

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE CRIMINALS.

One very important section of the denizens of Darkest England are the criminals and the semi-criminals. They are more or less predatory, and are at present shepherded by the police and punished by the gaoler. Their numbers cannot be ascertained with very great precision, but the following figures are taken from the prison returns of 1889 :—

The criminal classes of Great Britain, in round figures, sum up a total of no less than 90,000 persons, made up as follows :—

Convict prisons contain	...	...	...	11,660	persons
Local	”	”	...	20,883	”
Reformatories for children convicted of crime	...		...	1,270	”
Industrial schools for vagrant and refractory children			...	21,413	”
Criminal lunatics under restraint	...	...	...	910	”
Known thieves at large	...	...	...	14,747	”
Known receivers of stolen goods	...	...	...	1,121	”
Suspected persons	...	...	...	17,042	”
			Total	89,046	

The above does not include the great army of known prostitutes, nor the keepers and owners of brothels and disorderly houses, as to whose numbers Government is rigidly silent.

These figures are, however, misleading. They only represent the criminals actually in gaol on a given day. The average gaol population in England and Wales, excluding the convict establishments, was, in 1889, 15,119, but the total number actually sentenced and imprisoned in local prisons was 153,000, of whom 25,000 only came on first term sentences; 76,300 of them had been convicted at least 10 times. But even if we suppose that the criminal class numbers

no more than 90,000, of whom only 35,000 persons are at large, it is still a large enough section of humanity to compel attention. 90,000 criminals represents a wreckage whose cost to the community is very imperfectly estimated when we add up the cost of the prisons, even if we add to them the whole cost of the police. The police have so many other duties besides the shepherding of criminals that it is unfair to saddle the latter with the whole of the cost of the constabulary. The cost of prosecution and maintenance of criminals, and the expense of the police involves an annual outlay of £4,437,000. This, however, is small compared with the tax and toll which this predatory horde inflicts upon the community on which it is quartered. To the loss caused by the actual picking and stealing must be added that of the unproductive labour of nearly 65,000 adults. Dependent upon these criminal adults must be at least twice as many women and children, so that it is probably an under-estimate to say that this list of criminals and semi-criminals represents a population of at least 200,000, who all live more or less at the expense of society.

Every year, in the Metropolitan district alone, 66,100 persons are arrested, of whom 444 are arrested for trying to commit suicide—life having become too unbearable a burden. This immense population is partially, no doubt, bred to prison, the same as other people are bred to the army and to the bar. The hereditary criminal is by no means confined to India, although it is only in that country that they have the engaging simplicity to describe themselves frankly in the census returns. But it is recruited constantly from the outside. In many cases this is due to sheer starvation. Fathers of the Church have laid down the law that a man who is in peril of death from hunger is entitled to take bread wherever he can find it to keep body and soul together. That proposition is not embodied in our jurisprudence. Absolute despair drives many a man into the ranks of the criminal class, who would never have fallen into the category of criminal convicts if adequate provision had been made for the rescue of those drifting to doom. When once he has fallen, circumstances seem to combine to keep him there. As wounded and sickly stags are gored to death by their fellows, so the unfortunate who bears the prison brand is hunted from pillar to post, until he despairs of ever regaining his position, and oscillates between one prison and another for the rest of his days. I gave in a preceding page an account of how a man, after trying in vain to get work, fell before the temptation to steal in order to escape starvation. Here is the sequel of that

man's story. After he had stolen he ran away, and thus describes his experiences: —

“To fly was easy. To get away from the scene required very little ingenuity, but the getting away from one suffering brought another. A straight look from a stranger; a quick step behind me, sent a chill through every nerve. The cravings of hunger had been satisfied, but it was the cravings of conscience that were clamorous now. It was easy to get away from the earthly consequences of sin, but from the fact— never. And yet it was the compulsion of circumstances that made me a criminal. It was neither from inward viciousness or choice, and how bitterly did I cast reproach on society for allowing such an alternative to offer itself—‘to Steal or Starve,’ but there was another alternative that here offered itself—either give myself up, or go on with the life of crime. I chose the former. I had travelled over 100 miles to get away from the scene of my theft, and I now find myself outside the station house at a place where I had put in my boyhood days.

