

VII.—*The Sherborn Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women.*
By Alfred Webb.

[Read Tuesday, 15th June, 1897.]

FOR reasons which it is not here necessary to state, the subject of prisons, imprisonment, and prison discipline, has claimed somewhat of my attention.

During a late visit to Tasmania I visited some of the old convict centres. It was interesting to compare with the present my recollections of over forty years ago, when, during the height of the convict regime, I resided in a neighbouring colony. Tasmania is now one of the most crimeless and orderly communities in the world. Amidst the lovely scenery of Port Arthur it was difficult to realize that I stood in what had once been a veritable hell upon earth, where children even, through the severity of the system to which they were subjected, were led to commit suicide. The leaves blow about the empty corridors of the great prisons. The lizards creep in and out of the quadruple doored cells into which neither light nor sound could enter. The large lunatic asylum that fitly crowned the eminence overlooking the other establishments is now being turned to philanthropic purposes. "They treated us like devils, and they made us devils," remarked an old convict speaking of the system to me. "Just in proportion as we humanize imprisonment we lessen crime," was the observation of a police magistrate, who had been an underling in the service in the old days. Such of the old convicts as survive and are past labour are gathered into charitable institutions, free to come and go as they like. The principal prison in the colony, that at Hobart, is a model of good order and humane discipline. The inmates are engaged in associated labour. Flowers brighten the courts and corridors. The spirit of the place breathes reform and hope rather than revenge and despair.

In California I visited the great St. Quentin prison for male convicts.

But it is to an establishment nearer home I would briefly direct your attention—the Massachusetts Reformatory Prison for Women, at Sherborn, not many miles outside Boston. This prison for women, managed and officered by women, is by far the most interesting and cheering institution of the kind I have ever visited. Much of the remarkable success of the establishment is doubtless due to the capacity and strong individuality of the superintendent, Mrs. Ellen C. Johnson, a lady of independent means, who some years ago was induced to accept the position she now holds.

Sherborn was established twenty-one years ago, and into it were collected, under female management, the larger part of the female convicts in the State of Massachusetts undergoing sentences of at least one year's duration. From the first the experiment has been a success. There were when I visited it a year ago about 336 within its walls. Here, as in all other punitive, reformatory, and charitable institutions of the United States, one realizes how great is the burden cast upon that country in bearing the outcome of the sins and sorrows

of Europe. Only 194 of the inmates in the institution were born in the United States; and of these only 47 were of United States parentage. The buildings, somewhat in the Gothic style, stand on a farm of 400 acres. They are antiquated according to modern ideas of what a prison should be, and Mrs. Johnson has had some difficulty in adapting them to her requirements. We were struck by the lowness of the surrounding walls and a general appearance of a charitable rather than a punitive institution. The windows are guarded by strong open wire netting, instead of bars, and from all, except a few punishment cells for extreme cases, are to be had views over the surrounding country.

Mrs. Johnson thus expressed to a late visitor the principles upon which she works:—

“It would be easy to grow sentimental over the woes of women in any state of life. But this is a temptation to be resisted, since nothing is more misleading than sentiment uninformed by knowledge and unrestrained by common sense. It is better to forget that these sad-eyed, black-haired girls of all ages, from 15 to 70, in blue check print dresses, marching with folded arms, in single file, up and down the long corridors at Sherborn are women, and to think of them only as human beings. Still more important is it to forget that they have been convicted of crime—to lose the sense of their criminality in pity for their misfortune. Above all I want to know nothing of their past. It does not concern me. Let them keep their own secrets. I would rather help them to bury in the oblivion of eternal forgetfulness everything that ought to be hid from sight, so that it might never be resurrected, even in their own recollection. Here they are. The prison door has closed upon the dismal record of their temptations and their trials. Shall it be to them the door of the tomb, the portal of a living death, or a door of hope, through which they may catch a glimpse of a new and higher life, after the purification of sorrow shall have done its appointed work? Few of them are above the social rank of mill hands or domestic servants. One need not know their individual histories to know what has brought them there. Neglect, brutality on the part of others; in themselves, disobedience, self will, laziness, the love of dress, the want of education, poverty, animal appetites and passions cultivated and not held in check, contempt for the teachings of religion, restlessness, discontent, a roving disposition, curiosity to see life, social ambition and the desire of a career, evil associations, the lack of a home or of a good home; in general, the want of training in the power of self control. Here they come to have the nonsense taken out of them, and to be taught what they need to know. To be reformed is to be made over. Can it be done? Are they past hope? That is a question which none can answer until after trial of all the approved methods of reformation which have succeeded in other cases by an expert in human nature, with faith in its almost infinite possibilities, and the skill to apply reformatory methods to individuals in accordance with their personal qualities. The general principle applies, that all the conditions of a criminal life must be completely negated by those of a reformatory prison in order to obtain any valuable result.”

