

BEHIND PRISON WALLS—By Julian Hawthorne

"THE MEN ABOVE"

A Graphic Portrayal of the Type of Men Who Are Entrusted With the Care and Reform of America's Great and Growing Prison Population, and the Real Reason Why These Men Above Are Failures

The men below would like to feel respect for the men above, even if it be a respect married to fear. It is more humiliating to be dominated by worthless creatures, of no character or genuine manhood, whose authority is effective only because it happens to be the tool through which works the irresistible power of a government, than to obey men of native energy and force, captains of their own souls as well as of the bodies of their subjects. The despotism of the cur is revolting, and rouses the wild beast in the victims. Those responsible for its infliction insult human nature.

As far as I have had opportunity to observe or have been informed, the despotism of the cur in our jails, and in those of other countries perhaps though not to nearly the same extent as in ours) is the rule; and that of self-respecting and respected men is the rare exception. Hate inflamed with contempt is a dangerous and evil passion to stimulate. It awakens a thirst for savage retaliation which hate alone does not produce.

Moreover, weak and cowardly tyrants are always more cruel than courageous and masculine ones, and they do not observe any consistent line of conduct; in the intervals of their debauches of brutality they are oily and ingratiating, make apologies, offer insinuating apologies, protest humane intentions, and allege absurd excuses for past outbursts. A brute is bad enough, and we are all brutes at bottom; but a brute who covers his hyena snarl with the smug mask of a saint is monstrous and detestable.

The wardens of many of our jails are double men. Behind the imposing facade of their physical aspect we detect an uneasy hurriedly contriving creature, quite incommensurate with the material structure built up for his concealment and protection. He will not come out in the open, but seeks some advantage, plans to get behind us and execute some cunning coup de theatre, while our suspicions are lulled by the hospitable and comfortable glow of the exterior.

In his dealings with the convicts as a body he is apt to imitate Macbeth's snatches and keep the wooden promise to the ear but break it to the hope. He has vanity without self-confidence, lacks the truthfulness of the strong, his voice does not resound and compel, he dances and fidgets, grins and is grave in the same instant. If the men's attitude be sullen he tries to be bluff and hearty, "my boys" them, claps them on the shoulder, or lapses into whining and gushing. It is all of worse avail with these undecidable leaders of character. It is a curious effect of the working of esprit de corps in jails that the prisoners may feel ashamed of such unmanly antics in their warden, especially should strangers be within eyeshot.

Of course in his encounters with prisoners singly a man of this type may show more of his real nature, especially if the prisoner be one of the inoffensive sort. He will be bland, indifferent or cruel, as suits his mood of the moment.

"For God's sake, won't you let me write her just one letter?" implored a prisoner who had just got news of the fatal illness of his wife.

"Picture the situation—two human beings face to face, one helpless and in agony, the other with absolute power! The official faced the man deliberately with an amused smile.

"Can," he said slowly, "but—"

How would you have felt in such a case? Could you ever forget it? And would you not be ready, for that official's sake, to hate mankind and to curse God and die? But you perhaps believe that convicts have no human feelings and that they are cheerful under such treatment.

The value of these remarks lies of course in their general character; the conduct of an individual, regarded by itself, would have small importance. And if I do not instance the conduct of these honest and manly officials who are to be found here and there it is because the public is already informed concerning them; their deeds do not seek darkness, but are visible by their own light. It is the rascals that we do not hear about, or if we do, it is through reports of press agents in newspapers and otherwise, who are mere mouthpieces for the lying self-praise of the lesser themselves.

While I was in jail I had access by a fortunate circumstance to the annual reports to the department of several wardens of prisons in various States and was able to compare their stories of themselves with the accounts given by the prisoners who had lived under them and with my own first hand knowledge of prison conditions, which with a few shining exceptions are so petty and remorselessly alike the world over. After making every allowance for the different point of view of master and slave it was very plain that the author of the report was not merely prevaricating or coloring his facts to render them acceptable to his readers but was lying outright often, and not rarely by omissions.

