

**PRISON DISCIPLINE SOCIETY.**

[Extracts from the last Annual Report.]

*Does the Auburn System of Prison Discipline Depend on Stripes?*

**Preliminary Remarks.** The discussion of this question demands candor, patience and frankness, without fear or favor.

The officers and prisoners have both sacred and inviolable rights.

The officers have the right to govern with humanity, firmness, and authority.

The prisoners have a right to live, (if they do not attempt to kill,) to breathe, to eat, to be clothed, to be taken care of when they are sick.

The government of a Prison, however, is delegated and committed, by higher powers, to elected officers, who have no right to transcend the powers committed to them; and the prisoners have no right to resist the authority of the officers, when exercised according to law.

Absolute power, unlimited power, despotic power, are entirely inadmissible in the American Penitentiary system.

All the Prisons are, or should be, regulated by law, and nothing is more important, than that it should be seen and known by competent, unprejudiced, and disinterested inspectors, that the laws are faithfully executed, and no more.

The very beginning of assumption in regard to powers not delegated, should be crushed on the threshold. When an elected officer of a Prison begins to say, "I shall do as I please; I care not for the law, or the inspectors: if they know it, and like it, well: if not, well; my will shall govern, and no question shall be asked or answered;" you have despotism and tyranny, which the legislative and appointing powers should crush at once. It is the government of a tyrant over men, which the prisoners hate, which the laws do not sanction, which the ignorance of the inspectors cannot excuse, and which sets the hearts of the prisoners at enmity against society, because they are not treated according to law.

So important was this matter, in the view of the immortal Howard, that he always contended, that there should not only be laws for the government of a Prison, but they should be printed and published, and suspended upon the interior walls of the Prison, that every inmate might understand the laws by which he was to be governed, and that every officer and inspector might frequently be reminded of the laws by which alone the Prison could be governed, without trampling upon the rights of the prisoners or neglecting his own duties.

The fundamental principles laid down in these preliminary remarks, it is believed, are so obvious and self-evident, as to require neither proof nor illustration.

We proceed, therefore, to discuss a question of fundamental importance, which may need discussion and illustration. It has been said that terror, and not moral improvement, is the great end of the Auburn system: that the lash, and not moral means, will keep men out of Prison. It has been said, and a pamphlet has been written to prove it, that the Auburn system depends for its existence on the lash, and cannot be carried on without it.

If this were true, it would be a deadly blow against the system.

But it is not true, in the sense here intended. That the lash has generally been used at Auburn and Sing Sing is true. But to what extent the system depends for its existence and success upon the lash, is a question of vast importance, and deserving most grave and impartial consideration. We think it can be proved that it does not depend for its success upon the lash.

What, then, is the Auburn system of Prison discipline? It is not one thing; it is many things. It is a great improvement of the nineteenth century in a very important science.

In the first place, it is solitary confinement at night.

The importance and effect of this one feature of the system cannot readily be conceived by those who have not been familiar with the dreadful evils of the crowded night-rooms of the old Prisons.

Where old thieves taught young thieves, in companies of fifteen or twenty, how to pick pockets and pick locks; how to burn houses and break stores; how to make and set the matches; how to make the false keys; where were the most exposed places, and the richest plunder; who kept money in their houses; in what part of the house it was kept; when the men of the house were away from home; whether the houses were guarded by dogs, and in what manner the doors were fastened; and, moreover, how the old corrupted the young, by practising the sin of Sodom; it was well said, "*Better that the laws were written in blood, than thus executed in sin.*"

Pickpockets had a language of their own, which was taught in these rooms. Picklocks had moulds and models of false keys, which would go through all the locks of the city, and would furnish a key to unlock the door, by having the impression of a key-hole on a piece of wax. A key, furnished many years ago, by one of the old teachers, in an old Prison, has been preserved which would probably unlock 5000 locks in the city of Boston; and another false key, with six or eight variations, which would probably unlock half the stocklocks in the commonwealth. Instruction in these arts was the business of the old night-rooms. "*They were committee-rooms of mischief.*" "*Nature and humanity cried aloud for redemption from this dreadful degradation.*"

It was done, and done effectually, by the first great feature of the Auburn system of Prison discipline, viz., solitary confinement at night.

The second great feature of the system is silence by day and by night.

This is scarcely less important than the other; for, although men might be removed from personal contact with each other, and from the dreadful degradation of the old night rooms, still if they were permitted, by word of mouth, to teach the arts of mischief, but half the evil was prevented. Hence the importance of the second great law of the system—silence by day and by night. Persons who did not know why the law was made, might think it severe; but those who have stood, night after night, unperceived by the prisoners, along side of the old night-rooms, and heard the conversation of the old and experienced convict with the novice in crime, would almost choose that the tongue should cleave to the roof of the mouth, rather than it should not cease to make such communications. Silence by day and by night, therefore, became the second great feature of the Auburn system.

