

A CENTURY+ AGO SING SING INMATE #1500'S TALE OF DOING TIME 'UP THE RIVER' AFTER 'THE TOMBS'

An excerpts presentation by the *CorrectionHistory.Org* website of a book published by HVA Press of Warwick, NY, whose trademark motto is "The History of New York is the History of America."

CHAPTER I - I GO TO SING SING

About noon, on the day succeeding my sentence, I was notified to make ready to go to Sing Sing. It was not an entirely unpleasant summons. Little as I knew what was before me, I was confident that it could not be worse than the Tombs Prison where I had spent three months amid a crowd of noisy, foul-mouthed, cheap criminals of the kind that New York City breeds easily.

Vermin swarmed in the cells, and the turnkeys, like the horse-leech,

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cried, "Give, give," until my small reserve of money was nearly exhausted. The turnkeys were a little cleaner than the majority of the prisoners, except in speech, and were more noisy.



My cell-mate at this time was a gambler who had shot three men in a bar-room fight. He was a cheerful fellow, assured of the justice of his cause and confident that righteous

judge and an unbiased jury would give him his freedom . . . However, he broke away from the discussion of his own serious affairs to cheer me up with such hopeful things as he could think of. How hollow was all he said, — but how helpful it was in that day of trial and fear! “. . . Everything will be provided; you won't have a care. Say, you can't have a single worry. It will be paradise, if you only look at it right. That's what it'll be, paradise. Let's take a drink. I hear the sheriff outside rattling the handcuffs." Nothing was easier to get in the Tombs than dope and whisky. Food wasn't cheaper and my cell mate had an abundant supply of good spirits. He made a couple of stout high-balls which we



Author-inmate #1500 said newspapers of his day had hyped stories turning an engineering graduate/sometimes burglar into a romantic figure to rival 18th Century Eugene Aram, noted philologist and infamous murderer, about whom books and poems had been written. Later, with arrival of movies, 4 silent films retold the Aram story. This image and caption have been added to the- excerpt presentation by *CorrectionHistory.Org* as a design element and to give background info.

drank with satisfaction and then my summons came.

There were seven convicted men in my group and we were handcuffed four and three together. One of my companions was an electrical engineer, a graduate of Stevens Institute, who was sentenced to four years for burglary.

He figured in the newspapers as the "mysterious burglar," and the romantic school of reporters built him up a reputation that made Eugene Aram's history pale and insipid.

As a matter of fact, he was a drunkard and when in his cups would wander off into office buildings or apartment houses and steal what he could, from a copper boiler to a watch, and sell it for drink. Nevertheless, he was a man of good manners and personally clean.

A jaunty young thief, neatly dressed and making his fourth trip up the river, completed our trio. The other four men

were middle-aged tramps with jail-bird written all over them. As soon as we were ironed, we were marched off to the van which stood in the yard and pushed inside, the door was locked, leaving us in gloom, the driver cracked the whip and shouted to the gate-keeper

that he was slow in getting that gate open, the wheels turned on the rough stone pavement drowning the voice of the jaunty young thief trying to sing . . .



When the future author-inmate #1500 and his chained fellow prisoners were taken by rail to Sing Sing, they were transported first by a horse-drawn Black Maria to Grand Central Depot (above). When 6 ½ years later he was released and returned, the terminal had been renovated into Grand Central Station (below).

***CorrectionHistory.Org* has added these images and caption to this excerpt presentation as design elements and to give background info.**



I had looked forward to this particular experience with dread and loathing. I had, at times, seen at the Grand Central Station handcuffed men, herded by sheriffs, being pushed through the curious crowd who stared at them and with unreserved comment,

pointed out the notorious characters, and gave short histories of their criminal careers. I had even paused to gaze upon them myself, perhaps entertaining for a moment the terrible fancy that someday, I, too, might be in the station, and that a crowd would gaze at me with the morbid interest and unsympathetic regard I had bestowed upon others.

That fear was now realized, and as the van drew near the station, I trembled with foreboding before the ordeal. The van backed up at the waiting-room entrance and the door flew open.

There was the crowd filling the sidewalk, the newsboys and boot-blacks crouched in the front rank, men and women pressing against each other and staring with cold, curious eyes upon our misery. I

didn't hear what they said, but I knew what they were saying. Suddenly I saw a reporter perched in the window and leveling his camera upon us. I had a compact parcel of



A Scottish-American, Allan Pinkerton, gave his name to the detective agency he founded in the 1850s and which was often employed by railroads. Its agents were sometimes called "Pinks" or "private eyes." This image and caption have been added to the excerpt presentation by *CorrectionHistory.Org* as a design element and to give background info.

underclothing in my free hand and, with an impulsive movement, I hurled it at the Kodak with true aim, knocking it out of the reporter's hand into the area below.

"Hi! hi!" yelled the crowd, delighted with this added excitement.

"Good boy," cried a tall man, thrusting a bunch of cigars into my bosom. "Hit 'em again!" In the midst of this confusion, the sheriff hustled us through the waiting-room and onto the train platform, not yet opened for the other passengers.

Seats were found for us in the smoking-car and the young thief took up his song . . .

Somebody touched me on the shoulder. It was the tall man who had forced upon me the cigars. "I liked that trick, old fellow. You've got spirit.

You'll get through it all right. How long have you got?"

"No talking to the prisoners," growled the sheriff. "That's all right, Doyle. He's an old friend of mine. Don't you know me? I'm one of the Pinks!" "Oh, all right," replied Doyle, accepting the proffered cigar. "I didn't see it was you." All the prisoners were smoking and exchanging confidences. I had enough of detectives and turned my head resolutely out of the window

Familiar scenes flashed by. I saw High Bridge and counted its arches, a thing I had never done before, although I had passed it a hundred times.

. . . I suddenly caught sight of the station at Sing Sing and we alighted. The platform was crowded with people, but no one paid any attention to us. A gang of manacled men in that place was too

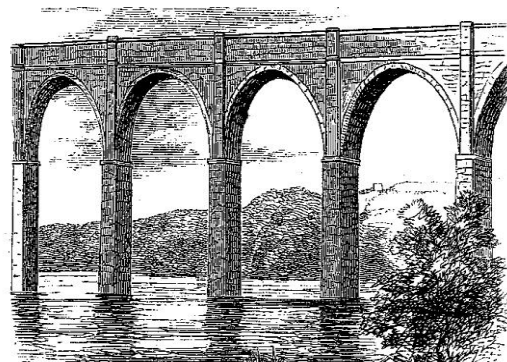


Illustration shows stone arches that once supported High Bridge over Harlem River. Later one steel arch replaced them. Sing Sing was a Harlem rail line stop. This image and caption have been added to the excerpt presentation by *CorrectionHistory.Org* as a design element and to give background info.

common a sight to attract notice We straggled down the railway tracks, crossing from one to another to avoid the trains, climbed the bank of the high bluff and turned into the roadway before the prison. . . .

