

A FLORENTINE PRISON FOR WOMEN

Lady Georgina Vernon contributes to the *Lady's Pictorial* the following article:—

"In the city of flowers" how sweet it sounds! and what bright visions it brings to one of Florence, that queen of cities, lying encradled amongst the flower-bedecked hills, the grey olive groves, carpeted with yellow tulips, crimson anemones, and the wealth of color and sweetness which spring brings to that joyous city. Turn where you will there are flowers, the stone benches round each gloomy old place gleam with bunches of many-colored blossoms, contrasting vividly with the massive walls and iron-barred windows; the sunny walks on the Lung Arno are lined with baskets of yellow daffodils and purple masees of violets, and the soft warm air is heavy with the scent. One almost forgets amid these surroundings that such things as sorrow exist! And yet to-day want to tell you of the silent world hid behind the prison walls not far from all this brightness, and beauty and sunshine. Of all the many deeply interesting days passed in Florence, none had for me a keener interest than a morning passed in the women's prison, and thinking this may also be of interest to many, I will briefly relate the incidents of my visit.

A friend had obtained permission for our visit from the authorities, but with difficulty, as it is rarely that visitors, and especially foreigners, are allowed to enter the prisons. We had some difficulty in finding the right door, as we first went to Muratto Jail, which is the men's part of the prison. We were there told there was no entrance to any part, and, although the sentries pointed the way out to us, they evidently thought we were on a hopeless search. At last we arrived at the door, over which the words, "*Carcere femminile di San Verdiano*," showed us we were right. A ring at the barred door soon brought a pleasant looking Sister, who evidently expected us, and ushered us in past the *guardianos*, or men warders, who sat in the outer hall, up through a long passage into a bare parlor, where we waited patiently till the door opened and the Mother Superior entered. She has the entire charge of the prison—a sweet, rosy cheeked, brown-eyed woman, whose firm, kindly mouth gave good evidence of the governing power which enables her, with her six Sisters, to control the unruly women committed to her care. Her calm, happy face seemed to make a light in the dark parlor, and spoke clearly of the loving, womanly heart which rules here. She bade us welcome and asked us to follow her. We first entered the central hall of the building, and as the mother for a moment bent her head and clasped her hands, I noticed that at the far end was an altar, now veiled by a heavy curtain, and here on Sundays Mass is said by one of the *Padri Scalopi*. The Sisters themselves have a little tiny chapel opening out of the hall, and truly it must be to them a very haven of rest!

In the great hall there were tiers of cells, with open galleries running round, much the same as in our own prisons. There were then thirty-six inmates; the prison is constructed to hold forty-eight, but very often they have had to accommodate as many as seventy, putting two in a cell! The Sisters looked at each other with sorrowful eyes that spoke volumes, and sighed as they said this was, indeed, "terrible." But we were told that this scandal will ere long be reformed, as a new wing is being built, which will also contain an infirmary, there being now no accommodation for the sick. This has at times caused serious difficulty as well as danger to the inmates of the prison. Some short time since there was a case of small-

pox, the patient dying there, without any means of isolation!

The Mother then took us into a small, cheerful-looking room, of which the door stood open, and sitting there were two women working at crochet and knitting. I imagined them to be servants, but to my amazement found that these were prisoners awaiting trial, and one was for infanticide! They looked comfortable and happy, but I must add they were two most repulsive-looking women. The work they were employed in doing would be sold; one-half of the profit is given to the workers, one-half goes to the authorities; and the same rule applies to all the knitting and work which is allowed to be done by prisoners undergoing light sentences.

Looking into the cells, we found them a good medium size, light and airy, but defective in sanitary arrangements; the furnishing very poor—a small bed, a stool, and in one corner a little cupboard to hold the bread, etc., allotted for the day. There are no means of warming the cells, and in winter they must be very cold, although each inmate is provided with a *scaldino*, which is a small portable crockery pan containing hot wood-ashes. This is an article without which no Italian woman could live, for even going to church or market, the *scaldino* is always in their hands.

