World Topics
Eminent Writers

MARCH OF EVENTS
The Washington Times
THE NATIONAL DAILY

Second News
Section

* * The National Daily * * SUNDAY, JULY 23, 1922. * * The National Daily * *

INSIDE PRISON WALLS - - - By Eugene V. Debs

Prison Kitchens Are Hotbeds of Petty Private Graft

MEN BROKEN BY BAD FOOD AND CRUELTY

Ill-Cooked, Cheap, Stale Food Arouses More Ill Feeling and Resentment Than All Other Causes Combined—Those Who Exposed Vicious Abuses of Kitchen Grafters Immediately Punished.

ARTICLE VII.
BRUTAL GUARDS AND HORRIBLE FOOD.
By EUGENE V. DEBS.

DURING the nearly three years that I was in Atlanta Federal Prison, a number of convicts spoke to me from time to time of their desire and intention to escape, if possible, from the prison. I invariably and emphatically advised them against it, knowing as I did, what lay in store for them as the fruit of such rashness. I also advised the men to keep within the rules and conduct themselves as decently as possible in the interest of their own protection and well-being against the cruel prison regime in general and the brutality of some of the guards in particular.

It should be conceded here that prison conditions, generally speaking, are today far better than they were at any time before in history. The truth of this is more apparent when we consider the state of the prison and its inmates in this country a century and more ago. To realize what a foul and hideous institution the prison was at that time, one need only read the pages of McMasters' "History of the People of the United States," dealing with prison life during the colonial period.

At that time men were still imprisoned for debt, and the prison sometimes consisted of an abandoned mine, a pest hole in which men and women were confined and in which they literally rotted away in filth and loathsomeness.

Capital punishment would have been more merciful than the unspeakable torture visited upon the unfortunate poor who were thrown into these black holes and doomed to a slow and shocking death for the crime of being poor and unable to pay some small debt.

* * *

IN the progress of society, the prison has in the very nature of things undergone some improvement, but there are vast stretches yet to be covered before the prison becomes, if it ever does, an institution for the reclamation and rehabilitation of erring and unfortunate men and women.

The general public knows practically nothing about the prison and appears to be little concerned about how it is managed and how prisoners are treated. Not until the average man finds himself behind steel bars does he realize how indifferent he has been to a problem in which he should have felt himself vitally concerned.

Controlled By Politics.

AS a rule, prisons are under the control of politicians to whom the welfare of its inmates, and the welfare of society as it is affected by them, is but a secondary consideration, if, indeed, that question really engages their attention at all.

The wardenship of a Federal or a State prison, is, in my opinion, of more importance to society than the presidency of a college.

The latter is chosen with at least some reference to his character and his qualifications for the position, whereas the warden is usually awarded his office in return for his political services irrespective of his fitness to hold a position that has to do with the welfare of human beings.

The president of a college has supervision of an institution in which young and normal people are dealt with, and who readily understand and embrace the opportunity afforded them to secure educational advantages to fit them for the struggle of life.

The warden of a prison, on the other hand, is in charge and has almost absolute power over the life and destiny of thousands of human beings, some of whom are abnormal, most of whom have, for the time at least, been broken and beaten in the battle of life—and all of whom are in need of such humane and intelligent understanding and treatment as is necessary to retrieve their lost character and standing, reinvest them with self respect and restore them to society fitted for useful service to themselves and their fellowmen.

But how many are there who take this view of the importance of the character and fitness of prison officials, and of the function and purpose for which the prison is maintained?

When it is taken into account that in the United States several hundred thousand men, women and children pass through our prisons and are influenced for better or for evil by their experiences in such institutions, it should appear apparent to even the most casual observer that the prison problem is one of the most vital concern to the people, and that the prison as an institution should be maintained with jealous care as to the character of the officials who are to preside over it, and as to the moral and physical treatment of its inmates.

Man-Hunting Exciting.

If the people would but analyze the human equation of a prison they might better account for the crimes that are visited upon them in cities, towns, and hamlets, oftimes by men who graduated with an education and equipment for just that sort of retributive service from some penal institution.