It would pose as a broad minded and compassionate father to his inmates when all the time he was subjecting them to cruel and needless severities and tortures. There was one man, who has lately resigned, I believe, full of State and honors, who addresses at the meetings of Federal wardens were almost angelic in tone and tenor, who was in fact notorious among persons who had actual knowledge of his official conduct as one of the most remorseless tyrants toward the men in contemporary prison annals. Many men of bad conduct may be excused on the plea that they are ignorant, know no better; but this man was an intelligent student of psychology and knew exactly how wicked and wanton he was. He was an ignorant baby once upon a time and might have grown up to be no worse a

man than is the estimable person who now reads these lines, but he took up prison work and the atmosphere of crime and preoccupation with it and the license to use arbitrary powers made a devil of him. It is a common story.

Another series of reports showed a man who, beginning as a reactionary of an extreme type, advocating the most ruthless measures toward convicts, finally felt the pressure of the wave of prison reform which is gathering force just now and adjusted his reports and addresses so as to make himself appear as a leading apostle of the new ideas. But though his public professions changed, the chief difference in his practices was that from having been undisguised they became secret, and so far as circumstances permitted he acted and permitted or encouraged his subordinates to act as cruelly as before.

However, a new deputy warden was presently appointed, with more liberal ideas and endowed with large powers, and for a while the condition of the prisoners improved; the warden, with his ear to the ground and his eye on the handwriting on the wall, deftly adjusting himself to the situation and industriously claiming for himself credit for all betterments introduced by the deputy, who having no press agent was forced to stand inactively by and see his honest credit fished away from him, in public opinion at least. Of course the prisoners knew perfectly well on which leg the boot was. But prisoners cannot make themselves heard outside the jail.

Accordingly this warden, whose methods I know well, is now quoted as a signal champion of the new and more merciful dispensation, though only two or three years ago, according to his own personally written and signed reports, he was for keeping prisoners practically incommunicado—dead to the world, writing and receiving letters to be nearly or wholly done away with; newspapers withheld; visitors denied. Prisoners, he urged, were sent to prison for punishment and punished continually and thoroughly let them be. Punish the man, kill his health, his hope, his spirit, his soul, his body too at need, and thus and only thus, reform him.

It was a simple plan and likely to bring results of a kind. Shall we believe that this man's professions of a change of heart are genuine or feel surprise to discover that at the very moment he is receiving visitors in his commodious office upstairs, and purring out to them his fatherly affection for his prisoners and denying that the old bad methods of repression any longer are tolerated, there are miserable wretches being hung up by the wrists in dark and noisome cells under his feet?

Regarding the personnel of the officials at Atlanta I can for obvious reasons say little. They are a good deal like such officials anywhere. The warden is a Pennsylvania Dutchman; the deputy a young Kentuckian, gigantic and fresh faced; his first assistant is a stalwart man of middle age, a good deal of a martinet, but the men are inclined to like him because they see in him a solid, masculine creature who stands pat, says what he means and does what he says.

Then there are the prison doctor, the steward of the commissary department and the parole officer, and under them are the guards and the snitches—the latter not being officially recognized, although they wield an important influence, their reports against their fellow prisoners being seriously considered and often made the basis of action by their superiors, which has no small effect upon the welfare of the jail. Yet these poor wretches—they are mostly negroes—sell their brethren for a mess of pottage of secret favors and immunities; none save the most abject would accept such employment. Could any inspiration of procedure be more insecure? Yet it is an essential factor in the present principle of prison management.

The guards are, with some exceptions, such a body as might be expected from their salary, \$70 a month, with no raise for length of service or meritorious conduct. They cannot be rated as high as the average police officer, and the conditions amid which they live are so unfavorable to manly development that it is small wonder they grow worse as they grow older in service.

They either dislike the men and use them accordingly, or they make secret compacts with them for surreptitious favors, which undermines discipline and corrupt such morals as prisoners may be supposed to possess. Often, however, they will solicit favors from prisoners, and when the latter seek some accommodation in return grin in their face or austere threaten to report their brutality is sometimes quite whimsical and unexpected, the outcome of some personal dislike, without bearing on the prisoner's conduct, though they are voluble in assigning some alleged infraction of the rules should a superior happen to call them to account. And the superior, I may almost say, never believes the prisoner against a guard, or rather never acts upon such a belief.

