining goods under false pretences, perjury, and uttering counterfeit coin — the last easily the most common of the group.

Nearly half — 48 percent — of everyone sent to Coldbath Fields arrives there for want of the money to pay a fine a magistrate has substituted for some lesser offence. Had the money been available, the offender would have gone free; lacking it, he goes to prison instead — which means, in effect, that he is no longer being punished for breaking the law so much as for being unable to discharge a debt to the state, a position scarcely different from that of a defaulting debtor at the county court, save that one is housed among ordinary debtors and the other among felons and vagrants. We take no position here on whether it is wise policy to let the state compound criminal offences for cash; we simply observe that, having chosen to do so, it seems unjust to then treat the resulting state-debtor with a felon's full rigour. That such offenders are rarely of a genuinely dangerous character is shown by the very fact that a sum of money is accepted as adequate satisfaction for their offence; that they are imprisoned for their poverty rather than their crime is shown just as clearly by the fact that payment of the fine, at any point during the sentence, secures

immediate release — exactly the arrangement that governs any ordinary debtors' prison.

Consider a workman who, out on a spree, drinks too much, is found by the police in a helpless state, and fined five shillings the next morning by the sitting magistrate. Very possibly he has already spent or lost his wages in the same evening's dissipation, and so cannot pay; though he may be, in every other respect, a perfectly sober and industrious citizen, he must serve seven days in jail for the lack of five shillings — even though his own labour, and therefore his liberty, might genuinely be worth that sum to him each day. Should he have a wife and children, and should the local shopkeeper, hearing of his imprisonment, refuse them further credit, the family is thrown onto the parish; the frequent presence of parish officers waiting at the gates on discharge days shows this to be no rare occurrence. One prison official put much the same case to us directly: a mechanic goes out on a Wednesday night, drinks too much, turns riotous, and is fined five shillings; having already worked three days that week but not yet been paid, he cannot raise the sum until Saturday, and so sits in Coldbath Fields as a criminal until his wife can draw his wages and buy his release.

The consequences of even so brief and technically minor an imprisonment can be genuinely disastrous. A man who has been in prison is a marked man for life; it matters little that his only real offence was not having five shillings in his pocket at the wrong moment — the answer will always be that he has been in jail. Employers turn him away, respectable landlords refuse him lodging, and he finds himself forced into precisely the disreputable quarters where his children fall into company with young vagabonds; should he ever again appear before a magistrate, however trivial the new charge, he will be recognized and classed among the “known” offenders, until, stripped of any remaining character, he drifts at last into the ranks of habitual crime rather than honest labour. Coldbath Fields' own recommitment rate — 32 percent, according to the returns for the year, out of 7,743 prisoners committed, 2,517 of whom had been confined in the same prison before — hardly suggests that a week or two of this experience instils any very lasting dread of repeating it; if anything, as one

official told us, prisoners of this class often find the reality of confinement considerably less terrible than they had feared — warmer, better fed, and better clothed, in some cases, than their own homes, with none of the outside world's daily anxiety over rent or the next day's dinner.

It seems to us that fining offenders, in principle, is an admirable way of punishing lesser transgressions without resorting to imprisonment at all — provided real facility is given for actually paying the fine. A fine is simply a debt owed to the state, and there seems no good reason the state should be a harsher creditor than it permits its own subjects to be; the county courts already recognize the wisdom of allowing debts to be paid by small instalments, treating imprisonment as very much a last resort, and English law has long held it wrong to house debtors alongside felons at all, providing separate accommodation for exactly that reason. Why, then, does the same law send the very poorest class of debtor — a man who cannot raise so much as five shillings — to pick oakum beside burglars and drink from the same tin as convicted thieves? Extending the county court's instalment principle to the payment of fines, we believe, would spare a great many honest but simply imprudent people from exactly this fate, sparing their families the workhouse in the process, and, through the ongoing sting of small weekly payments, teaching a more lasting lesson than a week's imprisonment ever could. One county court judge assured us that, of several thousand instalment cases he tried in a single year, fewer than ten in a thousand ever resulted in imprisonment for missed payments — suggesting the scheme need not sacrifice much in the way of actual enforcement.

Captain Chesterton records, in his own memoir, a case that illustrates the present system's cruelty with particular force: a man committed for seven days in default of paying a trifling fine hanged himself in his cell, his body discovered still warm — and the fine itself, a matter of a few shillings, was tendered at the gate only hours later, a few days' grace being all that stood between the man and his own life. We would extend the fine-and-instalment principle to cover the whole range of minor infractions that plainly do not belong among genuine crimes — crying one's trade too

loudly in the street, obstructing a public thoroughfare, sleeping in the open air, minor drunkenness, an accidentally broken window, hawking without a licence — while acknowledging that a flat fine, applied equally to rich and poor alike, is itself a poor measure of justice, since the wealthy have both less excuse for their offences and far greater means of paying whatever penalty is imposed. We would rather see fines set as a proportion of the offender's known means — assessed, say, against annual rental value, with the magistrate free to vary the percentage according to the gravity of the offence — with a floor set so that no one's liberty is valued, even in default, at less than an ordinary labourer's daily wage of half a crown, ending the present absurdity whereby one man's freedom is priced at four pence halfpenny a day and another's at three shillings and more, depending on nothing more principled than which magistrate happened to hear the case, and, we might add, what sort of morning that magistrate happened to be having.

The Prison Kitchen and Diet

The kitchen that feeds Coldbath Fields' 1,300-odd inhabitants is as large and lofty as a barn, cool despite the heat of cooking, everything prepared by steam on a scale that would not look out of place in an American boarding-house: a single pot holding a full ten gallons; twin steam boilers arched in crimson brickwork, white plumes hissing steadily from their safety valves; vast square iron tanks, more cistern than pot, holding at one time a hundred gallons of cocoa, its reddish scum rising and falling with the heat, and at another a hundred and fifty gallons of soup or the thick, pasty gruel that makes up so much of the prison diet. Two cooks spend three and a half hours simply weighing out the day's rations — one dividing a great heap of boiled meat into six-ounce portions with remarkable speed, the other dividing a hamper of steaming potatoes into eight-ounce lots. All the soup is made from bullocks' heads, several of which hung by the lips in the larder on the day of our visit, white bone showing through crimson flesh in a manner that called to mind nothing so much as childhood images of Bluebeard's closet; even the jawbones, once stripped, are put to a curious

second use, edging the gravel walks of the prison grounds much as oyster shells sometimes border suburban garden beds.

Dinner is served at two o'clock, and since a pint of gruel and six ounces of bread hardly matches an Englishman's usual notion of that meal, we were curious to see whether the men ate it with any real appetite after a morning's labour. We watched one yard's dinner service directly: men marching in a long file to the dining shed, caps removed as each entered, taking their places at narrow tables already laid with tin mugs of gruel, spoon, and bread. At the word "Draw up tables!" the light dressers were pulled in with a sudden rattle, and grace was said standing — "Sanctify, we beseech thee, O Lord, these thy good things to our use, and us to thy service" — followed by a shouted "Amen!" and then the particular sound, half tinkling and half sniffing, of several hundred men eating a half-liquid meal from tin cups with spoons. Two prisoners carrying salt-boxes passed down the tables so each man could help himself in turn; once the meal was "despatched," as our guide rather ironically put it, the men reached up for the small book-bags suspended above their heads and passed the remainder of the dinner hour reading.

One feature of the prison's dietary scale strikes us as genuinely difficult to justify: prisoners serving fourteen days or under — necessarily guilty, by definition, of the lightest offences — are kept on bread and gruel alone, while those serving more than two months, guilty of correspondingly graver offences, receive meat or soup daily, the best diet the law permits in any prison. The scale is modelled on that recommended by the Home Secretary and the prison inspectors, though Coldbath Fields' own allowance runs slightly below the government's recommended weights for short-term prisoners — twenty ounces of daily bread against the twenty-four recommended — while doubling the meat ration for prisoners serving between a fortnight and two months.

The justification offered is that longer-term prisoners suffer more acute mental depression, and require the better diet to sustain them; the meat and soup, in effect, are treated as a species of medicine unneeded by short-term men, who carry into prison a body still healthy and a mind buoyed by the prospect of imminent release. But is this really so? Which of the two classes of prisoner is

more likely to suffer real psychological distress — the man entering prison for the very first time, or the seasoned offender recommitted again and again? First offenders are, as a rule, sentenced lightly; it is the old jail-bird, after repeated recommitments, who accumulates the heavier sentences and correspondingly richer diet. The man sent to prison for a few days, in other words, is very likely the more genuinely distressed of the two, not the one already reconciled to prison routine through long and repeated experience of it. The clearest evidence of first-imprisonment distress lies in the pattern of suicide attempts recorded in prison returns: a newly arrived prisoner who attempts to starve himself to death almost always does so only in the earliest days of confinement, relenting once a few days' exposure to the ordinary routine has reconciled him, however grimly, to his surroundings.

Nor is granting the better diet only to long-term prisoners free of a second, more troubling defect: it functions, in practice, as a standing incentive toward heavier offending. Many professional thieves know the dietary scale of every London prison as well as they know their own trade, and will deliberately court a longer sentence — attempting some more serious undertaking rather than a petty one likely to earn only a short committal — purely to secure the better table that comes with it. Food, for this class of prisoner, ranks among life's greatest remaining pleasures, the proceeds of their thieving disposed of chiefly in eating, drinking, and similar animal indulgence; one Coldbath Fields prisoner, convinced without real evidence that his own bread ration was smaller than his neighbour's, broke into a warder's locker to obtain a knife and, two days later, stabbed the officer he blamed for the supposed slight.

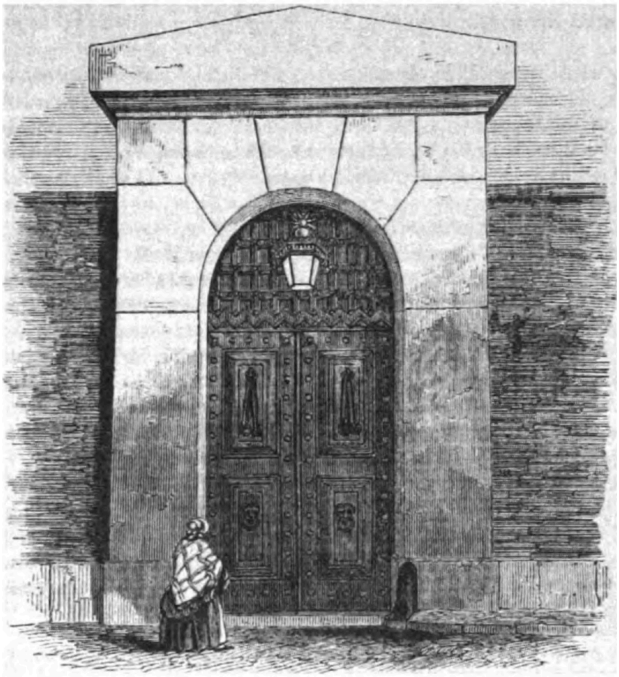
We see no genuine remedy for these dietary problems except the same principle we have urged throughout this account: making a prisoner's comfort depend directly on his own labour. Let punishment diet be the sole free allowance granted to any prisoner, of whatever sentence length, and let every class of offender alike earn the addition of meat to his table only by completing a set quantity of work. Such a system would function as a genuine incentive to industry, and would carry the further, more valuable lesson that the same strength and persistence a man once wasted

forcing a lock or breaking open a door will, applied instead to honest labour, reliably secure him a decent and respectable living — so that when he finally leaves prison, he leaves it, we might hope, genuinely intent on earning his own bread rather than merely waiting for his next committal.

CHAPTER X

Tothill Fields Prison

OF THE OLD SANCTUARIES AND THE MODERN ROOKERIES



ENTRANCE TO TOTHILL FIELDS PRISON.

Entrance to Tothill Fields Prison.

No quarter of London carries such strongly marked and contradictory features as the old episcopal city of Westminster — not the sprawling electoral district that now stretches out to Kensington and Chelsea, but Westminster proper: the compact triangle bounded by Vauxhall Road, St. James's Park, and the Thames. Here stand some of the noblest and meanest buildings in London side by side — the Abbey and the squalid old Duck Lane, the new Houses of Parliament and the half-derelict Almonry — a district that houses more schools and almshouses than most, and yet whose narrow courts shelter more thieves, whose public houses serve more soldiers, and

whose dry arches give refuge to more vagrant children than almost anywhere else in the capital.

Much of this contradiction traces back to the peculiarities of the old city itself. The French statistician Parent-Duchâtelet showed that the Quartier de la Cité in Paris, now the headquarters of the Parisian underworld, had once been the site of a recognized sanctuary; the same pattern holds at Westminster. "The church at Westminster," wrote the historian Stow, "hath had great privilege of sanctuary within the precinct thereof," a privilege confirmed by charter under Edward the Confessor, guaranteeing life and liberty to any person, whatever their offence, who fled there for refuge. The sanctuary extended across the church, churchyard, and close; the lane leading toward it, Stow tells us, was known as Thieving Lane, since thieves were led that way to the gatehouse while the privilege still held.

It is well known that there were formerly many other such sanctuaries, or "privileged" places, throughout London. From the time of Edward the Confessor down to the Reformation — a period of some five hundred years — any place or building consecrated by the clergy for religious use could serve to screen offenders from the ordinary justice of the law. There were, besides, several purely secular "privileged" districts where debtors in particular found themselves safe from arrest.

Similar sanctuaries once stood throughout London — the old Mint in Southwark, the Minories, St. Katharine's Hospital near the docks, Fulwood's Rents and Baldwin's Gardens off Gray's Inn Lane, and Whitefriars, once known as Alsatia — and, with the exception of Whitefriars, these old privileged districts remain, to this day, among London's principal haunts of beggars, prostitutes, and thieves. Other notorious quarters, such as St. Giles and the courts around Brick Lane, began life not as sanctuaries but as the sites of old hospitals for the poor or the diseased — the great leper hospitals of St. James and St. Giles-in-the-Fields among them, along with a well-known "loke," or leper house, in Kent Street, Southwark, now one of the worst districts in London; Spitalfields, similarly, took its name and its early character from an ancient almshouse that once stood there.

It appears, then, that London's various "rookeries" generally began as the site either of some ancient sanctuary for felons and debtors, or

of some hospital for the poor, the disabled, or the diseased — and that each such settlement became, over time, the nucleus of a dense and self-perpetuating population of outcasts. Much as today's habitual criminal sometimes turns up among the recipients of casual poor relief, and the vagrant sometimes turns up in a hospital ward, so the old "sanctuary men" likely mixed freely with the sick and the destitute crowded around these same religious houses — and around each such spot there gathered, inevitably, a shunned and mutually reinforcing population of the criminal, the diseased, and the desperately poor, cut off from ordinary society and left largely to intermarry and interbreed among themselves.

Whether such an isolated, outcast population might over generations become measurably more prone to idleness and crime than the rest of society — in something like the way particular physical ailments are understood to run in families — is a question some contemporary writers on the subject have been tempted to answer in the affirmative, drawing on the young and still-developing science of heredity. We think the evidence for any such inherited criminal "type" considerably weaker than its proponents allow, and would only note that habitual criminals do share one genuinely well-documented trait with the chronically insane: an inability to sustain attention or apply themselves continuously to any single pursuit, alongside a certain restlessness of body that marks the vagrant as clearly as it marks certain patterns of mental illness.

These old sanctuaries and hospitals remained in force until the dissolution of the religious houses, mostly between 1534 and 1539, when a series of statutes progressively curtailed the ancient right of refuge — a change historians have linked to what became known as the "age of beggars and thieves," as the crowds who had depended on monastic charity were suddenly thrown onto their own resources. The legal response was severe almost beyond modern imagining: an Act of 1536 ordered a sturdy beggar whipped for a first offence, his right ear cropped for a second, and hanged as a felon for a third; a somewhat gentler Act of 1547 ordered able-bodied vagrants branded and enslaved for two years, then branded again and enslaved for life if they ran away, and executed if they ran a second time; further Acts in 1572 and 1597 prescribed whipping, branding through the ear, and

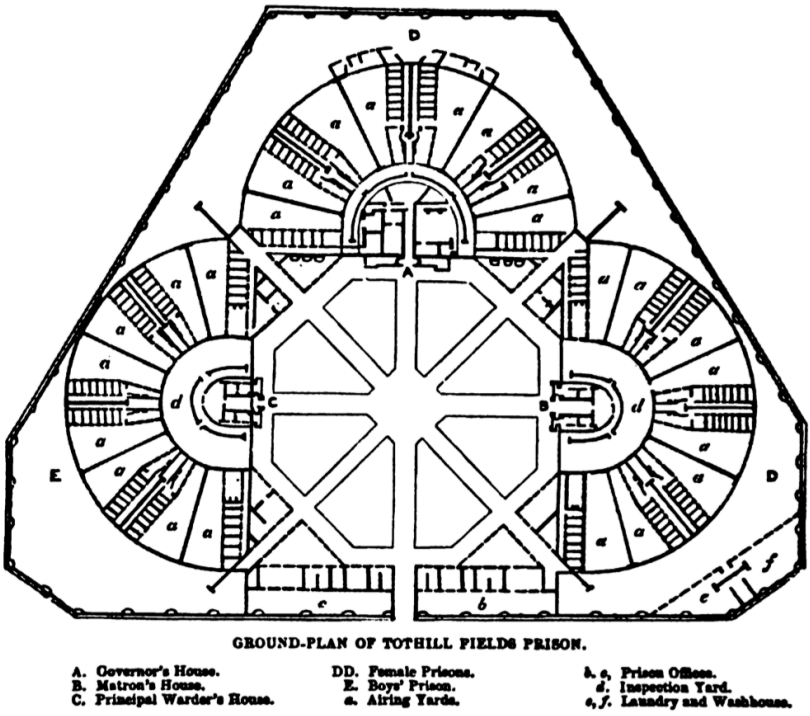
eventual execution for repeated vagrancy. Not until the more humane Poor Law of 1601 did England finally establish workhouses proper, funded to give the poor employment and shelter the old, the blind, and the disabled — institutions that could only ever have served the honestly destitute, since the habitual beggar and thief, preferring what the trade itself calls "shaking a free leg," generally regarded any such workhouse as barely distinguishable from the house of correction attached to it.

It was natural enough, then, that the sites of London's old sanctuaries and hospitals should have remained the settled haunts of the capital's outcast population long after the institutions that first drew them there had vanished — for habit alone keeps the poor in a neighbourhood long after it has become unfit to live in, and a district shunned by respectable society offers, besides, the near-certainty of meeting old associates and avoiding more respectable company altogether.

The History of Tothill Fields

Tothill Fields Prison, originally called a bridewell, stands on one of those old London "fields" districts — Moorfields, Spitalfields, Goodman's Fields, Lincoln's Inn Fields among them — whose open ground has long since vanished entirely beneath brick and paving, so thoroughly that no record survives of exactly where the original "Toot Hill" that gave the district its name once stood. "If a place could exist," Jeremy Bentham wrote of it in 1798, "of which it could be said that it was in no neighbourhood, that place would be Tothill Fields." The name itself likely derives from the Welsh word for a rising spring or beacon-hill, a comparable "Beacon Hill" surviving near Caernarvon Castle to this day.

The fields have a long and varied history: part of a royal manor under Henry III, site of a weekly market and annual fair granted to the Abbot of Westminster, later a recognized ground for trial by combat, and, by the seventeenth century, famous both for its cultivated parsley beds and as a mustering-ground for the London Trained Bands — fourteen thousand of them drew up there in 1651.



Ground-plan of Tothill Fields Prison.

Plague pest-houses once stood on the open ground, and twelve hundred Scottish prisoners taken at the Battle of Worcester were buried there after being marched “like a herd of swine” through Westminster and sold on to merchants bound for Barbados. The fields later served as a fashionable maze and pleasure-garden, then, in Richard Steele's account from 1709, held “a military garden, a bridewell, and, as I have heard tell, a race-course,” along with a bear-garden on the site of what is now Vincent Square, and, into the early eighteenth century, a recognized dueling-ground — the last recorded fatal encounter there, with pistols held close enough that the muzzles touched, took place in 1711.

The bridewell Steele mentioned had been built in 1618, enlarged in 1655, and demolished only in 1836, when its relics were transferred to the present building's grounds, where they remain: a small inscribed stone marking the site of the old prison, and the stone frame of the original prison gateway itself, standing alone among the

garden shrubs like some cromlech-shaped ruin, barely five feet ten inches high and scarcely wider than a cottage doorway. A second surviving stone, built into a wall connecting two of the present wings, records the old bridewell's original purpose: providing work for the poor of St. Margaret's parish, Westminster, "as also the county according to Law, and for such as will Beg and Live Idle in this City and Liberty of Westminster," dated 1655.

Tothill Fields Bridewell was thus originally a parish institution, twinned with the neighbouring Green Coat School (or St. Margaret's Hospital) that had provided for the parish's orphaned children since 1633 — one establishment for relieving the honest poor, the other for compelling the able-bodied idle to work, exactly as the Poor Law of 1601 had directed. Though built as a bridewell for vagrants, the prison was converted early in the eighteenth century into a jail for criminals generally, and John Howard, visiting in 1777, found it remarkably well managed under its then keeper, George Smith, whom he held up as a model to other governors.

The present building dates from 1826, when Parliament authorized a new prison on a fresh site near Vauxhall Bridge Road; the eight-and-a-half-acre plot cost £16,000, and the finished building, designed by Robert Abraham, cost a further £186,179 and opened in 1834, the old prison being demolished two years later. Built, like Pentonville, on Bentham's radiating "panopticon" principle, the new Tothill Fields consists of three distinct half-wheel prisons arranged around a central planted courtyard, their combined ground-plan resembling, rather aptly, the ace of clubs. Hepworth Dixon judged it, for a house of correction, "one of the very worst erections in London" — astonishing, given how recently it had been built, that the same flawed radiating principle already discredited elsewhere should have been repeated here, its separate wings offering no more genuine central oversight than if each had been built as an entirely independent prison.

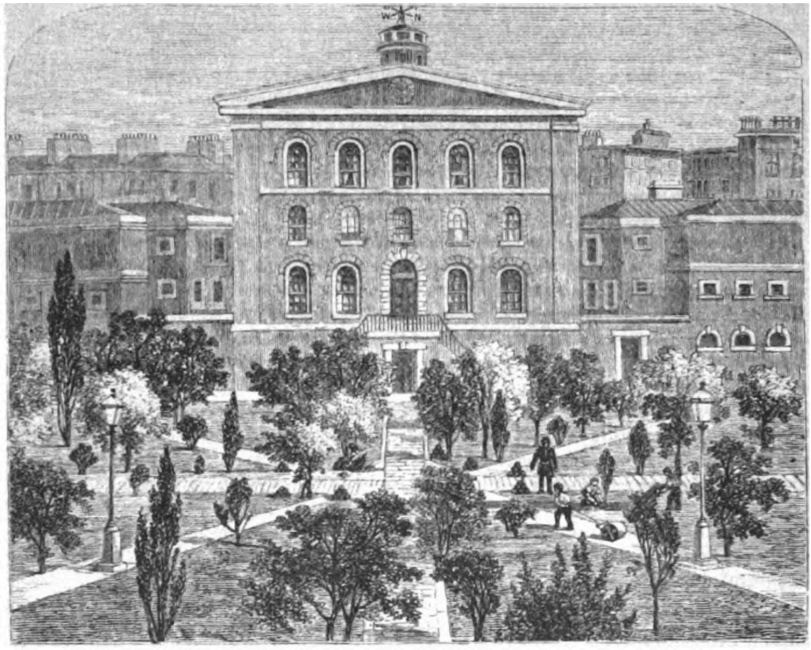
As originally built in 1834, Tothill Fields combined a jail for untried male prisoners and debtors, a house of correction for convicted men serving shorter sentences, and a separate prison for women. This arrangement changed in 1845, when untried prisoners and debtors were moved elsewhere, leaving the Westminster prison to

house only convicted criminals; a further and more significant reform followed in 1850, when the Middlesex magistrates resolved that Tothill Fields should henceforth take only convicted women and boys under seventeen, with all convicted adult males transferred instead to Coldbath Fields — a rational division of the sexes and ages that no Act of Parliament had ever required, but that produced, at a stroke, both a substantial saving in staff (the combined establishments needed twenty fewer officers, cutting £1,719 from the annual wage bill) and a far more sensible grouping of prisoners for the purposes of order, decency, and discipline alike. The credit for this reform belongs entirely to the Middlesex magistrates themselves, who also deserve recognition as the first in the country to establish a dedicated house of detention, sparing the untried and probably innocent from all contact with convicted criminals — a measure of real justice, matched by the equally humane and voluntary decision to separate young and old offenders long before any statute compelled it.

The present Westminster prison, then, has passed through a remarkable sequence of transformations: from a parish bridewell for idle beggars, to a house of correction for vagrants and petty offenders, to a jail holding prisoners both before and after trial, to an institution for every class of convicted offender, and finally to its current, considerably more rational role as the sole metropolitan receptacle for convicted women and boys. It consists of three distinct prisons, called A, B, and C, arranged around the shared planted courtyard — B and C housing women, A given over entirely to boys.

Numbers, Staff, and Comparative Statistics

The prison's official capacity runs to 900 — 300 boys and 600 women — when more than one prisoner shares a cell, or 549 if every prisoner is to have a separate sleeping cell, meaning genuinely separate accommodation exists for not quite two-thirds of the full capacity. In practice, the numbers run close to and sometimes beyond even the higher figure: the daily average through the year ending Michaelmas 1855 stood at 870 (270 boys, 600 women), with the single highest day reaching 956 — some 7 percent above the prison's total nominal capacity



PLANTED COURT-YARD AND GOVERNOR'S HOUSE, AT TOTHILL FIELDS PRISON.
(From a Photograph by Herbert Watkins, 179, Regent Street.)