There was a time not long ago when prison guards were armed with deadly weapons, when convicts kept the lockstep in hideous stripes, and were forbidden to speak or even look at one another. Most prisons have outgrown these abominations because it was realized that under their brutal and degrading influence men were turned into sodden beasts and subsequently settled their account with society upon the basis of the depth to which prison barbarity had sunk them.

PRISON guards at Atlanta and many other penitentiaries have been divested of their deadly weapons and are n olonger permitted to bear them.

They now carry clubs. In the march of prison progress we have passed from the gun to the club!

(I have reference here to the guards within and not those who surmount the walls, for the latter, in their watch towers, are still armed with rifles and under orders to shoot to kill the inmate who may try to escape.)

I must digress here to say a word about the prisoner who attempts to escape. The very moment the "count," which is taken several times a day, tells of his escape, a siren, known as the "escape whistle," is blown, and continues to screech at intervals for a considerable time.

This is the signal for the farmers in the surrounding vicinity to rush eagerly for their shotguns and rifles and join in the mad man-hunt, in which a prize is awarded to the lucky one who stalks the quarry.

* * *

"FIFTY dollars, dead or alive," is the reward paid for the capture of the escaping convict, and I have been told that those who participate in it find it more exciting than a fox chase!

I shall not stop to give my personal views as to the elevating influence of such sportsmanship.

It is nothing less than folly, and ofttimes suicidal, for a prisoner to attempt to escape, whatever the temptation may be, for it is next to impossible for him to make his way through the lines.

If he should yield to the natural impulse to break the bonds that hold him in captivity, and is recaptured, he must pay the severest penalty for his ill-advised attempt.

The guns on the walls that surround the prison accurately, though unwittingly, index the true character of the penitentiary in our day. It is a killing institution in a moral as well as in a physical sense. It is designed to break men and not to make them. If they are partly undone before they go to prison that institution will complete the wrecking process. The many expressions of bitterness, hatred and revenge I heard from the lips of departing prisoners who had served their sentences, left no doubt in my mind as to the effect of prison life upon its victims.

Ever since leaving the prison I have been haunted by those guns on the walls, and those clubs in the hands of guards within the walls. Neither the guns nor the clubs should be there. To the extent that they serve at all it is in a brutalizing way which tends to promote rather than restrain attempts to escape, and causes lesser infractions of the prison discipline.

Would Abolish Guns.

THE gun and the club are the signs and symbols of the prison institution, and they proclaim its cruel function to the world.

In one of my last interviews with Warden Dyche before leaving Atlanta I took occasion to relate to him what I had seen of club rule in the prison, and why I felt that the club should follow the gun out of prison.

I told him that only men should be allowed to serve as guards who could control the prisoners in their charge through respect for their character instead of through fear for the clubs they carried.

A man who can command the respect of other men only because he holds a club in his hand is totally unfit to be in a positoin of authority in the outside world, much less so in a prison.

After associating freely with those convicts, day in and day out, I knew beyond any question of doubt that they could be kept in far better order, that their deportment would be improved, and the morale of the prison elevated without the club to remind them that they were under its rule, and were subject at any time to its use in regulating their conduct.

* * *

ONE day we were marching back into prison after being out in the yard. A few feet in advance of me an undersized and emaciated convict was shuffling along in the line. It was rather warm and his jumper was open at his neck. This was contrary to the rule, and **a guard standing by gave him a cruel punch with his club that doubled up the prisoner with pain,** the guard yelling above the shriek of his victim, "Button up there!"

It was with difficulty that I restrained my own feelings. I did not report the guard for the reason that I had made up my mind from the beginning of my sentence to make no individual complaints while I was within the walls, having concluded it would be better policy to accept the situation as it was, and bide my time until I should be free to register my opposition to the whole prison system.

Another personal experience with a brutal prison guard is recalled. It was on Sunday morning in the prison chapel, where I had gone to join the other inmates in attending devotional exercises. At an appointed hour the prisoners march into the chapel, which is on an upper floor of one of the main buildings.

The inner blinds were partly closed and the room was rather dark. As we filed in, I stood for a moment at the end of a row, not knowing until the men in advance of me were seated if I was to occupy that row or the one behind it.

In that moment of innocent pause I excited the wrath of a guard who was standing by swinging his club. I do not know whether he knew me, nor does it matter. I only know that he howled loud enough to be heard a block away, "Sit down, there!"

