

## IN A WOMAN'S PRISON.

Strange Experiences Related by the Warden.

I was for several years assistant warden in a state prison where only male convicts were confined, and I left that to become warden of a prison where over 300 females were under lock and key the year round. If forced to choose I would prefer to have charge of 500 males rather than 100 females. Most men enter prison feeling that they have deserved their punishment and anxious to make all the good time possible. No woman admits her guilt, and by the time she reaches prison she has convinced herself that she is a martyr. One not familiar with the workings of a female prison can have no idea of the trouble and annoyance an obstinate inmate can cause. A male convict who is obstinate, malicious, and bent on causing trouble can be punished and forced to give in, but you can only go so far in inflicting punishment on a woman, and the limit scarcely compels obedience to routine orders.

One of my first patients was a woman named Mary Noonan. She was on a life sentence for the murder of her husband, and had been in the prison five years. A change of wardens always renews the hopes of those looking for a pardon, and it always causes a change in the conduct of certain prisoners. I had not been in the new place a fortnight when I discovered that all the convicts except one were perfectly innocent of crime and had been sent up through mistake or malice. The exception was a youngish woman named Haskins, who had poisoned the man who betrayed her and was making ready to desert her. She not only acknowledged the crime, but felt that she had only done her duty in revenging herself. The innocents were all agog for some change to benefit them, while at least a hundred expected me to recommend them for pardon. Mrs. Noonan sought an interview with me for the purpose of stating that she had discovered new evidence bearing on her case: evidence which would conclusively prove her own innocence. She had, in a fit of anger, as the records of the case showed, stabbed her husband with a butcher knife at noontime and before her four children. It was the clearest case in the world, but she contended that a great wrong had been done her, and that the real murderer had escaped.

The new evidence had come to her in a dream. She had dreamed that a clerk in a certain grocery near her home had stabbed Noonan before he entered the house, and that the guilty man was now anxious to confess the fact and obtain her release. The idea was so absurd and silly that I could not promise her anything, and from that hour she determined to make me all the trouble possible. She first refused to work. I gave her a day in which to think it over, and as she remained obstinate she was locked up in a dark cell with only bread and water. On the fourth day word was brought me that Mrs. Noonan was dead. I went with the prison doctor to the cell, and we found the body growing rigid and cold. Both of us had seen many cases of shamming, and while convinced that this was another, the counterfeit was startling. The jaw dropped, the half-shut eyes had the glaze of death, and the flesh assumed that pallor which only death can bring. And yet we both felt that the woman was alive. Indeed, there was a flutter of the pulse and the heart to prove it. It was a case of animation suspended by will power. Perhaps not more than one person in ten thousand is able to control mind and muscle in this manner. It is, for a time, next door to actual death. It does not require nerve, as I understand it, but simply the power to collapse, as it were. Prisoners who have thus shammed on me, have explained afterward that they heard every word spoken around them, though no voice sounded natural. They did not realize any feeling except that of extreme lightness, as if all solidity had gone out of the body. It required no particular effort to hold the breath or keep the limbs rigid.

I ordered the body to be prepared and placed in a coffin and the coffin placed in a shed next to the laundry. I supposed this was what Mary wanted and had planned for. All the other prisoners believed her dead, and she had two or three particular friends who wept over her loss. The coffin was placed in the shed about sundown, and two men set to watch it. At midnight Mary rose up, climbed out, and was working to loosen a board when accosted by the watchers. She returned to her work next morning as usual, and refused to answer any questions or make any explanations. About once a week for the next five years she had some new scheme to annoy me, and I was ever wondering what she would do next.

It is seldom that one hears of a woman escaping from a prison. This is not for the reason that they do not long for liberty, nor that some of them are not desperate enough at times to take any risk. One of the most deceptive of the inmates of the prison was a little woman of 30, all smiles and sunshine, who had been sent up for a number of years for committing a robbery. She was good-looking, well educated, and evidently of good birth. Every word and movement was ladylike, and during the six months she had served before I took charge she had quite won the matron's heart. She was placed in charge of twelve sewing women in a room on the second floor, fronting a side street. These women made the clothing of the inmates. This sewing room was lighted by two windows, defended by bars, of course. Off this room was a stock or store room, and Mrs. Newman, as the little woman was called, had the key to this and was in charge. There was but one window in this room. Mrs. Newman was the last person I should have picked out as a plotter. Indeed, I should not have expected her to go out had the doors been left open.

One midafternoon it was reported that the little lady was missing, and fifteen minutes later I had discovered that she had gone by the window. Where she got a file I never could learn, but she procured one somehow and filed off three bars. She was engaged at this work for three months. When she got ready to go she made a stout rope of cloth, fastened one end to a remaining bar, and then slid down to the earth in safety. She had secretly made herself a cap and a cloak, and she walked off two blocks, boarded a street car, and was soon out of the neighborhood. A trifling circumstance led to her capture that same night. If she had planned to meet friends, they had not come on. She had no money, and though the conductor did not put her off on this account, she was flurried by the situation. She got off at a street running out into the country, and walked briskly away. I happened to

take this same car two hours later, and overheard the conductor relating the circumstance. I caught at the idea that it was Mrs. Newman, and at 10 o'clock that night I found her in a farm house ten miles away. She laughed merrily, and hoped I would bear her no ill will.