As we stood in the hall talking to the Mother and another clever-looking Sister who had joined us, one of the prisoners appeared, wheeling a truck with the dinners. They all dine in solitude, and each had now gone to her cell, from workroom or laundry. As one cell door after another was opened to receive the dinner, we peeped in and saw the various inmates. In one was a touching sight; a poor, wild looking, dishevelled little child of twelve, who ran forward to the door and seized the pannikin of soup with eager outstretched hands, looking like a famished wolf! She, we learnt, had tended sheep on the mountains, but had been accused at the farm where she was employed of stealing a watch, and now got three months' imprisonment, of which the first ten days had to be passed in solitary confinement. Probably it would have been better for her if this had been the case during the whole detention; for, as I shall tell presently, one of the trying evils of the system here is the way in which the prisoners can contaminate one another by free conversation and intercourse.

During the dinner half-hour we went to see the very primitive wash-house, which certainly did not lead one to think that clean linen could be plentiful in the establishment, it being merely a small outhouse, with the roughest convenience for washing. The kitchen was small, but clean and bright, with its copper pans and nice stoves. Here we saw some of the *soup maigre* which had just been sent up for the dinners; it smelt most excellent, and looked good and nourishing with maccaroni and vegetables; but this is the only real meal of the day, and the tins of soup cannot contain more than a pint and a half. In addition to this, a two-pound loaf of white bread is given in the morning; and this is the day's provision, no coffee or milk being given.

But here comes in a most grave injustice—those who can afford to buy it, or who have friends outside able to send them food, are allowed to spend as much as ninepence a day in extras or to receive it from their friends; so the rich fare comfortably, while the poor and friendless have barely enough to keep body and soul together! The woman who was doing the cooking, a strong, tidy-looking person, dark-eyed and fresh-coloured, we thought must be there for some very trifling offence, but on asking the Superior, found that she had murdered her little daughter, or, as the Mother said, "The child disappeared—it was not

to be found!" And this woman, strangely enough, was merely enduring six months' detention, which seemed an illogical sentence, for if she had not murdered the child why was she there? And if she had, was this sufficient punishment?

The sentences that had been passed upon the prisoners appeared to be very similar, in most cases, to those passed in England: e. g., there were the women in for drunkenness, for "seven days"; those who had in more aggravated cases committed some assault, or similar assault, for "fourteen days" or a month; but upon a second conviction they invariably got a whole year's imprisonment, and this certainly must be deterrent. Drunkenness amongst the women is not very common, as it is only determined drinkers who take to spirits who can be inebriated, the light wines they drink being very harmless. The very serious cases which entail the "pena," or long and severe punishment, are now passed on from this prison to one of those at Rome, Perugia, or Turin, and there the rule is in all ways more stringent, prison dress is adopted, and they are known by a number; also no food is there allowed from the outside. This stricter discipline is only undergone, however, in those cases which have to suffer more than a year's incarceration.

We were now told that if we would come to the hall again we should see them all assembling for exercise, as the dinner half-hour was over, and down they all trooped from their various cells, with a strangely undisciplined look to English eyes, accustomed to the order and regularity of our prisons, some with knitting, some with sewing in their hands, others carrying their little stools, and nearly all with a *scaldino*, full of hot ashes. They were a motly-looking lot, as they passed by, clad in all manner of old garments; some with coloured handkerchiefs on their heads, others with their rough, unkempt hair rolled carelessly up; nearly all gave us a pleasant word or nod as they passed, chatting away merrily to each other. Here and there was a tidy looking woman, but the generality of the faces were of a low animal type; and it amazed one to think that all these rough women were under the sole control of six fragile little Sisters! Still, although there was so little *show* of power or coercion, one felt an influence and moral strength of these Sisters, such as must be recognised by these poor outcasts, and must have a softening and humanising effect on even the most hardened.

