A Countryman in Prison

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IN OVER TWENTY years' experience of grim, high-walled prisons, mostly situated in large industrial cities, I have often come across things of interest to nature lovers, free or incarcerated. From the window of my office in an old prison and one of the largest, at Liverpool, I could see and hear a pair of kestrels; for three years they have nested and reared their young in the bomb-battered roof of a derelict wing, which once housed women prisoners. Fraternising with these kestrels are large numbers of pigeons—semi-tame 'dockers', as they are called in the port. Their nests are built almost side by side, and often the adult birds can be seen perched within a foot of one another. Opposite the prison is a large and sparsely occupied cemetery where, at almost any time of day, the hawks are to be seen hovering in search of prey. The pigeons are a nuisance, because they breed all the year round and constantly foul the buildings, so that labour must be employed to reduce their numbers and clean up after them. Their droppings, which are inches deep in some of the ruins, are collected and used as manure in the gardens.

Sometimes a prisoner captures a young pigeon and tames it, so that it will visit his cell and feed on the ledge outside the sliding panes of his window, and even come inside to be fondled. Jackdaws, too, are not uncommon in some prisons —Dartmoor contained hundreds, known to the prisoners as the ghosts of dead 'screws' (their term for prison officers).

At Liverpool, wild geese can be seen flying over sometimes, and the call of the curlew is often heard at night. Seagulls visit the vegetable gardens and sports field in considerable numbers, though they seldom settle on the prison roofs as they do on those of the surrounding houses. In the grounds I have found nests of blue tits, blackbirds, sparrows and thrushes; starlings, too, make their homes in the cavities surrounding overflow pipes. Cabbage white, tortoiseshell, red admiral, peacock and other butterflies are common, and a host of moths. I have known prisoners keep caterpillars in tooth-powder

cartons. Once, at a prison in the Midlands, I saw a great spotted wood-pecker, and had a nuthatch make its nest in an old earthenware pot.

When a swarm of bees lodged in a great dark mass on the wall of an exercise yard, some stupid man threw a stone in their midst. It did not take long for order and discipline to go by the board, but I do not know whether the culprit suffered. We collected what remained of the swarm and built a hive where they did well, until the prison gardener suffocated them. He was due for release the following day, and I have never been able to make up my mind if he did it on purpose.

I had an ornamental pond made at another Midland prison and stocked it with water plants and fish. I even introduced trout which survived for almost exactly a year; then the half-dozen little fingerlings all died within twenty-four hours, after growing to almost five inches. I and many others enjoyed watching them rise to a fly. Later I caught some rudd and put them in the pond; they, or their descendants, thrive there I believe to this day.

At Oxford, within a few hundred yards of Carfax, I put a cock pheasant out of my garden only just on the 'free' side of the grey prison wall. I assume it found its way there from Wytham Park, two miles distant, where they had been shooting the coverts on the previous day. The bird was obviously 'pricked'.

In the heart of the industrial area, at Birmingham prison, we erected static water tanks at the beginning of the war and filled them from the Corporation mains. Within weeks there were water scorpions, boatmen and beetles swimming around; before long frogs appeared from seemingly nowhere, and, of course, myriads of mosquitoes, which had to be dealt with promptly. At Dartmoor, when the water tanks in the main prison roof were being overhauled and new pipes fitted to replace those corroded with long use, a black, blind, lean trout about nine inches in length was found in one of them. How long it had been there, how it got there and what it lived upon, no-one could say. The tanks were fed from a small reservoir (containing trout) on the hill opposite the main gates, and the unfortunate creature may have passed through the pipes in its infancy.

When I was stationed at Dartmoor, my daughter was a tot in her pram and a prisoner employed in the garden spent more time gathering flowers and catching frogs for her than on his legitimate work. As she grew up, she assumed a tyranny no Governor would ever dare to adopt; she marshalled the men with the mower and made them race to her bidding. 'Blue Eyes' they called her, and they were all her slaves.

In our prisons great interest is taken in horticultural work and in making the flower gardens beautiful and gay. Many prisoners show an extraordinary interest in the soil and what it can produce, and this is fostered by the National Gardens Guild, who supply teachers to take evening classes, and by friends who give books and send plants and flowers. This is not pandering to the criminal, but plays a very real part in preparing him for rehabilitation and a more balanced outlook on his return to the world outside. Such interests do more than is generally believed. If they could be extended there might come a time when I, and those like me, would find ourselves out of a job.

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FOOTNOTE

The reference to my daughter and her Dartmoor convicts had, oddly enough, a sequel nearly a quarter of a century later, on Christmas Day, 1956—my last to be spent in the Prison Service.

Whilst going my rounds of the dining halls during the dinner hour —always the most festive and relaxed occasion of the prison year —an elderly prisoner rose to his feet and asked respectfully if he might speak to me 'privately'. Normally I never took requests or applications casually but only at the proper time and place; this day however I made an exception and beckoned him aside from the others.

"I should like to know, Sir" he said, "how now is little Blue Eyes?".

For the moment non-plussed I looked at him in astonishment, wondering if this was some new form of impertinence (my own eyes being blue) or just what he was driving at!

"I see you don't remember me" he explained. "I was at the Moor in your time, Sir: my name was then . . . . . and I often used to skip work for a game with your little daughter. Blue Eyes we always called her".

The memory came flooding back across the years; of a tiny tot bossing the lags and their sudden exaggerated industry upon my appearance!

I was of course glad to give the man news of her and her happy marriage. That he, maybe others too, should remember that child that day struck, I thought, a remarkably warming and human note.

Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. Liverpool, 1962