That is the settled policy of the penitentiary; the warden himself has placed himself on record numerous times, to the effect that under no circumstances would he take the word of a prisoner over that of a guard. To be reported means to be punished, be the report baseless or not. It follows naturally that guards never scruple to give full rein to any animosity they may privately feel against a man, knowing that they will be able to "put it across" with the higher official to whom complaint may be made.

I happened to be in the corridor one day when one of the guards, a tall, strapping fellow, was bringing downstairs a convict of stature much less than his own, a poor, half demented youth, whose dementia unfortunately was wont to express itself in foul or abusive language, which came from



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him almost involuntarily without any particular personal application. The two men were half way down the final flight of steps when, without any visible pretext, but I presume on account of some unlucky epithet or utterance let fall by the convict, the guard suddenly seized the youth violently by the throat, hammered his head against the wall, and dragged him headlong down the rest of the descent.

They were now in the corridor; the man, bewildered and ziddy, was whirled round and shoved to the head of another short flight of steps leading out to the yard; the door was open. The guard came behind him, caught him by the collar, and exerting his strength, hurled him through the door; he fell prone on the ground and lay there.

Here my own view of the incident was cut off; but ten minutes afterward I met a comrade, who, bristling with wrath, described the continuation of the affray which he had just witnessed. He said that the guard, following the man, grasped him by the coat and jerked him off the ground and shoved him, staggering, toward the isolation building on the other side of the yard. There happened to be two visitors, a man and a woman, under convoy of another guard, passing at the moment; the first guard was by this time too much blinded by his own passion to notice them; the other laughed and apparently reassured the visitors.

Upon nearing the isolation ward a third guard, who was on duty at the gate, ran up and struck the prisoner several times on the head with his club. The man put up his arms in an effort to ward off the blows, or to beg for

mercy, but without effect, he was dragged between his two assailants to the deputy's office as if he were a dangerous giant struggling to get away, though in fact he was quite helpless and partly insensible. From there, as we learned later, he was taken to a dark cell, charged with I know not what misdeeds, and nothing was ever done to either of the licensed ruffians who had mistreated him.

I recall such scenes with reluctance; they are ugly things to think of; but some illustrations are necessary in order to put in your mind some notion of what jails mean. An episode which, as it turned out, has elements of the ridiculous, but which came within a hair's breadth of having very fatal consequences, occurred a short time before I became an inmate; it is still spoken of with emotion by those who participated in it.

A large number of prisoners, some twenty or more, I think, were collected in one of the basement workrooms when a fire broke out there. The smoke soon became suffocating and crept up into the ranges above, alarming the whole prison. But conditions in the room itself were immediately intolerable; the door had been locked, and the men were jammed together there, frantically shrieking for the door to be opened. Death for all of them would be a matter of only a few minutes.

The guard in the corridor above, a huge, burly personage, with the brains, I was about to say, of a calf and exceedingly punctilious in his notions, came down the stairs to see what was the matter. One of the men shouted out to him, forgetting decorum in the desperate hurry of the moment: "Why

don't you open the door, you —!" Now, it was not only against the rules that the door should be opened between certain hours, but it was altogether irregular and intolerable to miscall an official. The guard stopped short. "Who's that called me a —?" he demanded indignantly. But there was none to answer him, for the men were by that time strangling and fainting.

Down the stairs at this juncture came one of the higher officials, choking and gasping.

"Open that door, why don't you?" he managed to call out, seeing the guard below him.

"I'm trying to find out," replied the latter, "who it was called me a —."

The higher official was understood to say something which penetrated the hide of his subordinate and stirred him at last to action, not a moment too soon. The door was unlocked and the captives tumbled and crawled out. The burly personage, who rated punnett and seemed language above the lives of men, still retains his position in the corridor; but the prisoner who had insulted his dignity has never been identified.

But what can be expected of men in the position of guards of a prison? The function is abnormal, and unless it be undertaken from high motives and with an exceptional endowment of intelligence and humane feeling, it will steadily deteriorate a man; from being at the start to all practical purposes a social derelict, incompetent for productive employment, and often suffering from an incurable disease, he will sink lower and lower in the scale of manhood and morality. He has two chief aims in life: to requite himself upon defenceless convicts for the kicking out bestowed upon himself by the community, and to get an increase of pay.