As we approached the prison the sheriffs were joined by a couple of uniformed keepers, armed with big clubs, heavier and more formidable than a policeman's night stick, who turned us sharp around into an office at the right of the entrance where a clerk in civilian dress stood holding out his hand for our commitments. These he scanned carefully, calling each of our names in turn, and having found them all regular, he expressed his willingness to receive us. The sheriffs then removed the handcuffs. "Face the wall!" snarled the clerk. "Stop that talking. Black, stand here."

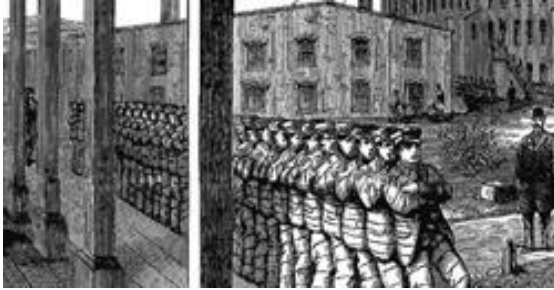
. . . . The little clerk fairly barked out these questions and instructions [for incoming inmates] and we trembled in his awful presence. What must the disciplinary officers be, if this clerk were so terrible! The others in turn were questioned and snarled over and then the rules were read to us. We were told that talking was not allowed, that we must be respectful to officers and instructors, industrious, obedient to all orders, that we could receive a visit once in two months, write a letter once a month and receive all letters of a proper character addressed to us at the prison.

Once in two months a box of eatables weighing thirty-five pounds could be sent by friends or purchased from private funds in the hands of the clerk.

"Fall in!" said the uniformed officer, speaking for the first time. "Put your hands on the man in front of you. Close up for lock-step. Silence! Forward, March!"



Images of mid-1850s train yard and circa 1865 rail tunnel are from this website's excerpts of Guy Cheli's *Sing Sing Prison* ©. Ctrl-click to access. These images and caption have been added to the *Life in Sing Sing* excerpt presentation by *CorrectionHistory.Org* as design elements and to give background info.



Images of striped clad inmates in lockstep are from this website's excerpts of Guy Cheli's *Sing Sing Prison* ©. Ctrl-click to access. These images and caption have been added to the *Life in Sing Sing* excerpt presentation by *CorrectionHistory.Org* as design elements and to give background info.



A door flew open and we entered the prison, a dark, gruesome place with interminable rows of open cells, floor over floor, surrounded by long, narrow galleries.

We passed it quickly and emerged into the yard, a quadrangle bounded by the massive prison on one side and faced by various buildings of mean appearance on the others. We had only a glimpse of this environment, as we were hurried through the silent yard up two flights of stairs to the state shop. Here we encountered a fierce man with a penetrating eye, who gazed at us in turn with ill-concealed contempt.

He knew none of us until his gaze lighted on the jaunty young thief, who, having finally arrived in Sing Sing, had ceased to sing about it. The keeper's face lighted up. "Ah there, Jackson, back again," he cried . . . "I know every man that's been here. Face the wall! Take off your clothes."

So we stripped and were put in a bath; a suit of knitted, second-hand under clothing, much patched, and coarse stockings, were thrown to us. Those of us who had good shoes were permitted to keep them, except the mysterious burglar, who wore patent leathers. They had to come off and replaced by brogues, which are as shapeless, uncomfortable and fragile as any foot wear that can be made.

A convict barber clipped our heads and shaved us clean, meanwhile gathering from each his pedigree. That evening, before the convict population had taken its frugal supper, all of its members knew that seven new men had joined; that Jackson was back with fifteen years ; that the mysterious burglar had four years; and the pedigree of the rest of us was similarly common knowledge.

Striped suits were then served out to us; a jacket, vest, trousers and cap, like the underclothing, very shabby and ill-fitting. A more pitiable sight than a freshly-dressed convict on his first arrival it is difficult to imagine. The course, worn clothes given him

have more than likely been fitted to a smaller or larger man and are as objectionable to the embarrassed and harassed wearer as they are ridiculous to the observer

However, we made the best of our absurd appearance and were marched away to get night buckets and then to our cells in the main prison. As we passed through the yard we encountered convicts in working or marching parties, or singly, and they all paused to regard us critically. My impression was that they were rather impertinent in their manner and that their survey was as odious as the curiosity evinced by the people at the Grand Central Station. I noted, too, that their discipline did not seem to trouble them very much and that they chatted and laughed with each other, pointing out Jackson, whom they knew, and who grew quite animated under their cordial recognition, even shouting to some chosen friends



Image of new inmates exchanging their civilian clothes for Sing Island striped garments is from this website's excerpts of Guy Cheli's *Sing Sing Prison* ©. Ctrl-click to access. This image and caption have been added to the *Life in Sing Sing* excerpt presentation by *CorrectionHistory.Org* as design elements and to give background info.

Note how cell door #40 in sketch matches description by #1500 for his #826 cell door.

Our keeper was a silent man and made no comment upon Jackson's or our behavior except to say, as we entered the door where some tables loaded with cut pieces of bread were standing: "Take one large piece and as many small ones as you want," and being thus provided with supper he put us, one by one, in cells and, locking the door, went away without a word.

My own cell was number 826. It was precisely like 1,200 other cells arranged in rows of one hundred each, back to back, on six tiers, and was built of solid, fairly well-dressed stone. The gallery was an iron frame with board floor, and entrance to the cell was through an iron door, which had grating in the upper half, while the lower part was of welded sheet-iron. Through these bars, cutting a space twenty-four by eighteen inches, is admitted the only light and air that enters.