I felt that it was the club rather than the brute in the man that had proclaimed its authority. I did not resent the outrage, for I never permitted acts of that kind to insult me, or to disturb my equanimity, which I managed to maintain throughout my nearly three years in Atlanta prison.

Hundreds of stories of the experiences of others along similar lines reached me whenever the inmates had a chance to tell me of their troubles, and what they thought of the guards, the clubs, the rules, and the prison in general.

Prison Food Revolting.

THE prison food was the one great unending source of complaint. The same is true to a greater or lesser extent of every jail and prison in the land. There was no lack of food at Atlanta so far as quantity was concerned. **But it was the cheapest and staleest conglomeration of stuff that the market afforded.**

Coupled with this was the fact that the food was never properly cooked, but steamed and stewed. Even had it been of better quality when it left the market-place, it would have been rendered unedible by the steaming process. This ill-cooked stuff was served in a manner to cause revulsion to all alike, and that item in the prison life aroused more ill-feeling and resentment than all other causes combined.

Whatever modification there may have been recently in the barbarous old punitive theory, that system is still stoutly upheld in the wretched menu and table service of every prison in the land

It is extremely difficult to say whether men who go to prison are ruined more quickly physically by the rotten food served to them, or morally and spiritually by the harsh and bitter treatment they receive.

Whichever method of degradation comes first in the inevitable prison process of human deterioration, it can be said without fear of contradiction that they are twin evils in reducing men to caricatures.

* * *

TO feed prisoners decently and wholesomely—not extravagantly, but in a clean, plain and substantial manner to conserve their health instead of undermining and destroying it—would do more to humanize the prison and to make it reformatory, rather than deformatory, than any other one thing that could be suggested in the prevailing social system. (As to the necessity of the prison at all, I shall have something to say in a later article.)

Such a system, however, will never be established until direct and effective measures have been taken to eliminate the graft of one kind and another in the contracts under which the food is furnished, and in the handling of the food inside the walls from the time it is delivered until it is served to the convicts.

As a single typical instance, I may relate the following incident:

It was commonly understood that there was a regularly organized traffic carried on in the prison kitchen at Atlanta in which the choicest foods were privately sold and disposed of under the Government's roof.

Two of my cellmates had told me that they knew of two employes in the kitchen who had bought their jobs for $100 each. In their positions they were able to realize handsomely from the foodstuffs that passed through their hands by selling it to favored prisoners in exchange for tobacco (which, in prison, is equivalent to legal tender in the outer world), and for cash when they could strike a bargain, either inside or outside, which was frequently the case.

Realizing that the general run of the prisoners were the victims of this arrangement, and that they were not getting the food the Government was paying for, I reported the matter to Superintendent Dickerson on his next visit and had him confronted with the men who made the charge; those men came before Mr. Dickerson and named the purchasers and the sums they had paid for their kitchen jobs.

Mr. Dickerson made notes of the evidence and said the matter would be investigated.

On his leaving the city, the two men who gave the testimony and exposed the corrupt practice were reduced to menial positions, and thus were made to pay the penalty for exposing one of the vicious abuses that obtain within prison walls.

THE rules of the average prison are evidently framed by men who have but a superficial knowledge of the prison and but vague ideas of the way it should be managed for the good of its inmates and society. The one dominating purpose of these rules is repressive and the stupidity in framing them is crowned with the statemnt that they are expected to be "cheerfully obeyed." No prison rule was ever cheerfully obeyed, and no work done under such rules as prevail was ever cheerfully accomplished.

On the contrary, the work that a man does under the club of another is grudgingly and sullenly done. There is no joy in a prison task. Work behind prison walls is slavish in its very nature and is done only under protest. **No intelligent attempt has yet been made to organize a prison on a scientific and humane basis to achieve the best possible conditions.**

The very walls of the prison buildings betray the convict labor that reared them. The bricks in their lack of proper laying and the irregular spaces that lie between them all denote a kind of protest against the conditions under which work is done while guards with clubs in their hands stand by and watch.

