

A MONTH IN THE WORKHOUSE.

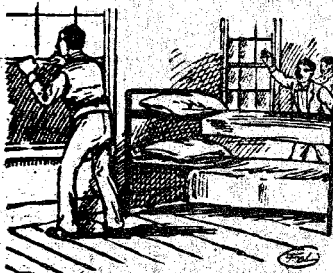
A "WORLD" REPORTER'S EXPERIENCE ON BLACKWELL'S ISLAND.

He Simulates Drunkenness and Is Sent Up for Thirty Days—Lethargic Condition of the Sleeping-Cells—How the Bakery Gang Makes Sickening Bread—No Baths Allowed and Everybody Is Unclean.



WHEN I accepted the no very agreeable task of making a practical investigation of the city's great reformatory and penitentiary institution known as the workhouse, I must admit that it was with some trepidation and many misgivings. For a man who has never experienced what it is to be cribbed, caged and coudsed, it is no light matter to be subjected to the machine-like direction of those who appear to be selected for the discharge of their duties principally because of their stolid indifference to all the claims and instincts of humanity. My first difficulty, strange as it may appear, was to get arrested. I finally effected this by taking a drink of whiskey sufficient to give an aroma to my breath and, feigning stoniness, I was quickly hustled off to Jefferson Market Police Court, where Justice White happened to be presiding. This was on Friday, April 27, at about 2 o'clock P. M. The officer who arrested me swore I was drunk, but one of the ambulance surgeons, who was called upon, stoutly maintained that I was suffering from kidney complaint and, in deference to his opinion and advice, the Justice ordered me to be taken to Bellevue Hospital in an ambulance.

The next afternoon, Saturday, April 28, I was taken on the steamer Thos. S. Brennan to Blackwell's Island, which may be described as the mental, moral and physical lazar-house of New York. For in addition to the criminal elements of the population confined in the penitentiary and workhouse, there are many hundreds of poor, sick and deranged persons provided for in the almshouse, charity hospital and lunatic asylum. Of these institutions, however, it is not my purpose to speak, not having had an opportunity to examine them. When I went to the island for was to experience the treatment accorded to prisoners who were sent there for minor offenses. There are about twenty-five thousand commitments made to the workhouse every year, and of these there is a very large percentage of *habitues*, including those who under no circumstances can control their appetite for strong drink, many of whom voluntarily commit themselves when the last resource for obtaining whiskey has been exhausted, or when hunger stares them gauntly in the face.



THEY OBJECTED TO VENTILATION.

I was surprised to find a large number of persons who had voluntarily placed themselves in this institution, not from any desire to reform or in any respect to improve their condition, but simply to get out of the city. There are men now on the island who have been there from choice for years, as, for instance, some of the unpaid clerks in the superintendent's office, the orderly of the dormitory, &c., and whatever of good food or comfort is to be obtained is accorded to them.

FAVORITISM TOWARDS PRISONERS.

Of favoritism of officials towards prisoners I heard of numberless instances, but I could not verify them often. A man named Eldridge, who had been serving a three-months' sentence for drunkenness and disorderly conduct towards his parents, and who had been performing the rather menial duty of driving a light wagon with small parcels and wares to the various institutions, was discharged on May 8. Four days later he was returned under a six-months' sentence for drunkenness and threatening his father, who had prosecuted him. He was immediately sent for by Mr. Gray, the warden, and assigned to duty in the workhouse office as clerk, although he could scarcely do more than write his name legibly. Being thus provided for as mentioned formerly from labor, he was generally about a better man than the distribution to the superintendent's dining hall, &c. In the dormitory and in the kitchen, at a separate table, where breakfast and other meals of coffee are served, the men are allowed to sit at the table and talk to the warden. This is the only opportunity for conversation.

occupants had retired. When I entered I feared I should faint. I opened one of the windows, but was greeted with a general yell of disapproval, for it was a cold night and there was not too much heat from the steam-pipes considering the scanty bedding. And so the windows were closed again, as it was for several nights afterwards, the nauseating effluvia being closely confined.

I thought, as I have felt strongly since, that whatever rigors the city may have to impose punishment for the infraction of one of its ordinances, it certainly can have no right that to sow in men's systems the germs of disease.

For drinking purposes a bucket of water is placed at one end of the cell, and long before morning becomes positively loathsome. That this state of things could be ameliorated at least in plain. There are on each tier of cells proper accommodations, and all that is necessary would be to have one of the many self-committed men, or otherwise useless loafers who make this prison their home, patrol each corridor at night. As it is, at night the entire institution, both for male and female, is under the charge of one night watchman, Mr. Whelan, assisted by two male prisoners and presumably the same number of female prisoners in the other building. There is, therefore, not a sufficient number of men to attend to the regular requirements of the post, and, should an attempted escape be made, scarcely enough men to raise an alarm.

