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Prison Impressions

Clara Gilbert Cole

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1918

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Like stitches in knitting the universe round.

With the click of my needles I dream, dream,
dream

On visions so dazzling they're like the sun's beam.
In shaping my thoughts with the heel and the toe
I've finished two tasks, and content, let them go.

Preface

I append a preface to explain why I was imprisoned, also to show how I was handicapped in recording these impressions. I wish to forestall the critics who seek correct literary form or literary ability. I did not write against war in order to obtain a literary reputation; neither in protesting against it did I wait to acquire one. Intense pity for suffering humanity and anxiety to spread the gospel of International Brotherhood (by which means alone man can express the greatest that is in him) ceaselessly urges me to protest against the demoralisation and slaughter of men through unnecessary war. Whilst in prison, I petitioned for pencil and paper – my only request was refused. I had a slate and was allowed to send out one letter a fortnight. That letter consisted of a folded sheet with four sides, one of which was occupied with printed instructions. All that is contained in this little book was written in prison and sent home in my fortnightly letter. Space being limited, the difficulties were great.

We were imprisoned for speaking the truth: no statement we made was refuted. To relate briefly the cause of our arrest, I will go back to Wednesday, May 10, 1916, when Rosa Hobhouse and myself set out from Knebworth, Herts., on a walking tour distributing literature for Peace. We were trying to create an atmosphere of love and brotherhood between all nationalities, instead of this deplorable feeling of hatred which at present exists and is daily being fomented by the Press.

We had walked 50 miles and distributed 2,000 leaflets when we were arrested near Kettering, and detained in the police cell five days. After being twice remanded, we were brought up under the Defence of the Realm Act and were fined £50 each, or three months' imprisonment. Not considering ourselves guilty, we refused to pay the fine or allow it to be paid for us, and were taken to Northampton prison. History has taught me that new ideas are always born in pain, so we are contented to suffer and

be misunderstood in order that future generations might reap the benefit.

CLARA GILBERT COLE
85, Camberwell Grove,
London, S.E.

To the Conscientious Objector.

1. TRUTH.

I hold a jewel within the centre of my being
That cannot be touched, dimmed or marred,
It is Truth.
It makes me unashamed, unafraid, and invulnerable.
Did these hard brick walls close in around me
Yet is my jewel intact, and prison only truly
Prison should I regret my actions, or carry not
This priceless jewel of Truth into captivity with
me.
Even if my body perish it will be reborn in someone else.

2. THE VISITOR.

As flush of daylight weaves last golden spell
A soldier skeleton enters my cell;
See! it has changed to the chill early dawn
To sombre sight used, all fear has now flown.
I question; Silence! for no sigh or moan

Sunday morning sunbeams glow,
But hark! minor tone of woe,
“Left, right.” No rest for my torn heart,
Sounds will come in with keen smart,
Now the brass band’s blatant bray
Clouds the sunshine of the day.
In dissonance bells’ tongues clash;
Foot that’s trained for war’s mad prance.
Long legs, short legs, all must dance:
Band that’s played to hide the groans;
Skeleton whose naked bones
Prematurely fleshless grown
Join the stream. The Church’s gown
Flows from outstretched blessing hand.
Human voices all combine
Jarring strains, and the Divine
Harmonies mock, when men slay
Hideously, then kneel to pray.
“From battle and from murder
The Lord should us deliver.”
Through other lands float sad tones,
Soft litanies and faint moans.

11. PRISON KNITTING.

With the click of my needles I round, round,
round.
They judged me, condemned me, and now I am
bound.
I fashion and shape, and weave wool into stocking.
My world and my knitting, heedless of mocking.
With the click of my needles I knit, knit, knit,
Not like Madame Defarge for heads to be cut,
But thousands of hearts to be knit and close bound

Stay! military madness. When will the poor,
The clotted brain of world see clear, the pale hour
Of crisis come and pass, and dawn arise?
With dawn the clipt wings grow, and the tired eyes
Gaze with awakened look, see war's world pain
As suicide, recant and start new life again.

8. THE PRISON GARDEN.

Two purple flowers on the scented sage,
Sweet waft of mint brushed by the full¹ skirt's
edge,
Thyme leaves quickly pressed in the passing,
Tiny things to give such a blessing.
The whole is crowned with curled parsely green.
Spices like these should charm prison'd queen.