The planted courtyard and governor's house, Tothill Fields Prison.

. Committals for the same year numbered 7,268 (1,909 boys, 5,359 women), bringing the gross prison population, including those already in custody at the year's start, to 8,134.

The official staff comprises a governor, chaplains, surgeon, clerks, a storekeeper, a principal warder and 31 male warders, and a principal matron with 47 further matrons — a ratio of roughly one officer to every 9 boys, somewhat better than Millbank's ratio and considerably better than Coldbath Fields', and one officer to every 12.7 women, similarly favourable by comparison with other establishments; taking the prison as a whole, the ratio runs to one officer for every 11 prisoners, against one to 17 at Pentonville and one to roughly 13 at Coldbath Fields. Set against the average for every prison in England and Wales — one officer to 8.6 prisoners — Tothill Fields compares favourably indeed, particularly for its boys, where the ratio of one to 8.7 sits almost exactly at the national average despite the genuinely difficult population the prison houses.

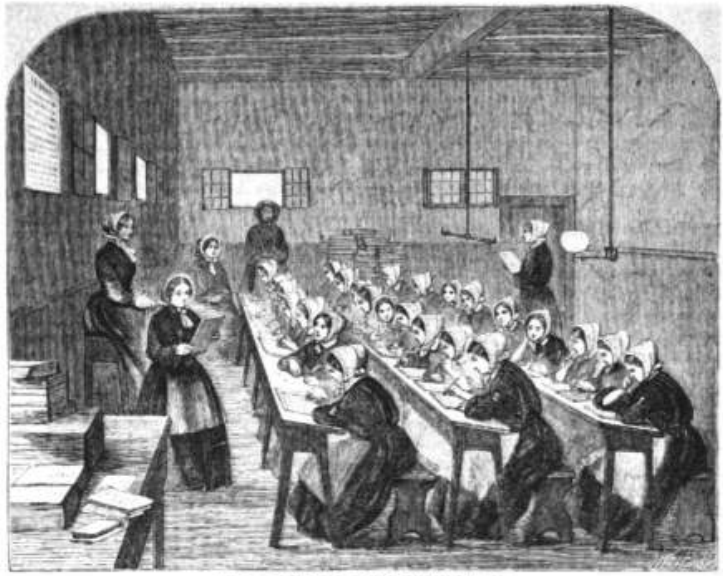
The five years of returns from 1851 to 1855 show a prison population and staff both growing steadily year on year: the average daily population rose from 650 in 1851 to 870 by 1855, the greatest single-day number climbing correspondingly from 768 to as high as 1,056 in 1854, and the officer establishment expanding from 78 to 88 over the same period, at a cost in salaries that grew from roughly £6,733 to £6,721 annually — a remarkably modest increase in expenditure, given the growth in prisoner numbers, that speaks well of the efficiency with which the establishment has been run since the 1850 reorganization.

The Boys' Prison

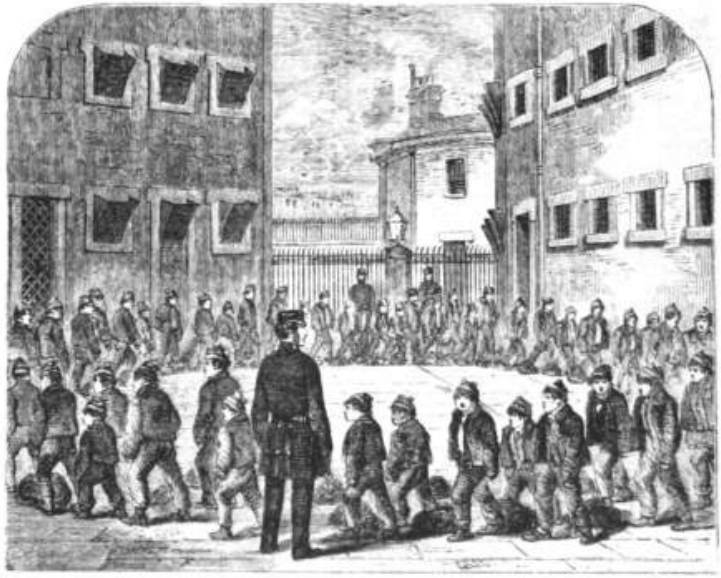
We take the boys' prison, styled “A,” first. Four radiating wings extend from a central lodge that serves as the principal warder's house, the wings themselves left detached from that central point in a way that defeats much of the intended purpose of the radiating design, since genuine oversight from the centre is largely impossible. Four airing-yards occupy the open spaces between the wings. The boys' division holds 193 separate sleeping cells in all, together with a large dormitory capable of housing some eighty further boys. On the day of our second visit, 271 boys under seventeen were confined here in total — 87 in the dormitory, 7 in reception cells, and the remaining 177 distributed through the separate cells.

Those separate cells measure eight feet by six by nine, a capacity of 432 cubic feet — less than half the size of the model cells at Pentonville — with no dedicated ventilating apparatus beyond simple holes in the wall, no gas, no water, no water closet, and no means whatsoever of summoning a warder in a night emergency. Some windows are simply unglazed, fitted only with a louvred screen and inside shutters; furniture runs to an iron bedstead, a straw mattress, a rug and one or three blankets depending on season, a stool, and a zinc night-pan — no table, no chair.

Frederick Hill, formerly a prison inspector, recommended in his own study of crime that a cell built for vigorous ventilation need be no larger than 560 cubic feet; Tothill Fields' cells, with no dedicated ventilation system at all, run nearly 23 percent smaller even than that minimum, and Hill nowhere suggested that any cell, whatever its size,



GIRLS' SCHOOL AT TOTHILL FIELDS PRISON.



BOYS EXERCISING AT TOTHILL FIELDS PRISON.

Girls' school at Tothill Fields Prison; boys exercising at Tothill Fields Prison.

should go entirely unheated through the coldest winter nights, objecting specifically to stone flooring as a notorious "abstracter of heat." Nor did he ever recommend locking a prisoner into total

darkness for twelve and a half hours out of the twenty-four, as happens here through the winter months — a waste of time and opportunity for improvement that strikes us as little short of wicked, and it is genuinely surprising that the Middlesex magistrates, who deserve so much credit for other prison reforms, should have allowed so glaring a defect to persist as long as it has.

Discipline here follows the silent associated system, though a substantial number of boys lack separate sleeping cells at night — an arrangement generally considered essential to that system's proper working, and one Hepworth Dixon criticized as an unpardonable fault some years before our own visit, a criticism, we regret to say, still true today. "This crowding of prisoners together at night," Dixon wrote, "is an unpardonable fault; whatever system of discipline the culprit is placed under during the hours of work or study, he should be compelled to sleep alone. A body of eighty felons lying in a common room, though an officer stay all night in the apartment, will suffer more corruption and contamination in ten hours than they would in ten months of silent fellowship in the school or work-room."

Despite these architectural defects, the prison's actual health record is better than its cells' condition would suggest, though still well below the national average: the 1853 sickness rate for boys here ran to 45.3 percent, against a national average for juveniles of only 16.9 percent, and the rate for the whole prison population, at 49.0 percent, ran to nearly double the rate for all England and Wales. It may seem unfair to set a metropolitan prison, drawing its inmates from the crowded and often unhealthy courts of London, against a national average dominated by smaller provincial establishments; but even comparing Tothill Fields directly to Coldbath Fields, its nearest metropolitan equivalent, the Westminster prison's sickness rate is barely half as high — a genuinely creditable showing given the far worse condition of its cells, though its mortality figures compare still more favourably: of 31,145 people committed to Tothill Fields between 1851 and 1855 (7,753 boys, 23,392 women), only 47 died in total, a mortality rate of 0.56 percent annually among the boys and 1.5 percent among the women — lower than at Millbank, the Hulks, or Coldbath Fields, though not quite matching Pentonville's or Brixton's still better figures. Even the 1854 cholera outbreak claimed only five

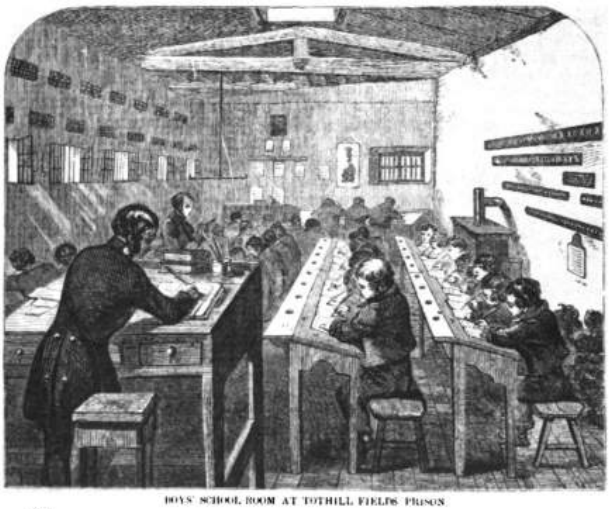
lives here, a fact the prison's own Special Report notes with evident and understandable satisfaction, remarking that the low mortality is "the more surprising, when it is considered that thousands who enter the prison are persons leading an abandoned life, or in a comparative state of destitution," many drawn from housing scarcely fit for habitation and long accustomed to every kind of neglect. Lunacy proved similarly rare: only eleven cases across the same five years, five of them already showing signs of mental disturbance on arrival, a rate of just 0.41 percent annually against a national prison average of 0.59 percent.

Punishment statistics, drawn from the Nineteenth Report of the Inspectors of Prisons, tell a genuinely striking story once set against the national picture. Nationally, young prisoners are punished far more often than adults — 79 in every 100 juveniles had their diet stopped in 1853, against only 19 in every 100 adults, and the national juvenile punishment rate runs to something over 100 per hundred prisoners, against only 39 per hundred for adults, a pattern that suggests either that juvenile prisoners are genuinely harder to manage, or that they are simply treated more harshly by their jailers, or very possibly both. Against this national picture, the boys' punishment rate at Tothill Fields runs strikingly low — so low, in fact, that it throws into sharp relief just how severe the national average for juvenile punishment actually is. We regard this low rate of punishment among the Tothill Fields boys as a matter of real credit to everyone connected with the prison's management. There is a view abroad, which we do not share, that our prisons are being made too comfortable — too much like schools, offering something close to a premium on crime; we have no wish whatsoever to strip prisons of their proper character as places of penitential correction, nor are we advocates of unnecessary severity for its own sake, but we do believe that the best-run prison is the one that maintains genuine order and discipline with the minimum possible resort to physical punishment — and by that standard, the magistrates, governor, and warders responsible for the Tothill Fields boys' prison deserve real praise, since ours is the only prison of this kind we have found where strict discipline is maintained at so low a cost in physical coercion.

THE FEMALE PRISON



FEMALE PRISONERS' OWN CLOTHES STORE AT TOTHILL FIELDS PRISON.



BOYS' SCHOOL ROOM AT TOTHILL FIELDS PRISON.

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Female prisoners' own clothes store; boys' school room, Tothill Fields Prison.

We wish the returns allowed us to say as much for the female side of the establishment. The statistics show punishment here running to almost double the national rate for women generally: only 4 in every 10,000 female prisoners are placed in handcuffs across the country as a whole, against 12 in 10,000 at Tothill Fields; 35 women in every 100 here have their diet stopped over the course of a year, against only 16 in 100 nationally; and the overall punishment rate for female

prisoners here runs to 38 percent, against a national average for women of just over 23 percent.

Metropolitan women may, in fairness, prove genuinely harder to manage than their provincial counterparts, and the Tothill Fields figures are in any case mild indeed set beside Brixton's, where the punishment rate runs nearly five times as high — 43.55 percent of Brixton's women pass through the dark cells alone, against just 0.69 percent at Tothill Fields, and the overall punishment rate at Brixton, 182 percent of the gross prison population, dwarfs the comparatively modest 38.57 percent recorded at Tothill Fields. It should be remembered, though, in fairness to Brixton, that it holds only long-sentence convict women under transportation or penal servitude, a genuinely different and more hardened population from the short-term offenders who make up the great majority of Tothill Fields' female intake.

This last point seems to us worth dwelling on, since it goes some way toward explaining a pattern that might otherwise look like simple inconsistency: a prison that manages its boys with a genuinely enviable minimum of physical coercion, and yet punishes its women at nearly double the ordinary national rate. The two populations differ in more than sex alone. Tothill Fields' boys are, for the most part, first offenders or at least young enough that habitual criminality has not yet fully set in; a well-judged mixture of firmness and encouragement can still reach them. The women committed here, by contrast, include a considerable proportion of habitual and repeat offenders whose settled habits of life make them far less amenable to ordinary discipline — women, in other words, closer in character to Brixton's convict population than to the boys held only a few hundred yards away in the same institution, even though the length of their individual sentences may be considerably shorter. Whether this genuinely accounts for the full disparity in punishment rates, or whether some part of it reflects a difference in how female warders and male warders are inclined to exercise their authority, is a question we do not feel qualified to settle definitively; but the figures, at the very least, seem to us to call for closer study than they have so far received.

CHAPTER XIII

Tothill Fields: The Boys' Prison

OF THE BOYS' WORK AT TOTHILL FIELDS

The labour performed at this prison takes much the same forms already described at Coldbath Fields and the convict establishments: oakum-picking accounts for the greater share, though a boy's earnings at it come to barely £1 a year, against a maintenance cost more than seven times as much. Smaller gangs work at tailoring and shoemaking, two or three boys at carpentry, and a few more in the garden.

In every one of these occupations, the same vital defect recurs: labour is enforced purely as punishment, never as a means of teaching a trade or cultivating any real love of honest work. Of genuine training there is not a shadow, nor, to give the authorities their due, even the pretence of one. We doubt whether anyone entrusted with the care of these wretched children has ever seriously considered how habits actually form — how an act that first requires real effort, and feels irksome to perform, gradually becomes automatic through simple repetition, until it feels more irksome to leave undone than to do. Nor, it seems, has anyone considered that the highest lesson a person can learn is self-reliance: faith in one's own power to contribute to one's own happiness, and the understanding that idleness breeds misery just as surely as effort, rightly applied, breeds comfort. Instead, the boys at Tothill Fields grow up believing that the easiest route to what they want is simply to take it, or beg for it, and that labour itself is a punishment rather than the safest and most reliable path to genuine pleasure. They are dutifully taught to spell, to write, and to recite catechisms they do not understand — but the State, in our view, has more business forming good citizens than good Christians; government's proper office is to ensure each person does their duty to their neighbour, not to police the duty owed to God, a distinction whose neglect has historically justified every religious persecution a free society has ever had cause to regret.

We do not hesitate to say that our prisons devote a great deal too much attention to a prisoner's happiness in the next world, and too little to his condition in this one — too much faith in the chaplain's influence, too little in the physician's knowledge, broadly understood. No one wishes more sincerely than we do to see genuine religion take root in the human soul; but the same social hypocrisy that leads a fraudulent banker to ride to his counting-house with a Bible on his knee leads thieves, young and old alike, to affect a convenient show of piety calculated to win credit with their fellow men rather than with their Maker. Abandoning the old "penitentiary" system, with its excessive reliance on religious observance alone, has done some good in reducing this hypocrisy; but until prison authorities find the courage to speak plainly about these matters, we see little real hope of reforming our criminals.

What is wanted — and the want is nowhere more glaring than at Tothill Fields — is sound, genuine industrial training: education in habits of real industry, and above all the practical inculcation of labour's dignity and worth. At present, industry earns a boy nothing here; the oakum is picked, the shoes mended, the clothes made, the ground tilled, with no positive benefit accruing to the boy from any of it. Yet these are precisely the children who most need the opposite lesson. Suppose the governor, the warders, even the chaplain, were expected to perform their prison duties entirely without pay — how long would they remain honest, or remain at all, once they found their labour unrewarded?

Admittedly, a genuine system of industrial education is not easy to practise under present conditions. Magistrates still delight in sending boys to prison for a few days at a time, merely to show them how different it is from home; fully 24.8 percent of everyone committed to the Westminster House of Correction serve less than a fortnight, and the average sentence across the 1,800-odd boys sent there in a year comes to barely three months. It is idle to expect any lasting impression on a young offender in so short a time, beyond teaching him that a warm bed and decent food await him at Westminster, obtainable merely by throwing an oyster-shell through a street lamp.

The shoemakers' and tailors' shops occupy the first floor of the No. 8 wing, each formed by knocking three ordinary cells into one —

whitewashed, vaulted, brick-paved rooms scarcely larger than a suburban parlour. In the shoemakers' shop, shelves held bundles of new shoes and heavy lasts, bags of old shoes awaiting repair, and rolls of leather; the presiding warder sat at a desk surrounded by tools resembling small cheese-cutters, the air thick with cobbler's wax exactly as the oakum-room we had just left was thick with tar. Boys sat ranged on benches, each half-encased in a leather apron, a kit or open tray at his side, a gas-pipe rising from the brick floor at each worker's elbow.

"Take off your caps, boys, and cease that hammering," the warder called as we entered, before showing us his monthly record of work done: 507 pairs mended in January, 385 in February, 367 in March, 490 in April, 426 in May, 497 in June, alongside just five to thirteen new pairs made each month — an average of roughly 73 pairs made and 445 mended monthly, worked by thirteen boys, or not quite nine pairs mended weekly by each hand. "I can't estimate their labour at much, sir," the warder said, "because they're all young hands." He valued half-soling at fivepence a pair and half-heeling at a penny, piece by piece, noting that a new hand might take two days over a job a practised boy could finish in one — "but we have the lads for such short terms that we can't get them ready at the business." By his own reckoning, the eighteen boys then at work earned £2 4s. for the week ending the 7th of June, and similar sums the weeks following — amounting, annualized, to something over £8 12s. per boy, a rate at which, he calculated, each young prisoner would very nearly support himself entirely.

His work-book recorded a running commentary on each boy's progress — "improved," "not improved," "learning," "can close a little" — and, asked how long the boys typically remained under his instruction, he ran through several names: one gone to Redhill after six months, another kept two months, a third only three weeks, a fourth about five weeks. "Sometimes I don't keep them more than a week," he said; "they get into trouble, are put into the cells, and so are constantly on the change."

We questioned the boys themselves. Of thirteen present, nine claimed to be sixteen, one fifteen, one fourteen, two thirteen. The first, though claiming sixteen to secure his placement here, admitted

to being eighteen; he had stolen tools, never been imprisoned before, had no father, only a stepfather, and had learned shoemaking here over three months. The second had been learning barely a week, had stolen £4 from his employer, a greengrocer, and was serving nine months, his first offence. The third, pale and sickly, had stolen a piece of oil-cloth, was in for the fourth time, and had both parents living; he had worked as a shoemaker outside. A fourth, twice at Tothill Fields and once at Maidstone, had taken 18s. 6d. from a shop till with two companions; his father, also a shoemaker, had never taught him the trade. A fifth, in for stealing a half-quartern loaf with two others — "we didn't want it, we meant to sell it" — had been imprisoned three times here and once at Wandsworth. A sixth, badly treated by a stepmother, had stolen £2 8s. from a man at his lodging-house, received four years' penal servitude, had been imprisoned five times before, and was a stonemason by trade, awaiting transfer to Redhill.

A seventh, a costermonger treated well by his stepmother, was in for stealing boots, his sixth recommittal. An eighth, a bootmaker by trade with both parents living, had stolen shoe-brushes alongside three companions, his third recommittal. A ninth confessed himself an outright pickpocket, working regularly with a gang of boys to obtain "hankychers and purses"; his mother was alive, he had no father, and he had been imprisoned three times. A tenth had stolen a gold watch, working with a companion; an eleventh, with both parents living, had stolen silk handkerchiefs from a shop window and had already served time at the House of Detention twice. A twelfth had stolen 3s. from his own employer, a shoemaker, his first offence. The last and eldest, sentenced to two years for regularly picking pockets as part of an organized gang, had been at Tothill Fields six times, Wandsworth twice, and Chelmsford once; his father, a bricklayer's labourer and former soldier, had never troubled to send him to school or apprentice him to any trade.

We learned, besides, that new shoes made here are valued at 2s. 4d. the pair, all for prison use only, and that Tothill Fields does not generally keep boys longer than two years — an order now exists requiring that any boy sentenced to twelve months or more be reported to the Home Office with a view to transfer to the farm-school at Redhill. "There's farm labour there for the lads," the warder told us;

"when I was down there three weeks ago, the crops were beautiful, I assure you."

The tailors' shop, similarly fitted, held some twenty boys sitting cross-legged on a raised platform, out of a normal complement of twenty-six, a counter for cutting cloth in one corner and the warder seated on a stool in the other. "Some of these have been three months on the board," he told us, "though occasionally I keep a hand six months. Many have been only ten days at the work; but if we know a boy is useful, we employ him regardless." The shop makes and repairs prisoners' clothing and officers' uniforms exclusively, doing no outside work at all; weekly earnings across the shop ran from £1 6s. 4d. to £1 16s., averaging £1 10s. 10d. for twenty-six boys — something like £3 18s. 9d. a year per boy. Only eight or nine of the boys, the warder said, could manage new work rather than mere repairs; one had done tailoring outside before his sentence, and two others, recommitted four times each, had spent some nine months apiece at the trade over their various terms. "The boys prefer this work to oakum-picking," he told us; "they say they want to improve themselves so as to get a living outside, though very few take advantage of it." One lad told us plainly, "I like tailoring better than oakum-work. I want to learn a trade"; another, who had actually secured a week's trial at a tailor's shop between sentences, admitted he had been caught thieving with other boys on the very Sunday before he was due back at work on the Monday. Jackets are valued at ninepence to make, trousers the same, waistcoats sixpence, repairs a penny a garment; officers' uniform trousers and waistcoats at four shillings each, the coats made at Coldbath Fields instead.

The carpenters' shop, the same size again, held only a single boy at work the day of our visit — the regular carpenter-instructor being called away to the female prison, his other pupil sent to the oakum-room meanwhile. The turpentine smell of fresh deal replaced the tar and wax of the rooms before it; benches, tool-boxes, and curling shavings replaced the hooks and fuzzy oakum. The boy present, an intelligent sixteen-year-old, was serving four months for stealing two felt hats and a cap from his employer, his first offence, both parents living. "I was very foolish," he told us, with what seemed genuine feeling, "and hope to do better for the future. My time expires on

Wednesday week, and father is going to try and apprentice me, or get me work." He had never worked at carpentry before his sentence, but liked it well enough, and hoped a former employer in Regent Street would give him a character reference. The chief warder rated a recently discharged carpentry boy, taught the trade outside by an uncle, as worth ten or twelve shillings a week — boys generally take to carpentry readily, he told us, and some show real aptitude for it.

The oakum-store, one of several small offices ranged round the planted courtyard, held nine further boys — coils of old rope, a great overhead scale, canvas bags of cut junk, and a large screw-press bearing the painted warning "PRISONERS ARE NOT ALLOWED TO SPEAK TO EACH OTHER." Boys here unpicked rope strands, repicked badly done oakum, or packed finished oakum into half-hundredweight "cheeses" for sale — the contractor supplying junk for picking pays £10 a ton for the finished product. One boy, making mats in a corner, was rated at fourpence a square foot, worth about two shillings a week; he had never made a mat before his sentence and could now, after three months, make one well.

The prison garden completes our account of the boys' labour: some two acres within the walls, three more outside them. A narrow strip surrounds the prison proper, given over partly to the governor's own flowers and vegetables, with a small lawn and modest fountain; the high boundary wall rises behind it, overlooked now by the newly built houses of Victoria Street, from which the cries of ordinary babies drift down into the prison yard. Walking toward the outer garden, past the spot where the old tread-wheels once stood, we asked the chief warder his own opinion of that abandoned form of labour. "I never thought the old tread-wheel did any good here, sir," he said; "it never made a man better, or reformed a prisoner — it's only meant for punishment, and that kind of useless labour never answered its purpose in my experience. The wheels were taken down about ten years ago, well before the transfer of the women here; the space was wanted for workrooms, and that was one reason, but some of the magistrates were against tread-wheel labour on principle — Mr. Welsby especially, who thought it useless work and was, I believe, the main cause of its being done away with. We never had more than two wheels, worked by up to thirty hands at a time — boys generally,

though men were used too, never women. Before the wheels were divided into separate compartments, each hand climbed between ten and twelve thousand feet daily; after the division, only seven thousand."

The outer garden, an oblong plot facing Pimlico, has been enclosed only four years, planted with potatoes, cabbages, turnips, beans, peas, carrots, parsnips, and onions, all for prison use; an earlier garden of the same kind once stood on the site now occupied by Victoria Street. About eight boys keep it through the year, more in spring. "I think the garden labour very good for the prisoners," the warder told us, "though of course we'd need far more land than we can get here in the heart of Westminster to employ all our prisoners this way. Some boys like the field work; others object to the heavy digging and wheeling. We found five boys there with an officer, three digging in manure, one hoeing, one carrying water; last year's crops were valued at £25, some years as much as £30, working out to roughly £2 10s. per boy annually. "It's very poor ground here," the warder added; "three foot down we strike sand, and that's one reason the crops are never better. We can only use short-sentence boys too, since we're afraid to trust the two-year lads out here — the wall's low, you see, and as soon as we've trained one gang, they're gone, and we have to find another. Town boys prefer oakum-picking anyway; digging galls their hands, they say."

Taken altogether: roughly 157 boys work the oakum-room, earning some 18s. each annually; 13 in the shoemakers' shop, earning upward of £8 each (an estimate we suspect runs generously high); 26 in the tailors' shop, earning about £3 each; 2 in carpentry, whose labour is not valued at all; 9 more in the oakum-store, earning similarly to the main room, besides one mat-maker earning some £10 annually; and 8 in the garden, earning about £2 10s. each. Against an annual maintenance cost of roughly £8 per boy, the loss on almost every form of this labour is considerable — the gross value of all 216 boys' labour combined comes to something under £375 a year, or roughly eightpence per head weekly, against a national average value of prison labour of one shilling threepence.