The assistant forewoman in the laundry was a Mrs. Williams, who had been sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for maiming a child she had adopted. She had been in three years when I took charge. She claimed to be the victim of a conspiracy, but seemed content to bide her time. Off the laundry was a large, badly-lighted room which had been intended for refractory cells, but which had never been finished up. The room was now used as a catch-all for the laundry. There were eleven women in the laundry, and in doing what she did Mrs. Williams had to blind them all. One end of this room was toward the side street, and the wall was three feet deep, and sunk six or seven feet into the ground. The floor was of concrete. A month before I came the forewoman was taken sick and Mrs. Williams was promoted to her place. She could now pass anywhere about the laundry unquestioned, and she at once began working on a plan to escape. Her tools were an old hatchet and a small fire shovel, and she began digging from the room described to undermine the wall. She was never absent from the laundry over a quarter of an hour at a time, and could not work at her digging over two hours per day. The other women saw her go and come, but it was not their business to inquire into her movements.

In about seventy days Mrs. Williams had gone down under the wall and was ready to break the surface of the ground on the other side. She would not risk daylight, as the other had done, but waited nearly a week until some extra wash gave her an excuse to remain in the laundry an hour later than usual. She had been gone half an hour before she was missed, and it was a full hour before the means of exit was discovered. The dirt had been carried to the rear end of the room and flung behind some old tubs and mangles, and she had done her work as well as the craftiest man. She had likewise got hold of bread and meat, and when she got into the street she only went two squares before hiding herself in a horse barn. The owner had no horse, and as it was summer time the woman could not suffer lying on the hay up stairs. There was water below, and she economized her food to make it last as long as possible. Immediately that her escape was discovered, I used every exertion to secure her recapture, having depots watched and the country scoured in every direction. A week past and I could not obtain the slightest clue. Then one night a barn on the alley opposite the one she was hidden in was set on fire, and before the engines got to work the roof of the other was ablaze. I happened to be early on the spot, and what was my astonishment when Mrs. Williams quietly opened the door and walked plump into my arms. She shed tears of vexation when returned to her old quarters, having made up her mind that her escape was assured.

Another of the inmates who pulled the wool over my eyes for the moment was a Miss Hutchins who was serving a sentence for pocket picking. I give you her prison name but it was said that she was the wife of a notorious thief and bank sneak. He had exhausted the law in his endeavors to get her clear, and had made his boasts that she should not serve her time out. When I took charge I was warned to be on the alert, and I kept my eyes open as far as possible. Miss Hutchins and two others were employed in making fancy baskets, which were sold to procure books and papers for the prisoners. They had a small room off the hall leading from the corridor to the laundry, and were constantly under some one's eyes. I had been in the place about three months when two young women called as visitors. It so happened that the matron was busy, and I volunteered to escort them about until she should be at leisure. We went to the bakery, kitchen, laundry, and other places, and would have passed by the basket room had they not particularly requested to enter it. Not a sign of recognition passed between the visitor and any of the three workers. A few questions were asked, some of the finished work admired, and we passed out. As the door closed behind us one of the visitors exclaimed: "Dear me, but I have lost my gloves. I must have left them on the table in the laundry."

"I, of course, volunteered to go after them, and I found them on the table. I did not stop to speak with any one, and was not absent over seventy or eighty seconds. The owner of the gloves thanked me, complained of a sudden headache, and remarked that they would trouble me no further. I passed them through two wickets and the main hall and out of the front door, and had just got seated in the office to write a letter when a messenger from the matron said I was wanted at once. When I reached her she stood beside a sharp, good-looking young woman, who was in *dehabille*, and a stranger. She had been discovered in one of the cells almost by accident.

"What does this mean?" I asked, failing to connect her presence with an absence.

"I do not know," she replied, wringing her hands and looking in a helpless way. "Oh, sir, where am I, and won't you take me home?"

I own up that she befuddled me neatly, and delayed me a quarter of an hour. It was a put-up job. The two girls had come in to do just what they did do. When I started for the gloves Miss Hutchins came into the hall. In the minute and a half she was clothed at the expense of one of the visitors, and the latter found refuge in an open cell. A carriage stood in front of the prison to carry them away, and they had a long start. There were two crooks in the job, and the party felt so elated over bamboozling me that they got drunk as they pushed along the highway for a town twenty miles off. Fifteen miles away the carriage was upset and broken, Miss Hutchins injured, and the other three arrested for brawling. Suspicion was aroused, and I was telegraphed to, and inside of twenty-four hours I had my prisoner back. Later on those who had helped her escape had to serve out sentences for six months, and the crooks were wanted for a job which gave them five years apiece.

The length of the Mississippi River has always been placed at 4,100 miles, but civil engineers familiar with the stream say that it has shortened itself over 400 miles in twenty years, and will do so well in the twenty to come.

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Was a merry old soul,  
And a merry old soul was he."

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