

When the Gates Shut*

F. McN. LIESCHING

WHEN THE GATES SHUT is a simple, straightforward account of life at Holloway Prison. There is something extraordinarily attractive about this book. Writing as one who is in charge of a Prison Service establishment and who is constantly asked to speak of the work going on there to a large variety of groups, I know how easy it is to paint a picture which, though not untrue in any detail, nevertheless presents the establishment to an ignorant public in a much more favourable light than the facts justify. It would have been so easy for Mrs. Kelley to have done the same—to have stressed the positive, constructive work carried out at Holloway and to have glossed over, or entirely to have omitted, the more seamy side of the life of a women's prison. This book is so attractive because it is written with such candid honesty. It is an honesty enhanced also by an almost childlike simplicity and a compassion for people. Further, there is no trace of cynicism in the author's outlook, and it is heartening to reflect that though Mrs.

Kelley has served for so long and throughout her service has dealt with surely the most difficult of the Prison Service clientele—the womenfolk—that her outlook has remained untainted.

Here are some examples of her candid and honest reporting:

"There is supposed to be one hour's exercise in the open-air on fine days—there is no exercise if it is wet. In practice only about half an hour is spent crawling around the exercise ground; the women have to be collected from the workshops and taken to the ground at the pace of the slowest; an equal amount of time must be allowed at the end for them to be returned to work or taken into the prison. . . . The exercise at Holloway is one of the most depressing sights to be seen there" (p. 19).

"A great deal of talk about sex goes on among the women. . . . There is quite often lesbianism amongst the recidivists" (p. 26).

"Sometimes a woman becomes completely lackadaisical and appears merely to be plodding on without caring about anything

* *When the Gates Shut* by J. E. KELLEY (Longmans, Green & Co. 25s.)

either in or out of prison. The more experienced officers then say, 'So-and-so has got gaol rot' " (p. 33).

"A woman who is really determined to do so can, in fact, avoid work most of the time" (p. 68).

"A male prisoner comparing life in a closed prison with the more rigorous regime at borstal, described it as 'one long kip'; far from preparing prisoners to cope with life outside, such conditions can be completely character destroying".

"Those who come from rough and violent backgrounds, who are used to resorting to kicks and blows, may easily intimidate those who come from more sheltered environments. Officers cannot always be present and dark hints of what can happen in a recess or association room can inspire great terror, often not unwarranted" (p. 177).

Mrs. Kelley's candid reference to these various problems which face the governor of any women's prison greatly enhances the value of her book. But together with this plain reporting of the uglier facts, she brings a compassion for people which shows itself again and again throughout the book. Her story of the night stoker (p. 64) who risked his job by pushing through the window bars of a punishment cell, cheese sandwiches and cigarettes to a man who was in trouble and the remarkable effect this simple act of kindness had on this

particular prisoner is illustrative of this. Her charming little parenthesis when writing of visiting rules (p.21): "On one occasion it became necessary to decide whether or not a cat was a 'person' within the meaning of the rules", again demonstrates her understanding of how much an apparently trivial matter can mean to a woman.

How well also those of us who have governed an establishment can appreciate her remark on page 23, where she is speaking of a woman she has placed in solitary confinement and on bread and water. "A governor has to visit each day anyone she has put in cellular confinement or on bread and water diet and often, after sitting on their mattresses with them and talking, it is possible to leave feeling that a friendship has been established; one can try to make them understand why they had to be punished and attempt to understand why they had to rebel". Recently the writer took the other end of a cross-cut saw with a boy under punishment. Some days later, the boy having completed the punishment, he chanced to meet him coming down a passage. A great smile spread over the boy's face and he said: "Any time you wish to do any more sawing, Sir, just let me know". It is a pity that our critics, so ready to point out our weaknesses in Press and elsewhere, do not give some publicity to this kind of relationship which exists

between so many individual members of the staff and prisoners in Prison Service establishments throughout the country.