Annual Report



1916 - Electric utilities



26 PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION, SECOND DISTRICT: EIGHTH ANNUAL REPORT, 1914

Organization: Incorporated May 5, 1905, under the Transportation Corporations Law. May 26, 1905, the following companies were merged into Northern Westchester **Lighting** Company: Ossining Heat, Light and Power Company, incorporated December 27, 1900, under the Transportation Corporations Law (term fifty years from December 27, 1900); Northern Westchester Light and Power Company, incorporated December 8, 1904, under the Transportation Corporations Law (term fifty years); and Briarcliff Manor Light and Power Company, incorporated November 1, 1900, under the Transportation Corporations Law (term fifty years). Northern Westchester **Lighting** Company is also owner of franchises and privileges of The **Sing Sing Electric Lighting** Company, incorporated April 11, 1889, under the General Manufacturing Law (L. 1848, ch. 40), for the purpose of manufacturing electricity as provided in L. 1882, ch. 73, amending ch. 512 of laws 1879 (term fifty years); **Sing Sing** Gas Manufacturing Company, incorporated November 1, 1855 (earlier certificate filed June 25, 1855, same name), under the act for the formation of gas light companies (term fifty years); and Croton **Electric** Light and Power Company, incorporated July 3, 1900, under the Transportation Corporations Law (term fifty years from July 3, 1900).

Term of corporate existence: Fifty years.

Location of generating plants: **Electric:** Foot of Broadway, Ossining; Water gas: Water street, Ossining.

Principal officers: President, F. A. Stratton; Vice-president, Stuart Wilder; Secretary, B. W. Stilwell; Treasurer, R. A. Carter.

A 1916 Public Service Commission report referenced on Page 26 that Sing Sing Electric Lighting Company, (incorporated April 11, 1889) and Sing Sing Gas Mfg. Co., (incorporated Nov. 1, 1855), were owned by Northern Westchester Lighting Co. based in Ossining. That suggests #1500's cell light fixture could have been perhaps about a decade old. This PSC report image and caption have been added to the *Life in Sing Sing* excerpt presentation by *CorrectionHistory.Org* as design elements and to give background info.

There is a hole about four inches square in the back wall, giving a pretense of ventilation through the spaces in the central wall of the prison.

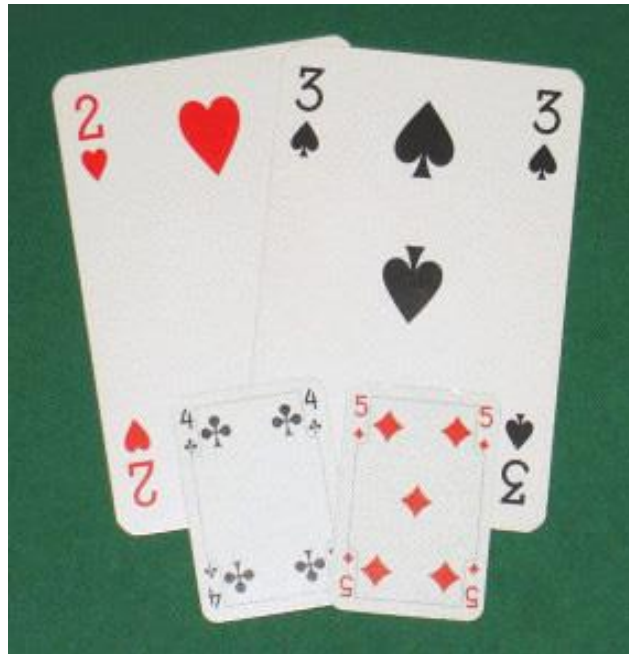
Fifteen feet from the tier rises another stone wall, pierced in front of each cell with a window 36 by 15 inches, but entirely disconnected with the cellular structure, reaching above it and roofed in so that the prison is really double, one part being a massive shell inclosing the other. These walls are built of stone and are forty-two inches thick. The cells are seven feet by three feet and six inches, and six feet high.

I neglected to mention that my cell was furnished with a sixteen-candle power electric light, which about sunset was turned on from without and burned till ten o'clock.

Although it subsequently proved a blessing, it was not so the first night of my imprisonment. It threw its full light upon my sordid surroundings and gave accent to their wretchedness. I suppose I slept, I dreamed, but where the dream began and alerter consciousness rested I cannot say.

My [cell] contained, when I entered it, an iron water-kit, a wash basin, an iron bed- frame hooked on the wall, with a dirty, lumpy straw mattress, a filthy straw pillow and two shabby coarse blankets which had never been aired and which were so dirty and stench-pervaded that only fire could have purified them. There was also a tin cup full of a dark hot liquid. They called it coffee. I was familiar with a similar beverage for nearly seven years, and the title was unconvincing to the last. It was only as much like coffee as rank hypocrisy is like pure religion. There was no stool, nor can, nor table, — no other furniture except a few spikes in the white-washed walls.

I did not take note of all of these things at once. I came to know them later on; but that hard bleakness and squalor fell on my soul as if its weight would press out hope and life. I stood in what was to be my home for six and a half years and gave way to despair . . . Ah, well! In that same cell I came to know hours of peace and rest, and in the daytime I longed for its quiet and privacy. With books and with pen and ink, yes, with the game of patience that had been commended to me by the man-slaying gambler [in the Tombs], and with like occupations, I forgot the stone walls, the grated door, the narrow space . . . When the rising-bell sounded at 6:15, the rattle of iron furniture, the yawns and calls of the men broke the long vigil; the clanging of doors, the measured tread of marching feet indicated that another day had begun. I was ready to face it.



The cards for Patience, or as we Americans call it, Solitaire, are traditionally smaller than those for Poker or Bridge. It became popular in France during first half of the 19th Century and reached the U.K. & U.S. in the later half. This Wikipedia image has been added to the *Life in Sing Sing* excerpt presentation by CorrectionHistory.Org as a design element and to give background info.

They brought me some breakfast: a plate of hash, not at all inviting, a large piece of bread and a cup of the mixture locally honored by the title of "boot leg," but appearing in the dietary scale as coffee. About eight-thirty a smart young convict came to my cell to take me to the doctor. This official had me stripped, inquired as to my general health, marked



Principal Keeper James Connaughton with Warden Lewis E. Lawes in 1920. The image is from this website's excerpts of Guy Cheli's *Sing Sing Prison* ©. Ctrl Click to access. It and its caption have been added to the *Life in Sing Sing* excerpt presentation by this website as a design element and to give background info.

me fit for labor and turned me over to the chaplain, who took a more exhaustive record of my life than the reception clerk with the truculent manner.