We followed them out to the exercise-yard, a large court divided into small compartments, each with a high wall and an iron gate, but the gates stood open. One Sister walked up and down, looking occasionally into the yards, where the women had already grouped themselves comfortably, about six or eight in a yard, many sitting on their stools knitting, one with her basin of unfinished soup which she had brought down from her cell, their heads here and there close together, busy whispering to each other, some talking loudly and unconcernedly. One singularly unpleasant looking old lady glared at us as we passed with a look of sullen curiosity, and to most we were evidently objects of much interest.

Words are not needed to depict all the evils of this unrestrained communication between criminals; the young girl who comes in here for the first time for some petty offence and with an innocent mind, must needs go out again into the world degraded and contaminated by the older and more corrupt women. The Sister stops a / too loud or profane talk, but naturally a good deal goes on that she never hears.

Two hours have sped away quickly while we lingered with the Sisters, talking of their charges and hearing of

their anxieties, and we were now obliged reluctantly to bid them adieu, although as each uttered her "*arrivederci*," we felt we would gladly return some day, and endeavour to carry on and supplement, both in and outside the prison walls, the work of these good Sisters. Indeed, such work is urgently needed, for it seemed to us as if the prison were merely a place of detention, where is no punishment except for the poorest, who must often suffer hunger. For the others, they come in, they sit at their work, knitting, crochet, etc., they gain what they can, and beyond the fact of occasional solitude, have little inconvenience to suffer. Little wonder that, as the Mother said, those who once come into the prison return again and again; as the system is conducted, it is simply a means of increasing the evil it should stop.

Out again we went through the barred doors, out into the freedom of life, and how marvellously sweet the soft air felt, and the sunshine seemed, how gay the bright shops and the busy thronged streets! And yet, as one stood there by the sunny Arno, watching the great river rolling away calmly and silently to the sea, that wonderful reminder of the life that drifts on and on so swiftly to eternity, one longed in one's heart to hold out a helping hand to these prisoners and captives, whose lives were drifting on, and who, when they were turned out of these prison gates, would just be thrust again into the same temptations which had assailed them to fall before, with probably increased knowledge of evil and less shame of its consequences.

Keep a pure heart and it shall be merry, and to a merry heart trials which crush scowlers are no more bother than a fly-speck to a busy housewife.

Don't ask questions—remember that most people are as anxious to tell their business as you are to know it. If they don't "out with it," just let them alone.

Thou canst not deny God when thou steppest out into the morning or under the starry heavens, or when thou art good or when thou art happy.

On April 27, the great Munster fair for the sale of horses and pigs opened in Limerick, and in the horse line there was a fairly large supply of good class animals, but the prices realized were on the whole poor.

Don't tell everything you know; try to keep a reserve on hand. Your egotism will grow under this process, and egotism is a fine, complacent background. If no one else thinks well of you, it is good to think well of yourself.

On April 26th, the ceremony of profession took place at the Presentation Convent, Enniscoorthy, the young lady who took the solemn vows of the order being Miss Maggie Kehoe, third daughter of Mr. Thomas Kehoe of Monroo, and to Miss Kehoe, Castle Hill, Enniscoorthy.

The death of Rev. Michael Gleeson, P.P., Castleconnell, is announced at the advanced age of 80 years. Deceased began his mission as a priest in the parish of Toomeenare, from whence he was transferred to Killaloe, and subsequently to Nonagh and Templeclodry. About 15 years ago, on the death of Father Hennessey, he was appointed to Castleconnell.

The remains of Master Richard Roche, of Knocknasillogue, who succumbed to the injuries he received from the accidental discharge of his gun, were interred at Blackwater, on April 22d. The immense cortege which attended the funeral testified to the great respect in which the family are held, and the deep and widespread sympathy felt for them in their sad bereavement.

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