

# What Is Prison For?

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"SO WE COME BACK," says the Group Counsellor, "to the original question . . . what is prison for? Does it do any good?"

Silence.

"It never done me any good," says the young C.T. with the Atlas-built torso. "This is my third time, and I daresay I'll be in again."

A titter rises and falls away again. The air suddenly becomes sharp with bitterness, as a sour, nagging voice declares "it's obvious it's to find jobs for a pack of lazy bastards that aren't clever enough to do anything else."

A slightly shocked pause and a muffled, half-heroic "Hear hear!"

"No you can't have that," says a big, wholesome-looking ex-seaman. "There's some good screws after all. Mr. B. here's a kind of screw but he's not a what-you-may-call-it, he's a pretty fair bloke. No, you can't have that."

More silence, broken by a faint hissing like a leaky tap.

"Don't mind me, says the Group Counsellor. "If it's his honest opinion let him express it. Many of you would probably agree with him . . ."

But now there is a chorus of amused deprecation. "Take no notice of him" . . . "It's his nasty mind' . . . "If he didn't run everyone else down where would he be?" However, there is an audible cross-current . . . "It's true enough" . . . "screws are dirt." The sour voice proceeds to elaborate his theme.

"I don't crawl to anyone, I say what I think. The whole set-up's one dirty swindle . . . police, courts, prison, the lot. It's all a conspiracy on the part of the moneyed classes to bolster up their privileges. There's no such thing as justice for you and me. The police are bent, they'll tell any lies to get a conviction, the magistrates are stupid and the judges are deaf, and that leaves the screws, who hate you because they know you're better than they are. I passed my G.C.E in five subjects . . .

"Oh, education!" snorts the C.T., "that's all crap. I'm not going to listen to all that again . . . your fine education did a lot for you, didn't it? You're no different from the rest of us. You broke

the law, so you're here. Sure they're all bent, and so are you, mate, as bent as the best. Even with all your advantages. Now me, I went screwing, yes . . . because I had to . . ."

"Had to! Idleness and ignorance. If I had my way . . ." But the group has had enough of this wrangle, and he is howled down with good-natured jeers, and has to sit back, scowling and biting his nails.

"But you know," says a new voice, well-spoken, didactic and rather cautious, "it isn't true that anyone's *got* to go screwing today, is it? I mean, with the Welfare State and all that. It's not easy, I grant you, when you've got a record, but if a man's determined to go straight, and not too proud to eat a little humble pie at first . . ."

"Oh yes, is that so?" A young Irishman jumps in, leaning forward and stabbing with a long dirty forefinger, "Is that so? Well, let me tell you how it is, because I know, see? I've been in prisons and institutions more than half my blessed life, and I've tried to keep out, because I hate the bloody places. They've murdered me, institutions have, murdered all the goodness that was in me, till I'm poisoned for ordinary living. They've taught me nothing, they've given me nothing, they've just . . . unfitted me for life. Where can I go this time when they push me out that gate? Who wants me? Who'll say, here

Michael, here's a home for you and a job for you and friends? I don't know anything, see, I don't know what to talk about to people outside, or how to behave in decent society. I'm ignorant, see. I know institutions, that's all, and screws and coppers, and cons. I hate them, but they're all I know. I hate you lot, every mother's darling of you, because you're no good to me, but you're all the friends I've got. Me parents had enough of me when I was twelve years old, and the blessed State took charge of me from then on. So now I belong to these places, and I'll be back. I'll probably be back till I die, because there's nowhere else for me."

An uneasy silence follows. The speaker sits back, red-faced and trembling, not unaware of the histrionic effect of his outburst. One or two exchange knowing looks and grins.

"Of course," ventures the quiet-spoken man, who looks like a middle-aged shopkeeper, "we know there are some unfortunate people who've just never had a proper chance, and you can't help but be sorry for them . . ."

"I don't want your . . . sympathy! D'you think I want sympathy from dirty swindlers and c . . . s that mess about with little children? Do you think I want to mix with you at all? That's why I can't get my rights, because the prisons are choked up with fat, sexy . . . s that hanging's too good for, getting all the care and

attention. I don't want your sympathy, I want a chance, that's all I want, to live my life!"

The shopkeeper's face turns grey and his eyes shrink to pin-points. He licks his lips and stares at the floor, shaken with sudden fears. The men to right and left of him shuffle uncomfortably.

"There's got to be laws," says a rough but respectable Tyneside voice stolidly. "I've got no time myself for sex-cases, but I reckon we oughtn't to get too personal about such things, because we don't know for sure what any of us is in for. Now me, I respect the laws . . ." loud and relieved laughter . . . "Oh yes, I do, though it mayn't look like it. I've respected them all my life, until I went bent. I knew what I was doing all right. I weighed it up and took my chance, and I come unstuck. Well, I deserved it. There's fellows that thinks a bank or a post office is fair game, it isn't the same thing as pinching off a private bloke, but that's hooey. The principle of the laws is there to protect property and it's for all our good. Well, this has opened my eyes, I tell you, and there'll be no more. Not if I have to go crawling on my belly for a crust to eat. It's not worth it. Not when you've a wife and family. I've seen what this lot has done to them, and that's sickened me. Television, football, pictures, all that silly stuff you fellows moan about in here, whether you get enough or whether

you don't, that's nothing. They could chain me to a wall and flog me every day and it'd make no difference to me. Every visiting-day my missus brings my little boy along with her, and every time they go that kid cries and asks his mummy why daddy isn't coming home. Well, that's prison for me. From now on I wouldn't lift a finger to save my best friend if he was in trouble with the law."