The Boys' School Room and Library

The schoolroom, opposite the tailors' shop, has all the fittings of an ordinary school: long, narrow, pew-like desks pierced for inkstands, walls papered with scripture texts ("I will arise and go to my Father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee"; "Boast not thyself of tomorrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth"), the alphabet and multiplication tables in large type, and a bookcase by the warder-schoolmaster's high desk near the door.

We arrived as the schoolmaster heard one class read aloud from the Bible, each boy standing with book in hand; at the far end, a second class stumbled over a printed sheet held up by another warder. "Look, boy, don't you see there's an h?" one warder demanded of a struggling reader; "And into whatsoever house ye enter — how often am I to tell you there's no such word as fust!" Another verse was read off rapidly by a boy who seemed barely half the age of his heavy, slow-spoken neighbour, a lad the warder finally gave up on — "Go on, next boy." Elsewhere, boys stumbled over even simple monosyllables; roughly half of those sixteen present could not manage the lesson at all.

The schoolmaster told us that of those attending, only thirty could read and write reasonably well, an equal number read and wrote only imperfectly, and the rest could barely read at all. "Fifty in every hundred don't know their letters when they come in," he said, "even some of the oldest boys we get sent here. Each prisoner gets an hour's schooling daily. Here's one now — he's thirteen, been in this prison more than a year altogether, and doesn't know more than his letters. He came first for begging, but lately for thieving — picking pockets, this last year or so." Only occasionally, though, did he find a truly difficult pupil: "they're generally like other boys. I've kept this school thirteen years, and about 2,200 come under my care in the course of a twelvemonth." He showed us copy-books with evident pride — "that's learnt in the prison; not bad, considering he's only been at it three months."

The prison library holds travels and voyages, periodicals such as The Leisure Hour, a History of England, narratives like The Loss of the Kent, natural history works such as the Book of Birds, and a

handful of novels, Robinson Crusoe among them. The chapel clerk distributes the volumes, and boys may keep a book as long as they like unless misconduct costs them the privilege; they may read during meals and for half an hour after supper before lock-up at six. In summer they may read in their cells or the dormitory; in winter, with no lights permitted and no heating in the building, they pass from six in the evening until half-past six the next morning in total darkness and idleness — a defect we regard as nothing short of a scandal to the country that permits it to continue.

Of the educational system itself we have little more to say. Anyone who believes that boys of genuinely criminal disposition can be improved by the schooling just described must be as ignorant of human nature as zealots generally are. Teaching reading and writing is, at best, a negative good; it becomes something closer to an active harm when people convince themselves it carries some positive moral or religious effect on its own, and so neglect, as our prisons invariably do, any education of feeling, principle, or even simple taste. The most valuable education of all is that of the heart, and next that of the hands, particularly for the poorer classes who fill our jails — and of either kind our prisons make scarcely any attempt at all.

Reception and Discharge

We have already described chapel services at Pentonville and Coldbath Fields, and the boys' demeanour here differs little. Meals follow a similarly practised routine: at the end of the oakum-room, a warder in a white apron stands with a ladle before two large washing-tubs, one holding gruel, the other cocoa, a basket of small loaves close by, a boy stationed at a basket of tin pannikins, and a heap of metal spoons on a mat. “Come on, front row,” the warder calls, and the boys file past, each taking a spoon and a pannikin before it is filled — a full or half pint of gruel for second- or third-class vagrants, a pint of cocoa for first-class felons, with bread rationed at five or six and a half ounces depending on the gravity of the offence. Dinner follows the same pattern, with soup or meat and potatoes reserved for the better-classed prisoners.

We happened to be present when three fresh prisoners arrived, and followed them to the reception ward facing Francis Street. Two were

shoeless and ragged; the third, in darned but decent clothes, showed some evidence of a mother's care. This last boy, thirteen years old, had just come from the Sessions with a two-year sentence for stealing brass — a heavy term imposed deliberately to secure his transfer to a reformatory. His father was dead; his mother, an India-rubber weaver with eight children to feed (the youngest only four), had by the warder's account given the boy decent guidance despite her poverty.

The other two were of a different character entirely. One, thirteen, already three times a prisoner here (the last stay only eight weeks before, for three weeks), was serving six weeks for picking ladies' pockets, and stood entirely unabashed. The other, sporting the distinctive side-locks the warder identified as marking a London thief, admitted freely: “Mother sells things in the street. I've done two pockets a day, I know that. I've been thieving ever since I was here before. I ain't got no father. It wouldn't have lasted as long as it has if I'd done that number all the year round. Sometimes I do odd jobs for mother, and when I'm not working for her, I go pickpocketing on my own hook.”

“Have you got anything in your pockets?” the officer asked as the boys entered the examination room. “You'd better say, or you'll be punished if anything's found on you after.” “I've got a loaf, please, sir,” the least hardened boy admitted, producing a piece of bread. “That's a House of Detention loaf, isn't it?” the warder asked, recognizing its shape at a glance; “well, you can keep that. Now go in and wash yourself thoroughly.” The two experienced boys went in grinning; the first offender followed, sobbing. A boy-prisoner sorted fresh suits of prison clothes nearby, passing a complete set into each bath-room as the new arrivals washed. Nearby, handcuffs hung on pegs alongside leather “muffles” sent years before from Hanwell asylum for restraining prisoners inclined to tear their own clothing. Within minutes the boys emerged in prison grey, the well-shod newcomers indistinguishable now from the habitual offenders beside them — one of whom pointed at the other with a smile: “He's got on his own boots, please sir, and his own hankycher too, instead of the stock.”

The new arrivals would remain in the reception ward until the surgeon examined them the next morning; the warder told us the boys

generally preferred the common dormitory to a separate cell, few ever volunteering for the latter — a preference the prison's own arrangement does nothing to correct, since these dormitories directly contradict the principles of the silent associated system under which Tothill Fields claims to operate, a system that properly requires separate sleeping accommodation for every prisoner even where daytime work is done in company. Instead, the dormitories reduce discipline to exactly the promiscuous herding that was the great vice of the old, discredited prison system, and at precisely the hour when supervision is weakest. A prison housing large numbers of inmates together at night shares, in this one crucial respect, all the worst features of the Hulks.

The single dormitory at Tothill Fields, spanning the full length and width of the No. 3 and 4 wing's upper floor, held 87 boys the night of our visit — fifty on iron bedsteads and the remainder on mattresses laid directly on the boards. The room measures eighty feet by thirty-two and twelve feet high, giving a total of not quite 40,000 cubic feet, or barely 350 cubic feet of air per prisoner — well under half the 900 cubic feet scientific opinion holds necessary for health even with perfect ventilation, and this room has no ventilating apparatus beyond a single pierced skylight capable of clearing only the uppermost layer of air. Two officers keep watch through the night, but with the boys locked in from six in the evening until half-past six the next morning, entirely without occupation, it is plain that no amount of supervision can prevent a great deal of moral harm from passing between eighty boys confined together that long. It seems a strange contradiction to keep boys silent all day, watched from every angle to prevent the smallest exchanged glance, and then to place those same boys together at night with a tenth of the daytime supervision.

We have already noted that punishment here runs well below the national average — a fact genuinely to the credit of everyone connected with the prison, and one we can personally confirm from the order and regularity we observed during our visit. The best prison authorities are always those who achieve genuine order with the least possible physical suffering, a standard by which the Westminster boys' prison compares favourably with any in the kingdom, particularly given how much greater the temptation generally is to

apply harsher coercion to boys than to grown men. Most reports during our visit were for the ordinary boyish offences of laughing, talking, and general disorderliness; two were specifically for talking and shouting after lock-up, an offence directly traceable to the same six-o'clock darkness already described — with only one warder patrolling the whole building through the night, the boys, well aware of their opportunity, naturally resort to conversation to while away the tedium of enforced darkness and solitude. One officer told us plainly that it was simply impossible to stop this particular communication, given the absurdity of the underlying regulation that produces it.

We were present, too, for a discharge. A warder entered the oakum-room with a slate, calling out names — "James C—, William W—, Thomas D—, John D—" — and each boy answered, stepped from his place, and gave his name and length of stay for the warder to check against the slate, before being led to the storeroom to reclaim his own clothes and brought down to the gate. We found half a dozen boys there, shed of prison grey and dressed again in their own rags — shivering now in clothes far scantier than the warm uniform they had worn only half an hour before, one without a jacket, another with his coat pinned shut to hide a missing waistcoat.

"William C—" was called, and a warder told him to step into the small passage facing the clerk's office window. "Have you ever been here before?" the clerk asked. "No." "Belongs to Millbank," a warder added, "and some friend is here for him." The friend, admitted, proved to be the boy's brother. "The magistrates have given this boy a shilling," the clerk said, "and they hope they'll never see him here again — so do you take care of him." The pair left with the money and the admonition together. "James H—" came next, a boy small enough that his head barely cleared the office sill. "You've been in for robbing your mother, eh? What a horrible fellow, to plunder her of all people! The next time you come here, you'll be flogged, I can tell you that." "Anybody for this boy?" the clerk asked. "Nobody, sir," came the answer. "Where does your mother live?" "Gone, sir," the boy said, with a slight smile and no evident distress at anything just said to him. "He's been here often before," the governor observed to us; "he's a bad boy, indeed."

"Henry N—" had served six weeks, his third time here and second time also at the House of Detention; no one had come for him. "Thomas W—," a small boy with a whining voice, had served ten days, his sixth time, for breaking sixty panes of glass along with other boys throwing stones at an old factory already missing a hundred panes before they started — "we was trying to smash the rest of them." No one had come for him either. "Very well, let them all go," the clerk said, and the gate opened.

The boy whose brother had come found two more companions waiting outside, dressed in fustian jackets and looking no more respectable than the brother himself; the rest of the discharged boys looked around for any friend who might be waiting, and found none. Not a father, not a mother, not even a decent adult friend had come for any of them. We stood at the gate and watched the whole group of wretched, friendless children turn the corner together, absorbed at once into the company of the fustian-jacketed youths who had come only for the one boy — and could not help reflecting on the fate awaiting them, and on the State's evident failure in its duty toward children it has, in every meaningful sense, already orphaned. Where else were they to go? Who else was there to counsel or protect them? The only home open to receive them was the thieves' lodging house, and the only friends and advisers available to them there, its older and more experienced inmates.

Juvenile Offenders and the Increase of Crime

Everything shown here about the Tothill Fields boys' prison, and about juvenile offenders generally, points to a single conclusion: it is from exactly this class that our habitual criminals are drawn and continually replenished, supplying, year after year, roughly the same numbers to our courts and the same body of convicts to our prisons, with no real reduction in the country's underlying criminal stock. Those unfamiliar with the subject often reach for easy theories about the causes of crime, attributing to general circumstance what really belongs only to the more limited category of casual offending.

Making a regular living from crime requires, like any other trade, a genuine apprenticeship. A novice attempting to pick a pocket, break into a house, or pass counterfeit coin would be detected on his very

first attempt without proper training. The burglar needs “putters-up” to plan a job, companions to execute it, and “fences” to receive the proceeds; the coiner needs to know where to obtain his materials and how to pass his counterfeit “shoful” safely into circulation; the pickpocket needs “stalls” to provide cover and confederates to receive the stolen goods the instant they are lifted. One might as reasonably attempt to practise law without knowing the courts or the proper counsel to instruct, as attempt professional crime without this same accumulated trade knowledge — crime, in short, is every bit as much a business among us as manufacturing or commerce, which means its professional practitioners must be regularly bred and trained to the craft, precisely as any other tradesman is.

That juvenile offenders supply the main body of habitual adult criminals becomes clear enough on reflection. A disproportionate share of boy-prisoners are of Irish descent, and a considerable number of regular thieves describe themselves, even in their own trade slang, as Irish-Cockneys. We have already shown that most convicts fall between seventeen and twenty-five, and since a thief's working career runs, by the best estimate, some six years on average, it follows naturally that the juvenile offender simply grows up into the mature professional thief. Thieves themselves describe a typical working life as four months in prison to six months at liberty, during which the practised “mobsman” commits, by his own reckoning, some six robberies a day — fifty a week, whenever a race, a fair, a review, a flower-show, or some other crowd-drawing event offers opportunity — meaning a single regular hand may commit as many as a thousand offences for every one that leads to detection. Sustaining that rate of undetected crime demands long practice, detailed knowledge of police movements, and real manual skill — none of which is remotely compatible with any sudden, casual influx of untrained recruits into the criminal class.

Despite these plain facts, learned commentators periodically argue before scientific societies that fluctuations in the criminal population simply track the nation's general prosperity — that hard years produce more criminals, and years of plenty fewer. Such theorists, we would gently suggest, understand the actual people they are describing about as well as a geologist understands the living habits of the iguanodon.

They forget that a great deal of crime consists of acts of ferocity and malice — assault, attempted murder, manslaughter — that have nothing to do with food scarcity, and are, if anything, more closely tied to increased drinking; that a further category consists of offences of lust and indecency, similarly unrelated to economic hardship; and that a third consists of offences of "evil-speaking," such as perjury, equally unaffected by prosperity or want.

Only the property offences — larceny, sheep-stealing, embezzlement, forgery, and the like — might plausibly seem, at first glance, tied to economic distress. But even these consist mainly, on close analysis, of acts requiring exactly the kind of practised skill and organized support that cannot possibly be adopted on impulse, and that the great majority of their perpetrators practise as a genuine, ongoing trade rather than a response to sudden want — no more variable with the nation's prosperity than the number of clergymen, merchants, or engineers varies with it. Anyone wishing to test the point statistically need only compare, across a long run of years, the number of people committed for trial against the number of able-bodied paupers receiving relief, the truest available measure of genuine national distress; we have made exactly this comparison ourselves, and find no meaningful correlation between the two.

The error in such theories lies in treating all crime as a single phenomenon — theft in general — and in confusing habitual offenders with casual ones. The number of habitual criminals is governed almost entirely by the number of young offenders who annually graduate from juvenile delinquency into adult criminal careers, and by the number correspondingly removed through transportation or imprisonment; only a small, marginal number are ever added through simple bad association later in life. Casual crime, by contrast, genuinely does respond to economic pressure, since it arises from sudden temptation or need rather than settled habit. Taking the last twenty years together, the annual rate of all crime combined has averaged 15.7 offenders to every 10,000 people, of which some 12.8 belong to the habitual class and only 2.8 to the casual — and while the habitual rate fell slightly, from 13.1 per 10,000 in the decade ending 1843 to 12.5 in the decade ending 1853, and the casual rate fell similarly, from 3.0 to 2.7, these are hardly

figures suggesting that our various educational and reformatory efforts have made any very substantial impression on the underlying body of professional crime.

Sorting these same offences by underlying motive rather than legal category tells a similarly consistent story: of the 15.7 criminals per 10,000 people, some 12.89 are committed for offences of cupidity and temptation — theft, fraud, forgery, coining — of whom 11.57 belong to the habitual class and only 1.32 to the casual; a further 2.36 are charged with offences of ferocity and malice, split roughly evenly between habitual and casual offenders; and a much smaller remainder, 0.37 per 10,000, with offences of lust or indecency.

The only rational conclusion we can reach, after testing statistically nearly every theory yet proposed on this subject, is that the great mass of crime constitutes a genuine trade and profession among us — that the forms of dishonesty making up nearly four-fifths of the country's recorded offending are pursued by certain classes as regularly, and for the same reason, that honest people pursue honest trades. And we can find no better explanation for the persistence of so much habitual crime than the simple fact that its practitioners are born and bred to it from childhood. It is not only in our juvenile prisons that we see the future convicts of the country in embryo; it is in the State's continuing failure toward its own outcast and destitute children more broadly. However one turns the question, the conclusion seems inescapable that habitual crime is, at root, a consequence of inadequate paternal care and oversight in youth — borne out by the fact that nations enforcing universal education, so that children spend their days under the eye of a teacher and, ideally, a genuine guardian and friend, show measurably less crime than nations, our own included, that leave their poorest children to gamble and idle in the gutter alongside older loafers and thieves.

This, we believe, is the entire explanation for the lower crime rates recorded in Holland, Prussia, and even Catholic Belgium compared with our own — for while teaching reading and writing in prison proves nearly useless as a means of reform, particularly without also removing a young offender bodily from his old associates and temptations, a genuine national system of education would rescue destitute children from idleness and street corruption before crime

ever became habitual, keeping them instead in the company of those whose actual duty is to train them toward industry and virtue.

We say again, then, that we place little faith in prison teaching, or even reformatory schools, as a means of reducing the country's overall number of offenders. Habitual crime strikes us as being, in its confirmed form, about as genuinely curable as lockjaw or advanced consumption. The only real hope lies in preventing juvenile delinquency in the first place — and just as cholera itself, though a physical scourge, can be checked through proper ventilation and cleanliness once we finally attend to our neglected duty toward the dwellings of the poor, so habitual crime might fairly be regarded as a kind of moral pestilence, sent to rouse us, at last, to our long-neglected duty toward the wretched, effectively orphaned children our own negligence continues to set adrift.

CHAPTER XIV

The Female Prison at Tothill Fields

OF FEMALE CRIME GENERALLY

From the boys' prison at Westminster, we turn to the female side of the same institution, and to the broader subject of crime among women. Taken as a body, women are considerably less criminal than men: across a long run of years, only about one prisoner in five nationally is female, even though women make up rather more than half the general population — meaning that, if the sexes were equally disposed to crime, our courts ought to see more women than men rather than fewer. Could we obtain reliable figures on the number of prostitutes nationally, we suspect they would account for the great majority of female offenders, leaving crime almost unknown among chaste women.

There appears, in other words, to be essentially one great vice peculiar to women: prostitution. Just as theft offers the dishonestly inclined man an easy living, street-walking offers the same easy living to a woman disinclined toward honest labour but drawn toward an idle one — sparing her the more dangerous course of theft, since she has, in her own person, a readier commodity to trade on. The French investigator Parent-Duchâtelet showed, in his study of Parisian prostitution, that the great majority of the women concerned come from precisely those trades — domestic service, needlework, the theatre — that combine the hardest labour with the closest daily exposure to luxury and admiration they can never otherwise afford.

A second explanation lies in the nature of shame itself, which we take to be a learned rather than innate sentiment, cultivated by upbringing and circumstance rather than present from birth — much as conscience or aesthetic judgment develop only through training. Since women are generally raised with a keener cultivated sensitivity to public opinion and reputation than men, the deliberate abandonment of that sensitivity, which prostitution requires, tends to open the door to further offending in a way it does not for men, for whom shame was never so central a restraint to begin with. Just as

juvenile delinquency serves as the apprenticeship of the habitual male thief, prostitution serves as the entry point into habitual female crime generally.

The government's own criminal returns bear this pattern out to some degree. In 1853, England and Wales' gross prison population, both summarily convicted and tried at assizes, came to just under 100,000 — roughly 74,000 men and 24,500 women, or about 25 women to every 100 men. Yet Mr. Redgrave's returns, tracking this ratio across two decades, show it climbing steadily: from 18.8 women per 100 men in 1834 to 29.5 by the early 1850s. Female offending, in other words, though still much rarer than male offending overall, has been rising markedly even as the underlying population ratio between the sexes has stayed roughly constant.

Women convicted of crime cluster heavily in offences against property committed without violence — simple larceny, larceny by servants, receiving stolen goods — which in 1846 accounted for 88 percent of female committals against 77 percent of male ones; women also supply a disproportionate share of perjury cases and convictions for keeping disorderly houses, the former often committed to shield a thieving associate, the latter an occupational hazard of the trade itself. Looking across the full range of offence categories, Mr. Redgrave found the proportion of women to every hundred men ran to 13.4 in offences against the person (murder, manslaughter, assault, bigamy), a mere 7.7 in offences against property committed with violence (burglary, highway robbery), a striking 28.6 in the same offences committed without violence (simple larceny, embezzlement, receiving), only 5.1 in malicious property offences such as arson, a further 23.1 in forgery and currency offences, and just under 20 in the miscellaneous category covering perjury, riot, and disorderly houses. In offences of outright violence against property, women make up barely one in thirteen of those convicted; but in murder, the picture is starkly different and worsening. Female murder convictions ran at just 42 per 100 male convictions in the late 1830s, climbing to 57 per 100 in the early 1840s and 78 per 100 by the late 1840s; taken year by year, the ratio reached 89 per 100 in 1847 and 124 per 100 in 1851 — meaning that in that single year, more women than men were actually

convicted of murder in England and Wales, even as the male murder rate held broadly steady or declined over the same period.

Geographically, female offending runs highest in the mining and manufacturing counties — Cumberland at 27.99 percent of all prisoners, Lancashire at 26.42, South Wales at 25.86, Northumberland at 24.70, Monmouth at 24.84, Devon at 24.46 — and in Middlesex, at 24.33 percent, home to the greatest concentration of prostitutes in the country; it runs lowest in the quieter agricultural midlands — Buckinghamshire at just 8.12 percent, Hertfordshire at 9.49, Essex at 11.43, Bedfordshire at 11.63, and Derbyshire at 12.23, against a national average of 20.18. Mr. Redgrave attempted to connect this pattern to the kind of labour available to women in each district, noting that female offending runs highest, outside London, in exactly those counties where women are employed in the roughest and least feminine trades — the mining districts of South Wales, for instance, saw their female committal rate climb from 29.4 percent in 1843 to 36.9 percent in 1847, and the northern mining counties from 29.1 to 33.6 over the same years. We are inclined, ourselves, to trace the same pattern instead to the prevailing standard of female chastity in each district, since precisely those same counties known for loose courting customs — "bundling" and its local variants — also show the highest concentrations of prostitutes, and we suspect that wherever prostitution runs highest, female criminality of every other kind tends to follow it rather than the reverse.

Female offenders begin their criminal careers considerably later than male ones — girls under twelve make up barely a fraction of female prisoners, against nearly one percent of male prisoners at the same age, a gap that persists at every age bracket up to seventeen, likely reflecting both closer parental supervision of girls in early childhood and the fact that so much female offending begins only once prostitution itself begins, generally well after puberty. Female prisoners are also markedly less educated than male ones: more than 70 percent cannot write, against a little over half of male prisoners.

London itself supplies a strikingly disproportionate share of the nation's female crime: of some 43,000 prisoners passing annually through the capital's prisons of every kind, over 12,000 are women — 28.5 per 100 prisoners of both sexes, some five points above the

national average — and London alone accounts for more than a tenth of the entire country's prison population. Only 6 percent of these London women are juveniles, against 19 percent of London's male prisoners, confirming again how much later women generally begin their criminal careers. We have set out this evidence at some length, both statistical and observed, because no honest account of Tothill Fields' female prison can proceed sensibly without first understanding the broader pattern of female offending it exists to address — a pattern markedly different in its causes, its timing, and its typical progression from the corresponding pattern among men, and one that, in our view, the prison system has been slow to adapt its own methods to reflect.

The single most striking feature of London's female prisoners is a certain settled shamelessness, a hardness of manner entirely unlike the instinctive self-consciousness most women show under any hint of public disapproval. Whether shame is truly natural to women, or merely a cultivated social habit that some women, through upbringing or circumstance, never develop at all, we believe the evidence points firmly to the latter: many of the women we encountered in London's female wards appeared never to have had the sentiment cultivated in them in the first place, while others, initially possessed of it, had been so thoroughly hardened by repeated scorn and reproof that no trace of it now remained.

And yet these same hardened women remain capable, we found, of a genuinely striking devotion to those they love — most often some disreputable man, a prize-fighter, cab-driver, soldier, or thief, for whom they will endure almost any cruelty or indignity, so that he might go on living, however meagrely, off their earnings and their shame. We once puzzled a good deal over what such women could possibly find admirable in the men they attach themselves to, expecting perhaps some appeal to personal good looks; but we found, on closer study, that most such women feel something close to contempt for men who make a display of their own appearance, and that neither honour, generosity, nor gentleness figures at all in their reckoning, since the men in question are, almost without exception, coarse, selfish, idle, and often outright brutal toward the very women who keep them. What such women prize, we

concluded, is simply power and courage — raw physical strength or a reputation for daring — which is precisely why so many "fancy men," as the trade calls them, are drawn from prize-fighting, soldiering, cab-driving, or thieving: trades that advertise exactly those two qualities and nothing else. We suspect this attachment has less to do with any personal charm in the men themselves than with sheer isolation: a woman who has lost every other relation and friend, cast off even by her own family, naturally seizes upon the one person in the world who still, however cynically, appears to want her.

A further, well-documented peculiarity of female prisoners is a tendency toward sudden, extreme, and apparently causeless fits of temper — violent enough that canvas dresses and straitjackets, along with perforated iron window-screens and shelving, are standard fittings in the female wards at Brixton and Millbank alike, and female prisoners' language during such fits is, by universal report, considerably coarser than a man's under similar provocation. Some women subject to these fits will, curiously, ask on their own initiative to be locked in a separate cell the moment they feel a fit coming on, evidently aware enough of their own condition to want to spare themselves and others its consequences. We suspect two causes at work: a genuine physiological factor, closely related to female insanity generally, of exactly the kind the physician Esquirol documented in his own study of madness among women; and the same underlying want of developed shame already discussed — since a woman left without that ordinary restraint on her feelings is, in the moment of passion, effectively reduced to an animal state, with nothing left internally to check the impulse once it arises.

The Interior of the Female Prison

We have already described how, in 1850, the Middlesex magistrates restricted Tothill Fields to convicted women and boys under seventeen, transferring adult men to Coldbath Fields — a change that let the county manage both establishments with twenty fewer officers, saving £1,719 annually in salaries. The female prison itself occupies two semicircular wings, styled B and C — B

behind the governor's house toward Victoria Street, C facing the river and the boys' prison. At the time of our visit, 611 women were housed across both wings: 337 on the B side, 274 on the C side, with 128 and 176 respectively sleeping in separate cells, and the remainder — 161 women in all, more than a quarter of the total — crowded into shared dormitories.