The prison is managed throughout on the principle of reward rather than punishment, of kindness rather than severity, of drawing out the affections and cultivating the responsibilities. The strictest discipline prevails. The place is a model of order, cleanliness and neatness. The inmates rise from class to class according to their conduct. These grades are distinguished by slight differ-

ences in dress, the highest being entitled to wear a red bow: a little badge distinguishes those who have joined a temperance club. The upper class pass portions of their evenings in a neatly decorated parlour or club-room.

Mrs. Johnson says that in extreme cases of insubordination, destroying State property or threatening life, are punished by what is known as "the solitary." No restraint is imposed beyond the mere confinement, and the fare is bread and water. The prisoner is released as soon as she asks to see the Superintendent, and declares her penitence and her determination to conform to rules, this state of mind being precisely the object aimed at in the whole system of prison treatment. The "dark solitary" is a punishment seldom called for. Experience teaches that physical causes have always to be taken into account, and are responsible for many of the outbreaks among female prisoners.

The chances are that a fresh arrival will be taken to the sewing room, where she will be trained in sitting still and keeping silence and attending to her work, which is the initial practice in self control. After acquiring the use of the needle, if she does not already possess it, she may be put on the sewing-machine. There are 120 of these in use, operated by steam-power. No woman is required to execute a given quantity of work, but what she does must be perfect. Quality not quantity is the desideratum. The only industries pursued are those in which women may properly engage, and in which they will have a probable opportunity of finding employment in their homes or elsewhere—sewing, knitting, housekeeping, and (in summer) light farm work, such as any farmer's wife or daughter might do at a pinch. The one exception is silk culture. Those who are below a certain standard of education must attend school

"The underlying purpose of the choice of occupations," I quote from the observations of a late visitant, "is to cultivate in them a love of home, of nature, and of animals. Much attention is paid to the raising of pets—calves, pigs, and poultry; and in the upper division a profusion of canary birds fly at large. Great reliance is also placed upon the refining influence of flowers and floriculture. One woman who insisted that she had no intention of earning money in any way but one, is believed to have been redeemed by her love for a calf of which she was given the care."

Having thrown together these preliminary observations, I shall proceed with my notes of our visit to the place, very much in the form in which they were jotted down the day following in a letter home.

We found Mrs. Johnson a bright, pleasant, capable woman, a lady in every sense, with, as may be supposed, considerable decision of manner—a personality, the appeals or commands of which it would be difficult to withstand, in anything in which one's better nature suggested she was in the right, or was best capable of judging as to the right. Shortly after our introduction she said: "I try to interest the women in affairs outside their daily routine. Last night I mentioned to some of them that I expected visitors from Dublin, and asked whether any of them came thence. One held