How completely this object has been effected, is illustrated by the anecdote of a prisoner who requested a sheriff, when conducting him from Wethersfield to New Haven, to put him a night in the County Jail with another man; because, he said, it made his tongue feel so good to talk, and added further, "One man is as good as five newspapers."

The third great feature of the Auburn system is moral and religious instruction. The evil communication being cut off, the good instruction is communicated. The morning and evening pray-

ers; the private visits, conversation, advice, and sympathy of the chaplain; the kind and faithful admonitions, instructions, and prayers of the Sabbath school teachers; the appropriate and pungent preaching; and, not unfrequently, the paternal advice and counsel of the warden, in the chapel, on the Sabbath, in the presence of all the officers and visitors;—this is the third great feature of the Auburn system.

In the chapel of the Auburn Prison, the late Judge Powers addressed a few words of kindness and affectionate regard to the prisoners, and about one half the whole number were in tears. How admirably this combination of the great features of the system is calculated to bring men to reflection! A prisoner was asked in the new Prison at Wethersfield, Conn., which is built and conducted, substantially, on the Auburn plan, "How do you like the new prison, compared with the old Prison, where they were lodged seventy feet under ground, in large night rooms?" He said, "There, it is, *Hail, fellows, well met!*; but here, it is prayers the first thing in the morning, and the last thing at night; and silence by day and by night; see our comrades and say nothing; but think, think, think. I do not like this so well as the other."

Several other important features of the system, although not, perhaps, as important as those which have been mentioned, are essential to its completion, and distinguish it from any system ever introduced previous to the present century.

The building is a Prison within a Prison, greatly diminishing the chances of escape, and preventing the ceaseless anxiety, calculation, craft, and cunning, of the old Prisons, in regard to escapes.

Moreover, the construction gives a place, in the area, around the block of cells, for a sentinel to be always on duty, during the night. If the prisoner gets out of his cell into the area, he is exposed to the fire of the sentinel on duty. This is a very distinct and important feature of the Auburn system, greatly distinguishing it from the old system of Prison discipline, where plots to escape, combinations for the purpose, insurrections, and rebellion, were the order of the day. We have scarcely heard of such a thing since the Auburn system was introduced.

There are still other features of the system, too important not to be mentioned, going to show that it is no one thing, but many things, that make the Auburn system.

The same relative position, to a vast extent, is preserved among the men. My neighbor to-day is my neighbor to-morrow and the whole year. The names, faces, crimes, sentences, of prisoners, in different shops, and, to some extent, in the same shops, are not known to fellow-prisoners. The extent to which this remark is true, owing to preserving the same relative position, would surprise any critical examiner.

And then the same relative position is preserved, by the lock-step, from the shops to the night-rooms, from the night-rooms to the chapel, and from the chapel again to the shops; and thus the jostling, bustle, and confusion of the old system is done away.

Again to prevent evil communication by signs, the men are extensively arranged, on the Auburn system, improved to the highest degree, back to face, and not face to face; so that the thing signified by signs what does it signify if it is not seen?

This is an imperfect outline of the Auburn system. There is evidently much in it to subdue, to silence, to instruct, to restrain, to render submissive and pliable, to keep in safety, before a word is said about stripes. The stripes are as the drop to the ocean, compared with the whole. It is not true, that it depends on stripes. Its efficiency does not depend upon them; its success does not depend upon them; the preventing evil communication does not depend upon them; the good instruction does not depend upon them; the construction of the Prison does not depend upon them; its reformatory character does not depend upon them; the keeping down insurrections, and the preventing escapes, do not depend upon them; keeping the convicts ignorant of each other does not depend upon them. In short, stripes ought to be, if they are not, either a very small part, or no part of the system.

What becomes, now, of the principle, which we set out to discuss, that terror, and not moral improvement, is the great end of the Auburn system of Prison discipline. We have seen that all the great features of the system aim at moral improvement, by preventing evil and communicating good.

The solitary confinement at night; the silence by day and by night; the moral and religious instruction; the very construction of the Prison; the chapel, the solemn assembly, the morning and evening devotions; the Sabbath school; the paternal advice of the warden; the sympathetic and affectionate visits of the chaplain; the night watch; the preserving the same relative position; the cutting off the language of signs;—all, all is designed to prevent evil communication, and, in the place of it, to pour upon the mind good instruction. The man who says it depends altogether upon the lash, does not understand the system. It is a powerful system without stripes.

We are now prepared to show that it can be conducted, and has been conducted, as well, if not better, without stripes. In the House of Correction, at South Boston, with 300 inmates, it has been in successful operation six years without stripes. The Auburn system, in all its great features, can nowhere be seen in more successful operation.