Officially, the female wing is certified to hold 600 prisoners at most, with separate cell accommodation for only 351; and yet on the night before our visit, the maximum was already exceeded, with fully 40 percent of the female population sleeping in common dormitories — an arrangement sharing every objectionable feature of the convict Hulks, without even the excuse of genuine shipboard necessity. Nor was this an isolated overcrowding: the prison's own returns show a maximum single-day population of 676 women during the year ending Michaelmas 1855, with a daily average of exactly 600 — precisely the point of official maximum capacity, meaning the prison ran at or beyond its certified limit for a substantial part of the year. The gross female population for that year, including women already in custody at its start, came to 5,982, of whom 279, or 4.6 percent, were under seventeen.

We have already noted the unusually high sickness rate among Tothill Fields' female prisoners — 50.4 percent in 1853, against 30.4 percent for female prisoners nationally — and the correspondingly excessive rate of punishment, running to 38 percent of the female population against a national average for women of little more than 23 percent. The female cells share every defect already described in the boys' wing: inadequate ventilation, no heating, and no lighting through the long winter evenings, when the women are locked in cold darkness for more than twelve hours out of the twenty-four, ostensibly to prevent conversation between neighbouring cells, though we were assured this proves as impossible to enforce here as everywhere else once the night patrol has passed.

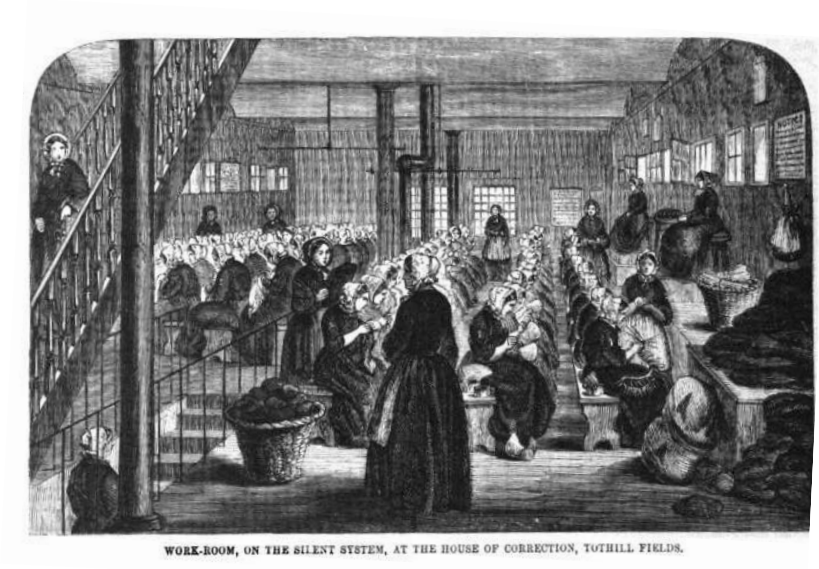
Punishment here, the magistrates explained further in their reply, arises chiefly from three sources: ordinary violations of the silent associated system's rules, which have no equivalent under the separate system practised elsewhere; the generally more violent

conduct of prisoners serving short terms; and the disproportionately large number of frequent, almost constant, repeat offenders the prison receives, who remain nearly always under some form of punishment however consistently the authorities attempt to reform them.

In fairness, we should note the response the Middlesex magistrates sent us after our earlier remarks on this subject were first published: the Westminster prison, they explained, was considered a model establishment when first built, but experience has since shown its cells cannot be properly warmed and ventilated except at prohibitive cost — a difficulty the visiting justices have repeatedly considered without finding an affordable remedy, until settling at last on building an entirely new wing on the Pentonville model, with properly certified cells, at an estimated cost of £11,000, with work expected to begin within days of our correspondence and the whole prison eventually to be remodelled on the same improved plan. As to the excessive sickness and punishment rates, the magistrates attributed the former partly to complaints peculiar to women and partly to the poor physical condition — from drink, dissipation, or simple starvation — in which many women arrive; and the latter to the demands of the silent associated system itself, compounded by the unusually high proportion of short-term and habitual repeat offenders the prison receives.

We would only observe, in response, that comparing Tothill Fields' female sickness rate against the sickness rate of female prisoners specifically, nationally, already accounts for whatever complaints are peculiar to women as a sex — so that explanation cannot itself account for the excess. Nor can the demands of the silent system alone explain the excessive punishment, since that same system operates in the majority of English and Welsh prisons against which the comparison was drawn; either discipline elsewhere is unusually lax, or discipline at Tothill Fields runs to something closer to unnecessary harshness.

The Schoolroom, the Girls, and the Nursery



WORK-ROOM, ON THE SILENT SYSTEM, AT THE HOUSE OF CORRECTION, TOTHILL FIELDS.

Work-room, on the silent system, at the House of Correction, Tothill Fields.

Two schoolrooms serve the female prison: one for women, in C8, one for girls, in B8. The women's schoolroom differs little from the boys' — the same sloping, pierced desks, the same scripture-text walls. Some 122 women attend across five daily classes, all nominally under twenty-four, “though we take any above that age the chaplain may please to send,” the teacher told us, alongside a separate Bible-class open to any age, its oldest current member forty-six. Any woman may request schooling, and many do — “it's a great relief to the prison life, and they know they're learning something,” as our informant put it. Nineteen women were present at our visit, rising and curtseying at the teacher's word; not one showed the least embarrassment, and several grinned openly as we passed along the rows. Asked to demonstrate her scholars' progress, the teacher had one woman read from a Bible she held, the reading proving so halting that the teacher had to reassure us the woman had genuinely learned her letters here in the prison.

The girls' schoolroom is a far more affecting scene. Some of its pupils are so young that it becomes genuinely painful to see them in prison dress, their faces already carrying an unchildlike boldness quite

at odds with their years. A blackboard over the mantelpiece read simply, "PRISONERS ARE NOT TO SPEAK TO EACH OTHER," beside the official notice of rewards for good conduct; a table nearby held samplers and patchwork needlework the girls had made. Some sixteen children occupied the room's forms on the day of our visit, dressed in blue-and-white spotted cotton frocks and deep-frilled caps, most working strips of straw plait between their fingers even as they stared up at us. A fair-haired little boy clung to the matron's skirts at the sight of a stranger — "he's the son of one of the prisoners, sir," the matron told us; his mother, serving four years' penal servitude, had been refused at Millbank for want of a nursery there, and the boy had lived at Tothill Fields with her for two years, coming daily to learn his letters and prayers. We could not help imagining his likely path forward — the same masked convict ranks at Pentonville, the same quarries and dockyards, the same unmarked convict burial ground eventually — a small, undeserving inheritor of a fate not remotely his own doing.

The youngest scholar present, eight years old, had not known her letters on arrival. Asked what had brought her to prison, she answered simply, "Stealing a pair of boots," taken with her brother because, in her own words, "'cause I hadn't got none of my own." She was serving three months. It struck us, watching her, that magistrates who brand so small a child a thief show roughly the same combination of severity and misjudgment as those who once tried corpses for heresy or condemned dogs as witches — the real offenders in such cases being surely the parents who let their children run wild in the streets, not infants the law itself considers incapable of forming genuine criminal intent.

A ten-year-old rose next, scarcely taller than the first; then several twelve-year-olds, one of them wearing three red good-conduct stars, who answered our questions with a genuine, almost startling shame — lowering her eyelids as she answered — "bad money, sir — aunt gave it me, please sir, I was along with her when I took it." Another, chubby-cheeked and grinning, answered simply, "pickpocketing, please sir"; a companion charged alongside her, we were told, had since been removed from the schoolroom for bad behaviour, and had, according to the first girl, actually committed the theft herself before

passing the stolen item along. A red-headed, freckle-faced girl had already served six months here once before, and was now serving twelve for stealing from the very reformatory school to which her first sentence had sent her — "I ran away, for I didn't want to stop there," she told us; "I did it because they didn't give me enough to eat. It was a Refuge, I think they call it, in St. Giles's." Her stepmother, the matron added quietly, was not kind to her, which seemed, by everyone's unspoken agreement, to explain a good deal of the rest.

The schoolmistress showed us copy-books with evident pride, one page entirely filled with a single repeated line — "Have peace with all men" — written, she told us, by a girl who had never held a pen before arriving here a few weeks earlier.

The prison nursery, in No. 4 building on the C side, beneath the straw-plait room, held some ten iron bedsteads the day of our visit, mothers seated at the bed corners dancing, bouncing, or tickling their infants amid a constant hum of prattling and laughter. Thirty-three children were then in the prison — three under six months, twelve between six months and a year, the rest between one and two, save for a single four-year-old whose mother had already served two years. "Sometimes the mothers wish to send their children out again, but that's rare," the matron told us; "I don't think they're different from other women in their feelings for their children, though one here" — she indicated a gloomy, morose-looking prisoner scarcely acknowledging the smiling infant in her own lap — "treated hers so badly we had to take it from her." Mothers pick a pound and a half of oakum daily once their children pass eight months old, working in the ordinary workroom while other nursery mothers mind the infants left behind — "they're very good and patient with one another's children," the matron added; "we seldom have to punish anyone here."

We had been told the nursery ran on the silent system, and feared, given everything else we had seen of that system's more absurd extremes, that even mothers might be forbidden to speak to their own infants. We are glad to report we were wrong: the enjoined silence applies only to communication between the women themselves; mothers speak and play freely with their own children, and the children with each other, and we could find nothing in the arrangement here that any fair-minded visitor could object to — a

portion of the prison run, so far as we could see, with real and consistent kindness toward both the women and the innocent infants confined within it.

It is, we confess, hard to witness this room without real feeling — the small, prattling, unknowing victims of a fate entirely of adult making, and the mothers' evident, aching awareness of exactly what that fate is likely to hold. A moment's reflection amid such scenes is enough to move even the hardest observer: the innocent babbling and small antics of these felon-infants would surely stir a pang of sympathy in anyone, however hardened, and the sight of these wretched mothers fondling their children, as though they were the one bright thing left in an otherwise black and comfortless world, is not easily forgotten. For ourselves, we do not mind admitting that the scene affected us more than any drama we have witnessed on a stage — for if the sheer wretchedness of these children's start in life could move a stranger with no more than ordinary human feeling to connect him to their fate, how much more must it wound the very mothers who wished, presumably, for their children's lives to be happier than their own, only to watch them begin instead under a shadow that seems almost too heavy to lift.

Nor is it mere sentiment that leads us to think the nursery mothers a somewhat better class of woman than the general run of prisoners here: we found none of the brazen defiance so common elsewhere in the same building, only a settled gravity and sadness that inspired something closer to pity than to the contempt so many other prisoners provoke — a fact perhaps unsurprising, since motherhood itself is proof enough that these are not women entirely without feeling, whatever their crimes; it seems a curious mercy of nature, in fact, that women capable of total shamelessness and complete indifference to others are so rarely mothers at all, so that the presence of these children is itself a kind of evidence that some capacity for genuine attachment survives in even the most degraded of the women who bore them. One woman we watched, dabbing at her infant's mouth to make it babble again, did so with a gravity that seemed almost mournful rather than playful; another, nursing her child, watched it with an intensity that suggested some deep and unresolved conflict of

feeling passing behind her eyes even as the infant nestled contentedly against her side.

As we stood taking notes, the same fair-haired boy we had met earlier in the girls' schoolroom wandered over and looked up into our face, wondering, evidently, what business we had there — his bright eyes fixing on ours much as the pale, stunted convict-flower we have described elsewhere in this book seems to shine, faintly and improbably, among the withered and hardened company that otherwise surrounds it.

Female Labour and the Clothes Store

Little needs saying about the labour performed here: no tread-wheel, crank, or pump-work survives at the Westminster House of Correction, nor any of the harsher, more punishing forms of labour once imposed on women in English prisons. The work here — needlework, straw-plaiting, and similar occupations — has nothing harsh or unfeminine about it, though it remains, like the boys' labour, essentially unprofitable: average earnings run to £1 15s. 9¼d. per woman annually, against an annual maintenance and clothing cost of £9 7s. 10½d. and a further £9 15s. in supervision costs — meaning each woman confined here costs the county close to £20 a year while earning less than £2 of it back. Mr. Charles Pearson demonstrated to a Parliamentary Committee that a thousand prisoners properly employed on a thousand acres of land could be rendered entirely self-supporting; but so long as our correctional prisons stand crowded into city centres, with no ground to till, some such loss seems unavoidable.

The most memorable part of our visit to the female side, though, was the store where prisoners' own clothes are kept until their release — a room organized, in effect, around each woman's bonnet, since the matron in charge identified every prisoner in her care as readily by her headwear as by her name, much as Dickens's Sam Weller once catalogued the guests of the White Hart Inn by their boots and shoes rather than their faces. “We haven't many smart bonnets in now, sir,” our guide told us, walking us past the long-term store's square compartments, each holding a woman's clothes rolled into a bundle with her bonnet set on top. “This silk and blond, trimmed with ruches and roses and geraniums inside, is in for pickpocketing. This purple

velvet one, with feathers at the side, has got twelve months for shoplifting. Here's a fancy Tuscan straw, quite fashionable though dirty inside the ruches — that's got six months for the same. Yes, sir, the grandest ones that come here are mostly for stealing in shops."

She moved to another compartment. "Here's a grand Leghorn, with a fall of bugles in front — that's a play-actress, in for four months for stabbing her husband. This next one was a very pretty thing once — horsehair, with green trimming, eight months for passing bad money. Here's one of the common willow bonnets, trimmed with flowers — that's for illegally pawning, I think; and this flattened old faded plush, I honestly can't say what for. Oh yes, we've a good many shabby ones too."

In the short-term room, holding the belongings of women sentenced to less than three months, the same inventory continued. "This grand pink and white silk, with cherry-coloured ribbons and blond and flowers, is in for a fortnight." "What for?" we asked. "Streets," came the laconic answer. "Just see how greasy and dirty it is at the back, sir — from being worn half off the shoulder. Here's another grand yellow silk affair, all grubby inside, with a piece of net for the crown to save the silk — there's deception for you, same as in everything nowadays. That's the streets again, same term." An old faded straw bonnet, half in shreds, its crown-plait hanging loose like an apple-paring, was down, the matron thought, for begging or sleeping in the open air, she couldn't quite recall which; and a ragged, rusty black crape bonnet was, by her account, a regular visitor of some five years' standing, generally in for drunkenness, this time for breaking a lamp. "I do believe I've known that one the last five years," she added, turning it over almost affectionately. "Oh yes, sir, they're all fumigated before we put them away," she went on, "or we'd be swarming, finery or no finery — though the sulphur often takes the colour out, so the women sometimes hardly know their own things again. But we're as careful with them as we can be, for the poor creatures, since very few we see here own anything more than what they stand up in, and it would be a hard thing indeed to spoil what little they have."

It struck us, leaving that store room behind, that few single details of our entire tour through London's prisons captured quite so much of

their occupants' condition as this simple inventory of borrowed finery and threadbare rags, each bonnet standing in, as plainly as any written record, for the small vanity, the petty crime, and the general wretchedness of the woman who had once worn it — an entire social history of the female prisoner, in effect, catalogued one hat at a time.

CHAPTER XV

The Surrey House of Correction, Wandsworth

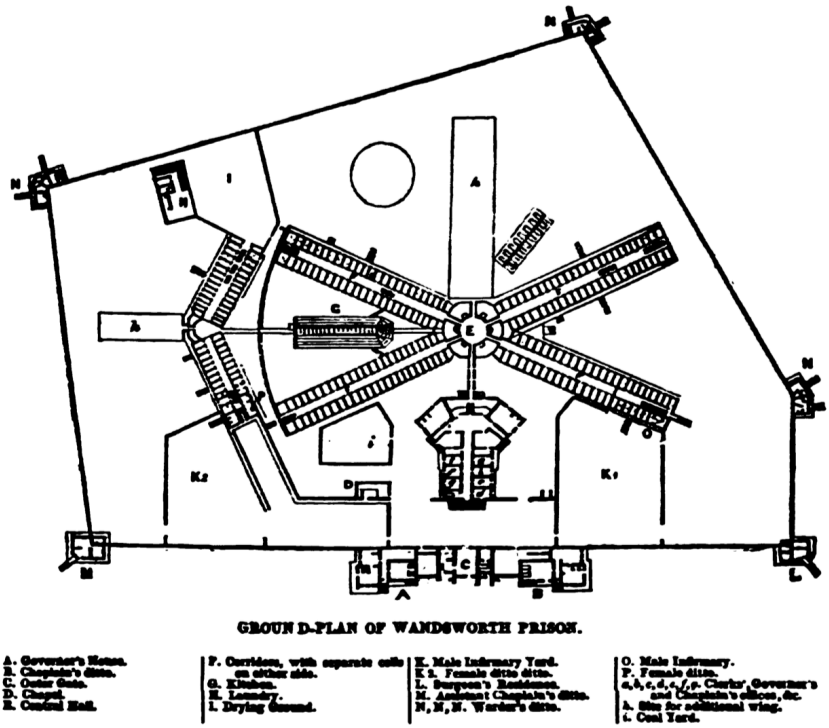
APPROACHING WANDSWORTH

Climbing a tropical mountain, a traveller passes in a few hours through every climate the earth has to offer, the vegetation shifting belt by belt from the brilliant flowers of the lowlands to the bare rock of the summit. A half-hour's run out of London on the Southampton railway offers a strikingly similar journey in miniature. No sooner has the train crossed the viaduct above the Westminster Road than it plunges into the manufacturing belt of Lambeth — a district identifiable by smell alone, one chemical stench succeeding another: gutta-percha here, floor-cloth there, bone-boiling, potteries, tanning, gasworks, soap- and candle-factories, each announcing itself in turn like the layered fumes of some vast industrial incense. The view keeps pace with the smell: the dome of Bethlem, the towers of Lambeth Palace, the potteries' kilns like giant brick skittles, the gasworks' black iron drums, the desolate rotunda of the old Vauxhall Gardens, and Price's great candle-works, all flitting past before the old Nine Elms station gives way at last to open fields, market gardens, and modest suburban villas. A short tunnel, a shrill whistle, and the porters' cry of “Clapham Common!” brings the traveller to open country that, twenty minutes before, was solid brick and pavement.

The Surrey House of Correction itself has little to recommend it architecturally. It lacks Newgate's gloomy solemnity, Holloway's castellated grandeur, Tothill Fields' massive simplicity, and Pentonville's noble portcullis gateway alike; its outbuildings show all the awkward pretension of a Cockney Italian villa and none of the severity proper to a penal building, and the heavy, ungainly central mass rising behind its stunted gateway gives the whole structure something of the look of an uninspired Methodist college. Its situation, though, is admirably chosen: built on gravelly, well-drained soil, on an open tract of country too large and airy for any epidemic to take real hold, the prison commands a view for miles around — the Crystal Palace glinting like a golden bubble in the distance, the

Victoria Tower rising with real grace from the grey haze of London's smoke. Aside from the Freemasons' Female School nearby, a small tea-garden, and a single roadside public house, nothing about the surrounding common suggests the nearness of the capital at all, save the occasional distant rumble of a train passing unseen along a cutting below the level of the common itself.

HISTORY OF HOUSES OF CORRECTION, AND OF WANDSWORTH ITSELF



Ground-plan of Wandsworth Prison.

The Building Committee appointed to oversee Wandsworth's construction prefaced their final report with a concise history of houses of correction generally, which we cannot do better than summarize here. The earliest statutes against vagrancy, passed under Richard III and Henry VII, required magistrates simply to bind idlers and vagabonds over for good behaviour, committing them to the

common jail only if they reoffended or could not find surety. Henry VIII's reign brought harsher measures: an Act of 1531 ordered vagrants whipped and returned to their birthplace; a further Act of 1536 prescribed ear-cropping for a second offence and death as a felon for a third. Edward VI's government briefly experimented with branding and outright enslavement for persistent vagrancy, a measure so severe it was repealed within two years. Elizabeth's reign brought the more lasting innovations: an Act of 1572 first authorized committal to "some other place" beyond the ordinary jail, explicitly because the common jails were already "greatly pestered" with prisoners; and a further Act of 1576 first used the term "Houses of Correction" for these dedicated new establishments, directing magistrates to fund and build one in every county within two years. Later statutes under James I made such houses compulsory everywhere, fining any county that failed to provide one £5 for every year of delay.

For more than a century afterward, little further progress was made; prison administration generally fell into neglect until John Howard's famous investigations, beginning in 1773, exposed conditions of filth, extortion, and indiscriminate mixing of every class of prisoner in jails and houses of correction alike. Howard's advocacy produced a rapid sequence of reforming statutes — clergymen required in every jail, fees to jailers abolished for acquitted prisoners, cleanliness and ventilation mandated, and, by an Act of 1784, a requirement that houses of correction specifically provide separate accommodation for those held on felony charges or sentenced to hard labour, to prevent their contaminating other prisoners. These reforms mark, in the Committee's own words, the beginning of a genuinely new era in the management of houses of correction, an era of continued experimentation — the tread-wheel's introduction, ever-finer classification of prisoners, the silent system — whose results, by common agreement, remained unsatisfactory even as the century wore on.

The Surrey magistrates had not been idle in this period. Having built Horsemonger Lane jail under a private Act of 1791, they built further houses of correction at Brixton and Guildford shortly after the tread-wheel's invention, to the best architectural standards then

known. But by 1845, with public attention turning toward Pentonville's new separate system, a committee of magistrates convened to examine whether Surrey's own prisons might adopt it, and concluded the following year that none of the county's existing buildings could be converted without complete reconstruction — prisons that, they found, already fell short both of the prison inspectors' recommendations and, in places, of the strict letter of the law.

The matter came to a head later that same year, when Brixton's own surgeon reported a severe winter fever spreading through the prison, worsened by chronic overcrowding — cells built for one regularly holding three or four, three of them squeezed into a space just three feet nine inches wide. A twenty-two-member committee, appointed to find the county adequate accommodation, reported a deficiency of no fewer than 440 cells county-wide, worsened to 500 once the outdated Kingston prison was abandoned as recommended. At Brixton alone, seventy cells built for one routinely held three, two mattresses laid together on the floor for want of proper beds, a condition affecting male and female prisoners alike; matters at Guildford were scarcely better. The committee's conclusion was blunt: the county's existing prisons could not be extended to meet the need, and an entirely new prison, built to hold 750 and capable of further extension, should be erected on a fresh site, with Kingston, Brixton, and Guildford all to be abandoned once it opened — a single large establishment being, they calculated, considerably cheaper to staff and maintain than several smaller ones.

By the time this report reached the Surrey magistrates in March 1847, conditions at Brixton had deteriorated further still: three and sometimes four prisoners to a cell, twenty to forty more sleeping on straw in the schoolroom, twenty prisoners pardoned early simply to relieve the overcrowding, and a coroner's jury, sitting on the death of a prisoner as the law required, formally requesting that the sheer scale of overcrowding be brought to the visiting justices' attention before a genuine epidemic broke out. Faced with a situation so plainly incompatible with the law's own requirement that every prisoner have a separate bed, the magistrates resolved without further delay to build

a new house of correction for 700, and reappointed the same committee to see it built.

Building the New Prison, and the Question of the Chapel

The Committee resolved that the new prison should stand within a mile of a railway station, and no more than six or eight miles from London — close enough to keep transport and supply costs manageable, however much a more distant site might have saved on land. At the Midsummer Sessions of 1847, they recommended purchasing the site on which the prison now stands, some 26 acres at £300 per acre, plus a further 8 acres in front at £350, held under covenant that nothing but a lodge should ever be built on it — protecting the prison from encroachment on three sides at once. That autumn, the Committee formally recommended adopting the separate system for the new prison, a recommendation the full court approved, and appointed Mr. D. R. Hill of Birmingham as architect, with plans complete for 708 prisoners on the separate plan, expandable to 1,000 without disturbing the original buildings' uniformity. Construction began in the spring of 1849; the prison opened to male prisoners in November 1851, and to female prisoners the following April.

One unexpected dispute arose during construction, over how the chapel itself should be fitted. The contracted design matched Pentonville's own arrangement of individual enclosed stalls — but several prison inspectors had by then raised serious objections to this design, on four grounds: that neighbouring prisoners, unless very closely watched, could pass written notes to each other under the partitions; that removing several prisoners at once to reach one seated further back caused real disorder; that moving female prisoners and their officers in and out of the chapel without being seen by the men proved genuinely difficult; and that some chaplains preferred, as a matter of principle, to conduct a more visibly communal form of worship. Against these objections, the Building Committee weighed a countervailing concern: that removing the partitions altogether would abandon the separate system's central principle — that prisoners should remain, so far as possible, unknown to one another — and

would strain the officers' ability to supervise a chapel full of prisoners no longer separated even nominally.

The Committee's eventual solution kept most of the original stalls but modified their arrangement so that any individual prisoner could be reached without disturbing his neighbours, effectively closing off the note-passing risk, and added a dedicated screen along one side of the chapel so that female prisoners could enter and leave entirely unseen by the men. Three of the four original objections were thus resolved without abandoning the separate system's underlying principle; as to the fourth, the Committee acknowledged real and sincere disagreement among the clergy on the merits of communal versus separate worship, but concluded they would rather see the separate principle tested further before conceding any part of it on that basis alone.