Every prison is infested with that lowest of mortal creatures—the stool pigeon. In prison parlance he is known as "the rat." The stool pigeon seems to be a necessary part of a prison under club rule. Human beings ruled by brute force resent and resist, and properly so, at every opportunity, and they must be spied upon and watched and betrayed by their own fellow prisoners in order to be kept in subjection.

"Pigeon" Guard's Ally.

THE stool pigeon is the silent ally of the guard. He noses around to see and hear what he can that he may report what he considers to be to his advantage, and what may cause those spied upon serious trouble. The stool pigeon finds his reward in immunity from punishment and in promoting his chances for the favorable consideration of his application for pardon, or parole, or commutation. This particular subject was the source of frequent comment among the prisoners during my term.

The stool pigeon and his encouragement in the nefarious part he plays is in itself a reproach to, and an indictment of, prison management. Not for one moment should such a perverted creature be permitted to function in a prison.

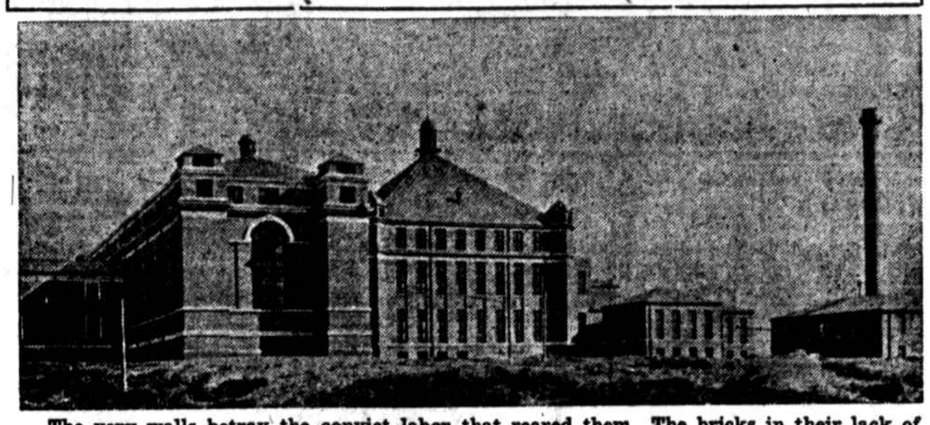
The service he is permitted to render betrays a condition which condemns the prison by the very means it employs as a low and demoralizing institution.

Chief among the features of the prison which mark it as an inhuman institution is the maddening monotony of the daily routine. The same dull and deadening program is set for each day and no effort is made to relieve it by a change of any kind. Almost every thing is done in a haphazard way. Prisoners are placed in positions for which they are unfitted, and are assigned to tasks repugnant to their natures.

It is this daily and continuous monotony that dulls the brain of the prisoner, saps his initiative, very often in his youth, undermines his health, and lays the foundation for his physical and mental deterioration and final ruin.

(Copyright, 1922, by Bell Syndicate, Inc.)

ATLANTA PENITENTIARY



The very walls betray the convict labor that reared them. The bricks in their lack of proper laying denote a protest against work while guards with clubs stand by and watch."
(Copyright, 1922, by Paul Thompson.)

HOW POVERTY FILLS OUR PRISONS, DEBS' STORY NEXT SUNDAY

HOW Poverty Populates the Prison is desribed in Mr. Debs' article in The Washington Times next Sunday.

Mr. Debs will show how poverty is penalized by the most cruel treatment and how youthful first offenders, after being sent to prison, soon become hardened convicts through their inevitable contamination.

An important phase to be touched upon is the perversion of sex instincts, and the resultant immorality in every prison.

DID THE "POISON OF THE BORGIAS" KILL AMERICAN WOMAN IN PARIS?

By DR. W. H. BALLOU.

THE great mystery of Paris at the moment relates to the specific poison which brought on the demise of Elizabeth Kahn, American woman, but of little-known habitat and biography.

Original dispatches versionized her death as due to bichloride of mercury. Later examination of the contents of her intestines showed no traces of mercury whatever. She is now believed to have been poisoned, by the same mysterious agency utilized by Lucrezia Borgia to put away people inimical to her interests.

Borgia poison, botanical chemists have determined positively, was a spectric mushroom or toadstool poison. We have a long list of emperors, popes and distinguished rulers, say nothing of commoners world over, destroyed by this same subtle agency.