"Well I see your point, mate, and I respect it," says the seaman quickly. "But as the bloke here says, what's prison for? You've learnt your lesson as you say, and you'll never screw again, so why keep you locked up here for years, and your wife and kiddy suffering? It'd be cheaper for all concerned to let you out here and now. Or take the booze, that's my trouble. I'm an honest man, mates, and gentle as a dove till I've got that stuff inside me. But then I'm a tiger, see, and I'm like to clobber anyone as doesn't agree with me. That's why I'm here. But what's the good of it? I can't lay off the drink, I've tried, and I shall try again, but I doubt if it'll work. Now if they was to give me some treatment . . . or even some decent useful man's work, and let me pay back any harm I've done, instead of five years playing about with womanish tailoring and stuff . . ."

"Work!" cries the C.T. with an hysterical note. "Hell to work! They've no right to make you lift a finger in here, it's a dead liberty. I'm not squealing, I'll do my time,

but I'll do it my own way. Give me the Local, where you know where you are. Here, it's a bloody sweat-shop, they nag you about work, classes, pry into your private affairs, read your letters, c'nivvy you about from morning till night. There's no peace . . . it's not prison at all, its bloody kindergarten. Well, that's not right. All the law says is you've got to be locked up, the rest is a liberty."

Jeers and laughter. "You'd kip your time away if they let you. That's why your'e here, isn't it? Because you're dead lazy. Why should the State keep you in idleness?"

"Did I ask them to keep me? They took my freedom away. They've got no right to make me work too."

"They've got all the rights. They can do what they like with you. And if getting you out of your idle habits is the only way to stop you screwing again, it's just as well they do. And I can take on six of your sort, mate, with one arm behind me back."

"You work yourself to flipping death if you like," retorts the C.T. "I say it's a liberty. Work's for suckers. I want to enjoy myself while I'm young."

"Call this enjoying yourself?"

"I'd be all right if they let me alone."

"Are you married?" The Tynesider and the seaman have teamed up against him.

"Yes, I'm married."

"Kids?"

"Got a couple."

"Your missus standing by you?"

"I reckon not. There's some bloke hanging round."

"And the kids then?"

"In a home." Stung, "what d'you expect me to do about it? They've broke up my marriage, haven't they? Let them sort it out. As for her, she's no loss, I can get plenty more women."

The Tynesider splutters, almost speechless. "You'd let your missus go off with another bloke and your own kids be brought up by charity, and not give a toss! Why, mate, prison's too good for your sort."

"I never had a chance, I tell you. I'm human, aren't I? I deserve a bit of fun out of life. I've got wants. I've got rights."

"I'll tell you what prison's for," says a new voice, quiet and twisted with emotion, "it's for punishment. Just that and nothing more. You're all on about your rights and your likes and dislikes, but you haven't got any rights any more. We've all sinned against the laws of God and man, and we must suffer, for the good of our souls and for the example to others . . ." Groans and a few oaths from the circle. Several men shift their positions, cross and uncross their legs, roll cigarettes. "let us pray," suggests one voice. But the speaker, a thin lath of a man with troubled eyes, continues undaunted. "You can flout man's law's and get away with it, but not

God's. We have done terrible things, some of us, unforgivable things. For what I did I deserved to die, and I wanted to die, but that wasn't God's will. He said I must live and suffer. Well, I do, but to my mind it isn't hard enough. Prison's too soft. But where else could a man like me go?"

"I could tell you, mate," says the C.T., but his joke falls flat. An embarrassed silence.

"People seem to feel today," says the Group Counsellor gently, "that imprisonment itself is the punishment, without adding to it . . ."

"Yes," says the Tynesider, "it's the separation, that's the punishment. Only fellows like him . . ." indicating the last speaker . . . "want to put the clock back, and that's just to ease their own conscience. What you don't like, friend, is the telly and the association and all the little comforts, because enjoying them makes you feel bad inside. But that's your punishment too, having to put up with all that. What you'd like is a bare cell and a Bible and a daily flogging. But that'd be a luxury to you. You're inside out, friend."

The group digests this for a minute in silence. The murderer's eyes are focussed glassily on a distance, and the last speaker regards him with something like pity. The seaman shakes his head impatiently, and the young C.T. looks ineffably bored.

"Prison's like the coloured water

the quacks give out to cure all ills with," says a man who hasn't spoken before. "There are twelve people here as different as chalk from cheese, and one prison. How can the same thing be any good to all of us? If it's right for him it's wrong for me. Prison's a dead waste of time, and so is talking about it. Where does it get you, reforms and education and all that? It isn't life here, it's existence, it's got no connection with the world outside that gate, and that's the only thing that interests me. You've got to do it and get out, that's all."

A chorus of protest . . . "There's ways of doing it" . . . "You can always help yourself . . . opportunities" . . . "they talk fine about helping you, but it's a different story when you're out there on your tod" . . . "Prison's a bad thing, it's got to be a bad thing, but it's got some good in it, and that depends on the individual. It's what you make of it" . . . "It's murder, it's plain murder" . . . "It's a put-up job" . . . "It's never done me no good and never will. And while we're at it, I want to raise something else . . ."

All eyes turn towards him expectantly. "Why," asks the C.T. "have you got to wait three years before you can have a radio? Because that means I'll never get one, I'm not doing long enough."

The Group Counsellor looks at his watch, and gets to his feet. "I think this is where we came in," he says. "Time's up gentlemen."