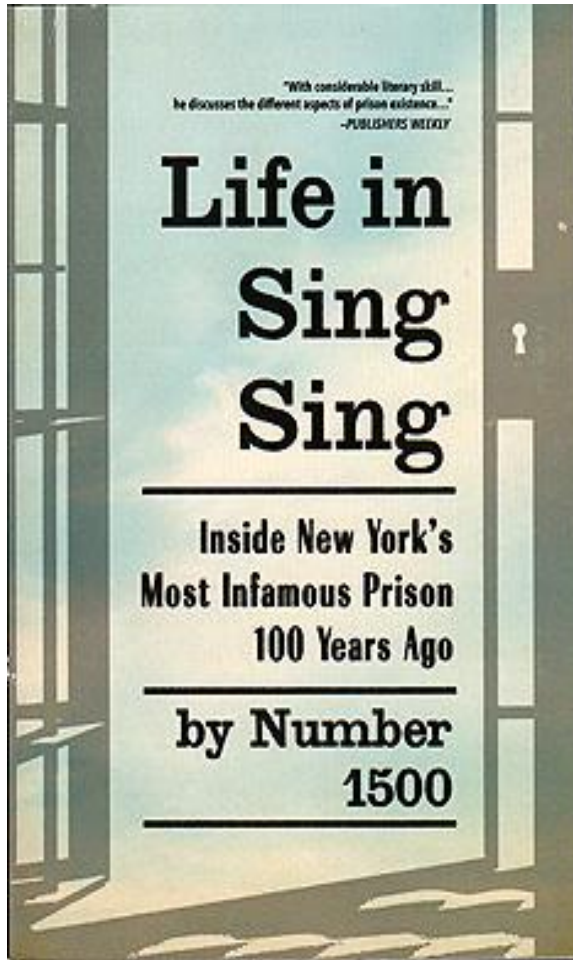
From him I was taken before the principal keeper. Through this officer, the administration of the prison moves, the executive on whom depend all the affairs of the prison . . .

For more than a quarter of a century this position in Sing Sing has been held by a man of the rarest equipment for his office. . . .

All of these James Connaughton possesses in the highest degree. . . . it is only to say that the unqualified praise that I shall bestow upon him will not be largely shared by any others of the prison staff of whom I shall have occasion to speak. He is the model prison officer, just, alert and capable, and

endowed with a sense of humor. . . He was perhaps 53 or 54 years old when I stood before him and marked his shrewd but kindly eyes as he took my measure . . . A faint twist of the brogue on his tongue gave his speech a fullness of sound at once hearty and cheerful as he said : "Black, what have you been doing all your life?" I told him. "That is to say, nothing much to speak of. Well, well, I was wanting some men to do hard work — you wouldn't like that, eh?" I said I would do what I was told as well as I could. "Good. Well, go up and whittle sticks in the Carving and Drawing School. Carve your way to fame." And thither I was sent, to a large, light, airy room, with tables and tools for wood-carving, where 30 or 40 convicts were engaged in drawing, carving and putting together by hand, tables, desks and like furniture, most of rare skill in workmanship and beauty.

A keeper received me there and turned me over to the convict instructor, who led me to a work-table, where I stood daily for nearly two years . . . I took an interest in my work, and gradually the cloud that hung about me on my arrival began to lift . . . Nobody talked to me of reform, or appeared to take interest upon that subject with anybody else . . . How I happened to come to prison was and remains my own affair . . . after I started the *Star of Hope*, and while I edited it for more than four years, I had an opportunity not only to experience prison life, but to observe it under unusual circumstances. In these sketches I shall try to convey to the reader some adequate conception of its nature. . . . It is simply an honest effort to tell the story of my years in Sing Sing Prison.



A CENTURY+ AGO SING SING INMATE #1500'S TALE OF DOING TIME 'UP THE RIVER' AFTER 'THE TOMBS'

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CHAPTER V - THE STAR OF HOPE

Among the industries that had been proposed and partly adopted [at Sing Sing] was that of printing. It offered light employment for the men engaged in it, and whatever else there may be to do, there is always something to print.

Accordingly, a printing office was installed, — a really good job office plant with all the modern and improved appliances, with cases for about twenty-five men, with improved Colt and Gordon presses and a Scott cylinder press. It was an ill-considered project with reference to

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the labor unions and to that wing of the political



parties which had found convict labor an exciting theme in their plans of conducting the affairs of state. They found aid in the newspaper press of the country, which is never so jealous in the cause of the people as where its privileges are menaced. They rallied to the defense of the

What was only a mistaken policy in prison administration while the convict made shoes, was high crime against dignity, peace, honor and safety of the state when he was set to printing directions for taking patent medicines or blank tags to hang on freight cars.



The above image, from the website of BriarPress.Org, shows a Walter Scott & Co single-revolution pony press, typical in 19th Century. Briar Press is a community of letterpress printers, book artists, and press enthusiasts. The site is dedicated to the preservation of letterpress-era equipment and the art of fine printing.

Ctrl Click to access. The image and its caption have been added to the *Life in Sing Sing* excerpt presentation by this website as a design element and to give background info.

What it might have been in their eyes if he had thought to print the bills of legislature, the governor's state papers, or the stationery that bears at its head the capitol building may be guessed.

Probably it was the menace that the convict

printers' labor might destroy certain fat contracts, which mobilized the whole force of press men, editors and printers together to make a resistless onslaught upon prison printing. Such unanimity was never before seen. Naturally the printers in prison laid down their sticks and sought an employment which, if directed against the interest of anybody, should be against someone better selected and less able and vociferous in protest.

Still the printing industry came under the provisions of the act. Departments of the state, county and municipal governments were required

by law to make known their wants to the prison commission, and if the prisons could meet their demands, they were required to supply themselves from this source and from nowhere else. Every department of all the groups of government requires printing, and if the law were carried out to its logical effect, the prisons would become vast printing establishments, the largest ever organized, but yet too small to meet the requirements of the conditions the statutes provide. There was nothing else for the prison administration to do except yield to the clamor their printing enterprise had awakened; but in the meantime, they had established a fine plant at considerable outlay, and there it stood idle — an ideal office, to a printer's or editor's eye. Withal, it was new and complete, attracting my own longing gaze every time I marched by it, which was some half- dozen times a day. If I only had that plant upstate somewhere, I used to say to myself, what a happy activity for myself I could create!