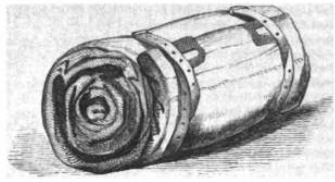
On the closely related question of hard labour, the Committee reached a firm and, as it turned out, historically significant conclusion: that the tread-wheel was unsuited to a prison built on the separate system, being both expensive and incapable of occupying an individual prisoner within his own cell, and that some form of hard-labour machine, worked entirely within the cell itself, should be adopted instead — "provided such machines, unexceptionable in their construction, can be procured." Accordingly, the Committee purchased one hundred labour machines, which have since answered the purpose intended: every prisoner sentenced to hard labour and passed fit by the surgeon is set to one of these machines on arrival, required to complete some 15,000 revolutions daily for a period ranging from one month to the full length of his sentence, after which, space permitting, he is generally transferred to the pumps for a further limited period, and then to garden work, oakum-picking, or a trade. Male prisoners not sentenced to hard labour work instead at gardening, carpentry, tailoring, shoemaking, mat-making, bricklaying, smith's work, netting, painting, and cleaning; female prisoners work exclusively in the wash-house and laundry, picking coir, at needlework, or cleaning — no proper provision, the Committee admitted candidly, having yet been made for enforcing hard-labour sentences among women at all, beyond washing itself.

On the separate system's own merits, the Committee offered a genuinely balanced judgment. Prisons of any kind, they conceded, can make little permanent impression on hardened criminals born and raised to that life, who have no real prospect open to them on discharge beyond returning to their old company; but the majority of prisoners are not so far gone — many retain friends genuinely anxious to help them, and have fallen into crime through a single unguarded moment or a bad companion rather than any settled criminal character, and on this larger group the discipline of separate confinement, together with the chaplain's counsel and the general solemnity of imprisonment, might reasonably be expected to have real and lasting benefit. The Committee stressed, too, that the separate system properly understood is not solitude or silence for their own sake, but simply the separation of prisoners from one another; a prisoner under this system has frequent, regular contact with the governor, chaplain, surgeon, schoolmaster, and taskmaster, and the old charge that associated discipline corrupts more than it reforms has, the Committee believed, no application here at all. They closed by regretting that no distinct provision yet existed for juvenile offenders specifically, whose numbers, they noted with some alarm, were increasing even as the overall prison population fell, and urged Parliament to take up the matter before longer delay allowed still more young offenders to graduate into the ranks of mature criminals.

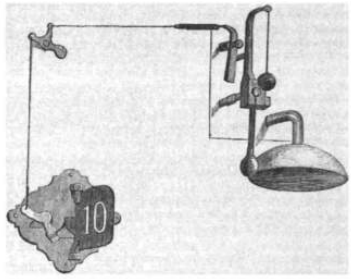
On the day of our final visit, the prison held 830 prisoners in total — 640 men and 190 women — distributed across five male wings, styled A through E, and three female wings, F through H.

The Interior: Reception and the Cells

Admitted at the outer gate by a tall, silver-headed porter, we passed through a neat little lodge furnished with a desk, several chairs, and a small letter-box for post from officers and prisoners alike — a Bible resting on the mantelpiece, which struck us, on our way in, as a fitting emblem of the establishment we were about to see. The chief warder, a man of mature years and evident energy who had served the prison for a decade, guided us throughout; his uniform, distinguished by lace at the collar, wrist, and back, marked his seniority among the ordinary officers.



PRISONER'S MATTRASS, WANDSWORTH.



CELL INDICATOR, WANDSWORTH.

Prisoner's mattress, and cell indicator, Wandsworth.

On a side table lay several folio volumes of the “Prisoners' Letter and Visit Book,” complete with indices; the chief warder explained that whenever a prisoner's friends apply to visit, the porter first checks this book to confirm the visit is actually due, since relatives are admitted only at fixed intervals, and sends word to the governor's clerk to prepare the necessary papers. Letters follow much the same path: the porter marks each one “due” or “not due” against the same register, forwards due letters to the governor and then the chaplain for examination before delivery, and holds back any not yet due for a later occasion — all of them released to the prisoner in full, whatever their status, on the day of his final discharge. Money enclosed in such letters is credited to the prisoner's own account, sometimes specifically to fund his journey home on release; where a discharged prisoner is under twenty-one, his friends are notified by circular of the exact date, and asked to be at the gate to meet him.

Beyond the outer lodge, an inner porter's lodge — staffed, we learned, by a Crimean veteran of the Light Brigade's charge at Balaclava, a powerfully built man who looked, if anything, better suited to the heavy cavalry than the light — held a large oak cupboard

containing every key to the prison's interior, systematically arranged and handed over each morning by the governor to the chief warder, who redistributes them among the day's officers; a separate, smaller tin box within the same cupboard held only the master keys to the outer doors, cell doors, and mortice locks, reserved to the governor, surgeon, chaplain, and chief warder alone. A deal table in this same lodge serves for discharging male prisoners: brought down from their cells and ranged before the governor at this very table, they are examined and formally released from here before ever reaching the outer gate. A separate visitors' book, kept nearby, records the name and address of every person admitted to view the prison, together with a column reserved specifically for any observations they might wish to record about its arrangements.

Passing through the central hall — a lofty, hexagonal space, its dome supported on iron girders, five long corridors radiating outward like the spokes of a half-opened fan — we found the air remarkably clear and fresh, no different, it seemed to us, from the open meadows surrounding the prison walls. Masked prisoners in dark grey moved along the corridors on cleaning duty, their eyes flickering toward us through the eyelet-holes of their masks exactly as at Pentonville, while files of prisoners, boys and grown men together, moved along the galleries toward chapel, hands crossed behind their backs, several feet apart, under a handful of watching warders — some tripping along with the light, active step of boyhood, others more advanced in years, a few noticeably thin, one or two distinctly stout, but all moving with the same measured, downcast gait. At the centre of the hall, a great hexagonal stone slab, ringed by a broad band of perforated iron flooring, lights and ventilates the storerooms directly beneath; a square cavity in one wall, fitted with simple hoisting machinery, carries the day's provisions up from the kitchen below to whichever gallery requires them.

The reception ward occupies the basement beneath this central hall: sixteen cells, each nine feet high at the crown of its arched roof, five feet two inches wide, and nearly sixteen feet long, ventilated through an opening above the door and a further air-passage beneath the floor, the whole system fed by hot-water pipes distributing warmed air along the corridor and drawing foul air out through a

dedicated flue in every cell, connected to a single trunk shaft rising through the roof of the building — the same tall ventilating shaft visible, on a clear day, from some distance across the surrounding common. Each cell holds a covered night-utensil doubling as a seat, a small water-box shielding the tap from tampering, and a copper wash-basin; a circular inspection-plate in the door lets an officer observe the prisoner without entering, and a small hinged metal plate outside each door, thrown open by the prisoner's own bell-pull and left open until an officer resets it, signals exactly which cell has rung.

The reception room itself, some twenty-one feet square, holds a large desk for recording each new prisoner's full description — age, education, religion, trade, birthplace, family circumstances — alongside a locked drawer for whatever personal effects a prisoner carries in on arrival: tobacco boxes, penknives, purses, watches, pawn tickets, breast-pins, each carefully entered in the prisoner's property book and returned intact on discharge. The adjoining clothing-store, its walls lined with numbered wooden racks, held bundle after bundle of prisoners' own clothes awaiting their eventual release — the scene, we could not help thinking, not unlike a broker's shop in Rosemary Lane, though considerably cleaner and more carefully arranged, every bundle numbered and shelved in strict sequence. Our guide walked us past several bundles by number: an Italian claiming to work as an interpreter, evidently better educated and better dressed than most — a good black surtout coat, a light fancy waistcoat, a clean white ironed shirt, drab trousers in good condition — in for indecent conduct; a crippled, middle-aged tailor with a wooden leg, serving three weeks for breaking a pane of glass, his bundle a light jean coat, a shepherd's plaid waistcoat, and invisible-green trousers striped down the side with dark braid; a dwarf of thirty-five, barely four feet five inches tall, a familiar face at this and other London prisons according to the chief warder, his clothes so thoroughly reduced to rags that they could scarcely have covered him at all, no hat and no soles left to his shoes; and a deaf and dumb vagrant, in for seven days under the Vagrant Act, his corduroy trousers, light-brown coat, and wide-awake hat all, in the chief warder's own words, “in a filthy and disgusting condition.” Every bundle is fumigated over brimstone for twelve to

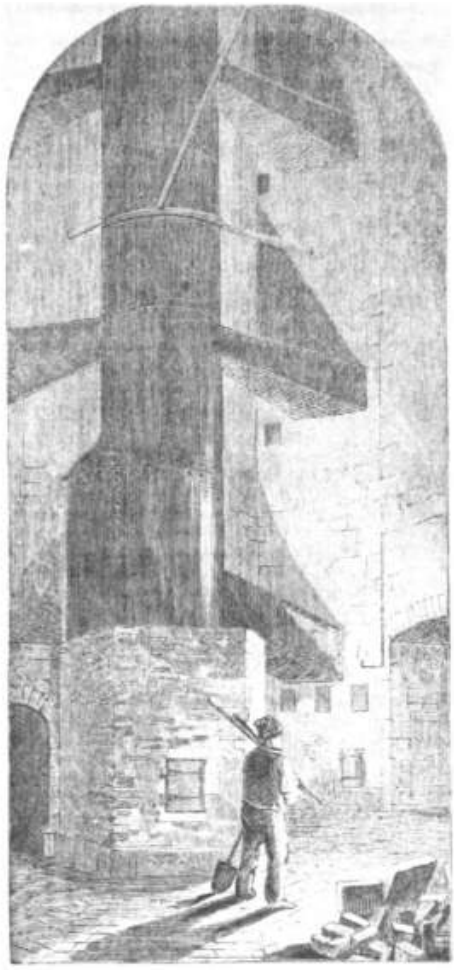
fourteen hours in a dedicated furnace room before being finally stored on the numbered shelves already described.

The reception store proper, back across the passage, holds the prison's own ready stock of new clothing, arranged by size along the same wooden shelving — jackets, waistcoats, trousers, and masked caps in the familiar dark grey, alongside striped cotton shirts, flannels, drawers, ringed worsted stockings, and shoes, all stamped with the prison's own mark and sized numerically from one to six. A large table nearby holds braces, register numbers, class badges, and caps ready for issue, together with scales for weighing each prisoner on entry and departure and a standard measure for recording his height. The attached bath-room, fitted with four slate baths supplied with hot and cold water, completes the reception process before a prisoner is finally examined by the surgeon the following morning and sent up, card in hand, to his assigned cell.

A typical occupied cell measures thirteen feet by seven, nine feet high — very nearly the size of Pentonville's own model cells — furnished with a small deal table, the same covered night-utensil and shielded water-tap already described, a gas jet, and three small shelves holding a tin plate, pannikin, wooden spoon and salt-cellar, comb and brush, and a Bible, prayer book, and library book, the rolled hammock bedding stowed above like a lady's muff. A card on the wall records the prisoner's name, offence, sentence, admission date, trade, and any previous committals; we copied one such card verbatim — a forty-two-year-old labourer, twice previously committed to this same prison, sentenced to two months' hard labour for unlawful possession of a pair of boots, received in late June — along with the brief coded record on its reverse tracking his progress: judged unfit for the hard-labour machine on first examination, passed fit a month later at 10,000 revolutions, admitted to the infirmary a few days after that, discharged from it some three weeks on, and finally released on the expiry of his sentence. Prison dress consists of a dark grey jacket, waistcoat, and trousers, a blue-striped cotton shirt, worsted stockings, shoes, and a grey cap with an attached eyeletted mask, a strip of alpaca sewn in over the mouth for easier breathing; the prisoner's register number appears in white on the left sleeve, the letters H.C.W.S. — House of Correction, Wandsworth, Surrey — in

white across the back, and his cell number on a small brass hook at the breast.

Hard Labour: the Pumps, the Mills, and the Machines



VENTILATING SHAFT. WANDSWORTH

Ventilating shaft, Wandsworth.

We have already described oakum-picking and mat-making at length elsewhere in this book, and found both trades practised here much as at Coldbath Fields, save that every prisoner works alone in his own cell rather than in a common room. In the mat-making ward, a trade instructor showed us the frames on which coconut-fibre yarn is worked into diamond and sennit mats, using little more than a shoemaker's knife, a blunt-toothed beater, and a sailor's palm and needle; we watched boys as young as fourteen and men well into middle age at the same steady work, most with their masks laid aside inside their own cells, the afternoon sun falling pleasantly across more than one otherwise cheerless little room. One boy of about fourteen, plaiting coir yarn with his mask pushed up, had a genuinely pleasant, intelligent face, his cell looking almost cheerful in the light; an older man nearby, quiet and grey, bent steadily over his own frame without once lifting his head; a younger man of perhaps six-and-twenty, plainly of humbler origin by his look and manner, worked briskly at his own mat with the same unhurried application. A finished sennit mat, trimmed at last with a pair of large garden shears, is ready for sale; on the day of our visit six prisoners were engaged solely in this plaiting work, the trade instructor told us, with several more finishing and binding mats already off the frame. In the shoemakers' ward, twelve men — three of them experienced tradesmen, the rest simple cobblers mending prison shoes — turned out work the instructor rated fit for the best shop in London, including a set of chaise harness with German-silver fittings and a pair of gentlemen's side-spring boots, along with a pair of fancy shoes made, we were told with some pride, by a prisoner released only a few days before after nine months at the trade.

The pump-house, a plain oblong building near the junction of two wings, houses twenty-four hand-pump stalls arranged along a central shaft, each prisoner working a forty-five-minute hour with three five-minute rests, drawing water up into cisterns on the prison roof from an artesian well 480 feet below — some 4,700 to 6,000 gallons daily, the water level tracked by a simple wooden float visible from outside the building. The mill-house, in the basement of A wing, holds twenty hand-mills where prisoners grind wheat into flour over three-hour shifts, half a bushel per man per session, the ground flour weighed

and mixed in a large bin nearby; a smutting machine cleans the grain of dust and dirt before milling, and a separate two-stone bran-mill regrinds the coarser bran afterward to extract every last portion of usable flour.

The hundred hard-labour machines proper, concentrated in corridor E, are altogether more severe: an iron mechanism turned by a crank handle, weighted internally to set the resistance — seven pounds unweighted, rising to ten or twelve pounds fully weighted, the exact setting prescribed by the surgeon for each individual prisoner — and fitted with a dial recording each completed revolution, typically requiring 10,000 to 16,000 turns daily depending on sentence. We watched several prisoners at this labour: a red-haired seventeen-year-old resting briefly against his machine before resuming with what looked like real good humour; a young man pausing to read, his machine's handle left pointing upward as though he too needed a moment's recovery; another, stripped to shirt and trousers, a handkerchief bound round his temples, moving stiffly as though genuinely exhausted; a fourth wiping his face with a towel, one hand still resting on the machine's frame. It is worth noting, in fairness to Wandsworth's own governing committee, that these machines were chosen deliberately as an alternative to the tread-wheel precisely because they could be worked within an individual cell under the separate system — though we cannot help observing that they serve, in the end, no more genuinely useful purpose than the tread-wheel they replaced, being designed, as the prisoners themselves might put it, purely for grinding the wind.

It struck us, comparing this arrangement with the City Prison at Holloway, that Wandsworth's productive labour — however admirably disciplined the establishment is in every other respect — falls some way short of Holloway's own arrangements, where every form of work has some genuinely useful end, and even tread-wheel labour is ingeniously harnessed to pump water for the prison's own use. At Wandsworth, the mats and rugs manufactured are sold entirely through the prison's own officials rather than under contract to outside tradesmen, as at Holloway, leaving the storerooms perpetually stocked with more raw material and finished goods than seems entirely efficient; and the hard-labour machines themselves, whatever

their ingenuity, produce nothing at all beyond the exhaustion of the men turning them.

THE EXERCISING GROUNDS

The exercising grounds occupy the north-eastern corner of the boundary wall, beyond the end of E wing: three concentric circles, a warder patrolling the middle one while prisoners walk the inner and outer rings at set distances from each other, the outermost and largest reserved for stronger, more athletic men, the innermost for the weak and for boys. More than fifty prisoners were exercising there on the day of our visit, parsnips growing in the strip of ground between the outer circles and potatoes recently dug from within the inner one, the neighbouring plot between D and E wings given over to onions and cabbages. The men walked masked, hands behind their backs, in a quiet, almost contemplative attitude, keeping a steady four yards apart; when two drew too close, evidently tempted to talk, a warder's voice cut cleanly across the yard — "No. 44, not so close there," or "Not so quick, 48" — and the only other sound across the whole ground was the steady patter of feet on gravel. Two officers oversaw the circles between them, one walking the outer ring for a closer watch, both in the same white trousers, blue surtout coats, and peaked caps we had seen throughout the prison, dark leather pouches slung behind them like cartridge boxes.

Each detachment exercises for a full hour before being relieved by the next, in movements differing little from those we have already described at Pentonville. Among the masked men that day, the chief warder pointed out the same diminutive dwarf whose rags we had examined earlier in the clothing store, sauntering along in a stooped, careless posture, looking smaller still beside his fellow prisoners — the prison uniform, we suspected, a considerable improvement on the squalid clothes he ordinarily wore at liberty, as it plainly was for a good many other men on the ground that day. A second prisoner drew our attention for the opposite reason: a tall, athletic man, evidently of some education and social standing, in for embezzling his employer, a London draper. Masked as they all were, we were told, such men remain perfectly recognizable to their old associates within the prison

by gait and build alone, whatever the eyelet-holes conceal of their actual features.

THE CHAPEL AND THE SCHOOL

Wandsworth's chapel, reached by staircases from the central hall and a covered bridge from the upper floors of two of the wings, holds 422 prisoners in individual stalls, 389 of them enclosed, with a further dozen open seats and standing room on the galleries' staircases when fully occupied. The governor and chaplain sit in elevated seats overlooking the whole congregation, the apostles' creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the ten commandments inscribed on the panelling before them; a low partition screens the female prisoners' section from the male, and inspection galleries run the length of both sides for the warders on duty. Given the prison's numbers, chapel runs in four separate sittings each Sunday — at nine, a quarter to eleven, a quarter to two, and three o'clock — arranged so that every prisoner, male or female, attends twice but hears only a single sermon.

We attended more than once. On one occasion, seated near the pulpit, we could see almost none of the ordinary prisoners in their stalls, screened as they were by the stall partitions themselves, but caught sight of a small boy in the front seat nearest the pulpit — newly committed, sharp-eyed, and, despite his evident youth, entirely unmoved by his surroundings, sitting through the service with the settled unconcern of a much older offender — and, on the women's side, a middle-aged prisoner following the service attentively from her prayer book, a fair-haired girl of about twelve beside her eyeing us with open curiosity, her countenance strikingly at odds with the setting. Prisoners' cell and stall numbers correspond directly, letting warders trace any misconduct — scratching on the panelling, most commonly — back to its source without difficulty; we happened to be present once when exactly such a complaint was brought before the deputy governor.

The juvenile schoolroom, beneath the chapel, held nineteen boys the day of our visit, aged seven to thirteen, taught by a kindly, silver-headed instructor named Mr. Ellis. Three could not yet manage the alphabet or the Lord's Prayer; ten could read the Testament; the remainder worked through a primer. We watched one boy copying a

verse from Proverbs onto his slate — "As snow in summer, as rain in harvest, so honour is not seemly for a fool" — in a hand notably neat for a boy of fourteen; another, his fingers still dark from picking oakum, wrote out "In all labour there is profit" with evident care. Mr. Ellis told us plainly that he considered the chief fault, in most cases, to lie with the parents rather than the children themselves — the boys generally being either the children of drunkards, or already lacking any parent at all, and almost uniformly neglected or simply never taught right from wrong in the first place. Two of his current pupils had already been committed three times, one five times.

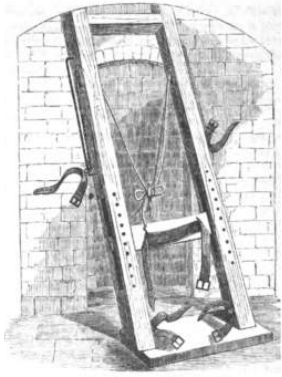
The adult school, held in the chapel itself outside service hours, drew forty-three men the day we visited, an assistant teacher standing where an inspection warder ordinarily stands, working through a passage on divine mercy chalked onto a large board. Some read fluently, others stumbled badly; Mr. Ellis, who also oversaw the adult classes, told us many showed real familiarity with scripture, and that every cell in the prison holds its own Bible. Attendance is compulsory for boys under fourteen and voluntary for everyone older, though he found most adult prisoners came readily enough once invited.

The Bakery, Kitchen, Punishment Cells, and Stores

The bakery, forty feet long and thirteen wide, runs two nine-bushel patent ovens heated by a coal furnace, work beginning at six each morning with a dough-mixing machine that the baker, Mr. Claridge, considered decidedly superior to hand-kneading. Between the day's four batches, the ovens turn out some 1,200 six-ounce loaves and 1,000 eight-ounce loaves, finished by half-past five each evening and delivered to the storekeeper the following morning; a finer white loaf, baked separately, supplies the infirmary. The kitchen, a similarly spacious room fitted with four seventy-gallon steam coppers and matching steamers, produces cocoa and gruel for breakfast from half-past five, dinner — meat and potatoes, by the cook's own account of a quality superior to many respectable London eating-houses — by one o'clock, and a final supper of oatmeal gruel and bread at seven.



WHIP, OR ROD, WANDSWORTH.



WHIPPING-POST, WANDSWORTH.

Whip, or rod, and whipping-post, Wandsworth.

The fourteen punishment cells, seven of them entirely dark, are secured behind double doors admitting no light or sound at all when closed; we entered one ourselves and found it as silent and lightless as a sealed vault. Furniture runs to an iron bedstead fixed to the floor and a water-closet, with straw bedding issued only at nine each evening and removed each morning; prisoners here subsist on bread and water throughout their confinement. At the time of our second visit, eight male prisoners occupied these cells for offences ranging from shouting and removing their masks to refusing work, insolence, taking a library book from another prisoner's unlocked cell, spitting on a Bible, and idling at the hard-labour machine; two women were separately confined in the female punishment cells, one for eating soap in a bid to be placed on the sick list, the other for disobedience. Nearby, in the basement of D wing, stands a whipping-post where boys are occasionally birched by magistrate's order, and beside it a

padded cell of the kind used in lunatic asylums, reserved for the most extreme cases of violent refractory conduct.

The classification of the male prison's 544 workers, drawn from the returns taken at our second visit, gives some sense of the establishment's scale: 170 picking oakum, 95 at the hard-labour machines, 53 general labourers, 32 mat-making, 24 assigned to punishment or infirmary duty, 17 tailoring, and smaller numbers at shoemaking, baking, smithing, carpentry, and a dozen minor trades besides. The storerooms beneath the corridors, presided over with real system and evident pride by the storekeeper Mr. Goddard, held clothing of every size and description, raw calico, canvas, flannel, and sheeting for making it up, a full range of officers' uniform cloth, hundreds of new blankets, bales of grey army cloth, and separate rooms devoted entirely to coir, junk, and finished matting — alongside a well-stocked provision store: oatmeal, rice, barley, sugar, split peas, cocoa nuts (ground on-site in a small windmill, and, the storekeeper assured us, considerably purer than anything sold commercially), sago, arrowroot, mustard, pepper, coffee, treacle, salt "white as newly fallen snow," and, reserved strictly for the infirmary at the surgeon's discretion, beer, stout, wine, brandy, and gin. A separate wheat and flour store held the raw grain awaiting the mills, weighed at a full sixty-two pounds to the bushel, passed first through a "smutting" machine that extracted a genuinely surprising quantity of dust and grit before milling, and a large two-stone bran-mill that reground the coarser bran a second time to extract every last portion of usable flour from it. A further store, devoted entirely to coir and matting materials, held stacks of Bombay yarn and "coir dolls" awaiting the spinning frames, sacks of loose cuttings issued out to the female prisoners for picking, and finished bundles of picked coir sold on, like the finished mats themselves, for the county's own benefit — a trade the storekeeper described as "very extensive," though we noted, as already mentioned, that Wandsworth manages this trade entirely through its own officials rather than under outside contract, leaving a rather larger stock of both raw material and finished goods permanently on hand than seems the most efficient possible arrangement.

The Female Prison

The female branch, reached by a covered walk past the matron's own flower garden — roses, dahlias, geraniums, a row of young laurels along the path — occupies three wings, F, G, and H, radiating from a smaller central hall of the same basic design as the male prison's. Its reception ward, fifty-seven feet long, holds eight cells of similar dimensions to the male reception cells, along with two slate baths and a small desk where every new prisoner's description is recorded. The chief warder walked us past several bundles of stored clothing by way of illustration: a schoolmistress's black dress and grey shawl, three years for maltreating a child in her care; the clothes of a woman convicted of robbery with violence in the Waterloo Road, two years; a cluster of plainer bundles belonging to pickpockets and shoplifters serving twelve months. A separate rack, reserved for women about to be discharged, held clothes in considerably worse condition — one bundle, we were told, so far gone with dirt and decay that "no rag-shop would receive them," belonging to a stout, otherwise respectable-looking woman of twenty-six serving seven days for drunkenness.

At the time of the matron's clerk's most recent count, 166 women occupied the female wings, with a yearly range running from 134 to 170 and an average of exactly 170; the female staff comprised the matron, a chief warder, storekeeper, matron's clerk, reception and infirmary warders, two laundry warders, eight ordinary warders, a schoolmistress, and a portress. A dedicated register tracks Roman Catholic prisoners specifically, under a standing rule requiring the matron's clerk to visit every such woman individually in her cell soon after arrival, ascertain whether she wishes to remain excused from ordinary chapel service, mark her cell door with a small dark badge if so, and record the whole arrangement in a dedicated book laid before the matron each morning without exception — a degree of individual attention to religious conscience that struck us as considerably more careful than we had found in several other London prisons.