up her hand. Whilst I am attending to business prior to showing you round, I will send her to you that you may speak to her." With the exception of this poor woman, we were not encouraged to communicate with any of the inmates. As we passed doors opening from the corridors upon grass plots, pet sheep and lambs came crying to be noticed. They were evidently on good terms with Mrs. Johnson's collie dog. She avoids as much as possible knowing what the prisoners are committed for. Of those under her charge she remarked: "They are naturally good—it is our [society's] fault that they are here." At times she finds it beneficial to visit obdurate cases in their rooms in the quiet of the night. We were ushered into a room laid out with tables on which silkworms were feeding.—"To-morrow I shall have every woman in the place in here to explain to and interest them in the various stages of silk culture." We were shown into one of the solitary "cells" to which, for a month, women are committed who are returned for a second term. It was an airy, boarded, cheerful room about ten feet square. The inmate was engaged at needlework, and rose as we entered. Mrs. Johnson apologised to her for introducing strangers with the words: "I desired to show a punishment cell as occupied." "Ah! how is it that you are in here a second term," she exclaimed, on recognising the woman. "Now, don't tell me your offence! Why I feel like a laundress on whose hands a piece of work had been returned as badly done." The woman burst into tears and murmured: "I had a good place but was tempted!" "Ah, drink I suppose! It is the rum sellers and not these poor people who should be in here. I would die happy if they were put into prison under my charge for a year." To avoid the danger of arousing or renewing in the inmates a taste for alcohol, the doctor is desired not to include any in her prescriptions.

The nursery, a cheerful, airy, sweet room, was an interesting sight. There were under the care of prisoner nurses twenty-five babies and infants, some of them coloured, who had been born in the establishment, or whose mothers were nursing when committed. The mothers are allowed to see them for a few minutes twice a day. The care of the children is found beneficial in softening hard and obdurate cases. We asked how long the children were kept, and were told that by law they were, when eighteen months old, sent on to a charitable institution:—"But when the mothers do well, I do not feel bound to remember their ages," added Mrs. Johnson.

A majority of the prisoners are Catholics. Mrs. Johnson's opinion is that "It is best to use for reformation the most powerful instruments to our hands, and the principal of these is the religion in which prisoners have been educated." A fitting altar has been supplied for the church; and the reading desk for the Protestant service, which was previously screwed down in front of the altar, has been put on castors so that it can be wheeled aside during Mass. Oil paintings of the Nativity, and of Christ and the Woman taken in Adultery, have been set up. In the centre is a Madonna. Mrs. Johnson told us much concerning her methods as we sat in the large airy room used as a church, commanding pleasant views.

Portraits of Elizabeth Fry, and the well-known engraving of her reading to prisoners in Newgate, were amongst other adornments on the walls. One lesson above all others, the superintendent desires to impress upon those under her charge—that we on earth are one family, with common duties, and a common Father. She herself decorates the altar for and sits through the Catholic services, and the Protestant prisoners are encouraged and in reality do so likewise; whilst, on the other hand, the Catholics make no objection to attending the Protestant service. Catechetical instruction and Bible lessons are of course given separately. The Catholic clergyman attends as often as he thinks proper. Nothing sectarian or controversial is permitted in sermons. A choir of Protestants sing at the Catholic service, and of Catholics at the Protestant service, the hymns being selected as expressing common feelings and common hopes. We saw but one text on the walls in the Church: “God is Love.”

Everything is done to keep up and cultivate the family affections. Visits are allowed under proper restrictions. A letter may be written—in the earlier portion of a sentence, once a month; and later, once a week. If I understood rightly, the receipt of any number of letters is permitted, so long as they are inspected. Upon entering, formal permission for this inspection is required from each prisoner. If not accorded, all letters received are stopped and handed to her unopened at the termination of sentence. The better to fit them for after life the inmates are put to learn new occupations, not those at which they may be already adepts. Of plain food they are given as much as they care to eat; but any left on the plate is brought forward at next meal. (At all poorhouses and prisons that we visited in the United States the inmates are given as much as they wish for of the simple food provided.) The sewing machine room was a sight—the neatly dressed, silent workers, the piles of snowy work, the rush of the power-driven machines.

Greater efficiency than in similar institutions at home with us is secured by the payment of much higher salaries. Mrs. Johnson receives £400 a year (I count the dollar at 4s.) and she has under her 40 female assistants at salaries, including rations, of from £50 to £200. In the out department are twelve men occupying positions as engineers, firemen, carpenters, and the like, receiving from £100 to £250 a year. Under Mrs. Johnson's management the charge per prisoner has been considerably reduced. It stood last year at £22 each. Thirty per cent. of the cost of support is derived from the sale of work and farm produce. She has more applications for servants and domestic helps than she can supply.

