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Governing Our Criminals

(By Mr. Chas. Cook, in 'The Christianian.')

Much—I am bold to say all—that tends to humanize, yea, to Christianize, the criminal, has been carefully eliminated from our prison system; and what remained had become well adapted to brutalize and harden the men against all that was good or godly.

I have it on the highest authority that a rule was in vogue not very long ago, and may still be, that 'not one word concerning the Lord Jesus was to be spoken by any of the officers to any prisoner.' The excuse for this was, 'It would be familiar conversation;' but happily I know that this rule was often 'more honored in the breach than the observance.' In fact, there has lately come about a great change in the iron discipline of our prison system.

It was considered at the Home Office that any effort to bring about spiritual results in the lives of the criminals, or anything done to bring the comfort and consolations of the Gospel to bear upon those who were in suffering and sorrow, was so much mitigation of punishment, and therefore was looked upon by many governors as unwise, and therefore discouraged. Penal servitude was administered as a punishment for crime, and any attempt to reform the criminal was so much less punishment in their eyes.

I most gladly report that our system has been passing through a time of transition, and when a certain governor was promoted, it was almost generally admitted he was 'the last of the old régime.' I have met with this gentleman and others of the same stamp, and while going in and out at all our English prisons have bewailed the harshness and severity of the penal code which they certainly administered in the spirit of a Martinet. But I could not fail to see that, while in many cases it filled the 'punishment cells,' and added to the number of men 'in chains,' it failed to soften the men thus punished, but rather helped to steel them against the officials, and harden their hearts against God.

The authorities are now discovering what I saw and advocated twenty years ago, and are wisely permitting the introduction of a new force to our prisons; that is to say, they are allowing that prisoners can be changed into useful citizens by a change of heart caused by an influence wholly outside discipline; and it is matter for congratulation that, having gained some light upon this important matter, they at once commenced to act upon it, by permitting missions to be held, outside clerical influence, within the formerly closed walls of the prison chapel.

How this has been brought about would be too long a tale to tell here; no doubt many things have conduced to it; but the authorities have been aware that amongst the gentlemen acting as governors of H.M. Prisons have been some few whose modus operandi has been altogether different from that implied above, and we trust the lessons learned by the Home Office will lead to this practical result—that the greatest care will be exercised in choosing gentlemen who are capable of bringing Christian influence to bear on those whom they govern, that those to whom we commit the sufferers from sin,

shall be such as have been themselves translated into the liberty which Christ alone can give.

I am thinking particularly of Colonel Plummer, the man who has won untold numbers of convicts to Christ; many such have visited me on release. Three such men have recently been in the room where I am writing this—while seven letters are before me from ex-convicts, who date their conversion from the time that their iniquities gave them an introduction to the late Governor of H. M. Prison, Parkhurst. A strict disciplinarian, a stickler for order, a perfect soldier, a unique governor, and yet withal a loving, Christian gentleman—this is my friend with whom I first became acquainted many years ago, when he was in office at Dartmoor convict prison.

The Colonel is old enough to have seen service in the trenches at Sebastopol, and



COLONEL PLUMMER.

the Mutiny in India, but has now for many years been caring for our prison populations. I saw and knew of many instances in Dartmoor, where he had been greatly used of God. He told me of one man who had recently been discharged after twenty years' imprisonment—a man who had never had a mark against his character whilst he had been there the whole twenty years. Another convict said:—'I was converted while cleaning the windows of the governor's bedroom, for over his bed was the text, "He is our Peace." It made me think, and Jesus soon after spoke peace to my soul.' It was in this prison, and of the Colonel that the incident I tell in my lecture 'The Prisons of the World,' happened:—

'Do you know anything of the Grace of God, Collins?' asked the governor of a convict for life.

'Thank God, I do, sir.'

'How long has it been?'

'Some years, now, sir, as I entered my cell, and the door slammed to with a jar, I fell on my knees, and, as I remembered my mother's prayers, and my father's tears, I accepted Christ as my Saviour, and I thank God I have never had a dark hour since.'

Poor fellow! and yet how rich! A convict for life! What misery! and yet withal,

what solace! In all my wanderings, and midst many preachings, I know no grander testimony to the power of the Gospel of Christ.

But it is at Parkhurst that Colonel Plummer has found his life-work, and numbers of men leave the place thankful that ever they were branded as convicts, for as such they have listened to 'thoughts that breathe, and words that burn,' that have been spoken by the governor, and have reached their souls.

Men who have slipped from the higher ranks of life have found in the Colonel a spiritual father and a brother in Christ, whilst professional criminals have told me that they owe their salvation to him.

'He is the first Christian governor I ever saw; I have seen some who were more like devils; but that man—God send more like him!'

Thus spake one who was known as 'the King of the Forgers,' now a consistent believer.

'The dear governor, how I love him,' said an ex-convict.

'He writes to me twice a week,' said another; 'and as for young Moore, he's allowing him £1 a week till he can get work.'

The secret of the success which has attended the Colonel's work is—that he differentiates; he has treated no two men alike, and his discrimination has been a help to him. Writing to me of three ex-convicts whom he had commended to my care, he said, 'Thank you so much for your kindness to my three friends.'

Some governors treat criminals 'in the lump;' to them they are all criminals. Colonel Plummer sees in them souls for whom Christ died—that love will reach the worst of men, and that the Gospel, lived and preached, will change the vilest criminals.

Born at Heworth Vicarage, Durham, in 1838, the Colonel joined the Army in 1854, and served in the Royal Fusiliers in the Crimea from July 7, 1855, and in India for eleven years, including a period of the Mutiny, and two campaigns against the Hill tribes of the North-West frontier under Sir Neville Chamberlain, G.C.B., in the latter as Q.M.G. He served in the United Kingdom from 1870 to 1878, when he entered the Prisons Department, and was sent as deputy-governor to Borstal Prison, remaining there for seven years, when he was transferred to Dartmoor Convict Prison. From thence he was promoted to be governor of Borstal Convict Prison, and after four years to Parkhurst Convict Prison. During his charge of this prison, it was turned into an invalid station for all breakdowns of mind or body, also a lunatic ward was added, causing a great increase of work and anxiety.

The Colonel retired on superannuation recently, thus closing a career of forty-six years in the public service, of which twenty-two years were spent in the prison service. He has the great joy of knowing that God's blessing has rested upon his word and example, as well as upon his work in the discharge of his onerous duties.