The laundry, a tall building at the far end of H wing, employed twenty-eight women the day of our visit — nineteen washing, four at the wringing-machine, the rest folding, mending, or minding the drying-horses and heated irons. Nineteen individual washing-cells, each fitted with its own trough and hot and cold taps, let each woman work at her

own allotted task independently, signalling for attention by pushing a corner of wet linen through a small circular opening in her cell door. A mechanical wringer, manufactured by Seyrig, Alliott, and Manlowes of Nottingham and worked by two handles, extracted water from soaked linen with a rapid whirring clatter before the garments passed on to the drying-room; we watched two women feed it in turn, one a modest, dark-complexioned girl of about eighteen serving her first sentence for a petty felony, the other a good-looking woman nearer twenty-two. We noted, elsewhere among the women at work, a fair-haired young pickpocket at the mangle, and an older woman knitting quietly by one of the tall windows, evidently trusted with lighter duties; pots of Australian onions, we were told, grow unusually well on the laundry windowsills, kept purely for curiosity's sake given the building's constant heat.

The female schoolmistress, unlike her counterpart in the boys' wing, teaches no formal classes at all, visiting each new prisoner individually in her own cell instead — determining first whether she is Catholic or Protestant, and, if the latter, whether she can read; very few, the teacher told us, can do either well. “I find the young felons are often better educated than those of riper years,” she said; she was, at the time of our visit, teaching some twenty-eight women the alphabet and simple monosyllables directly in their cells, moving on to simple scripture stories and eventually the New Testament as each pupil's ability allowed. She visits as many as forty women a day, spending five or ten minutes with each, and believes her pupils learn better individually than they would in any group setting; she reports a prisoner for misconduct, she told us, no more than twice a year, almost always for damaging a book rather than any greater offence.

We were present when a twelve-year-old girl, confined for singing in her cell against the rules, was taken to a punishment cell; looking in through the door's inspection-hole afterward, we found her crouched in a corner, wrapped in a single garment, her own prison clothes torn to shreds beside her, drumming furiously at the door. The reception warder described her as “a very perverse, stubborn girl” who had already been shown considerable forbearance, and added that few prisoners are ever confined in these cells at all, and never until every other measure has already been tried. Three days later, visiting her again, we found her calm, dressed once more, and quietly reading, her card recording a

sentence for picking pockets and nothing else remarkable in her appearance or manner. The chief warder's own punishment book, covering the preceding fortnight, recorded only four cases in total: idleness, taking needles from another prisoner's unattended cell, the singing offence already described, and disorderly conduct on the exercise ground; talking, she added, remained the single most common offence generally, along with scratching messages on the painted chapel stalls, though the latter had grown noticeably rarer of late.

Before leaving the female branch, we looked into several further cells at random. One held a woman of about forty-five, working with real energy at picking coir, a brown heap of loosened fibre growing at her feet, her expression thoughtful and entirely absorbed in the task; another held a smart, rather more forceful-looking woman nearer thirty, evidently a person of stronger character but less skilful hands, her own pile of coir still largely untouched. A third, marked outside with the small dark badge denoting a Roman Catholic excused from ordinary chapel, held nothing remarkable beyond the badge itself. One cell, noticeably larger than the rest and set close to the central hall, held a mother and her infant together, furnished with an iron bedstead rather than the usual hammock — the chief warder explained that any prisoner arriving with an infant is given this particular cell as a matter of course. In another, a fair, delicate-looking girl of seventeen, in for uttering counterfeit coin, sat sewing quietly until our presence seemed to unsettle her; she bent low over her work and wept once we had turned to leave.

The storekeeper's own account of the female prison's needlework confirmed what we had already observed elsewhere: most women arrive unable to sew at all, and are started on the simplest hemming of towels and handkerchiefs before progressing to shirts and caps as their skill improves; some manage to sew their own dress by the time their sentence ends, though none are taught proper cutting or shaping. Those set instead to picking coir — the great majority, six pounds daily even for the youngest girls — generally prove more immediately capable, some managing the full quota as competently on their first day as on their last.

CHAPTER XVI

The City House of Correction, Holloway

APPROACHING HOLLOWAY

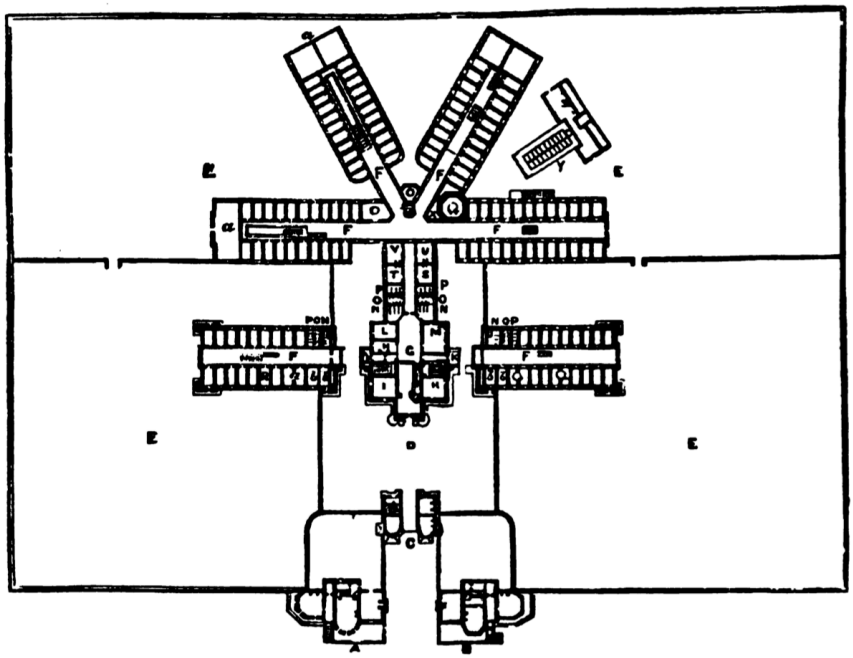
We set out for Holloway on a cold December morning, well before dawn, the streets still lit only by gas and starlight, a slight frost on the pavement not yet firm enough to dry the previous night's rain. Along Tottenham Court Road, workmen were already making their way to their trades, tools slung over their shoulders; upholsterers' shopmen dusted their windows for the day's trade, and the gaslight burned low in the fanlight of an occasional public house already stirring within. At the junction with the Euston Road, a young costermonger stood by his barrow of oranges and faded apples, and beyond him the roadworks for the new underground railway from Paddington to the City lit the darkness with torches and a snorting steam windlass, workmen wheeling barrows of brick and stone across planks laid over the excavated trench.

Past St. Pancras Church, its grounds trimmed and gravelled, past the curious pagoda-roofed church of St. Luke's at King's Cross, past coffee-stalls serving early workmen their bread and coffee, we reached King's Cross itself just as day was breaking, its hoardings plastered with garish placards for Christmas pantomimes and music-hall entertainments. Climbing the slope of the Pentonville Road toward Islington, we passed a warder of the Middlesex House of Detention on his own way to work, and reached the Angel under a heavy morning mist. From there, along the busy shopping thoroughfare of Islington High Street, past Islington Green, and on toward Highbury, an omnibus finally carried us the last stretch to Holloway itself, through a countrified cluster of suburban villas that gave little hint of the great castellated building waiting at the end of the road.

The City House of Correction is a genuinely noble structure in the castellated Gothic style, its wide frontage of Kentish rag stone dressed with Caen stone at the chapel and wings, the cell windows fitted with Portland stone sills and splayed brick reveals. Two elegant houses for

the governor and chaplain stand just outside the walls, each with its own garden, some sixty feet from the inner gate. The prison itself occupies ten acres of rising ground on the Holloway Road, bought by the City Corporation originally for use as a cemetery during the 1832 cholera epidemic, and ringed by a brick wall some eighteen feet high. Behind it stretch open meadows and arable fields, with the wooded rise of Muswell Hill, Hornsey, and Highgate visible in the middle distance, Hampstead Heath beyond — once the roaming ground of the highwayman Dick Turpin — and, to the south, the whole vast pile of the Metropolis itself, its hundred spires already wreathed, even at this early hour, in a dense haze of smoke.

THE HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE PRISON



GROUND PLAN OF HOLLOWAY PRISON.

A. Governor's House.
B. Chaplain's ditto.
C. Outer Gate.
D. Inner Gate.
E, E, E, E. Courtyard and Exercising Grounds.
F, F, F, F, F, F. Corridors.
G. Main Passage.
H. Governor's and Clerks' Offices.
I. Reception Warder's Office.
K. Lobby.
L. An Anteroom.
M. Magistrates' Committee Room.
N, N, N, N. Prisoners' Visiting Room, with different compartments.
O, O, O, O.
P, P, P, P.
Q. Storeroom.
R. Waiting Room
T. An Anteroom.
U. Deputy Governor's Office.
V. Surgeon's Room.
W. Treadwheel and Pumps.
a. a. Associated Rooms.

Ground plan of Holloway Prison.

The City of London's own Prisons Committee, reporting to the Court of Common Council in January 1843, set out with real thoroughness the reasoning that led the Corporation to build an entirely new house of correction at Holloway rather than expand any of its existing City prisons. Giltspur Street Prison, the Committee found, was both too confined by its construction and far too small in area — barely two roods and thirty-seven perches — to serve the purpose at all. Enlarging Newgate offered little more room. A site incorporating the Debtors' Prison in Whitecross Street would have meant demolishing that prison and building it afresh elsewhere, at an added cost of at least £133,000. Two further plans near the same debtors' prison would have given barely three acres between them, at a cost approaching £142,000; a site in Goswell Street, just outside the City boundary, offered four acres but at £214,000; and a site incorporating the old Fleet Prison, extending from Farringdon Street to the Old Bailey, came to £154,800 once the value of the old prison's materials was deducted. Every one of these plans, the Committee concluded, cost a great deal more and delivered a great deal less space than building afresh outside the City altogether.

Building beyond the City walls, the Committee argued, would let the Corporation acquire whatever space might ever be needed — enough for 400 prisoners, with full airing grounds and workshops, for as little as £5,000, a saving of some £130,000 against any City site. It would allow a prison built to the very latest standards of discipline and reform, impossible to achieve on a cramped City lot; and it would place prisoners in a genuinely healthier situation, a matter the Committee thought a plain question of humanity given that sentences were, by 1843, running considerably longer than in earlier years, transportation itself having been restricted to the gravest offences only. The Committee further reasoned that Middlesex was the natural county for such a prison, since the City already held the county in fee, its sheriffs doubled as sheriffs of Middlesex, and many aldermen sat as Middlesex magistrates besides — making a site within that county more genuinely convenient to the City's own authorities than any alternative.

A plot of City-owned land at Holloway was duly identified and approved through a lengthy sequence of committee reports between

1846 and 1849 — the Lord Mayor and Court of Aldermen conferring with the Common Council's own prisons committee, a joint committee unanimously recommending the site, and the City Architect, Mr. Bunning, engaged to prepare plans flexible enough to accommodate whatever eventual system of discipline might be adopted, with separate sleeping cells for every prisoner as a fixed requirement from the outset. Bunning's finished plan, approved by both committees and by the Home Secretary's own office (with technical input from Colonel Jebb, the Inspector-General of Prisons), provided for 400 prisoners in total: two wings of 144 cells each for adult men, one wing of 56 cells for women, and a further wing of 56 for juveniles, the whole complex to occupy eight acres, with a small triangular plot beside it kept in reserve. The first stone was laid on 26 September 1849 by the Lord Mayor, Sir James Duke, and the finished prison opened in 1852, at a total contracted cost of some £77,890 for the building itself, and just under £92,700 including sewers, an artesian well, warming and ventilation apparatus, and every other incidental expense. In its first full year, the prison held a daily average of 348 prisoners, with a peak of 889 on its busiest single day.

The Outer Gate, Reception, and Discharge

Approaching the outer gate along an enclosed entry flanked by the governor's and chaplain's houses, the prison's battlements and lofty tower rose before us with something of the presence of an old feudal castle. An elderly, courteous officer admitted us at the grating, in the standard dark blue uniform and peaked cap, an iron chain of keys hanging from his belt; the governor, on seeing our order from the visiting magistrates, introduced us to the chief warder, Mr. Clark, whose gold-laced cap and elaborately embroidered uniform marked his seniority among the staff. The gate lodge itself, comfortably furnished with an oaken table and a case of rifles, pistols, cutlasses, and bayonets arranged with almost decorative care, kept a whole shelf of registers: a visitors' book, a prisoners'-friends visiting book, a solicitors' book, a book recording the ladies who assist discharged female prisoners into situations or institutions, and separate books tracking every vehicle entering the gate and every officer's hours of attendance.

Beyond the outer gate, the courtyard itself makes a genuinely striking first impression — the castellated frontage rising ahead, the female wing to the right and the juvenile wing to the left, each three storeys, and the inner porch projecting forward under two massive winged griffins, one gripping a key and a leg-iron in its talons, the other reaching forward as though to seize hold of some prey. The reception ward, in the basement beneath the central hall, holds a comfortably furnished office for the reception warder — not unlike a solicitor's chambers, several writing desks under gas jets, and a full register recording every prisoner's height, weight, complexion, religion, education, family circumstances, trade, and the magistrate who committed them, along with a detailed inventory of whatever clothing and property they carried in.

The prisoners' own clothing store, its walls lined with numbered, labelled bundles, told its own story of Holloway's genuinely wide social range. “Some bundles,” the reception warder told us, “belong to rogues and vagabonds, pickpockets and burglars, others to sailors and soldiers. We have several returned convicts imprisoned for picking pockets, and for receiving stolen property. A good number of the prisoners have been clerks in lawyers' offices, and travellers and warehousemen in commercial houses, brought here for embezzling their masters' property; and some have been in good position in society, and are now under sentence for fraudulent bankruptcy.” Much of the clothing needing fumigation, he added, belonged to men driven by unemployment into London's low lodging-houses and covered in vermin as a result — though, he noted with a certain professional interest, “we generally find the most expert thieves are respectably attired, and cleanly in their persons.”

We were present, more than once, at the discharge of prisoners whose sentences had expired, and found the governor's own examinations — conducted personally, with the chief warder and clerk present — among the most genuinely affecting scenes we witnessed anywhere in London's prisons. A small Irish boy, brought in first, admitted freely that he had never been in prison before, that his mother lived in town with his sisters working as feather-trimmers, and that bad company had led him into the theft that brought him there; asked whether he had shoes when he came to prison, he

answered that he had only “a pair of old shoes, without soles,” and the governor at once ordered him a fresh pair for his discharge. A second boy of twelve, charged with attempting to steal a handkerchief, admitted to having stolen a dozen more on previous occasions, selling them in Petticoat Lane for anywhere from twopence to eighteen pence apiece, the proceeds spent on lodging and gambling with other boys.

A third case moved us more than either: a thin, pale-eyed young man of about nineteen, evidently of weak intellect, who had driven cattle for a living, slept for months in sheds since his father's death and his mother's remarriage to a soldier, and arrived at the prison filthy and infested with vermin. Advised by the governor to seek shelter at the workhouse rather than sleep rough, he answered simply that he would rather stay outside at night than go to the union. He had, he told us, no friend in the world to take any interest in him, and thanked the governor for his kindness before he left — a case of plain destitution, we could not help feeling, rather than any real criminal disposition. A further prisoner, questioned closely on whether he was willing to seek honest work, admitted he had learned mat-making in the prison some years before but had no character reference to show for it, and so no way of putting the skill to use; the governor gave him a shilling and a stern reminder never to return. A bricklayer with a wife and six children, who had stolen twenty-six pounds of lead specifically to keep his family from starving, struck us as an honest man driven to a single desperate act; the governor gave him half a crown and a warning, his manner notably gentler than with the practised offenders.

Not every case drew such sympathy. One tall, grey-wigged man with a hard, callous face claimed never to have been in the prison before; the moment he turned to leave, the governor remarked to us plainly that the man was “one of the most expert thieves in London, and a trainer of thieves.” The governor's questioning could be sharp as well as kind: one young pickpocket, asked directly whether his own moustache and general bearing suggested he kept company with women other than his wife (whom he stood convicted of having deserted, along with five children), left the office thoroughly chastened. A young, fashionably dressed pickpocket of about twenty-three, charged with attempting to steal a watch, could offer no plan at

all for his own future once free — no trade, no home he could name with any confidence, nothing beyond a vague hope that something might turn up.

We were struck, too, by a case at the opposite emotional extreme: a sallow, sharp-featured Irishman of about thirty, brought in among a later batch of discharges, who simply stood silent and mournful when asked whether he had any friends in London, and stood again with tears in his eyes, saying nothing at all, when asked what he meant to do that same day. The governor, without further questioning, quietly told the clerk to give the man a shilling and let him go — a small, wordless act of charity that struck us, watching it, as more genuinely affecting than any of the more talkative exchanges we witnessed that morning. After being examined, each discharged prisoner was walked by the reception warder to the outer gate, where the porter, holding a list supplied by the clerk, released him formally into the street; we watched one such party disperse just beyond the gate, some heading toward the City, others turning at once for the public house directly opposite — the measured, orderly tread of prison discipline abandoned within a few dozen yards of freedom.

Whatever the individual case, we came away from these discharge sessions convinced that the governor knew, with real particularity, the exact history and character of a very large proportion of the men passing through his prison — a degree of personal attention we found genuinely remarkable given the scale of the institution. One case in particular seemed to us to sum up both the promise and the limits of that personal attention: a young Irish lad the governor had, by his own account, gone to real trouble for on a previous discharge — paying his passage home to an uncle in Ireland who had agreed to teach him shoemaking, a trade the boy had begun learning in prison — only to have the boy return within seven weeks, unable to bear his uncle's constant scolding, and drift back to his old London companions until his present arrest for trespassing on a wharf at midnight. “To my astonishment,” the governor told us, “he has come here again.” Asked why he had not simply stayed with his uncle, the boy answered only that the man “kept jawing” him — a small, almost comic phrase that nonetheless captured, we thought, exactly how fragile even the most

well-intentioned rescue can prove against the ordinary friction of daily life.

The Outer Watchman

We visited the prison once before dawn, arriving about half-past six on a dark, moonless morning, the great tower barely visible as a darker shape against the grey sky, the Metropolis to the south still wrapped in mist and silence but for the distant roll of an occasional cart and the shrill whistle of an early train. Admitted at the gate, we soon heard the interior bell summon the prisoners to their morning labour, and shortly afterward met the outer watchman himself, doing his rounds with a lit lantern, whom we accompanied for part of his circuit around the exterior walls.

“I commence duty at nine o'clock in the evening,” he told us, flashing his lantern briefly across our notebook as we walked. “It is my duty to inspect all external doors, and to see that articles are not thrown over the walls by persons from without. I go round with my lighted lantern in hand to see that all is right, and to ascertain that no prisoner has a light in his cell, and that there is no communication from without.” He carried a master key admitting him to the building's interior as well, he explained, and periodically checked in with the night watchman stationed inside; any unexpected light glimpsed in a cell window sent him at once to investigate, though as often as not it meant nothing more than the chief warder attending to a sick prisoner. His duties extended well beyond simple patrol: he lit the kitchen fires between one and two each morning, brought the steam up for the day's cocoa and gruel, and stayed at his post until relieved by the arriving day officers around a quarter past seven — a long, solitary, largely unheralded shift that nonetheless kept the whole machinery of the prison quietly running through the hours when almost everyone else, staff and prisoners alike, was asleep.

The Central Hall and the Cells

The central hall, reached by an elegantly matted staircase from the reception ward, rises in a lofty hexagonal dome of glass and iron, four long corridors radiating outward much as at Wandsworth and

Pentonville. Two principal warders, gold-striped and keys at their belts, oversee the hall from a small glazed office; skylights set into the floor itself admit light to the kitchen directly below, and a simple hoisting apparatus, its cradles running on polished steel rods some forty feet high, carries food trays up from the kitchen to each corridor in turn. We noted, moving through the corridors, that the prisoners cleaning the floors here had a distinctly more cheerful bearing than the masked men we had seen at Wandsworth and Pentonville — Holloway's prisoners work unmasked, and went about their scrubbing and sweeping with real energy rather than the sullen, watchful manner masking tends to produce.

A typical cell measures seven feet by thirteen at the top of its arch and nine feet at the bottom, floored in polished asphalte, fitted with a small folding table, a covered water-closet doubling as a seat, a copper basin, and the same triangular shelving and rolled hammock bedding found throughout London's separate-system prisons, supplemented here by library books — we noted, in one cell, copies of Summer in the Antarctic Regions and the Narrative of the Loss of the Amazon. The prison's ventilation, the engineer explained in some detail, runs on a genuinely thorough system: hot-water pipes warming the air along each corridor and distributing it into individual cells through a grating above each door, while a corresponding extraction flue draws foul air out near floor level and up through a single great ventilating shaft at the angle of two of the wings, kept artificially heated even in summer to maintain the draught. A small handle beside each cell door, turned by the prisoner, sounds a gong in the corridor and throws out a small metal plate identifying exactly which cell has called — the same basic principle found at Wandsworth, refined slightly in its execution.

Prisoners are distributed through the corridors by criminal history and sentence: Corridor A holds felons convicted for a first offence, along with those tried summarily; other corridors hold known, repeatedly convicted felons, and still others hold long-sentence and habitual offenders specifically. The chief warder's own thermometer journal, recording the temperature of sixteen separate parts of the building three times daily, and a misconduct book that, on the day of

our visit, had recorded not a single complaint in four days, together suggested an establishment run with real and consistent order.

The Mat-Rooms, Tailors, and Shoemakers

Holloway's mat-making department, unlike the equivalent trade at Wandsworth or Coldbath Fields, is contracted out to a private firm and run under the direct supervision of Mr. Davies, an outside trade instructor rather than a prison officer — a genuinely large operation, sixty-one weavers across five associated rooms in two corridors, with a further fourteen prisoners sewing finished mats and three more preparing raw material. We watched men of every age at the looms, from a superior-looking sixty-year-old winding coloured worsted to a nineteen-year-old guiding warp-chains onto a beam, most working with their jackets off, the floor littered with newly cut mats and bundles of coir "dolls." Mr. Davies showed us a genuinely impressive range of finished product: plain household door-mats bordered in red, green, and blue; finer fancy-bordered mats for a more discerning market; a heavier, cocoa-fibre "bass" mat so durable, he told us with evident enthusiasm, that he believed it would make excellent flooring for dog kennels, being entirely proof against damage from ordure or damp; hand-finished hearth-rugs in carefully blended colours, which he considered far superior to machine-loomed "velvet-pile" rugs; and a set of mats made to special order for the South Western Railway Company, the company's own initials worked directly into the pattern.

A new hand generally takes about a month to become proficient at the simplest mats, Mr. Davies told us, though ability varies enormously — one young man in Corridor B's mat-room had mastered every grade of the work, from the simplest to the most difficult, in barely a fortnight, a proficiency Mr. Davies said he had never seen matched. Prisoners work seven hours daily, and many genuinely learn a trade capable of supporting them on release, provided they are willing to work and can find an employer; others, Mr. Davies acknowledged plainly, simply return to their old criminal courses regardless of what they have learned.

The tailors' and shoemakers' associated room, adjoining the adult schoolroom, held fifteen tailors and eleven shoemakers the day of our visit, the tailors seated cross-legged on a raised platform making

prison clothing, officers' uniforms for Holloway, Newgate, the Guildhall, and the Mansion House, clothing for the boys of the Emmanuel Hospital, and slop-work for outside mercantile firms besides. Some prisoners had never held a needle before their sentence began; after six months, the warder told us, most could manage vests and trousers, and after eighteen a genuinely comfortable livelihood was within reach for anyone willing to pursue the trade seriously. The shoemakers, similarly, ranged from complete beginners set to the simple work of closing uppers to genuinely accomplished workmen capable, in the warder's words, of doing credit to the best shops in London — the officers' own boots, made here to a notably higher standard than the ordinary prison shoe, serving as the clearest proof of what the more skilled hands could achieve.

The Schools

Holloway's schoolmaster, Mr. Barre, had taught in the prison for eight years by the time of our visit and told us, with evident and justified pride, that he had never once had occasion to report a prisoner under his care for misconduct. He ran four separate classes daily — two for adults in the morning, two for juveniles in the afternoon — graded by ability from men who could not yet manage their letters through to a more advanced class covering geography, basic history, and arithmetic as far as fractions, along with a Friday singing class in psalmody that he considered attended by "the best educated, and the best behaved men in the prison."

"I want them to feel at home with me," he told us, describing his general approach, "and wish them to forget, if they will let me, that they are criminals, and to fancy themselves to be my guests at home in my parlour." He never singled out a prisoner's misbehaviour by name, he said, preferring to address the class generally; his chief aim, always, was "to gain a good moral impression, and then the influence is lasting." We watched him close one lesson on arithmetic with a small moral parable about an honest boy rewarded for returning a dropped handkerchief, and heard him press the same point repeatedly through the session: that care in small things builds character, and that London held genuine opportunity for anyone willing to work steadily for it.

The juvenile classes, held daily in the juvenile wing itself, worked through much the same material at a simpler level — monosyllabic scripture readings, slate-writing, elementary arithmetic by question and answer. Mr. Barre told us many boys arrived unable to read at all, and that within six months a fair number could manage the New Testament competently; he attributed his own consistent success chiefly to genuinely befriending his pupils rather than merely instructing them. “If they feel that people are really interested in them,” he said, “there is less likelihood of their misconducting themselves.” A circulating library, changed weekly and distributed to every cell, supplemented the formal lessons; the better-educated prisoners — clerks and commercial travellers particularly — relied on it heavily rather than attending class at all, some even producing original written compositions, occasionally in verse, which Mr. Barre showed us with evident satisfaction.