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The above image, from the website of the Minnesota Historical Society, shows a 19th Century issue front page of what is believed to be the longest continuously published prison newspaper in the U.S. Ctrl Click to access. The image and caption have been added to the *Life in Sing Sing* excerpt presentation by this website as a design element and to give background info.

Finally, the idea took form in my mind that I might be able to create it right where it was. . . . I had become an instructor in the Art School and most of my pupils were as capable as myself — and some of them much more so — and I foresaw that the industry was not likely to last out my time.

Perhaps the same rational inclination existed in the mind of the superintendent and warden. I had never heard of prison journalism, although I knew that in Stillwater, Minnesota, a little sheet called the *Prison Mirror* was printed weekly, and was considered

an auxiliary to the chaplain's office, circulating his texts and some of his more striking admonitions. It was, as I understood it, little more than a weekly tract.



Above: NYS Prisons Superintendent Cornelius V. Collins. Below: Sing Sing Warden Omar V. Sage, who later headed the House of Refuge on Randall's Island, NYC. All image and caption boxes seen in this *Life in Sing Sing* excerpt presentation have been added by the webmaster as a design element and to give background info.



So I set to work to frame up a prospectus of what I thought a prison journal might be. First, I recognized that in the state it must be absolutely eleemosynary — that it could not be sold in any way. Except that the plant existed and was

First, I recognized that in the state it must be absolutely eleemosynary — that it could not be sold in any way. Except that the plant existed and was going to waste, this consideration would have ended the project right where it was first formed. On the other hand, the labor conditions had arrived at such a state in prison that the authorities recognized the necessity of giving employment to the men, even at a direct charge upon the state and without reference to the cost, except to check it by reasonable economy.

The new superintendent, Cornelius V. Collins of Troy, was a man obviously intended to make his administration impressive; and a paper like the one I proposed, to be written, edited, printed by and circulated among the prisoners, would be in line with his policy and could, indeed, be made a helpful adjunct of it. Warden [Omar V.] Sage, too, was a man of initiative and of a really progressive character, — one of the few who get into prison service with ideas of his own and who is, at the same time, capable of executing them. Altogether, the scheme was feasible.

The question with me was: Could I, unsupported except by the plea I could make on its merits, present it in a convincing way to the authorities? I was not a practical printer nor an experienced editor, but I knew

something about the news gathering and writing part of journalism and sufficient of the workings of an office to present my plans intelligently; so my prospectus was drawn up at

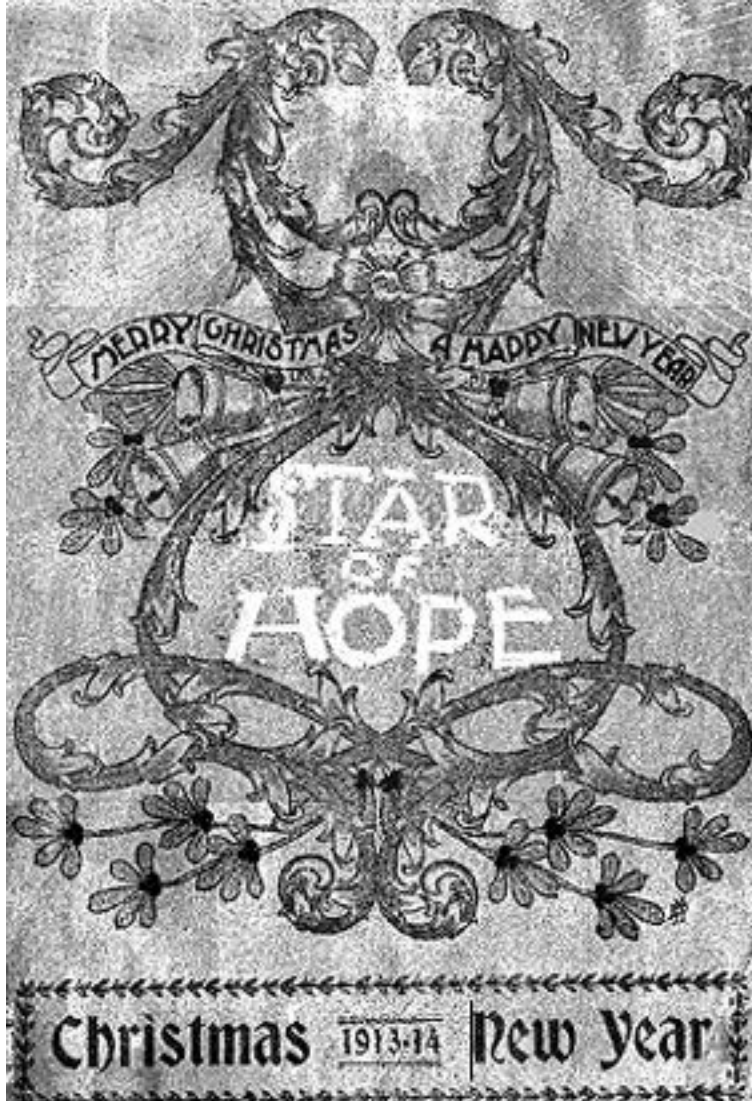


These paired pop-up images – of the prison print shop and snow sled shop – are from the “Early Life” chapter in this website’s excerpts of Guy Cheli’s *Sing Sing Prison* ©. Ctrl Click [here](#) to access that chapter excerpts page. All image and caption boxes seen in this *Life in Sing Sing* excerpt presentation have been added by this site’s webmaster as a design element and to give background information.

last, suggesting, as an experimental start, an eight- page, twelve by seventeen paper, devoted to the interest of Sing Sing Prison and its inmates, to be issued bi-weekly, to be original in matter, to be liberal and generous in its treatment of all proper subjects, to abjure criminal happenings of the outside world, and to act as a moral and educative factor among the prisoners.