WHAT THE BEDS ARE LIKE.

The beds consist of a piece of canvas stretched tightly to the iron frame, with a small straw pillow and one blanket. The consequence was that during the first two weeks I spent in No. 39 I saw men who did not remove their day clothing the whole time, which naturally had a tendency to increase the already disgusting pest of loathsome vermin. The lady visitors, who are so courteously invited to enter what may be called the "show cells" on the first tier, would not be so willing to bring their gracious presence a second time into the cells on the third tier after once inspecting them. Every evening after supper the men, so long as the light will permit, pursue the hunt, and Sundays there is a grand slaughter. The cells on this tier are in charge of prisoners, mostly self-committed men, and during the whole month I never saw Mr. George Ross, the chief keeper, or Hink's, his assistant, on this tier, everything apparently being left to the sweet will of the prisoners in charge, the result of which may be imagined.

The inadequacy of the night-watch is another feature which needs attention. There are frequently cases of delirium tremens brought into the place and it often becomes necessary to place men thus suffering in a padded cell, which is as dark as Erebus. Whether this is done from careless disregard as to results or from a desire to be freed from the trouble of giving the requisite attention is not clear, but it is none the less a fact that such treatment is opposed to the most intelligent practice outside, it being a well-known fact that the most aggravating condition in which a man in delirium tremens can be placed is in the dark, when all the hallucinations of his disordered brain have the fullest scope, while a bright light enables him to see other things which distract his attention.

It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that horrible deaths sometimes occur in these cells, as was the case on the night of May 19-20. A strong and apparently healthy man was brought into the workhouse on that Saturday afternoon. He looked to be a German, and from his dress and heavy build appeared as if he might have been a driver for some brewery. In the evening he became noisy and was placed in the padded cell, and the next morning was taken out dead. This is the only instance which came under my personal observation, though Mr. Whelan told me some days afterwards that it was not by any means an isolated case.

LOATHSOME FOOD.

The food supplied to the prisoners is generally of the most indifferent quality, and while the fact that most of the men survive is ample proof that it is sufficient to sustain life and enable men to perform hard labor, if it were not for this tangible evidence it would scarcely appear probable. For my own part I can say that, though I had what was considered extra diet and had no hard labor, I lost in weight in thirty days over ten pounds. The bread is made of fairly good flour, but is generally poorly baked and doughy. The coffee served to the majority of prisoners is known as "boot-leg" and is not coffee at all, but a decoction of burned rye and chicory. I tasted it several times and did not wonder at the name given it, so suggestive was it of the odor of decayed or decaffeinated leather. The soup, which is the principal article in the general diet, except bread, is made of vegetables, peas or beans, with which has probably been added a small quantity of meat.

Fresh meat is supplied to the institution at the rate of four cents per pound, and is frequently tainted, sometimes to such an extent that even the plentiful seasoning of onions fails to disguise the sickening flavor and odor. On one day especially, May 12, the meat was so bad that when it was brought off the boat every man held his nose. Mr. Spear, the shipping clerk, who was on the dock at the time, beat a retreat. The meat intended for the almshouse was returned by the next boat down. The workhouse meat, however, was retained and used.

NO OPPORTUNITY FOR CLEANLINESS.

It would naturally be supposed that one of the first things to which importance should be attached in the institution of this kind would be personal cleanliness, and yet it practically receives no attention at all. Soon after sunrise the gong is sounded for prisoners to go to the wash-room. There are provided in this room something like thirty buckets filled with water, in which all the inmates of the prison, numbering from 600 to 700, are expected to wash. They go in detachments of nearly a hundred at a time and the scramble to get at the buckets is truly interesting. No soap is provided and the average time occupied in the ablutions is certainly not more than two minutes. This is the only opportunity for washing the men have.



MR. SPEAR AND THE BAD MEAT.

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I was surprised to find a large number of persons who had voluntarily placed themselves in this institution, not from any desire to reform or in any respect to improve their condition, but simply to be kept in the cells. There are men now on the island who have been there from choice for years. For instance, some of the unpaid clerks in the Superintendent's office, the orderly of the dormitory, &c., and whatever of good food or comfort is to be obtained is accorded to them.

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THE FIRST DAYS.

The initiation to the workhouse merits a passing notice. After the usual preliminaries of taking the name, nativity, &c., of the new arrival, he is

wanted to be clean. It soon happened that I was the sole applicant for graduation on the afternoon of April 6, and was accordingly favored with moderately clean water, but as there are only eight bath-tubs in the room I can readily imagine that when the number of new admissions is large—sometimes as many as eighty or ninety in a confinement—so whom but a few minutes each is allowed for bathing, the water would, in a short time, become somewhat thick, if not lively. Then the only accommodation for drying is a roller towel that does not reach very far, and which must not, under any circumstances, be removed from the roller.