The Chapel, and Hearing Reports

Holloway's chapel, considerably larger than Wandsworth's, seats the entire prison population at a single service — adults ranged along open galleries rather than enclosed stalls, juveniles enclosed separately on one side, women on the other, none visible to each other. We found the open-gallery arrangement a genuinely more cheerful scene than the boxed-in stalls at Pentonville or Wandsworth, the prisoners' heads and shoulders fully visible rather than glimpsed only occasionally over a partition. Among the adult men we noted several bald, older prisoners of evidently superior social standing — one, we learned, imprisoned for fraudulent bankruptcy, who had until recently ridden to his City business in his own carriage. The chaplain, the Reverend Mr. Owen, told us that prisoners of every denomination attend the same service, with the single exception of one eccentric Roman Catholic, and that all controversial doctrinal matters are deliberately excluded from his preaching.

Every morning after chapel, newly admitted prisoners are brought individually before the chaplain, who records a full account of their circumstances and generally sets them a short scripture passage to memorize and repeat back to him a fortnight or a month later. Unlike a convict prison, Mr. Owen pointed out, a Holloway

prisoner gains no remission of sentence for professed piety, removing the most obvious incentive to religious hypocrisy; he believed, on this basis, that genuine impressions of conscience, when they occurred, could be taken more nearly at face value here than in an establishment where good behaviour is directly rewarded. “Leaving out the professional thief, who rarely reforms,” he told us, “there are many who date their first serious impressions from the time of their imprisonment” — a judgment he based partly on letters he continued to receive from former prisoners months after their release, thanking him, sometimes through tears they could not entirely explain even to themselves, for what the solitude of the cell had led them to reconsider.

After chapel, we followed the governor to his own office to observe him hear the day's requests and misconduct reports — a far gentler proceeding, on the whole, than we had expected. One prisoner asked simply to write to his wife, and to be allowed to grow his hair and whiskers before his approaching discharge; both requests were granted without hesitation. A dispute between a German Jewish prisoner and an Irish companion, arising from a disagreement over shared thread in the tailors' room, drew a brisk but even-handed hearing from the governor, who warned both men against quarrelling further rather than taking either side outright. A small, sharp-featured boy, reported for swapping places on the exercise ground to walk beside a friend, was let off with a simple warning after admitting the offence honestly. “For the past eight days,” the governor told us afterward, “there have only been two punishments inflicted, which was done by stopping the bread at supper” — a genuinely low rate of punishment for a prison of this size, and one that seemed, on the evidence of what we witnessed, to owe a good deal to the governor's own even, attentive manner with the men brought before him.

The Tread-Wheel and the Exercising Grounds

Holloway's tread-wheel, unlike the purely punitive machines at Coldbath Fields, is put to genuinely useful work pumping water for the entire prison. Divided into a larger sixteen-box compartment for adults and a smaller eight-box compartment for juveniles, with

eighteen enclosed seats in front where resting prisoners pick oakum between turns, the wheel draws water from a 370-foot well and delivers it to tanks on the prison roof, at a typical rate of some 1,300 gallons an hour. Each prisoner spends twenty minutes on the wheel and twenty picking oakum in rotation, working a combined four and a half hours daily on average — well below the eleven-thousand-foot legal maximum, averaging around 6,500 feet in winter and 8,700 in summer, the exact figure adjusted according to how much water the prison's tanks actually require on a given day. We found the labour here considerably less punishing in appearance than the hand-mills at Wandsworth, the men on the wheel showing noticeably less exhaustion at the day's end than we had observed elsewhere.

Five separate exercising grounds serve the prison — one each for the female and juvenile wings, and three more behind the main building, all laid out in concentric circles, the spaces between them planted with vegetables and mangold-wurzel for sale to local dairies. We visited on a bitterly cold day, the prisoners walking briskly to keep warm, several visibly pale and shivering, the central drying-ground where no crops had been planted seeing the fastest pace of all as men hurried round to generate what heat they could. The general bearing here struck us as looser and less military than the equivalent scene at Wandsworth or Pentonville — a difference we attributed chiefly to the weather rather than to any real difference in discipline, since Holloway's prisoners, unlike those elsewhere, wear no mask at all, and would in any case be harder to keep in strict step while visibly suffering from the cold. In the female garden, we found the warder in charge perched on a ladder against the boundary wall, overlooking half a dozen young prisoners moving earth to fill a cesspool; he told us he generally kept ten to twenty men at work across the grounds, growing potatoes, leeks, cabbages, and other vegetables for the prison's own kitchen.

The Kitchen and the Engineer's Department

The kitchen, in the basement of D wing, runs six large steam-jacketed boilers, one of them given over that day to a substantial

quantity of broth thick with beef, lifted for our inspection on a great two-pronged fork by the cook himself, plainly satisfied with its quality. A separate provision store nearby held bins of oatmeal, barley, and cocoa, a mill for grinding the prison's own cocoa nuts — considerably purer, we were assured, than anything bought ready-ground in the shops — and a weighing machine used daily to portion out exact rations to the cook according to the government's own dietary scale.

The prison engineer walked us through the heating and ventilating apparatus at some length: four great boilers in the basement furnace-room, each dedicated to a specific wing or combination of wings, kept burning day and night through the colder months to maintain a steady, healthy temperature throughout the cells; a network of flow-pipes carrying the heated water out along each corridor, with return-pipes bringing it back to an expansion cistern above the boiler itself. “We keep the fires burning night and day when the weather is cold,” the engineer told us, “keeping the temperature up in the winter, which renders the cells very healthy.” The great ventilating shaft at the angle of two of the wings, an iron funnel rising the full height of the central tower, draws foul air up and out of every cell in the building; remarkably, the engineer told us, this shaft must be kept artificially heated even in high summer, since the air inside must always run warmer than the surrounding atmosphere for the draught to work properly at all. The same shaft carries smoke from the steward's office, the laundry, and several other fireplaces scattered through the building, by way of underground horizontal flues.

The tread-wheel's own pumping mechanism, we learned, draws from a well 370 feet deep, the water rising naturally to within five feet of the pump itself; a single strong pump, worked by the wheel through an eccentric-wheel mechanism, delivers some 1,300 gallons an hour to cisterns eighty-five feet above ground at the building's entrance. The prison carpenter, when we found him at his bench in a workshop adjoining the engineer's own, told us candidly that he rarely had genuinely skilled hands to work with — only those already trained to carpentry before their sentence began proved of any real use to him — and that he and his small band of

assistants handled every carpentry repair the prison itself required, along with maintenance work at the governor's and chaplain's houses nearby.

Visiting the Prisoners in Their Cells

To gain a fuller sense of the range of character actually confined at Holloway, the chief warder walked us through a number of individual cells across the main corridors. One held a Dutch Jew, a cigar-maker by trade, imprisoned for making threats and unable to find security for his future good conduct; asked the cause of his troubles, he answered simply, in his own broken English, that drink was “de reason he got into trouble.” Another held a robust, well-formed young man of twenty-one, in for picking pockets, whom the governor personally offered to help find honest work if the man would return home to his family in Newcastle — an offer the prisoner, his eyes visibly brightening, accepted on the spot. Once the governor had gone, the young man told us candidly that he had been a professional pickpocket for twelve years, among the most skilled in his trade short of the men who worked the banks specifically, and that he had worked as far afield as Paris (where ladies' two pockets, he noted with a certain professional complaint, doubled his labour) and several towns in Scotland.

A further cell held a man imprisoned for stealing pewter pots to sell to a marine-store dealer, who told the chief warder frankly it was done to support a starving wife and family; another held a former bricklayer, an Irish veteran of the Crimean War, now serving two months for the unlawful possession of two doormats, who had, by a striking coincidence, helped build the very prison walls now confining him. In Corridor D we met a young thief who specialized in stealing gentlemen's watches at fairs, sometimes clearing fifty pounds in a single good day, working always with a confederate who “stalled” for him — he considered six watches a genuinely good day's work, and told the chief warder he would gladly take honest employment if anyone would trust him with it, though he balked outright at the suggestion of a reformatory. A further cell held a boy with a strikingly cone-shaped skull, fourteen times a Holloway prisoner already and known at several other London prisons besides,

suffering, the chief warder believed, from a family complaint of the legs worsened by a dissolute style of life; and another held a cab-man of about forty-five, entrusted unknowingly with a stolen chest of tea by a fare who vanished the moment the goods changed hands, now serving twelve months' hard labour for a crime he plainly had no part in planning, and plainly anxious for the wife and family he had left behind.

One particular case struck both the governor and ourselves with special force: a remarkably handsome, fresh-complexioned boy of seventeen, whom the governor remarked might, properly dressed, pass for a nobleman's son. He had already been through a Westminster committal, two years at a Surrey reformatory, and a genuine second chance at a telegraph office in the City, which he had abandoned of his own accord rather than face a reprimand for a minor mistake — drifting back within weeks to his old companions in Spitalfields, and from there to five further prison terms. “If I had a house adjoining the prison where I could learn this boy a trade, and have him under my eye for five years,” the governor told us, with evident and genuine regret, “he would become a useful member of society; but leave him to his old companions, and he will one day be transported.” Asked whether he had any friend at all to take an interest in him, the boy — still smiling in the same light, unconcerned manner he had shown throughout — answered simply that he did not know; he had no father, and a mother in Bethnal Green he had not seen in two years.

Two further interviews, conducted specially in the chief warder's own office, gave us a fuller picture of Holloway's more hardened long-term criminal population. The first, a quiet, pale, gentle-mannered man of thirty-five, had begun his criminal career at ten by stealing from his mother's own till, had committed two burglaries and countless smaller housebreakings over a life he estimated at seventeen years' total imprisonment, and told us plainly he had never married, reasoning — in terms that struck us as a genuinely revealing piece of self-knowledge — that he had never been dishonest enough to deceive an innocent woman into a marriage he knew from the start he could not honour. The second, a lively, quick-witted Scotsman, described a career of burglary spanning nine years, including one

occasion when, fleeing a jewellery-shop robbery gone wrong, he swam fully clothed across the Thames on a winter night to escape pursuit; he estimated his takings over the preceding eighteen months alone at some £1,500, all of it since gambled away.

The Juvenile Wing

The juvenile wing, reserved for boys of seventeen and under, held nineteen such prisoners at the time of our visit, run under the same basic discipline as the adult wings but with boys under fourteen legally exempted from hard labour regardless of their sentence, set instead to oakum-picking or similar lighter work. Refractory cells exist here too, though the warder in charge, Mr. White, told us they stood empty far more often than occupied, discipline generally being maintained with comparatively little formal punishment.

Two boys brought specially before the governor illustrated the wing's more troubling cases. The first, a small, fair Irish lad of about sixteen, timid and soft-spoken, described a stepmother's neglect and his own six prior committals for shop theft, always working with a companion who fled with the stolen goods while he himself, as the more easily searched party, stayed behind empty-handed by design. The second, a sharp, dark-eyed boy of fifteen, already reputed one of the cleverest young pickpockets in London, described four and a half years of active thieving despite what he called, without any apparent irony, a well-behaved family background; he worked Oxford Street specifically for its wealthy female shoppers, sometimes lifting as many as ten purses in a single day, observing shrewdly that fashionable ladies rarely carried much money themselves, while plainer country visitors often carried a great deal.

The Female House of Correction, Holloway

The female branch, opposite the juvenile wing, held sixty-six women across its various employments on the day of our first visit: twelve picking oakum, fourteen at needlework, eight in the laundry, six cleaning, fifteen knitting caps and stockings, and the remainder nursing, sick, or newly received. The reception ward, matron's apartments, and clothing stores followed the same basic pattern

already described for the male prison, though the matron told us candidly that Holloway currently held more "showy" fashionable pickpockets and shoplifters, aged generally between twenty and thirty-five, than she had ever previously seen at once.

The prison school, held in a comfortable room off the first gallery, drew twelve to fifteen women to its adult class the day we visited, most of them, by the teacher's own account, fashionable pickpockets and shoplifters rather than the rougher class of offender found elsewhere. One prisoner in particular — a tall, fair, strikingly handsome woman brought to the prison in a rich flounced black dress, an elegant trimmed bonnet, and military-heeled boots — struck the teacher as looking, in her own words, "like one of the finest ladies in the land," nothing in her dress or bearing suggesting her actual trade; she kept a house in Kensington with a disreputable partner, paying another woman a pound weekly to mind her own child. Beside her sat a twenty-two-year-old pickpocket of genuinely pretty, deceptively gentle appearance, and a nineteen-year-old who burst into tears the moment the matron asked her directly about her offence. A further prisoner, a former barmaid turned pickpocket, sat near a woman who lived, by her own account, as the mistress of a burglar, supporting herself now by robbing drunken men late at night; and a fourth, altogether more respectable in appearance, sat quietly at thirty years old, convicted of forging a bank cheque.

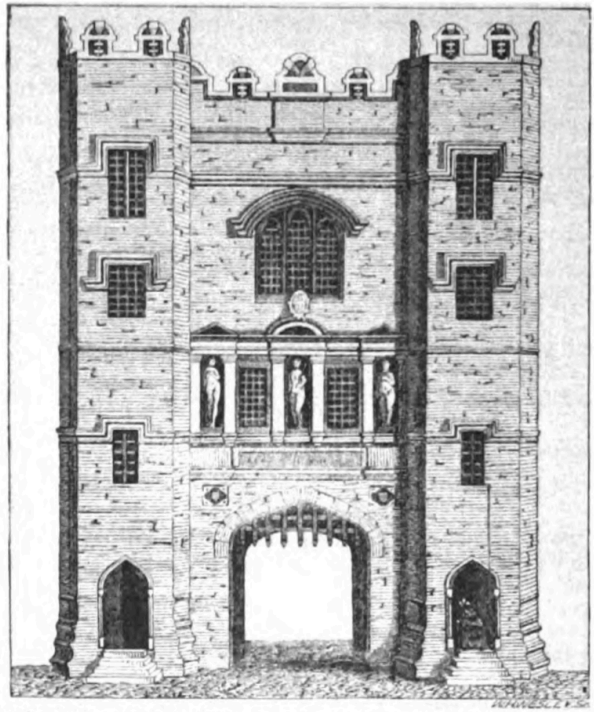
The laundry, a large and airy room, employed a substantial number of women washing, folding, mangling, and ironing for the entire prison, male and female alike, the women here permitted a daily pint of beer as part of their allowance — a genuinely striking exception to the otherwise strict dietary regime found elsewhere. Among the women at work there, the chief warder pointed out a strikingly attractive young pickpocket, said to cohabit with a disreputable man in the City, and an older, plainer woman beside the mangle whom he described, with a certain weary familiarity, as an equally practised hand at the same trade despite her unremarkable appearance — confirming, yet again, a pattern we had noted throughout our tour: that a fashionable, respectable-looking exterior offers no guide whatsoever to the character or history of the woman wearing it.

A single day's return of employment across the whole establishment gives some sense of Holloway's overall scale and organization: 268 men, 66 boys, and 66 women variously occupied, from seventy at mat-making and over a hundred between the tread-wheel and oakum-picking, down through smaller numbers of tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, smiths, bookbinders, basket-makers, and gardeners, to a handful of clerks, nurses, and cooks — nearly 400 people in total, each fitted, so far as the prison's resources allowed, to work suited to their sentence, their health, and, not infrequently, their own previous trade. Taking the whole of our visits together — the governor's genuinely personal attention to individual discharge cases, the schoolmaster's deliberate cultivation of his pupils' trust, the chaplain's careful, low-pressure approach to religious instruction, and a productive labour system considerably more useful than the tread-wheels and hand-cranks we found elsewhere — Holloway struck us, on the whole, as one of the best-managed correctional establishments we encountered in the whole of London, whatever the underlying and largely intractable difficulty of the criminal population it exists to house.

CHAPTER XVII

The Detentional Prisons

NEWGATE: A HISTORY



CHAMBERLAIN'S GATE—A MOST MISERABLE DUNGEON REBUILT BY RICHARD WHITTINGTON, AND CALLED BY HIM NEW GATE.
[*From an old engraving.*]

Chamberlain's Gate — the old dungeon rebuilt by Richard Whittington and named by him New Gate.

Hepworth Dixon, in his own account of London's prisons, called Newgate “massive, dark, and solemn” — one of only half a dozen buildings in the whole sprawl of the Metropolis with a genuine architectural character of its own, matched among London's prisons only by the Tower. Its history stretches back to Henry I, who gave the name “Newgate” to the youngest of the City's four original gates; the jail itself, according to Stow, was rebuilt at the expense of the great Lord Mayor Richard Whittington, whose executors funded the work

after his death under an Act of Henry VI. The old building, fronting down the Old Bailey with an ornamental triumphal archway not unlike Temple Bar, survived the Great Fire of 1666 largely intact — its walls of solid granite outlasting the twelve thousand houses burned to the ground around it — and was repaired in 1672, continuing in service, in much the same wretched condition Howard would later document, for more than a century afterward.

John Howard's surveys of the 1770s found conditions at Newgate no better than at any other English jail of the period: prisoners locked into damp, airless dungeons for fourteen or fifteen hours out of the twenty-four, some cells standing an inch or two deep in water, straw serving for bedding where any bedding existed at all. “The air was offensive beyond expression,” Howard wrote; his own clothes, after visiting, grew so tainted that he could no longer bear a closed carriage and was forced to travel on horseback instead, and jail fever, bred by exactly this neglect, killed more prisoners by his own careful reckoning than every public execution in the kingdom combined. A vicious custom then prevailing in most jails, which Howard also documented, required new arrivals to pay established prisoners a fee known as “garnish” or “chummage” — “pay or strip” — stripping penniless prisoners of what little clothing they had and leaving them to whatever disease followed from sleeping unclothed on bare stone.

Executions themselves, through most of the eighteenth century, took place not at Newgate but at Tyburn, near the site of today's Marble Arch, the condemned drawn there in a public cart along what is now Oxford Street while the bell of St. Sepulchre's tolled and crowds of the lowest orders gathered to watch, sometimes joined, for a sufficiently notorious criminal, by crowds of otherwise respectable citizens making the same journey by carriage. The last Tyburn execution took place in November 1783; from that date, largely at Howard's own urging, executions were moved to a scaffold erected directly in front of Newgate itself. Howard's own tally found 678 executions across the preceding twenty-three years, an average of nearly thirty annually, and argued forcefully that only murder, arson, and violent housebreaking properly warranted the gallows at all — the ordinary highwayman, footpad, or habitual thief, he believed, would be far better sent to a proper penitentiary than to slaughter by

the cartload every six weeks, when most might, with the right training, still be made into useful members of society.

The present building, designed by the City Architect George Dance to Howard's own recommendations, replaced the old jail shortly after his surveys, though it was itself burned during the Gordon Riots of 1780 before repair. Howard, revisiting the nearly finished new prison in 1783, found the builders had "regarded nothing in their plan but the single article of keeping prisoners in safe custody," the rooms once again close and disease-breeding; on a later visit he found some hundred and fifty women crowded into three or four rooms, young girls confined alongside women imprisoned for years, boys as young as twelve held among grown men, and an infirmary holding twenty sick prisoners, several of them lying naked and sore-covered on the bare floor for want of beds. By 1787 Newgate held 490 prisoners, debtors and criminals together; the following year, 613; and the situation continued to deteriorate for a further twenty years, prisoner numbers rising steadily with no real improvement in classification.

Sir Richard Phillips, a City sheriff writing in 1808, described boys of thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen confined for months alongside hardened offenders, and women of every degree of actual guilt — the genuinely depraved alongside those merely awaiting trial, who might yet be acquitted — forced into the same close physical contact at night that he compared, without exaggeration, to the packed decks of a slave ship: rows of women lying eighteen inches apart, head to foot, across wards barely forty-three feet wide. The Honourable Mr. Bennet, writing a decade later to the City's Common Council, found conditions scarcely improved: Newgate, built to hold 427 prisoners, sometimes held as many as 1,200; on a single day in February 1817, eighty-eight people sat under sentence of death simultaneously, most aware they would never actually be executed, whiling away the tedium in "unbecoming merriment" or steady drinking, indistinguishable in mood from prisoners under genuine and imminent sentence. Bribery was routine — turnkeys sold favoured ward assignments for fifty guineas, smuggled in spirits, and admitted women under the pretence they were prisoners' wives for a shilling a night — and Bennet reserved his one word of genuine praise for Mrs.

Elizabeth Fry and the Quaker committee whose work had, by his account, brought real and lasting improvement specifically to the female side of the prison.

Reform came only gradually and by stages after Bennet's letter: the old associated rooms in the wing fronting Newgate Street, essentially unchanged since Howard's day, were finally cleared away in 1858 and replaced with a new wing built on Pentonville lines, and the old female wing was rebuilt in similar style in 1860. The prison's massive outer walls, though, remain exactly as they stood in Howard's own time — a genuinely striking case of a building whose grim exterior has outlasted, by the best part of a century, the wretched interior conditions it once concealed.

The Lodge, the Relics, and the Murderers' Busts

Newgate's outer gate, reached by a short flight of steps from the Old Bailey, stands barely four and a half feet high, iron-spiked along the top and doubly barred above; a second, massive oak door faced with iron, fitted with a Bramah lock whose bolt gives off a distinctive rumbling clang when turned, is shut and further secured with chains and padlocks each night. The lodge beyond, small and sombre despite its iron-grated windows, holds the usual registers of visitors, solicitors, and attorneys, alongside notices forbidding liquor within the walls. A gloomy, gas-lit passage, kept lit even at midday, leads back past the female wing toward the bread-room and kitchen.

The bread-room, doubling as the space where new prisoners have their descriptions taken, holds one of the more genuinely macabre collections we encountered anywhere in London's prisons: a cupboard of old ironwork including the actual leg-irons once worn by the celebrated prison-breaker Jack Sheppard — a fifteen-inch iron bar joined to heavy ankle-clasps, the whole assembly weighing some twenty pounds — and a facsimile of the equally celebrated highwayman Dick Turpin's own irons, thirty-seven pounds of hooped ankle-clasps and connecting chain. Alongside these hung the axe prepared, though never actually used, for the beheading of Arthur Thistlewood and his fellow Cato Street conspirators, convicted of high treason — a genuinely heavy implement, eleven pounds in weight, nine inches across its edge — together with the leather

pinioning-straps used to bind condemned prisoners' arms and legs on the scaffold, several of them, we were told, having secured the wrists of murderers whose stories fill the pages of the old Newgate Calendar.

An adjoining anteroom, leading to the governor's office, holds a small arsenal of pistols, guns, bayonets, and cutlasses against the possibility of a prison outbreak, along with two old paintings — one depicting the first convict ships arriving at Botany Bay, the other a rough self-portrait, painted before his own execution, of a murderer named Davies, condemned for killing his wife at Islington. Above the door and along two further shelves stand three full rows of plaster busts, cast from the bodies of murderers executed at Newgate: Greenacre, his brow narrow and low, his whole face suggesting to the deputy-governor "a man of low, passionate character"; Daniel Good, convicted of murdering and burning the body of a woman he had kept as a mistress, his features somewhat better formed than Greenacre's despite the enormity of his crime; the well-known Courvoisier, executed for murdering Lord William Russell, his lower face notably sensual and his neck thickened, the deputy-governor suggested, by the hanging process itself; and Mullins, more recently executed for the murder of an elderly woman at Stepney, whose bust struck us as carrying a genuinely heartless, calculating expression entirely consistent with a man who had also tried, quite falsely, to have an innocent man charged with his own crime.

The Cells and the Visiting of Prisoners

A typical cell in the new wing measures seven feet by thirteen, nearly nine feet at the crown of its arch, fitted with a folding table, a copper basin whose single tap serves both the basin and the water-closet depending on which way it is turned, and the same triangular shelving and ventilation grating found throughout London's newer prisons. Touring Gallery B, reserved for men already sentenced to penal servitude and awaiting transfer, we found a genuinely striking range of prisoners: a notorious housebreaker, already once transported for four years and now serving fifteen more, whom the deputy-governor called simply "the finest looking fellow we ever saw in a prison" — an educated linguist, elegantly dressed when first brought

in, working steadily at his allotted oakum despite his evident refinement; two postmen, in separate cells, each convicted of rifling letters entrusted to their care, the deputy-governor noting that both worked their oakum steadily enough but lacked the practised speed of the old hands; and, in Gallery C, two men connected to a single case of large-scale embezzlement — one a former cashier to a wholesale City house, ruined by a taste for dancing-rooms and fast living, seated at his table with papers spread before him preparing his own defence, the other a man of some apparent means from Belgravia, accused of obtaining goods worth some £12,000 by fraud, a case the deputy-governor observed was rare only in that it had actually been detected, swindlers of similar means and method being, in his frank assessment, far more common than the criminal statistics ever show. A further cell held a foreign artist of about thirty-five, handsomely dressed, charged with the ignoble offence of attempting to extort money from a woman who had once been his lover; he sat writing steadily, apparently preparing his own case, when we passed.

Newgate permits visits through a glass-roofed passage crossing the courtyard, prisoner and visitor separated by a double wire screen some four feet wide, an officer stationed between to prevent any improper exchange. We watched several such interviews: an elderly, bearded Jewish prisoner, charged with forging Russian banknotes, conversing in broken English with a woman plainly devoted to him and visibly distressed by his situation; a sullen young man under remand for stealing from his employer, visited by a young woman he seemed to care for yet would barely speak to; two young costermongers visited by girls of their own class who showed little apparent concern for their situation; a modest, silver-haired elderly man, charged with embezzlement, conversing steadily with a small, sharp-eyed elderly woman in grey. One scene affected us more than any other: a working man's wife, her eyes already red from weeping, watched her own son — a plain-looking boy of about twelve, charged with passing bad money — brought out to see her; she cried aloud at the sight of him, then turned sharply to anger, warning him not to be difficult with the prison authorities, “as that would break her heart more than anything,” before the visiting bell rang and she was led away, the boy weeping loudly as he was returned to his cell.