As for its staff, I offered myself as editor and publisher and the whole community of prisoners as its corps of contributors. I went over this general plan with many details, including estimate of cost, number of printers, pressmen, proof-readers, copy holders, cost of paper, ink, power and the organization of the office in accordance with the disciplinary necessities of the prison, and when I was done, and saw that my proposition was radical, if not revolutionary in prison affairs, I almost despaired of success. I news, but still to record the important put myself in the place of the superintendent and the warden, and considered how I should receive such an idea presented by a man in my own place, and I was forced to admit that it would not, in all likelihood, be a favorable reception. However, I sent it in. The time was propitious. Mr. Sage had been instrumental in putting in the printing

plant and he hated to give it up altogether. He was at his wits' end to provide work for the men, and this project provided for a shop of twenty- eight to thirty men, perhaps permanently. He sent for me at once and listened attentively while I repeated my plans concerning the new project, asked many questions, and finally said : "Go over there in the



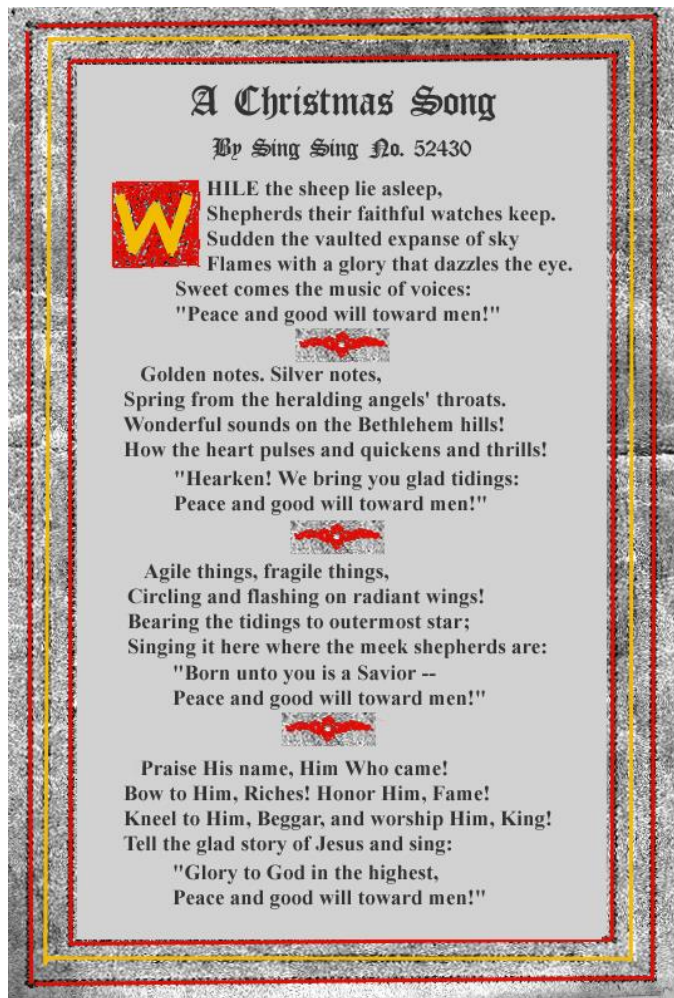
The above grayscale image shows a reduced version of the front page of the Christmas-New Year 1913-1914 issue of the *Star of Hope* published by Sing Sing inmates. The image is from this website's excerpts of that issue. Ctrl Click to access. All image and caption boxes seen in this *Life in Sing Sing* excerpt presentation have been added by this site's webmaster as a design element and to give background information.

prison journalism, and said that naturally the contributors would steal remorselessly, and that the *Star* only furnished a new and inviting channel for their industry and predilections in that direction; that, at best, the professed originality of its contents could not be trusted.

morning, get up a dummy paper, and I'll take it to Albany and present it to the superintendent."

At that time there were only five men in the office, but they were tradesmen and knew their business. In twenty-four hours we got up the dummy and printed it very much as it appears today, and upon general lines that have not since been departed from. Mr. Sage did not add a suggestion. Out of the exigency of the moment, we were forced to use some reprint, but this was the only copy of the *Star of Hope* that ever intentionally went to the press with any other than strictly original matter.

Occasionally some plagiarist would send in a stolen poem, and not infrequently a warmed-over joke slipped through; but I pilloried the thieves when I caught them, which was not always, and from this source there was little difficulty. One great daily paper in New York that thinks no small things of itself took up the discussion of this phase of the difficulties of



The above image shows a reduced version of a poem from the Christmas-New Year 1913-1914 issue of the *Star of Hope* published by Sing Sing inmates. The image is from this website's excerpts of that issue. Ctrl Click to access. All image and caption boxes seen in this *Life in Sing Sing* excerpt presentation have been added by this site's webmaster as a design element and to give background information.

About that time we were discussing in the *Star of Hope* the advantages of parole legislation, and the same paper took up the subject, under circumstances that invited the use of the "deadly parallel column," and showed that the sin of the plagiarist thrived in other surroundings than those of the *Star of Hope*. We had no further criticism from that source.

So, on April twenty-second, 1899, the *Star of Hope* was duly issued, addressed at first to the inmates of Sing Sing Prison and written by them. On July fifteenth of the same year it was extended so as to embrace the prisons under state direction at Clinton and the Auburn male and female prisons; and when the Eastern New York Reformatory opened, two years later, that institution was included. Editors were appointed at each of the institutions and prison journalism became an established factor in the state.

Of the paper itself, its influence for good among the men, and its popularity with the public, so far as they could get it, I am competent to

speak. But, except with Warden Sage and Superintendent Collins, the impression it created among the prison officials was one of horror and alarm. Of all things that a prison keeper fears, nothing is so terrible as the newspaper. It is associated in his mind with exposure and shame, and its chief business, as he regards it, is to pry into the secrets of his business. It has led to investigations, dismissals and reform; and as a newspaper rarely finds in prison anything except abuses to write about, this view of the matter is not surprising.

LUCIFER ON PRISONS.

Writer in Convict Newspaper Declares Devil Invented Penal Code.

Hutchins Hapgood in Ainslee's.

"A very interesting and able article in Star of Hope, the convict's newspaper, is 'Lucifer on Prisons,' published January 13 of this year. The superintendent objected to this article, apparently not so because of its specific criticism as for its general cynical condemnation of the criminal code and penal institutions. Sing Sing 372—the author of several other able papers—tells how he was sitting in his cell when a sprucely dressed individual appeared to him and talked on the administration of criminal law—a man 'more qualified to speak authoritatively on such subjects than any man now living.' This was Lucecifer. The writer, nevertheless, assures the inmates of Sing Sing that he was in his right mind,

having eaten nothing but dry bread, drank nothing but that curious concoction served to us thrice a day which some sarcastic individual has dubbed 'coffee.' Lucifer says he has run up to Sing Sing to look after the Penal Code, which he claims to have invented. He has been in Massachusetts and other States trying to counteract the reforms in prison regulations, 'and then I came here and found the same old rules in force, no reform, nothing to worry me.' Lucifer had brought a number of cigars to give to his friends among the keepers, and after lighting one proceeded to tell the story of his 'two pet inventions, the Penal Code and the punitive system.' He told very cleverly how he had fooled mankind into the adoption of the present system. Coming to prison regulations, he had arranged to confine the convicts for certain terms in prison under circumstances which would make them serve him excellently. It

At all events, the attitude of aversion and astonishment. . . "A pretty thing for convicts to be allowed to do, to publish a paper. They will be running the prison next, locking us up."