It is greatly to the credit of the State of Massachusetts, that it has allowed neither sectional nor trade jealousies to stand in the way of the full exercise of that most beneficent of all means for the reformation of criminals—training in the industrial arts. There are few more hateful forms of narrow-minded selfishness than those which, here and elsewhere, discourage such training.

There is in the prison a library of 1,200 well selected volumes. Each woman has a pocket in her dress in which she carries a book

with which to utilize odd moments. In connection with the establishment is a Government department for aiding and advising discharged prisoners.

The peculiarity of the discipline is that it is much more distinctively moral than physical. It has been well said that a socially uncultivated man or woman has no weapon to oppose to the perfect self-possession of a thoroughly well-bred woman.

"This is why" says a recent writer, "every officer and employee of a woman's prison, should be, in manner at least, a lady, with complete control over her temper, countenance, words, tones of voice, and gestures. A higher power still is that of kindness, patience under great provocation, manifest desire to be of service, a disposition to appreciate what merits praise, and to ignore as far as possible that which calls for censure, willingness to meet a social inferior more than half way, heart going out to meet heart. Disciplinary punishment there must be, but it should be inflicted more in sorrow than in anger. With a graded system (such as prevails at Sherborn) loss of marks is the only penalty which requires, in the great majority of cases, to be imposed.

Such are Mrs. Johnson's qualifications—such are the methods she employs. "And what would become of the prison without you?" we asked, as we left. "Oh! there are plenty to be had as good if not better," was the rejoinder. I do not believe this to be case.

There were during last year seven pardons granted. The reasons for these, as given in report, so strikingly illustrate the humane principles applied to punishment in Massachusetts, that I feel tempted to quote them.

"Margaret A. Foley. Convicted of stubbornness, Municipal Court, South Boston, May 24, 1895. Sentenced to the Reformatory Prison for Women for one year. Pardoned Oct. 10, 1895, upon the recommendation of the Commissioners of Prisons. During her imprisonment she had been quiet and well-behaved. Since her sentence her mother has died, and her father, who is nearly blind, left without a housekeeper. The pardon committee were of the opinion that she would profit by the punishment she had received, and that it had been sufficient.

"Bridget Mahoney. Convicted of drunkenness, Municipal Court, Boston, June 19, 1895. Sent to the Reformatory Prison for Women for one year. Pardoned Oct. 31, 1895. The prisoner was a married woman, but nineteen years old. She had a child twelve months old, who was ill and needed a mother's care and attention. The father was not able to provide for its wants in the mother's absence. It was believed that the young woman would profit by the imprisonment already served, and would hereafter abstain from the use of intoxicating drink.

"Mary Gibbons. Convicted of being idle and disorderly, Municipal Court, Boston, Aug. 24, 1895. Sentenced to the Reformatory Prison for Women for one year. Pardoned Dec. 12, 1895. The prisoner was the only daughter of most respectable parents. As this was her first offence, and as her home surroundings were good, she was thought to be a proper subject for executive clemency.

"Mary Reagan. Convicted of drunkenness, Western District Court, Hampden County, May 14, 1895. Sentenced to the Reformatory Prison for Women for one year. Pardoned Feb. 13, 1896. The prisoner had a young child, seriously ill with scarlet-fever. The father was unable to

meet the expense of a proper nurse. Upon the recommendation of the select men of Westfield, where the offence was committed, as she had but thirty days more to serve after deducting the time for good behaviour, a pardon was granted on the ground of humanity.

"Olive Taylor. Convicted of drunkenness, Police Court, Lowell, Oct. 25, 1895. Sentenced to the Reformatory Prison for Women for fifteen months. Pardoned April 16th, 1896, upon the recommendation of the Commissioners of Prisons. This was the prisoner's first offence. She was but seventeen years of age. The probation officer was away at the time of the sentence; if he had been present, the Commissioners were satisfied she would have been placed on probation.

"Nellie Donohue. Convicted of being idle and disorderly, Central District Court, Worcester County, Jan. 6, 1896. Sentenced to the Reformatory Prison for Women for one year. Pardoned April 16, 1896, upon the recommendation of Judge Utley, who imposed the sentence. It was believed that she was innocent of the crime for which she was sentenced. She was arrested with other inmates of a disorderly house, but it has since been learned that she was employed as a domestic, and had nothing to do with the proceedings of the house.