I had not been three days in the prison when one of them came to me in my cell and asked me to write for him a letter to the department urging a raise of salary. So be it! all means if higher pay will get better men; but men who can command higher pay do not care to do such work. Since my guard saw no impropriety in asking for it—though of course it was against the rules—I wrote his petition for him. The rules governing guards are explicit, but so far as they regard

treatment of prisoners they are freely disregarded. For example, guards are forbidden by the rules to address prisoners insultingly, to apply names or epithets to them, to lay hands upon them or to strike them "upon whatever provocation" unless they believe their own lives are in danger. A rabbit has as much chance of throttling a bulldog as the ordinary prisoner of endangering the life of a guard; yet hardly a prisoner in the penitentiary has not repeatedly either undergone or witnessed, or both, insults and physical violence offered by guards to the men.

As to the impropriety of asking favors of the men the guards might plead distinguished precedent for it. One of the higher officials of the penitentiary summoned me to his office one morning. He informed me that he intended to devote his life to prison work, but that he was still a young man and that advancement was slow and difficult.

"When you were outside you lived in society and knew a lot of big men," he was kind enough to say. "You will be going out of here again before long. If you should find it in your way to speak a good word for me in quarters where it would be likely to do me good I should appreciate it."

I should perhaps have premised, lest he appear in the light of asking something for nothing, that he had opened the conversation by handing back to me the Ingersoll watch of which I had been deprived on entering the institution. I knew that my young friend and benefactor was deep in the darksome intricacies of prison politics and was just then getting rather the worst of it. But I was unable to give him any positive assurance that my influence with the department, or elsewhere, would suffice to give him a lift.

Favoritism rules in all parts of the prison administration. It and prison politics are indeed twin curses of our whole prison system. In spite of all the specious official promises of reward for good conduct in the form of parole and obedience to the rules every prisoner knows that they are apples of Sodom; the most correct conduct maintained for years will gain a man nothing, while a worthless and heedless fellow, if he has a friend among the men above, will have his way smoothed for him.

An official's pet snitch enjoys all manner of indulgences in the way of food and freedom and if he be an intelligent fellow he can ride on his superior's neck and influence his conduct to a surprising degree. Again, certain guards in the eyes of their superiors can do no wrong whatever wrong they do, and others, who are apt to be men who retain some conscientious notions as to their duties, find their path difficult. Some guards, too, though they may be obnoxious to their officers, are not dismissed because they know too much and might reveal uncomfortable facts were they cashiered.

I could name an example of this—a young guard who a few years ago committed a cold blooded crime upon a convict for which in the outside world he would have been liable to hanging. But the prison authorities did not find it expedient to punish him and he still saunters about the prison with his cap tilted on his head, and his rifle. He is a good shot and is employed a good deal on the towers, where quick marksmanship might be useful. He knows too much.

Evil conditions breed evil deeds and dangerous secrets. Conditions have improved somewhat during the last two or three years, but the improvement has been more outward than inward, one day two or three years ago suddenly appeared at the gates the Attorney-General from Washington. He had not been looked for so early. He walked straight into the dining room, where he noticed a number of convicts standing up with their noses against the wall.

"What is this for?" he asked one of them. The convict couldn't exactly tell; he was waiting to be haled up for examination.

"How long are you kept there?" "From 7 in the morning till 7 at night."

"Have you had anything to eat?" "The man had not."

The Attorney-General in Washington had never showed himself a friend of convicts, but when he saw this comparatively slight instance of prison discipline his gorge rose. He ordered all the culprits to the kitchen for a meat and issued an edict against this punishment and discovered some other things that he disagreed.

Continued on Fourth Page

THE PRISON ANGEL.

By Julian Hawthorne.
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BEAUTIFUL, gracious Spirit of human pity and kindness,
You from your tranquil retreat remember our need and our blindness
You speak not, but stretch your hands, full of plenty and healing,
Not cold and disdainful, but gentle and tender with sisterly feeling;
From your light serene you step down to comfort our gloom, and remind us
To hope and be strong, and to leave our evil and errors behind us.
Our void is filled with your bounty; we bless your name, though unspoken.
We hail you the herald of God, Whose mercy your mercies betoken!