Fortunately, the moderate tone of the paper commended it. . . . Its columns were thrown open to the discussion of the widest range of subjects. A few topics were barred: the discipline wasn't to be criticized, nor were personalities of an offensive nature touching the officers admitted; nevertheless, many an adroitly launched dart was let fly, and the contributors became very skillful in concealing their sarcastic shafts under cover of the most innocent-appearing expressions.

Nor was the literary tone of the paper at all despicable. It would have been quite possible to be was make it more elaborate and dignified, for there was no

end of talent available, but the aim held in view was to make it representative.

Occasionally something of really striking quality was submitted. Two articles in particular, entitled respectively, *Lucifer on Prisons* [see image of satire's beginning above] and

Below is a continuation from this presentation's previous page image of the *St. Louis Republic's* report about Ainslee's quoting the *Star of Hope* article *Lucifer on Prisons*. The satire continues on the next page

was, of course, necessary to have love and justice left out of the arrangement. It was also necessary to decrease self-respect, so he invented the prison stripes, the shaving system. As the growth of individuality is essential to progress, Lucifer arranged to suppress it.

"To this end I would ticket them with numbers, like specimens in a museum, I would establish rules that should confront and throttle every natural expression of the ego; rules which, in their inflexible barbarity, should require that a man become a machine, thus weakening the mental and sapping the moral strength. I would bar the convict from that intercourse with his fellows by which alone the good that is in him may find at once its stimulus and its expression."

"As a final step, in order to avoid the chance of a convict becoming a good citizen, Lucifer invented the 'lockstep,' in order to brand him forever in society as a man who had 'done time.'

"The lockstep is rather ingenious; it requires a peculiar and noticeable carriage of the body, and an equally eccentric movement of the lower limbs. In the course of time, these become habitual, and the results are a rounding and slanting of the shoulders, an unevenness in the gait, which are quite unmistakable. The lockstep is also valuable in that, like the prison garb, and the hair-clipping, it hurts a man's self-respect."

"Mrs. Booth and her work in the prisons Lucifer described as a thorn in his flesh. 'She beats the devil,' he said, and explained that her doctrines were against his interests because they practically inculcate that prisons do not . . . protect society. Crime is not to be prevented by fear of punishment. . . . It is largely—first, the effect of social conditions; second, the

Crimes Against Criminals, attracted wide attention and were copied far and wide by the exchanges. When Lucifer found, in certain unpopular reforms, subjects for congratulating himself upon the material aid his cause was securing, it was time to suppose him absent; and the brilliant and satirical writer was cut off the staff.

Poetry was the favorite method employed by the contributors, and I suppose *The Star of Hope* printed and still prints more and worse verse than any publication in the world. It had, however, the distinctive quality of being representative.

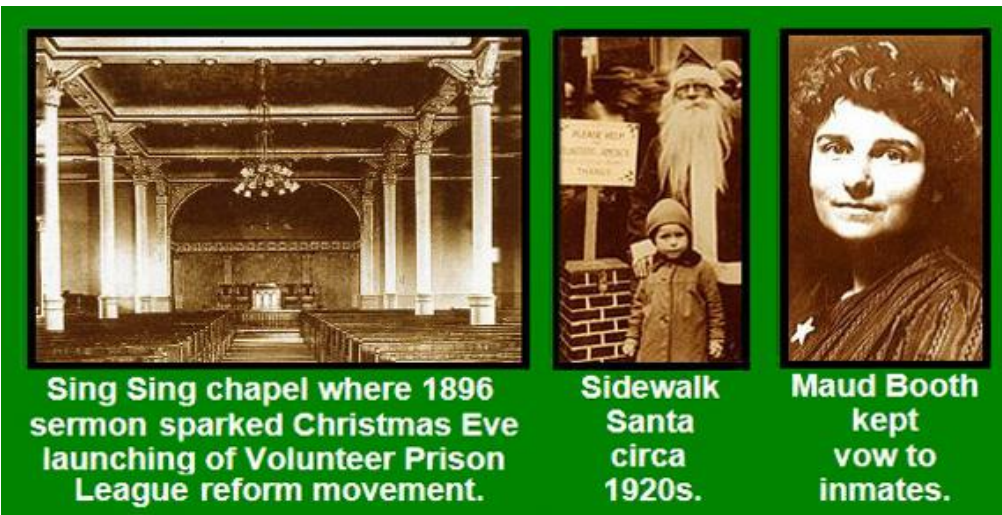
"*Lucifer on Prisons*" satire continued below.

product of the prison itself. Direct your efforts to removing causes, and effects disappear. The value of all punishment is determined solely by its practical utility as a deterrent; void of such utility it becomes immoral, in that punishment as punishment is the prerogative of the Almighty alone.' "

The "Mrs. Booth" whom the "Lucifer on Prisons" satire referenced as "a thorn in his flesh" and "beating the devil" was "Mother" Maud Booth, co-founder and long-time leader of the Volunteers of America, the U.S. spin-off of the Salvation Army which her father-in-law, General Wm. Booth founded in the U.K. Maud and husband Ballington Booth launched their Christian mission group in March 1896 and three months later she delivered a sermon in the Sing Sing chapel. It led to the formation that Christmas Eve at that prison of the inmates Volunteer Prison League reform movement whose motto was "Look Up and Hope." Given that the initiator and first editor of the future inmate newspaper had arrived at the prison only 42 days after the start-up of the League, the journal's name tie-in to the movement's motto is hardly surprising. All over the world, sinners "look up" to the Christmas star "and hope" to find in themselves and in others the will to do good that brings peace to their lives and to humanity. Ctrl-click the image below for this website's presentation on Maud Booth and her Sidewalk Santas.

It had much to say about mother, and home, and was frequently mawkishly sentimental; but it was generally informed by a real feeling, and sometimes it was genuine and strong.