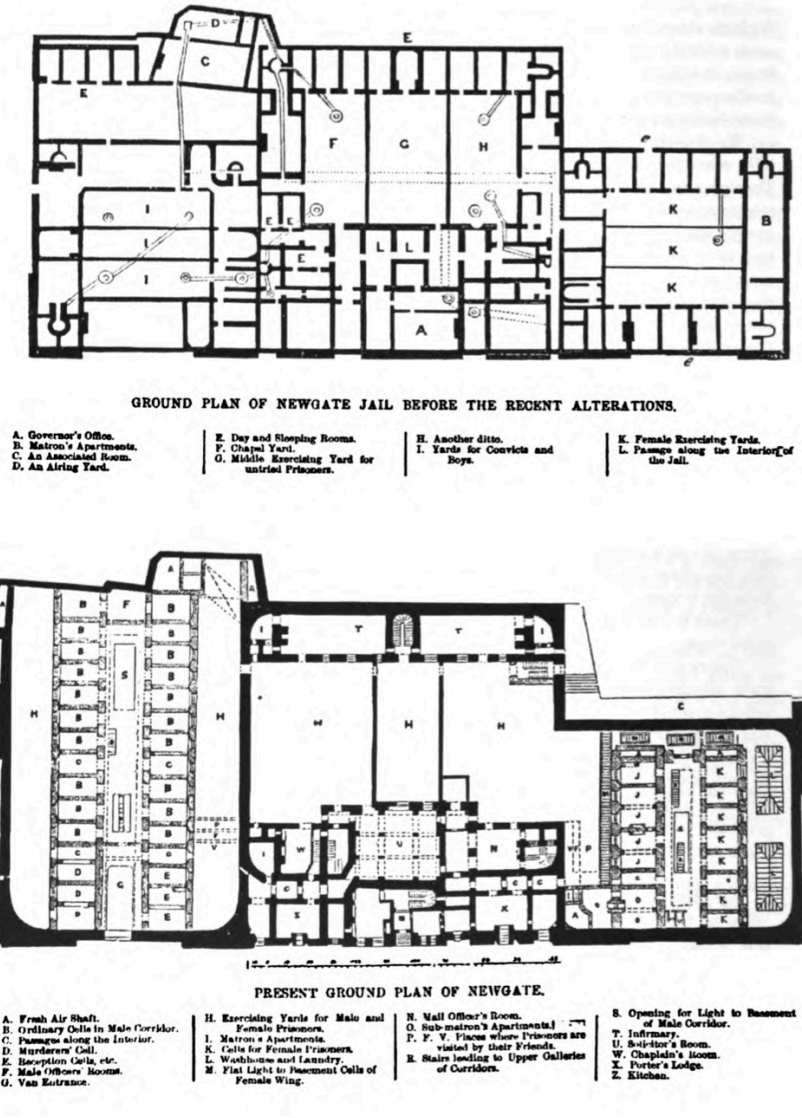
Newgate's reception cells, eleven in number, occupy the basement, alongside three slate baths heated from the same engine-room boilers that warm the prison generally, and a steam-driven fumigating vessel that cleanses vermin from prisoners' clothing in a quarter of an hour without the least damage to the fabric itself — a genuine improvement, we thought, on the cruder brimstone-fumigation still practised at several other London prisons. Six dark punishment cells, admitting no light whatsoever though well ventilated, complete the basement; the deputy-governor told us plainly that punishment here is rare, confined mostly to insolence toward officers or prisoners deliberately spoiling their allotted oakum rather than picking it, and that only two men had occupied the dark cells in the two years preceding our visit — a genuinely low figure, by the standards of every other London prison we had toured.

The Murderers' Cells and Burying Ground

Two cells in the new wing, each roughly the size of two ordinary cells, are reserved specifically for condemned murderers, watched day and night by a dedicated warder; prisoners here are given no knife with their food, which is cut into small pieces in the kitchen beforehand, purely to prevent any attempt at self-harm before the sentence can be carried out. At the time of our visit, only one man had occupied either cell since the new wing's completion: Mullins, convicted of murdering Mrs. Emsley at Stepney through the work of the celebrated Inspector Thornton of Scotland Yard — a wretched-looking, middle-aged man, once a member of the Irish constabulary, who the deputy-governor told us bore his confinement with a quiet, orderly composure typical, in his experience, of most men in the same desperate situation.

Beyond the murderers' cells, past the male exercising grounds, a long paved passage running behind the female wing leads eventually to the Sessions House — and this same stretch of pavement, over which every condemned prisoner passes on his way to and from the dock at the Old Bailey, is also the burial ground of every murderer executed at Newgate. Sunken flagstones here and there mark where the ground has settled, perhaps from the slow decay of the bodies beneath; along the flanking walls, single initials mark each grave —

G for Greenacre, G for Good, M for Mullins, L for Lani — a plain, unremarkable passage that carries, once its actual purpose is understood, a genuinely tragic weight far beyond its ordinary appearance.



Ground plan of Newgate Jail, before and after the recent alterations.

The Exercising Grounds

Newgate maintains five exercising grounds in total, four for the male prison and one for the female. The main square ground, some fifty feet by forty-eight, sits hemmed in by the old prison's dark walls, forty feet high in places and topped with iron spikes; a pump here draws on an artesian well beneath the yard. We watched several groups of prisoners exercise here in their own clothes rather than prison dress, since most were still awaiting trial rather than serving a sentence: a group of five men, all of Jewish extraction but of notably varied appearance, charged together with forging Russian banknotes, one of them the same intelligent-looking linguist we had already noted elsewhere in the prison, whom we took, watching him move among the others, to be the actual leader of the group whatever his formal role in the forgery itself.

A separate, narrower court held boys awaiting trial: a knock-kneed, sinister-looking boy of fourteen, charged with obtaining money by a forged order; a genuinely innocent-looking schoolboy of only ten, under remand for stealing a glazier's diamond; a genteel fifteen-year-old accused of robbing his own employer, a Regent Street hosier; and a shabbily dressed boy who had attempted to hang himself in the kitchen where he worked after a girl he loved chose another man — a case whose gentle, quiet countenance made the desperate act genuinely hard to credit. A further group, older men awaiting transfer to government prisons under sentence of penal servitude, included a convicted burglar, a once-prosperous solicitor ruined by fraud and fast living, a man of colour recently returned from four years' penal servitude and now charged again with passing bad money, and a sixteen-year-old named Reeves, charged with murdering his own sister in Drury Lane — a robust, fair, notably intelligent-looking boy whose modest, ordinary demeanour the deputy-governor believed reflected genuine provocation rather than any settled violent character.

The Sessions House and the Old Bailey

The Sessions House stands immediately adjoining Newgate, its older wing uniform in appearance with the prison itself; where a single criminal court once sat here, the business is now divided among three, with a fourth occasionally convened in the Grand Jury room when needed. The old courtroom, barely fifty feet square, seats the Recorder and Common Serjeant on a cushioned crimson bench beneath a carved wooden canopy bearing the Royal arms, a ceremonial Sword of Justice suspended beneath it during sittings; the dock stands directly opposite, a plain enclosure thirteen feet by nineteen, reached by a staircase connecting directly to the cells below. Every class of serious offence — forgery, arson, coining, manslaughter, murder — is tried here, prisoners brought up from Newgate itself and held in cells beneath the court until called to answer their indictment.

The deputy-governor, who had personally witnessed twenty-nine executions and sat through the trials of most of the men involved, offered us a genuinely candid assessment of the murderers he had known over the years. “Some are callous and ruffian-like in demeanour,” he told us, “but others are of more gentle and peaceable disposition, whom you heartily pity, as you are convinced from all you see about them that they had been incited to the commission of their crime through intemperance or other incidental causes, foreign to their general character. We find those to be worst who premeditated their crimes for gain.” He described William Palmer, tried for poisoning John Parsons Cooke to cover gambling debts, as “one of the most diabolical characters among penal offenders I ever saw,” a gentlemanlike, strong-nerved man trained originally as a surgeon; and Mrs. Manning, hanged alongside her far weaker-willed husband for the murder of her own lover, as “the most callous of females” he had encountered, a former lady's maid to the Duchess of Sutherland whose strength of will had, in his account, dragged her more easily led husband into the crime alongside her.

He recalled, too, Greenacre's execution in 1837 — the murderer's dismembered victim scattered across several parts of the Metropolis, and some 16,000 spectators gathered to watch him hang, householders opposite the prison charging three guineas a

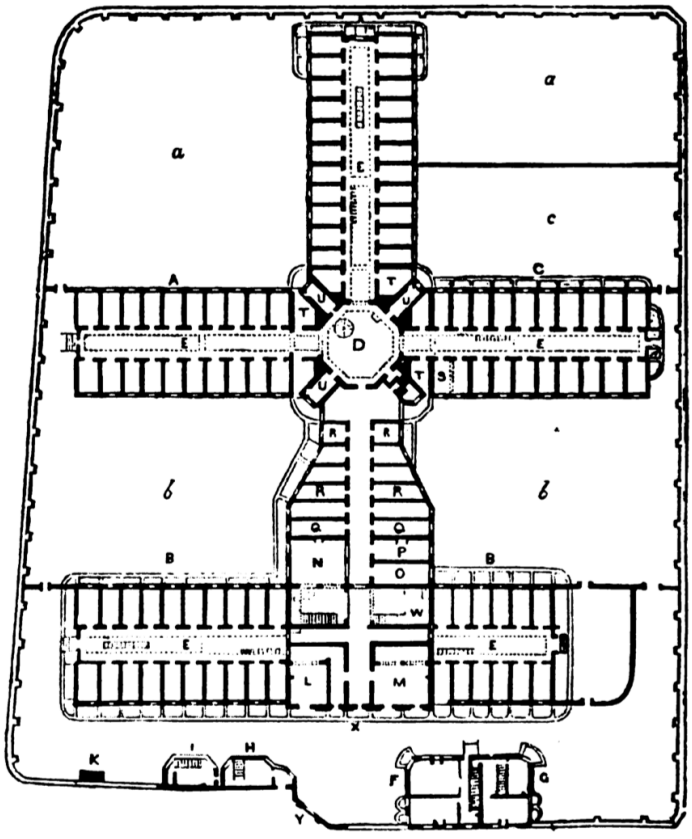
window and two sovereigns a rooftop seat for the view — and the schoolmaster Hocker, tried in 1845 for murdering a Mr. Delarue at Hampstead, whose defiant bravado held firm right up until the morning of his own execution, when the first stroke of the prison bell summoning him to the scaffold broke his composure entirely; his face changed colour, he collapsed into his attendants' arms, and had to be carried bodily to the drop and held upright by the officers until the bolt itself was drawn. The law restricting capital punishment to murder and high treason alone dates only from 1836; before that, the deputy-governor's own execution records, kept since 1816, show men hanged for cutting and wounding, burglary, forgery, and passing counterfeit coin, with as many as eighteen or nineteen executed together on a single occasion in the 1780s.

The scaffold itself, he explained, is built only in the small hours immediately before an execution, workmen beginning around one in the morning and finishing by six, the surrounding crowd-barriers generally erected the same Monday morning the execution itself takes place. The condemned hangs for a full hour before being cut down, examined by the prison's medical officer to confirm death, and buried within the prison walls that same afternoon — a plaster cast of the head and face generally taken first, for the same small collection of busts we had already seen in the bread-room. “The murderers generally sleep well on the night before their execution,” he told us, a fact that struck us, on reflection, as saying a good deal about the particular temperament capable of committing murder in the first place.

The County House of Detention, Clerkenwell

The House of Detention at Clerkenwell, its foundation stone laid by the Marquis of Salisbury in May 1846, holds prisoners from Middlesex and the metropolitan police courts on the north side of the river, excluding the City itself: men and women on remand or awaiting trial at the Middlesex Sessions, those held for want of bail, army deserters, and cabmen charged under the Hackney Carriage Act. New arrivals, brought by police van from the various courts, are searched, bathed, and registered in the

reception ward before being distributed to their assigned corridors — the first and second divisions holding remand and Sessions prisoners, the third holding deserters, sureties cases, and cabmen specifically.



GROUND PLAN OF COUNTY HOUSE OF DETENTION, CLERKENWELL.

A. & C. Male Wings.
B. Female Wings
D. Central Hall
E. Passages in the Interior.
F. Governor's House.
G. Garden attached to the same.
H. Porter's Lodge.
I. K. Offices attached to it.
L. Entry to Female Corridors.
M. Clerk's Office.
N. Warder's Mess-room.
O P. Waiting-rooms.
Q. Attorney's Rooms
R. Reception Cells.
S. T. Cells for the Refractory.
W. Governor's Office.
X. Entry to Main building.
Y. Large Prison Gate.
a. b. c. Exercising Yards.

Ground plan of the County House of Detention, Clerkenwell.

The central hall rises in a lofty octagonal dome, its corridors floored in plain stone rather than the polished asphalte we had seen at Holloway, giving the whole building a slightly more severe, military character; officers here wear the same three-sabre brass

shield at the collar we had noted at Coldbath Fields. We attended chapel here on one occasion and found the scene genuinely different from every other London prison we had visited: since so many prisoners here are held only on remand, awaiting trial rather than already convicted, they attend chapel in their own clothes rather than any uniform prison dress — giving the congregation a far more individually distinct, unmasked character than the same scene elsewhere. We noted a well-dressed man with carefully groomed auburn whiskers, evidently once a person of some means; a stout man in corduroy; a silver-haired gentleman in a worn brown overcoat who had plainly seen better days; a Polish exile with a grim, set expression; and, among the boys occupying the front pews, a strikingly handsome, fair-haired twelve-year-old whose open, winning face made his presence among the "little felons" around him genuinely difficult to reconcile.

VISITING THE CELLS AT CLERKENWELL

Touring the male corridors with the chief warder, we found a genuinely remarkable range of individual stories, several of which struck us as capturing, better than any general description could, the sheer human variety passing daily through a prison built purely to hold people awaiting trial rather than serving any settled sentence. One cell held a poor coloured seaman from Halifax, Nova Scotia, cast into destitution and petty crime after the ship that employed him was sold off from under him in a foreign port; another held a sharp-featured Sheffield apprentice, no more than fourteen, who had fled a cruel master by boarding a London-bound train and bluffing his way past the ticket-collector, only to be arrested on arrival — a genuinely sympathetic case, we thought, of a boy failed by the very apprenticeship system meant to train him honestly.

One scene affected us more than any other we witnessed in any London prison: a fine-featured, curly-haired boy of about twelve, poorly dressed and clearly half-starved, held for stealing from a till at the urging of two older boys who had made him their tool and then escaped detection themselves. His mother, a careworn, poverty-stricken woman of about thirty-five, arrived to visit him

while we were present, and broke down entirely at the sight of her son — the boy himself bursting into tears at her evident anguish, the mother nearly collapsing against the cell doorway before being led away, silent with a grief too deep, it seemed, for further tears.

Other cells held stranger, more particular histories. An old, bald-headed farmer from Colchester, genuinely comfortable in his own circumstances, had travelled to London on what he called a sentimental errand — tricked by local pranksters, forty years after a broken courtship, into believing his long-lost love lived at a particular London address, and arrested attempting to force his way into the house against its occupants' wishes; he arrived, by his own account, with £17 in his pocket and every intention of a joyful reunion. A once-notable public figure — a man the author recalled, from his own boyhood, addressing a Scottish parliamentary constituency and publishing a modestly regarded book on the French Revolution — now sat in a cell here, twelve months already served for threatening a Member of Parliament and a further twelve months added for want of bail, his once-promising bearing entirely given over to what we could only describe as settled melancholy; we found the transformation, seeing him again after so many years, genuinely difficult to reconcile with the ambitious young candidate we remembered. A retired Grenadier Guardsman, still strikingly fine in appearance despite his years, sat confined for assaulting his own wife, unable to find security for his future conduct; a young Irish artillery deserter, now working as a cooper, had grown weary of civilian life and voluntarily surrendered himself to be returned to his old regiment, two fellow artillerymen arriving some days later to escort him back; and a Polish refugee, once a soldier in Poland's own army before exile at Portsmouth, now a shoemaker, sat charged with trying to force his way into a meeting of the Polish Refugee Association.

The prison's padded cell, we learned, had recently held a man suffering delirium tremens, who had torn the wire screen from his cell door and wrenched off the gas fittings in a frenzied attempt to escape; and a set of special cells, stripped of gas fittings and lit only through glass set out of a prisoner's reach, exist specifically for those committed after attempting suicide — one such occupant,

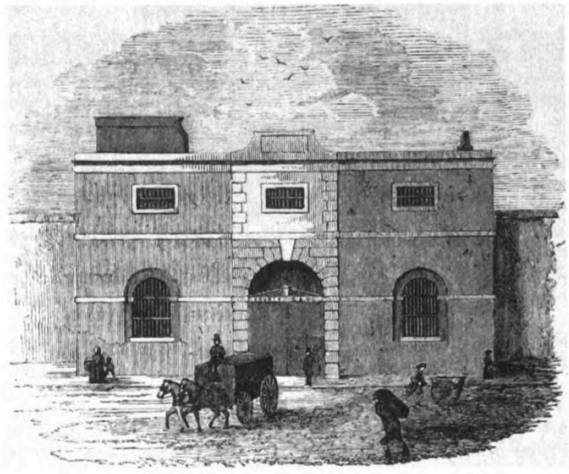
a strong-built labouring man in his fifties, told us on our visit that he had "recovered his spirits, and was beginning to feel in a more hopeful and bright condition of mind." The general pattern we found here, across dozens of individual cases, was of a prison holding an extraordinarily wide cross-section of London's population — far wider, in our experience, than any of the settled correctional prisons we had already described, since detention before trial draws in, indiscriminately, the genuinely desperate, the merely unlucky, and the occasionally, quite strikingly, eccentric.

The Female Branch at Clerkenwell

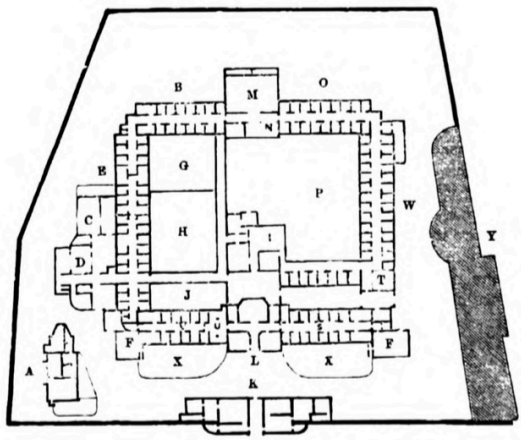
The female prison occupies both wings fronting the main building, connected in a continuous upper gallery over the central entrance hall. Its reception ward, laundry, and general cell arrangements followed the same basic pattern we found at Newgate and Holloway; the female warder told us the branch comprised six wards in total, holding 112 cells between them. On the day we recorded a formal census, the whole establishment held 236 prisoners — 166 men and 70 women, along with four children — split between those awaiting trial, those on remand, those held for want of bail, and a small number of cabmen and deserters.

The prison's own annual returns for the year ending September 1860 give some sense of its scale: 5,645 male and 2,141 female commitments across the year, the great majority — well over half in both cases — already known to some London prison from a previous committal, a pattern consistent with everything we have already observed about the settled, recurring character of habitual offending. Literacy proved strikingly poor even by the standards of London's other prisons: nearly a quarter of male prisoners and almost a third of female prisoners could neither read nor write at all, with only a small handful — 90 men, 30 women — rated as having received anything approaching a superior education.

HORSEMONGER LANE JAIL



EXTERIOR OF HORSEMONGER LANE JAIL.



GROUND PLAN OF HORSEMONGER LANE JAIL.

A. Infirmary.
B. Boys' Cells.
C. Laundry.
D. Women's Baths.
E. Women's side.
F. Visitors' Room.
G. Boys' Airing Yard.
H. Women's Airing Yard.
I. Kitchen, etc.
J. Female Debtors' Yard.
K. Offices.
L. Governor's House.
M. Chapel.
N. School-room.
O. Cells.
P. Men's Airing Yard.
Q. Court.
S. Master Debtors.
T. Men's Baths
U. Female Debtors.
V. Common Debtors.
W. Men's Side.
X. Airing Courts.
Y. Sessions' House.

Exterior of Horsemonger Lane Jail, and its ground plan.

Horsemonger Lane, the Surrey county's own detentional prison, stands behind a dingy brick wall reached by a narrow lane off Stone's End, its flat-roofed gatehouse doubling, grimly, as the site of the county's public executions — the scaffold itself stored on a staircase

directly above the entrance passage. Beyond the gate, the governor's house stands centrally, debtors' wings flanking the courtyard on either side: the right-hand wing for debtors supported by friends or their own means, the left for county-court and sheriff's-process debtors unable to support themselves. We found the debtors in the right wing, on the whole, notably better dressed and more at ease than those in the left, several carrying themselves, we thought, with something of the idle, unhurried air of visitors at a fashionable watering-place rather than men actually confined for debt.

The criminal prison proper stands behind the debtors' wings in a roughly square arrangement, reached through an archway opposite the Sessions House. Its reception ward, bath-rooms, kitchen, and general cell furnishing followed patterns by now familiar from every other London prison we had described, though the corridors themselves struck us as distinctly different in character — low, dingy, and only about twelve feet high, groin-vaulted but considerably more cramped than the lofty galleries of Pentonville or Holloway, giving the whole establishment a more homely, provincial feel than any other London prison we visited, Wandsworth's severe military precision least of all resembled here.

Chapel, Exercise, and the Cells

Horsemonger Lane's chapel seats debtors, remand prisoners, and convicted felons in strict order of entry — debtors first, into long open seats at the front; remanded and untried prisoners next, into the body of the chapel; convicted prisoners last, into elevated separate boxes at the back — with the female prisoners occupying a gallery above, entirely out of the men's sight. Three paved exercising grounds serve the prison: a large one for adult men, a smaller one for boys, and a third for women. We found the adult ground occupied by a genuinely mixed company on one visit — common felons and ragged beggars alongside three soldiers, cavalry and infantry both, charged with burglary — and the boys' ground holding a small cluster of young pickpockets and petty thieves, among them a fair-haired boy dressed, we noted, in the distinctive garb reserved for misdemeanants convicted specifically of begging.

Touring the cells, we found much the same range of individual stories that had struck us at Clerkenwell. One cell held a West Indian sailor from Kingston, Jamaica, charged with stealing two pigs, lying in a state of evident destitution, a chocolate-coloured counterpane pulled over him and a handkerchief bound round his temples; he spoke tolerable English, told us he had served as an able seaman aboard a man-of-war, and had never before been imprisoned in his life. Another held a young clerk, accused of a serious offence against a young girl, protesting his innocence with evident sincerity before ultimately being convicted and sent on to Wandsworth for twelve months; he told us his mother lived at Gravesend, and clung to his protestations of innocence right up to his conviction. A Canadian-born costermonger, cheated of an inheritance early in life by an uncle entrusted with his father's property, complained bitterly of being "hunted from pillar to post" by police who recognized him on sight as a known thief regardless of what he actually did for a living — fined four times in a single week merely for selling fruit in the Borough — and admitted he had once attempted to strangle himself in despair during an earlier stay at Wandsworth, though he seemed, by the time we met him, considerably more resigned to his situation, and even allowed that some police officers, in his experience, behaved decently enough, whatever the cruelty of others.

The prison's padded room, condemned cell, and several "strong" cells for prisoners who had already attempted escape or self-harm followed patterns we had by now seen repeated at every detentional prison in London; the condemned cell itself, furnished with two iron bedsteads and watched constantly day and night whenever occupied, had held Dr. Smethurst briefly while he awaited trial for poisoning Miss Bankes, and, more recently, Youngman himself before his execution. The chief warder recalled only one execution during his own eight years at the prison — Youngman, hanged in September 1860 for murdering his mother, sweetheart, and brother at Walworth, a sullen, resolute young man of about twenty-four. Prisoner numbers here, the chief warder told us, fluctuated considerably: as few as 90 in a quiet October, as many as 206 by late December, and 138 on the particular Saturday of our own visit — a volatility he attributed simply to the ordinary rhythm of the Sessions calendar, remand

numbers swelling and easing as each new round of trials approached and cleared.

The Infirmary and the Female Prison

Horsemonger Lane's infirmary, a detached building at the side of the main courtyard, holds separate wards for debtors and criminals — the debtors' ward entirely empty at the time of our visit, the criminal ward holding only three patients, one recovering from an abscess and another from the amputation of a leg. Each larger ward comfortably accommodates ten or twelve patients on iron bedsteads, the smaller rooms four apiece, all reasonably well lit and ventilated behind their heavily barred windows.

The female prison, reached through a separate courtyard behind the debtors' wing, holds nine reception cells and four main divisions — one for convicted women, one for those on remand or awaiting trial, one for women summarily convicted of lesser offences, and the reception ward itself. The matron told us frankly of the genuinely wretched physical condition in which some women arrive: “Some prisoners are in such a disgusting condition that we have to cut their hair off, and others are covered with dreadful eruptions of the skin. Such parties are of different ages, from thirteen to sixty, but most of them are young. Many of the young girls are afflicted with horrid disease, and in a sad condition. We have such frequently remanded for a few days or weeks.” The prison's teacher, Miss Moseley, visits every woman unable to read individually in her own cell, since most stay less than three months — often long enough, she told us, to progress from total illiteracy to a competent reading of the New Testament, the younger prisoners proving, as everywhere else we found, the most consistently capable pupils.

Taking the whole of this chapter's three institutions together — Newgate's grim historical weight and its genuinely remarkable collection of relics and murderers' busts, Clerkenwell's extraordinarily wide cross-section of London humanity awaiting trial, and Horsemonger Lane's smaller, more provincial, almost homely character — we came away persuaded that London's detentional prisons, taken as a class, offer a more genuinely representative window onto the city's population at large than any of the settled

correctional or convict establishments described elsewhere in this book. A convict prison holds only those crime has already claimed for good; a detentional prison, by contrast, holds a far wider and more unpredictable sample of ordinary human misfortune, ordinary human folly, and, not infrequently, ordinary human innocence still awaiting the chance to be proven.