The new arrival is handed a suit of clothes, in which all individuality is lost. This consists chiefly of a coat and trousers, made of what is dignified on the department's invoices as satinetts, but which in reality is a cloth made of the coarsest kind of shoddy. As I was destined to a clerkship in the storehouse I was favored with a new suit. I was also supplied with a good, serviceable hickory shirt and an undershirt, the latter article, as I had occasion to note during the next few days, having probably been furnished inadvertently. Some of the men suffer severely from the want of similar clothing. One young man, who gave me his name as John Kenney, came into the place about May 2 wearing two undershirts and a thick woolen overshirt. In place of these he was given simply a thin muslin shirt, without undershirt or anything else but the threadbare coat, and those who remember the biting winds and cold rain which prevailed during the early days of May will understand what this meant for him. Fortunately for him his friends only allowed him to remain two days, or the consequences might have been serious, for he had already contracted a severe cold.

After donning the clothes provided I was given a pair of socks. I wear a No. 9 sock and he gave me a pair of No. 14, which he, with a great show of consideration, exchanged for a pair of No. 11. The 21st week one sock was a No. 10 and the other a No. 13, while the third week one was again a No. 14 and the other had apparently been made for a man with a club foot, being short, and wide enough to wrap twice around.

A FILTY SLEEPING DEN.

The sleeping accommodations are such as certainly should receive the attention of the Board of Health. I was assigned to cell No. 29, on the third or fourth, in this cell there are seventeen double-deck cots, consisting of iron frames, with two soundings of canvas, one above the other, stretched on them. There are thus thirty-two cots, all of which, on the first night of my stay, were occupied. In the construction of the cells no serious attention has been given to ventilation or other sanitary requirements, the only means of ingress for air other than the door being a six-foot grate two feet from the floor, supposed to connect with an air shaft, and for the escape of foul air absolutely no provision is made except the windows. For these thirty-two men, confined in the cell for nearly twelve hours, only wooden benches are provided, so that it will not be difficult for intelligent readers to imagine how poisonous the atmosphere must become before morning. On the first night I was put into the cell shortly after 9 o'clock, having, as is usual with the other cells, been detained there all that time. It was cold, and all the other

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It is true there is a clause in the rules and regulations which states that baths will be allowed "when necessary." When it is considered necessary is a mystery to most of the inmates. I heard a man ask Keeper Hinds for the privilege of a bath, and if the keeper had been asked to make him a present of a house and lot he could not have looked more surprised or refused more peremptorily. I know men who have been in the place two

months and have never been able to do in the other morning visit to the wash-room. It is no wonder, therefore, that the cells, the cots and the blankets are infested with vermin and that personal cleanliness is a thing impossible.

THE BAKERY GANG.

The hardest-worked and most shamefully treated lot of men among the whole of the prisoners are those in the bakery gang. The full complement of these is about sixty-six, but during part of May not more than forty were so employed. To see these men at work is revolting. Without the opportunity for cleansing themselves they are dirty in the extreme, with flour and perspiration clotted in their hair and beards. Some of them were, when I saw them, suffering from open wounds or ulcers, and all of them were literally covered with vermin. The work is trying and laborious, and though Mr. Chancellor, the head of the baking department, does what he can to ease the men, it is not in his power to do much. A certain number of men have a certain amount of labor to perform in a given time.

When these men have finished drawing the last batch of bread they are immediately all heated and perspiring as they are, marched in the road in front of the bakery until they please the keeper to order them to move, holding them frequently, as I saw keeper O'Hara do one day, so long in the cold that they became thoroughly chilled. When they reach the workhouse, cell No. 37, there is a grand rush for blankets, and the strongest men get the best, and extremely poor and threadbare are the rest. So thoroughly infested with vermin are they that the other prisoners will not willingly approach them. When the full complement of men is employed at the bakery there is not sufficient bath-room in the bakers' cell, so that some are compelled to sleep on the floor, which is usually befouled with tobacco-juice and other filth. And these are the men who make the bread for all the hospitals and other institutions under the charge of the Commissioners of Charities and Correction, a fact which may interest the dainty young doctors at Bellevue and Randall's Island.

GENERAL DISCIPLINE.

Of the discipline of the workhouse it must be said that it is not so severe as might be expected, and with all the rules and regulations the prisoners cheerfully comply. But there is one source of unnecessary irritation, and which, if anything should at any time cause a serious collision between the prisoners and the authorities will be the foundation of the complaint, and that is the numberless petty devices which on ignorant, Jack-in-office spirit one can invent, as displayed on the part of the keepers towards those temporarily in their charge. These may appear trivial when taken separately, but their cumulative force and effect is anything but pleasing.

I remained in the institution until Saturday morning, May 21, when I asked the first favor, which was that I might be spared from going into the cell on the steamer Bremen coming to the Twenty-sixth street dock. Through the good office of Mr. Spear, the shipping clerk, this was granted.

W. F. R.

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