Personal Paper

Gaol

During the second world war I was a conscientious objector and was imprisoned three times—for seven days, for seven weeks, and for seven months. I am naturally apprehensive about being imprisoned a fourth time! I was in between house jobs at the time, and imprisonment certainly made it difficult to get jobs. But I didn't have to give up important positions, or lose a practice laboriously built up over the years. In this sense it was not a great traumatic experience, leaving my life in ruins or anything like that. Even so it was quite enough of a shock, and precipitated me into a world very different from anything that medicine had prepared me for.

Prisoners are collected from the courts in bus-like Black Marias with tiny windows and sitting so closely packed (though in separate "cells") that one's legs and knees are tucked under the seat of the man in front and the panel that separates you is a few inches from your face. Undoubtedly it economises on space, but the claustrophobic effect is appalling. You are deposited at Rochester Row Police Station, and later the same mobile toast rack distributes you to the prison proper. At the prison reception you exchange your own clothes for the extraordinary, anonymous prison clothes. The reception at Wormwood Scrubs became quite familiar to me. Ironically it is next door to the postgraduate medical school at Hammersmith Hospital in Ducane Road, where I had spent two strenuous years as casualty officer. The officer on reception greeted me with a cheerful "Not you again!" But he added to my companion: "If you are like him, you'll do all right." It's nice to be appreciated and made welcome.

At Hammersmith I had treated several of the warders from next door and their children. Prisoners contemptuously call them "screws," and from previous experience I had not held them in any great esteem. But as patients I found them no different from anyone else, and they were certainly just as concerned about their children's earaches and other ailments. And they were equally grateful; for on the first night of my third term my cell door was noisily unlocked and an enormous mug of cocoa pushed inside with a muttered "Thank you for being good to my kid!" Another young warder whose fractured scaphoid I had plastered proudly insisted on showing me what a good functional result we had achieved between us. After this I was continually consulted—on exercise, in the workshops, at mealtimes, and for every conceivable malady or problem. Even the padre, when he came to offer me spiritual consolation, spent most of the time telling me about his family problems, and the hopes and fears he had for his children. We got on famously. Every doctor knows the problem of being nobbled in inappropriate situations; I felt that a doctor in prison is certainly a sitting duck.

I used to protest that I had no tools, no means of treatment. My plea, "Why don't you go to the prison medical officers?" was instantly brushed aside. Undoubtedly my situation made me prejudiced, but it did seem to me that the official MOs gave the impression that their first duty was to the prison, to the detriment of the doctor-patient relationship. Very different were the local general practitioners who came in and dealt with most of the prisoners' day-to-day ailments.

During my first sentence—seven days—I worked as a cleaner. I was instructed by an agreeable chap who couldn't read or write. He dreaded the long 14 hours (from 4 pm to 6 am) when we were locked in our cells, and used to while away the time looking at bound copies of the *Illustrated London News* of 20 years before. My job was to scrub down the flagstone gallery outside the cells. To make it more interesting, and because I suspected it was a fairly useless job anyway, I used to scrub the first flagstone with soap, wash the next one with a wet floorcloth, and leave the third one untouched. When it was all dry I used to try and determine which one had had what treatment, and found they all looked the same. It was a sort of research project.

A hanging

Later on I worked in the laundry in Wandsworth. The prisoners used to dry chrysanthemum leaves in the ironing machine to provide a substitute for tobacco. In the Scrubs I worked in the basket shop, and made 128 potato baskets. The instructor was concerned about "my surgeon's hands," but the wet willow withies never did me any harm. I rather enjoyed it. As a cell task one has to sew mailbags—eight stitches to the inch. On mainline stations even to this day I cannot resist looking at the mail bags to make sure that they are stitched properly! In those days you could earn up to a maximum of 11 pence (old pence) a week, and the only thing you could spend it on was tobacco. I didn't smoke, so I paid very willing colleagues to sew my mailbags for me, and thus gained extra reading time, even though I never earned more than seven pence a week. Nobody got much tobacco, and one wag claimed that he chain smoked for five minutes a week.

On the third morning of my first imprisonment a man was hanged. It was in Wandsworth. (Wormwood Scrubs, the first-timer's prison, was at that time handed over to the Wrens.) The whole prison was tense with expectation and disquiet. Other prisoners told me that the execution chamber was under the central portion of the star shaped building, and that the clang when the trap-door was sprung could be clearly heard all over the prison. So that we would be out of earshot, we were all moved after breakfast to exercise by a remote disused wing—a three-pointed star building. (It seems incredible today when men live three in a cell in a burstingly overcrowded prison system, that such unused blocks were available.) To prevent our knowing when the fatal hour of 8 o'clock struck, all the clocks were stopped and silent. If anything, these precautions only heightened the tension, and the prisoners thought and talked of nothing else. By no means all were against execution as such. "He killed a bloke, didn't he? He deserves to be topped," one chap said to me as we trudged around the exercise yard on that April morning; but the sense of fear and foreboding dominated us all, prisoners and warders alike. In Barlinnie Gaol in Glasgow, a governor had committed suicide on the day before an execution was to take place. As the day wore on normality gradually reasserted itself, but it was a weird and horrible experience, impossible to forget.

