

PRISON REFORM.

Education as a Factor in Rousing the Dormant Minds of Convicts.

In order to reform any person addicted to evil living, an adequate motive must be offered. At Elmira the powerful motive is the desire of regaining liberty. This would seem enough, but it is not always sufficient to arouse ambition in a sluggish nature, especially when the period of incarceration is fixed and is short. This motive, then; has to be supplemented by others. A way must be found to arouse the sluggish body and interest the dormant mind. It is sometimes long before this way can be discovered. These ruined natures have often very little that can be appealed to successfully. But I do believe there is in most men and women, however degraded, the seed of a better life. The first step will probably be the awakening of an interest in something outside themselves; not a purpose of change, but simply an interest. It may be a desire to learn the alphabet, or an awakened taste for reading, or a little inclination to know something. It may be a pride in personal appearance, or a wish to get commendation for good behavior, or a dawning sense of the agreeableness of order, neatness, cleanliness. Or it may be some pleasure in a discovered power to do well a piece of work. This interest, once aroused, can be stimulated by various incitements, slight rewards of promotion, the fear of social degradation; and this path of doing well will become powerfully attractive when it is seen to be the path, and the only one, to liberty. But this interest in any form, with even the prize of liberation, can not be depended on to last. The will of the criminal is weak and vacillating. He can not be depended on, he can not depend upon himself, for continuance. He may fail and fall again and again. The only remedy in his case—and it is the common case—is to keep him at it, keep him trying, until a habit is formed, until his will is strengthened, until, in fact, it is mentally and physically just as easy for him to live a normal, healthful life as it was to live a disorderly life.

In the life that is required of him under the Elmira system it is very difficult for a man to sham. The study, the work, the behavior, demanded of him continuously almost preclude hypocrisy. The neophyte may try to pass himself off

as docile, and even as pious, but no deceit lasts long under this severe, exacting, trying discipline, which is applied equally to his attention in the workshop, his alertness in school, and to all the details of his personal behavior and appearance. The requirements are too rigid. If the man does not put himself willingly and honestly into harmony with his position, he is pretty certain to break down and go back into the harder conditions of prison life. These he finds very unwelcome after a taste of something better, and he tries again, with a new resolution. The pressure is incessant. The incentive of liberty, better apprehended as he gets into a normal state, is always inviting him. Meanwhile habit is doing its work. He can continue longer in a straight course. He begins to feel in all his renovated physical and moral nature not only the desire for liberty, but a longing, however faint, to make a man of himself.

The important thing, as necessary in this system to getting out of confinement as to becoming a man, is the formation of habit. And here is where the notion of an indeterminate sentence comes in as the only condition of forming a fixed habit.

An indeterminate sentence is the sentence of a convict to confinement until in the judgment of some tribunal he is fit to go out into society again, until it is evident that he is likely to be law-abiding. If a person is determined upon a criminal life, the best thing that can be done for him and for society is to confine him where he can do no mischief, and where his labor will pay for his keeping, so that he may not be an expense to society nor a terror to it. And, logically, he should be confined until there is good reason to believe that he will be a self-supporting, law-abiding member of community. Now, the difficulty heretofore has been to determine

when a person might safely be released on an indeterminate sentence. Under the present prison system, if release depended simply on good behavior, on external observance of rules, most criminals are shrewd enough to behave admirably, and to even offer evidence of Christian conversion, in order to get release. Where is there a tribunal that could pass upon his character? The Elmira system compels a person literally to work out his own salvation. It will take some men a longer and some men a shorter time to do it, that is, to acquire