

Mr. Spencer Miller for his extraordinarily interesting account of how trusting humanity seems to succeed in America. He has certainly given us such a fascinating account of what is going on that I FEEL THAT IT WOULD MEET YOUR WISHES IF WE, AS A MEETING, EXPRESSED A HOPE THAT MR. MOTT OSBORNE WILL BEFORE LONG COME OVER AND TELL US MORE ABOUT WHAT IS BEING DONE. I BELIEVE THAT THERE IS A CHANCE OF PERSUADING HIM TO COME. I AM SURE THAT YOU WILL AUTHORISE YOUR SECRETARIES TO APPROACH HIM IN THE HOPE THAT HE MAY BE PERSUADED TO COME.

We have learnt a great deal from an American idealist. I am now going to call upon one of the most eloquent and sincere of our English idealists to speak to you. I refer to Miss Bondfield.

PRISONS AND THE PUBLIC.*

By MARGARET BONDFIELD J.P.

I want, if I may, to express the views of the general public, after hearing the views of the experts here to-night. This is the first public meeting under the auspices of the amalgamated Howard League for Penal Reform, and you certainly have had a good send-off in your work of showing up the prison system. You have had the evidence from Camp Hill, most remarkable evidence, of how utterly unnecessary prisons are. Why on earth this country is so stupid as to keep men for three years in our convict institutions instead of sending them at once to Mr. Wintle,† I simply cannot understand. It seems to me that Mr. Wintle would be quite able to deal with the whole population whose anti-social habits require to be dealt with by any sort of segregation whatsoever. Then we had the amazing spectacle of one of the prison officers coming here and pleading with us to abolish him and his class altogether. I think that that is one of the most hopeful signs of to-day. We have had it brought home to us that but for the grace of God we should be in these prisons, if we had our deserts, because we have had the testimony that the men are there and the women are there for doing things that we have done. The only difference between us is that we have not been found out and they have been. The psycho-analysts—I do not go all the way with the psycho-analysts; but they tell you some perfectly horrible things, and it is quite useful to use them sometimes—tell us that we are all sinks of iniquity inside. I am very much impressed with the fact that in this country of ours for far too long we have dealt in the wrong way with what I will call external crimes which are really far less injurious.

* An address before the Howard League for Penal Reform, June 3rd, 1921.

† See p. 7, "Preventive Detention at Work."

than those crimes which not only go unpunished in society but are rewarded with honours if people happen by those crimes to make riches. We have to turn society upside down as regards our categories of crime. Many of the offences are very frequently offences against property, and different people have peculiar ideas about property. I think that we are entirely wrong in the attitude which we adopt towards those people whom the social environment prevents from having those necessary things which they then are inclined to take on their own account. The Howard League for Penal Reform has it, as one of its mottoes, that in dealing with those people who are guilty of anti-social acts of a certain category that have been laid down in the penal codes, the important thing to remember about them is not what they have done so much as what they are and what they may become. We have seen Mr. Wintle, by acting upon that precept, has been able to bring back into decent society, into the social life, not merely reformed characters but men who have contributed valuable services to the community as soon as they have been given a decent chance of developing that social sense which is a part of the necessary make-up of a good citizen in modern times.

If we were put into the environment of these people who lack the social sense and who do anti-social acts, we should begin to have a very different view of how punishment should be meted out.

The other moral that seems to be drawn from what we have heard to-night is that the purpose of all these reformatory methods in Sing-Sing and in Camp Hill, and in those other centres, is not either punishment or vengeance, but redemption by education and social influence, by an appeal to all that is finest and highest in the man, instead of putting him into circumstances which bring out more of the brute than ever.

Another thing that struck me in listening to those speeches was that among what are called criminals there are certain types, men of weak will and mental instability, who ought never to have been punished in that sense, but who ought to be under medical supervision. They are men who are merely defective. There are also those who are criminals through what seems to me to be sheer, misdirected genius. By segregating them into prisons, society is losing an enormous output of genius which would otherwise be of immense value to the social life as a whole. So, from the standpoint of the waste of human material, from the standpoint of the reproach to civilisation, it is unwise to treat these moral invalids in the way in which we do treat them. It seems to me that we have had a valuable opportunity to-night of learning the better way.