"Margaret Johnstone. Convicted of drunkenness, Police Court of Holyoke, Sept. 17, 1895. Sentenced to the Reformatory Prison for Women for two years. Pardoned Sept. 17, 1896, upon the recommendation of the Commissioners of Prisons. During her imprisonment she had been a well-behaved prisoner. She was pardoned after serving one-half of her sentence, and sent to her former home in Scotland. It was believed that she had been sufficiently punished for the crime committed."

One of the distinguishing features of the Massachusetts method of dealing with female prisoners was introduced in Sherborn in 1879, and has been in successful operation since. In 1880 it was extended so as to apply to prisoners in the county jails and houses of correction throughout Massachusetts. Following is the text of the law:

"SECT. 23. The commissioners may, with the consent of a woman who is serving a sentence in a jail or house of correction or in the reformatory prison for women, and with the consent of the county commissioners if the woman is in a jail or house of correction, contract to have her employed in domestic service for such term, not exceeding her term of imprisonment, and upon such conditions, as shall seem to them fit, having regard to her welfare and reformation. If after such contract her conduct during the term thereof is not in their opinion good, they may order her return to the prison from which she was taken

"SECT. 24. If a woman employed in domestic service under the preceding section leaves her place of service, or, having been ordered by the commissioners to return to prison, neglects or refuses to do so, she shall be deemed to have escaped from prison, and may be arrested and returned to the prison from which she was taken, in the same manner as if she had escaped therefrom, and shall upon conviction of such offence be punished by imprisonment in the reformatory prison for women, or in a jail or house of correction, for not less than three months nor more than one year."

The success of the system has been due, in the main, to the fact that prisoners are thoroughly trained in the prison for domestic service, and upon release are removed from old surroundings and

companions. If the prisoner returns to them when she is discharged she comes under very severe temptations. But if she can be placed in a family, under sufficient restraint to cause her to remain, she is likely to be able to resist temptation when fully released. Many continue in their places after their sentences expire. Prisoners thus indentured have their wages for their own use. As I have already mentioned, the demand is in excess of the supply, for only a part of the prisoners are suitable for domestic service, and none are put out until toward the end of their terms. Few leave their places or misbehave. Seventy were bound out last year, and only seven were returned. In some of these cases the fault was not the prisoners.

Sherborn proves what can be and what might be done, by the application of the highest principles to the reformation of the weakest and most erring of our population. Mrs. Johnson's prison methods stand out in startling contrast to those generally applied here and in other countries. Sherborn is one of the brightest outcomes of United States civilization—a civilization which, clogged by the crime, and misery, and shortcomings of Europe, has its dark sides, but which surpasses that of other countries in the scope which it gives for the exercise of all that is best in our nature.

During a tour of nine months abroad, I saw much that was deeply interesting, but nothing that approached in interest Sherborn Reformatory Prison for Women.

VIII.—*Crime, and How Best to Attack It.* By E. D. Daly, Esq.

[Read Tuesday, 15th June, 1897.]

THIS short paper is designed to start discussion, but, of course, not to deal in any sense exhaustively with a very difficult subject.

Mr. Webb presents one aspect of that subject, most pleasant no doubt for kindly persons to dwell on. I invite attention to another aspect, but I do not pretend that it is at all such a pleasant one—only unfortunately it is, I think, true.

First of all I will ask you to remember what crime really means. The essential characteristic of it is that it injures unduly the unoffending. Every person who does what is considered to be wrong is not a criminal. Some of them only ruin themselves. The criminal is he or she who by means of violence, theft, perjury, housebreaking, coining, or some other of the infinite varieties of fraud or wrongdoing, inflicts direct and admitted injury on other members of the community. If anyone sins quietly, and only injures himself, the State leaves him to the Church whose former practice, however, of employing fire or imprisonment against sin is no longer tolerated.

The State alone uses force now, and uses it only where without it, admitted injury would fall upon the unoffending. Hence, two wholly different sets of persons are always to be thought of in