“How many times when a lad, with wondering eyes, and a heart stirred with childhood's pure sympathy, I had watched the poor waifs from time to time led within its doors. It was my turn now. I entered the charge room, and with business-like precision disclosed my errand, viz. : that I wished to surrender myself for having committed a felony. My story was doubted. Question followed question, and confirmation must be waited. ‘Why had I surrendered?’ ‘I was a rum'un.’ ‘Cracked.’ ‘More fool than rogue.’ ‘He will be sorry when he mounts the wheel.’ These and such like remarks were handed round concerning me. An hour passed by. An inspector enters, and announces the receipt of a telegram. ‘It is all right. You can put him down.’ And turning to me, he said, ‘They will send for you on Monday,’ and then I passed into the inner ward, and a cell. The door closed with a harsh, grating clang, and I was left to face the most clamorous accuser of all— my own interior self’

“Monday morning, the door opened, and a complacent detective stood before me. Who can tell the feeling as the handcuffs closed round my wrists, and we started for town. As again the charge was entered, and the passing of another night in the cell; then the morning of the day arrived. The gruff, harsh ‘Come on’ of the gaoler roused me, and the next moment I found myself in the prison van, gazing through the crevices of the floor, watching the stones flying as it were from beneath our feet. Soon the court-house was reached, and hustled into a common cell, I found myself amongst a crowd of boys and men, all bound for the ‘dock.’ One by one the names are called, and the crowd is gradually thinning down, when the announcement of my own name fell on my startled ear, and I found myself stumbling up the stairs, and finding myself in daylight and the ‘dock.’ What a terrible ordeal it was. The ceremony was

brief enough; 'Have you anything to say?' 'Don't interrupt his Worship; prisoner!' 'Give over talking!' 'A month's hard labour.' This is about all I heard, or at any rate realised, until a vigorous push landed me into the presence of the officer who booked the sentence, and then off I went to gaol. I need not linger over the formalities of the reception. A nightmare seemed to have settled upon me as I passed into the interior of the correctional.

"I resigned my name, and I seemed to die to myself for henceforth. 332B disclosed my identity to myself and others.

"Through all the weeks that followed I was like one in a dream. Meal times, resting hours, as did every other thing, came with clock-like precision. At times I thought my mind had gone—so dull, so callous, so weary appeared the organs of the brain. The harsh orders of the gaolers; the droning of the chaplain in the chapel; the enquiries of the chief warder or the governor in their periodical visits,—all seemed so meaningless.

"As the day of my liberation drew near, the horrid conviction that circumstances would perhaps compel me to return to prison haunted me, and so helpless did I feel at the prospects that awaited me outside, that I dreaded release, which seemed but the facing of an unsympathetic world. The day arrived, and, strange as it may sound, it was with regret that I left my cell. It had become my home, and no home waited me outside.

"How utterly crushed I felt; feelings of companionship had gone out to my unfortunate fellow-prisoners, whom I had seen daily, but the sound of whose voices I had never heard, whilst outside friendships were dead, and companionships were for ever broken, and I felt as an outcast of society, with the mark of 'gaol bird' upon me, that I must cover my face, and stand aside and cry 'unclean.' Such were my feelings.

"The morning of discharge came, and I am once more on the streets. My scanty means scarcely sufficient for two days' least needs. Could I brace myself to make another honest endeavour to start afresh? Try, indeed, I did. I fell back upon my antecedents, and tried to cut the dark passage out of my life, but straight came the questions to me at each application for employment, 'What have you been doing lately?' 'Where have you been living?' If I evaded the question it caused doubt; if I answered, the only answer I could give was 'in gaol,' and that settled my chances.

"What a comedy, after all, it appeared. I remember the last words of the chaplain before leaving the prison, cold and precise in their officialism: 'Mind you never come back here again, young man.' And now, as though in response to my earnest effort to keep from going to prison, society, by its actions, cried out, 'Go back to gaol. There are honest men enough to do our work without such as you.'

"Imagine, if you can, my condition. At the end of a few days, black despair had wrapt itself around every faculty of mind and body. Then followed several

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days and nights with scarcely a bit of food or a resting-place. I prowled the streets like a dog, with this difference, that the dog has the chance of helping himself, and I had not. I tried to forecast how long starvation's fingers would be in closing round the throat they already gripped. So indifferent was I alike to man or God, as I waited for the end."

In this dire extremity the writer found his way to one of our Shelters, and there found God and friends and hope, and once more got his feet on to the ladder which leads upward from the black gulf of starvation to competence and character, and usefulness and heaven.

As he was then, however, there are hundreds—nay, thousands—now. Who will give these men a helping hand? What is to be done with them? Would it not be more merciful to kill them off at once instead of sternly crushing them out of all semblance of honest manhood? Society recoils from such a short cut. Her virtuous scruples reminds me of the subterfuge by which English law evaded the veto on torture. Torture was forbidden, but the custom of placing an obstinate witness under a press and slowly crushing him within a hairbreadth of death was legalised and practised. So it is to-day. When the criminal comes out of gaol the whole world is often but a press whose punishment is sharp and cruel indeed. Nor can the victim escape even if he opens his mouth and speaks.

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