We really want the view of the prisoner. My view of the prison is largely from the point of view of the prisoner because so many of my

friends have been there for all sorts of "offences" of which I myself have been guilty during my public life. Talk about sedition! I have said much worse things than the things which have been said by those who have been sent to prison. Why I have not been sent to prison I do not know! I am very much impressed with their story of the psychological effect of prison environment upon them. Many of these young men and women who have been in prison, some for conscience sake, some because they were rebellious against certain laws that existed, who went to prison from the very highest motives, have come out dedicating their lives to the purpose of prison reform and of abolishing a system which caused them such intense agony, mental, physical and spiritual. There were men who had gone into prison, whose own conscience was clear, whose motive was good; but the effect of the prison upon them was of such a nature as to make them suffer agony. What sort of influence could you possibly expect that environment to have on a man who went into prison not wanting to serve society but feeling that society was an enemy, except to make him feel, as the result of the treatment which he received, that society was doubly his enemy?

One other point: We call ourselves a Christian country. We are supposed to have a Christian civilisation. We have statutes which make it practically expected of all that they should belong to the Church of England. We have a State Church which is supposed to be based upon the Gospels. You cannot get away from it. It is no good saying that it has nothing to do with you because you do not go to Church yourself. It is implicit in the civilisation and very largely in the fabric of our constitution that we are a Christian country. Very well. The Head of Christianity used a phrase as to which I doubt whether very many of us have ever given a thought. He said, "I was in prison and ye visited Me." "I was in prison!" This is said of One who we are taught by the State Church to believe is very God and Light of Light. "I was in prison." Then He says, "As ye did it to the least of these My brethren, ye did it unto Me." You put a man into a stone cell, denying him every kind of human sympathy, denying him all those things which are the vital things of life, apart from the physical things that you deny him; you deny him those things which are summed up in fellowship, in comradeship, in love. You shut him off; and you are shutting off God. You have no right as a human society to take such a step against any one of your fellow men, no matter what his crime may have been. That is not the way to deal with him. So we feel that this must be dealt with on the lines laid down here to-night. This Camp Hill experiment is a mere star in the darkness of the night. We want to get rid of the prohibitions against the extension of the

system which is represented in the three years sentence first, we want to sweep away entirely the old style of prison, and we want to treat the whole question from the standpoint of humanising our institutions and recognising in a way in which we have never hitherto recognised them the importance of personality and the awful responsibility which we take when we attempt to put anybody under a system which attempts to break that personality, to starve it, to swamp it and to suppress it utterly and absolutely. You cannot impose goodness upon people, you can only draw it out.

If the Howard League will go ahead with its work in that spirit, we may very easily live to see the day when there will be no prisons left in this country.

LABOUR'S PRISON ENQUIRY.

We welcome the active interest of the Labour Research Department in the working of the prison system. Some two and a-half years ago the Department instituted a Prison System Enquiry, the work being undertaken by a strong committee presided over by Sir Sydney Olivier, K.C.B. Mr. Stephen Hobhouse and Mr. Fenner Brockway are secretaries, and Mrs. Sidney Webb, Mr. Laurence Housman, and Mr. George Bernard Shaw are active members. The Howard League for Penal Reform is represented by its secretaries both on the general committee and the executive. The Report will be ready shortly.

MINUTÆ.

The policy of the League with regard to prisoners is, as our members know, to demand a complete change of aim and outlook rather than to lay stress on minor reforms. Yet it would be absurd to pretend that we do not welcome changes even of detail which make for betterment.

For instance, in many prisons it has been found possible to break the monotony of the dreaded week-end by two exercises on both Saturday and Sunday. At Parkhurst and formerly at Portland the convicts have had the privilege of a time of recreation in the evenings. At Portland this was spent in the garden in summer under comparatively little supervision.

At Birmingham, three ladies, teachers in a neighbouring High School, have been allowed to teach simple handwork to the women prisoners on remand on three afternoons in the week. This is a considerable innovation as far as England is concerned, though Brabazon classes are well-established in Scottish prisons. The Scottish Prison Commission have accepted from one of our members a set of mounted pictures for the cells in the Calton Gaol, and the English Commissioners have given leave for a similar gift to be made to the Women's Convict Prison at Liverpool.