9. THE GARLAND.

A lovely garland of colour and scent
In the prison garden grows;
It rises 'mid tiers of golden stone's glint,
'Gainst a rose-red wall it glows.
Frail flowers in harmony blend and thrive,
Though from different seedlings sown.
Blend and thrive, ye nations, live and let live.
'Mid unity Love is grown.

10. DISCORD.

Sights and sounds intensely swell
In a solitary cell.

¹ Prison skirts are very voluminous.

Moved his bony breast as we sat alone.
To-night I question not, for the plaintive
Voice of a violin drew th' unwelcome
Tears to the overflow brim of mine eyes,
The great spots wet my book, I let them rise,
Then in a dim and dying daylight's haze
Lifted my head with gasping breath to gaze
On eyeless socket dropping an icy tear.
Bruised arm uprose "What here"? voice seemed to
sigh,
"And is this all that you can do? *I die*!"

3. PRISON SERVICE.

The slowly growing, slowly fading light
Pressages coming day or passing night,
The jangling bell tells all their time and task,
No need to wait or timid question ask.
Strange that at service time their voices sound as
sweet
As those more fortunate, who never branded meet,
Or ne'er by fatuous fate are rudely hurled
On this cold, unresponsive, witless world.
"Ah well"! we often say, with broken sigh,
When we should say "Ah ill"! But, by-and-by
With airing in the sunlight sweet of love,
These barren trees may useful, fruitful prove.

4. THE THRESHOLD.

The whitened stone of many a humble home
Will never more be marked by manly step
Or hurrying feet, as through the door they come,
Toilworn to father, mother, wife, or friend,

Sweet sound of clinking cups and teaspoons
bright,
The cheerful log that shoots out golden stars,
And (held in bondage) harmless tongues of flame.

“Light not the lamp, my mother, yet awhile,
I love to see the shadows play
At hide and seek, on door, and floor, and o’er
Thine own kind face. *That* makes the place.”

He is so tall he need must stoop to stand
Under the giant beam, his own roof-tree.
Now he’s away he loves his wide hearthstone
More than before, since in a sad and long
Perspective and prospective view he’s seen
The log, warm flame, round table cleanly spread,
His favourite seat drawn up, and savoury dish.
To grasp familiar shadow forms, intense
The yearning gripped his heart, and he awoke
To find he clasped his cold and callous cannon.

Guns held in bondage split not harmless blaze
But red, red tongue with swish of smoky death.
Hurt in the lurid battle back he fell.
No need to stoop beneath the beam, it will
Be high enough; for he, he will lie low.

5. LONG SOLITARY CONFINEMENT.

Strong bars, keys, locks, and the high brick wall,
Uniforms, rules, one system for all.
Commands, obedience, bare grim cells
Men and women hide, pine in their shells,
And then we all think them such queer fish.
Can you wonder, caught in this close mesh?
We never know them or find the pearl

Which still is there half dimmed, but we hurl
This most wonderful and fragile shell,
With the precious pearl down into hell.

6. THE VIEW.

Through my window embrasure, fast bricked and
barred,
A visitor enters each day and tries hard
To brighten the hours. His gold wand he stretches,
And changes each brick with shimmering patches
Of gold dust. I kick off my shoes and mount my
chair,

To peep at the country and drink of fresh air.
Two churches, a tower, laburnum’s gold bloom,
Stretch of flat country I view from my room.
You dear two at home think mother in prison:
Her eyes travel miles when the red sun has risen;
Her ears catch the church bell, the school bell and
hour bell;

Her fancy can picture her loved ones well,
Nor distance, nor law, strict rules, nor brick wall
Can bar her from seeing her home and her all.

7. CLIPT WINGS.

Dives and swims, rises and sinks out of sight,
Deep bathed in a blaze of clearest sunlight,
Oh happy, free, swift; oh! swallow, what *do*
You think of Humanity now? You flew
So free, you flew so far. In shame I bow
My head to see how on the ground so low,
Netted and snared, lies Liberty, and priceless
Freedom’s wings are clipt with cruel steel’s caress.