Prisons during the war were full of all nationalities—

London
Conscientious objector

Americans, Canadians (whom I remember as being quite exceptionally foul-mouthed), French, Polish, and Dutch. I used to play chess with a Pole who made do with a mixture of English and French. A young Dutch soldier was accused and punished as the alleged "ring leader" in a disturbance in the tailors' shop. One of my friends witnessed the incident and knew he was certainly innocent. Nevertheless, he lost all his remission and privileges and was moved to another prison. Our sense of injustice was heightened because the visiting magistrates refused to let him call witnesses in his defence—a right under the prison regulations. Some of us tried to smuggle the facts out of prison, and, of course, were detected. We lost two months' remission and were given the maximum period of penal diet, bread and water for three days. The governor was astonished when we exercised our right to petition the Home Secretary, and simply related the whole incident all over again. I think the authorities must have been impressed for they gave us back one month of our lost remission! I do not know what happened to the Dutch boy.

Like boarding school

While I was on my bread and water diet one of the kitchen workers contrived to slip into my punishment cell a loaf, cut in half, and containing an enormous knob of butter, a most welcome gesture of solidarity. I hid it. But half an hour later one of the principal officers (a grade made familiar today by "Mr MacKay" in Ronnie Barker's "Porridge" series), picked on me for one of the periodical cell searches. One of the warders who accompanied him found my bit of contraband almost immediately, and I thought I was done for. But to my astonishment and relief he simply looked at me with one raised eyebrow, and held it behind his back until the search was over. He then returned it to its hiding place and relocked the cell door.

These episodes remind me that prison is very like boarding school. You are like a new boy having to cope with prefects and bullies and accommodate yourself to the hierarchy. People have said to me, "It must be so much worse for you, an educated man!" But I felt I had been through it all before at my public school. For my colleague the cleaner in Wandsworth, yawning his way through the *Illustrated London News*, the long hours dragged painfully slowly. For me, by contrast, the months inside provided me with marvellous opportunities for reading. Never since have I read the *BMJ* and the *Lancet* so thoroughly. One of my fellow inmates was a second-hand bookseller I had known for years, and he had managed to get the job of librarian. He brought me the catalogue, and I was amazed to find what a wealth of titles it contained. A friend who was a tramp preacher in for some free speech offence in one of the Scottish prisons, went to the governor, as his day of release became imminent, and asked if he could stay in a few extra days as he was just starting the last volume of Gibbon's *Rome*! The governor refused his request.

The superabundance of leisure gave me some marvellous talks with all sorts of men, as well as with my particular friends. Exercise parades were long conversational strolls, and the hours of "association" in the recreation room were given over to games of chess, draughts, or cards, or just chat. Similarly, the workshop time was all talk—to the screws and instructors as well as one's fellows, who were a richly assorted lot very different from the people one meets in the narrower social intercourse outside prison. Two friendships I made in the Scrubs have lasted a lifetime.

Applying for jobs after release was quite difficult. At interview one is naturally asked what one has been doing since the last appointment. I never tried to prevaricate, and usually got a sympathetic hearing and many curious questions; but seldom got the job. In the end I tended to get the posts which no one else seemed to want, and after a few such I was able, truthfully, to give a reasonably hum-drum account of my last few appointments. I cannot say that I have suffered much from the stigma of prison. I never blazoned it forth, but I have hardly ever had to choose between untruthful denial or more or less uncomfortable admission. You just don't get asked. Only once, when I had been in my own practice for several years, was I faced with a serious dilemma. An old friend, who was the brother of an MP, asked me to stand bail for him. At court, his barrister, strongly advised me *not* to stand bail, although he said there was no one else available. It appeared that the police opposed bail and were prepared to bring up my record. Because of his brother, my friend's case had attracted reporters from all the evening papers, and the barrister feared that I should suffer professionally. I thought for some time, but it seemed to me that I could hardly live my life under a cloud of concealment, so decided to stick my neck out and stand bail. The police duly spilled the beans, the magistrate asked me if the General Medical Council had acted against me (which they hadn't), and in the event he rejected the police plea and allowed bail. The evening papers reported in full, and I returned rather apprehensively to my evening surgery. As it happened, only two of my patients adverted to the matter. One, an octogenarian lady who was proud of being the first lady reporter on the *Daily Mail*, rang me up with evident interest and chatted on about it. The other, my local publican, said nothing directly, but welcomed me with unwonted warmth and insisted on standing me a drink, talking animatedly about the prospects of us getting a garage he hoped we could share.

All in all I can't say that prison was a serious trauma. I have tended to forget the frustration and loneliness shut up in a cell, and the longing for friends and family outside. Instead I remember the broadening of one's experience, the cheerful and amusing and occasionally heart-warming things. I certainly learned a lot; but you could call it learning the hard way.