DEADLY MUSHROOMS.

It is surprising that French chemists do not recognize the well known Phallin poison as the cause of Mrs. Kahn's death, from their own statements of the symptoms cabled here.

Phallin poison is given off by the deadliest known mushroom. Amanita Phalloides, which fruits all over the world and is easily mistaken for the common field or cellar mushroom which all the world greedily devours.

Both species have similar caps, stems, ring or collar around the top of the stem and bulbs at the base of the stem. But there are two striking differences with which many people in the Old and New World are familiar. The gills on the underside of the edible mushroom cap are either pink colored or brown, according to age.

The field, of cellar mushroom of cultivation, opens its cap like a parasol, all rosy beneath, but exposure to air soon turns the color to brown.

The deadly, poisonous Amanita, on the contrary, opens out white underneath and stays white. Also, the base of its stem sets in a sheath, or cup, when young. The cup, however, and even the white collar near the top of the stem may soon fall away, increasing the resemblance to the edible mushroom. The expert always knows the difference and rejects any type with white gills which otherwise resembles the edible mushrooms.

SYMPTONS SIMILAR.

The report of the Universal Service reads:

"The poison she took was not mercury, 'but some mysterious substance unknown to medicine.'

"Dr. Paul points out that the poison invented by Borgia acted in exactly the same way. The first effects were felt forty-eight hours after taking, with death occuring from four to seven days afterward. The condition of the body indicated that she had been without food for several days."

The statement of Dr. Paul precisely fits the case of Phalloid poisining. In fact, I doubt if the woman committed suicide at all but came to her death by eating poisonous fungi which she assumed was edible. If she did commit suicide, then she must have deliberately cooked and ate the deadly mushrooms which she must have known would cause her many days of frightful experiences and agonies.

The cobra and the diamond-back rattler kill within the hour of their strike, but the mushroom Phalloides proceeds with its stunt in the most diabolical conceivable manner.

ATTACK IN THREE DAYS.

Phalloides cooked is just as delicious to the taste as the cultivated mushroom. Agaricus campested.

Mrs. Kahn, after eating it would have no symptoms of trouble until the second or even the third day—not until the virile poison had invested her entire circulatory system.

Suddenly she would have been seized with violent spasms, which would continue for perhaps an entire day or even two days, until the entire contents of her stomach had been ejected.

Meantime the poison would have been attacking each and every corpuscle of her blood, dissolving them, the blood serum escaping into the alimentary canal. Finally, the whole of her system would have been drained of all its liquid and solid contents.

VERY PAINFUL DEATH.

During this whole period of the activity of the poison, usually ending about the fifth day after eating the toadstools, the woman, after the first symptoms of screaming abdominal pains, would have had cramps, mostly in the legs, convulsions and tetanic spasms, which in some cases end in lockjaw. During the whole period the victim is perfectly conscious, and very often will not yield to opiates.

It is a horrible, slow, violently painful death. When the victim is finally dead the body looks very much like that of one who has starved to death. Dr. Paul's statement that the condition of her body showed it had no food for two days confirms the deadly ravages of Phalloid poisoning.

The so-called "Borgia poison" is a joke in a way. Borgia did not administer the poison to her victims. She merely invited them to dinner. In the courses were luscious mushrooms.

All she had to do was to slip a single cap of Amanita phalloides into the cook's mess of field mushrooms to get her victim or victims. Be sure that all at the table who partook of her mushroom course died a violent, lingering death.

Thus the great Augustus Caesar, Emperor of Imperial Rome, perished. Thus potentate after potentate, in the earlier history of civilization, either was poisoned deliberately or because of the ignorance of the chefs.

TWO ALMOST ALIKE.

Julius Caesar had a standing offer of its weight in gold for the delicious mushroom named after him, Amanita caesarea, brother of Phalloides. The two mushrooms, standing side by side, the one deliciously edible and the other deadliest poison, resembled each other in nearly all particulars, except that caesarea is colored red on the center of the top of the cap and its gills are yellowish instead of white. Hence the ease with which the poisonous type may be mistaken for one of the two most edible types of commerce.