The sequel to Mrs. Kelley's willingness to sit on a mattress with folk under punishment is to be found on page 41 where a girl who grew to know the governor very well simply because she was punished so often asked her to visit her after she had been transferred to a closed ward of a mental hospital, as "no one else would want to visit her". The governor's visits continued, even after she had refused to provide the money for a bottle of gin to be smuggled in to the hospital".

On page 57 there is quite the most delightful story of a woman shop lifter that the writer has ever read. "Another stole a large piece of bacon from a well-known supermarket. When she got home she found it was slightly mouldy. She flounced back to the shop. The manager apologetically offered her another piece but she said no, it had put her off bacon. She would rather have her money returned, which was done. She then graciously agreed to treat the incident as closed".

The references to prostitution are of interest. On page 100 we learn that some prostitutes regard themselves as performing a valuable service, at least as useful as that of the dustman and far more useful than that of the policeman. The reason why a woman turns to

prostitution may often surprise, and it is interesting to learn of a woman (p. 111) who turned to prostitution because she could not any longer face the loneliness of living with a good but taciturn husband. Not only this, but she claimed that many of her clients did not really want sexual intercourse, but only someone to talk to.

On page 138 we find the delightful account of the woman who interviewed the governor. "As she sat down, she said, 'I have been meaning for some time to ask you a question. I notice that you are much better dressed than you used to be and really wear some quite pretty things these days. Is this because you have more money to spend and so are able to buy from better shops, or is it that you are taking more trouble, or is it simply that your taste has improved?' " Alas, we are not treated to the governor's reply!

When the Gates Shut is simply an unvarnished factual account of life in Holloway Prison albeit presented with an attractive sympathy and understanding. Further than this the author does not go, the more the pity. This is the first book ever written and published by a serving prison officer in this country. To-day the whole field of criminology is bedevilled by experts, and every so often these experts gather in conferences and make known their ideas. The writer attended the United Nations Congress on Crime in Stockholm

in August, 1965. He sat through the recent conference organised by the Howard League and held at University College, London. For many days at both these conferences he listened to expert after expert speaking on the treatment of criminals. He came away from both conferences distressed by the sheer poverty of thought of the world's experts in this field. As far as successfully tackling the mounting crime wave was concerned, the experts had little or nothing to offer. But now, here is a book written by a serving prison officer, a woman of great experience in dealing with delinquent peoples. Perhaps she would have some positive but practical contribution to make to penal thought. Perhaps maybe for the first time ever the experts would be shown the way by a serving prison officer. Alas! Mrs. Kelley remains content simply to describe what she sees, but makes no attempt to indicate how present methods could be improved or even radically changed. Her book is disappointing in that she confines herself simply to the factual account of life in Holloway Prison.

Or could the writer be mistaken? There is a little paragraph hidden away on page 173, which is so simple that perhaps the experts would quite fail to recognise it as being of any significance. "The happy part of the work is that one can sometimes give help where help is desperately needed and at a time

when it makes a real difference. Often one is able to offer kindness and affection to women who have known little of either and whose outlook may be greatly changed by receiving them".

Perhaps it is only in this way that delinquent women can be helped. Mrs. Kelley, surely, would fully have agreed with the American who, as a result of his own experiences as a prisoner, could write: "In essence what is lacking in the prison system, as it is lacking in our culture generally, is love. Not the eros type of love, but *agape*—the love that expresses itself in reverence for the personality of the most depraved, that reacts to evil and cruelty with understanding and sympathy and sorrow, and that forgives because it understands and sympathises and sorrows. This has been borne in on me increasingly. Knowledge, the wisdom to understand all mysteries—these are a 'tinkling cymbal' if love is not present. Even those who give their bodies to be burned find that it profits them nothing unless they are able to leaven their offering with love".

We cannot read *When the Gates Shut* without becoming very conscious that the womenfolk of Holloway have experienced 'this quality of "*agape*" as a result of the ministrations of the governor and her staff.