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Prison Life

Freedom Press, Anonymous

August, 1887

[SECOND NOTICE.]

Are Prisons Necessary? is the title of the concluding chapter of Kropotkin's account of his prison experiences. "Unhappily, hitherto," he goes on to remark, "our penal institutions have been nothing but a compromise between the old ideas of revenge, of punishment of the 'bad will' and 'sin,' and the modern ideas of 'detering from crime,' both softened to a very slight extent by some notions of philanthropy." But is it not time that we fully recognized the fact that crime, like bodily disease, is capable of scientific investigation, and of that scientific treatment which considers prevention the best of cures?

An energetic school of scientific students of crime has sprung up of late years in Italy and Germany, who have devoted themselves to searching out the main causes of this painful phenomenon. They have concluded that there are three groups of such principal causes: the cosmic, the anthropological, and the social. All these causes, and especially the first, have as yet been but very imperfectly investigated ; nevertheless, some very interesting facts have been conclusively established.

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Cosmic influence, that is roughly speaking, the state of the weather, has been shown to have a strong and definitely ascertainable effect upon human action. To take one instance; an English writer (S. A. Hill, *I -Nature,* Vol. XXIX., 1881, p. 338) has pointed out that in India crimes of violence correspond in frequency to the amount of moist heat in the atmosphere. The Italian Professor E. Ferri has collected statistics of temperature and of the prevalence of "crime against the person," which show the most striking correspondences.

The anthropological, the distinctively human and individual causes of crime are still more important. Dr. Loinbroso and his Italian colleagues have put together many valuable observations on the physical characteristics of criminals. They have shown that the majority of prisoners have some defect of brain organization ; that the most brutal murders have usually been committed by men afflicted with some serious physical imperfection ; that most criminals have singularly long arms (suggestive of nearness to the monkey), etc., etc. Researches in interesting relation with the investigations of our English Dr. Maudsley, into what he calls the wide "borderland between crime and insanity."

A crime is rarely due to something which has suddenly sprung up in the criminal. "Take for instance," says Kropotkin, "a man who has committed an act of violence. . . . Before this time, probably, throughout his life, the same person has often manifested some anomaly of mind by noisy expression of his feelings, by crying loudly after some trifling disagreeable circumstance, by easily venting his bad temper on those who stood by him; and, unhappily, he has not from his childhood found anybody who was able to give a better direction to his nervous impressibility. . . . And if we push our analysis still deeper, we discover that this state of mind is itself a consequence of some physical disease, either inherited or developed by an abnormal life."

” . . . More than that. If we analyze ourselves, if everybody would frankly acknowledge the thoughts which have sometimes passed through his mind, we should see that all of us have had some feelings and thoughts such as constitute the motive of all acts considered as criminal. We have repudiated them at once; but if they have had the opportunity of recurring again and again; if they were nurtured by circumstances or by a want of exercise of the best passions—love, compassion, and all those which result from living in the joys and sufferings of those who surround us; then these passing influences, so brief that we hardly noticed them, would have degenerated into some morbid element in our character.”

”Fraternal treatment to check the development of the anti-social feelings which grow up in some of us—not imprisonment—is the only means that we are authorized in applying, and can apply, with some effect to those in whom these feelings have developed in consequence of bodily disease or social influences.” A remarkable instance of the healthy influence of fostering the self-respect and kindly feelings of criminals is given by Dr. Cameron. Speaking of his 30 years of experience as a prison surgeon, he says that by treating the convicts ”with as much consideration as if they had been delicate ladies, the greatest order was generally maintained in the hospital.” He was struck with ”that estimable trait in the character of prisoners—observable even among the roughest criminals—I mean the great attention they bestow on the sick.” These convict attendants are just those prisoners who have an opportunity of exercising their good feelings, and who enjoy the most freedom. ”The most hardened criminals,” Dr. Cameron adds, ”are not exempt from this feeling” of kindly compassion.

The moral necessity for the adoption of a humane and brotherly method of treating criminals appears the stronger when we turn to consider the social causes of crime. ”The feeling is growing among us that society is responsible for the anti-

social deeds committed in its midst. . . .” From year to year thousands of children grow up in the filth—material and moral—of our great cities. The “father and mother leave the den they inhabit early in the morning in search of any job which may help them to get through the next week.” The children enter life without even knowing a handicraft.”

“I never cease to wonder,” adds Kropotkin, “at the deep rootedness of social feelings in the humanity of the nineteenth century, at the goodness of heart which still prevails in the dirty streets.”

1’In Russian and French Prisons.’ By P. Kropotkin. Ward and Downey.

This social morality of the wretched is still more remarkable when we remember not only the continual flaunting display of the luxury and license of the rich, but that “everything we see around us—the shops, the peoples we see in the street, the literature we read, the money-worship we meet with every day—tends to develop an insatiable thirst for unlimited wealth,” and an impression that the *beauideal* of life is to make others work for us and to live in idleness.

About two-thirds of the actual breaches of the law, are so-called crimes against property.” And it is obvious that these will disappear with the removal of the social injustice which is their cause.

”As to ‘crimes against persons,’ already their numbers are rapidly decreasing, owing to the growth of moral and social habits which necessarily develop in each society, and can only grow when common interests contribute more and more to tighten the bonds which induce men to live a common life.” “We live now too much in isolation. Everybody cares only for himself, or his nearest relatives. Egotistical—i.e., unintelligent—individualism in material life has necessarily brought about an individualism as egotistic and harmful in the mutual relations

of human beings.” “But men cannot live in this isolation, and the elements of new social groups—those ties arising between the inhabitants of the same spot having many interests in common, and those of people united by the prosecution of common aims—is growing.” And where there is common life there is mutual moral as well as material support, influences calculated to draw forth the kindly feelings and counteract those morbid tendencies, which, if unchecked by the growth of better things, finally corrupt the mind. Where the bonds of common life are strong, as in the Chinese compound family or Swiss or Slavonian. communes, we see its beneficial effects in the low level of crime. We may expect the like results from the new developments of social life now springing up around us. “Yet notwithstanding all this, there surely will remain a limited number of persons whose anti-social passions—the results of bodily disease—may still be a danger to the community.”

Such men and women can only be treated as modern science and humanity are teaching us to treat the lunatic and idiot. We have ceased to whip and chain the madman, we are ceasing to lock him up in the mitigated imprisonment of an asylum. The plan tried by the kind-hearted and brave peasants of Gheel, in Belgium, of taking the insane into their houses as members of the family has lately found warm advocates among medical men elsewhere, notably Dr. Arthur Mitchell in Scotland, where the practice of receiving lunatics in private families is rapidly gaining ground with markedly beneficial results.

It is by such self-devoted and compassionate fellowship, not by imprisonment, that we can hope to redeem the afflicted and erring among our brethren.” All that tends that way,” concludes Kropotkin, “will bring us nearer to the solution of the great question which has not ceased to preoccupy human societies since the remotest antiquity, and which cannot be solved by prisons.”