Under the law, the paper could not be sold at all, and as it was unable to possess a circulation based upon actual paid subscriptions, it could not be admitted into the mails as second-class matter. It was able, however, to make up an exchange list



such as only a few dailies and leading weeklies and monthlies could secure, and the applications from the publishing world were so numerous that it was impossible to include more than a small part of those who sought to exchange with it. It was therefore widely copied and commented upon. With the exception of *The Atchison Globe*, it led the

list of credited extracts in the daily and weekly press of the country for the year that I took pains to trace this flattering regard.



THE NEWSPAPER AT SING SING BY HUTCHINS HAPGOOD

“But where the Hudson with majestic sweep
Rolls on its course to mingle with the deep,
There stands a frowning pile of brick and stone,
Whose massive walls were built for strength alone.

“Whose grim watch-towers, and portals strongly barred,
Make freedom’s way to many long and hard;
Yet in that tomb of buried hopes forlorn,
One blessed year ago our *Star of Hope* was born.”

Above are three images – adjusted to fit neatly here -- from the opening page of the July 1900 *Ainslee’s Magazine* article by Hutchins Hapgood (real person’s real name) from which the *St. Louis Republic* newspaper quoted extensively in its report, reproduced in the three preceding pages of this website’s presentation (Pages 18 - 20).

To access the full Hapgood article:

1 -- Ctrl-click one of the three image elements above: The *Star of Hope* banner from its May 1900 issue, the *Ainslee* article’s title and byline, or the *Star’s* first anniversary issue poem.

2 – That brings up the *Ainslee’s Magazine’s* July 1900 issue. Scroll down or use the top-of-page utility to get to Page 543. The article runs from there through to and including Page 550.

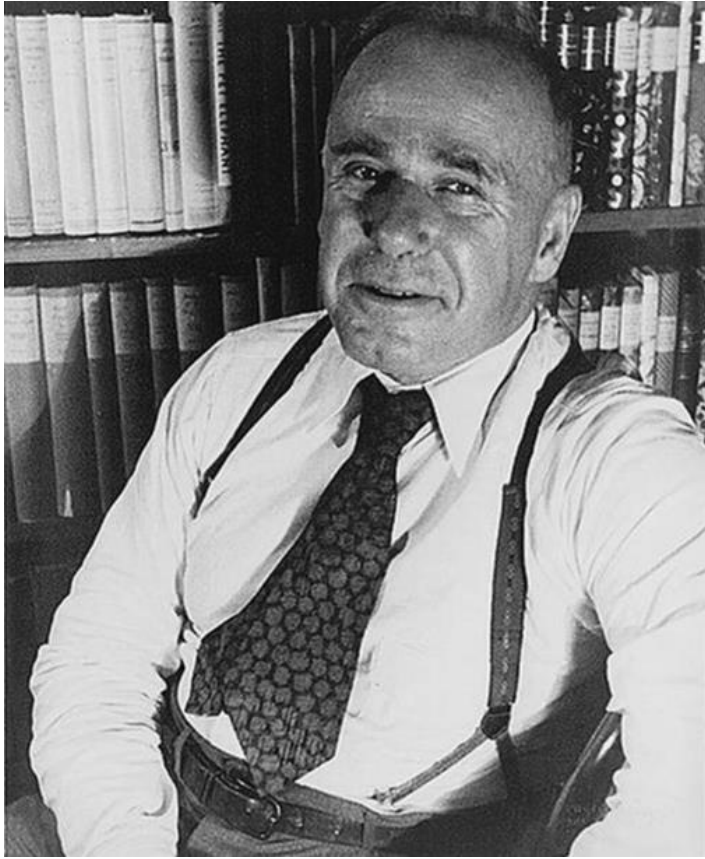
Perhaps more than any other agency could have done, it revealed the general character and mental equipment of the prison population. It furnished the most valuable data for the student and

observer in the science of penology, and gave a new point to the whole problem.

Doubtless there was a vast deal of hypocrisy and more or less sycophancy in its contributed columns. It would not have been representative otherwise; but it was a pleasant surprise to the superintendent to find how clearly, liberally and strongly the men could think and write.

Among the reforms that it advocated was the introduction of a system of parole, or provisional release. In

this effort it was quite successful, and the legislation the men asked for and supported by reasons in the columns of the paper, was granted by the law of 1901. In urging this measure, the whole field was covered and the subject presented with surprising vigor and



Above is a Carl Van Vechten photograph of Hutchins Hapgood in 1933. It's available through the Library of Congress. Various biographical sources tag Hapgood as a muckraking journalist, radical writer, anarchist author, advocate and practitioner of the bohemian lifestyle. It's worth noting that he wrote a novel published as *"The Autobiography of a Thief"* a few years after his Ainslee article on the Sing Sing inmate newspaper, which involved an interview at the prison jointly with Superintendent Collins and editor Inmate #1500.

clearness. But the writers didn't confine themselves to matters of their own interest. They boldly invaded the fields of philosophy, higher criticism on art and letters, discussed with freedom and assurance the policy of nations, and dictated tariffs and duties to the commercial world. It was presumptuous and amusing, but after all it didn't much depart from the empiric custom of the press of the world. Altogether the *Star of Hope* is a highly elevating influence and distinctively an educative one among the men. Its indirect influence was also important. It gave a clean apprehension of prison

conditions to the public and lent to its writers a faith in themselves, throwing a new light on the duties and possibilities of life that could not fail to work for good. . . .

. . . . In the work of this office I forgot that I was in prison, at least for a part of every day. For a time I worked at night in my cell, but later on I was allowed freedom of the

hall till nine-thirty at night, and the use of a desk with good light and every other convenience; so that my own condition as a prisoner was as easy as it was possible to make it. On the other hand, if I were free from much of the irritation of constant supervision by the keepers and guards, I was afforded an opportunity to observe very generally the workings of the prison; and I was thrown in contact with the men and came to know many of them well. I discovered that they were very much what anybody of men would be, taken at random from the street as you met them day by day. That in moral character, as well as in mental and spiritual quality, there was little apparent difference.

In the Driftway

SO the prisoners at Sing Sing are no longer to get out a newspaper! Too bad! The Drifter has read that publication with pleasure in the past, and he has always thought that it would lessen the monotony of prison life to write for it if sometime he were sent "up the river" for bigamy, mayhem, or subornation of perjury. He must be careful now to choose a crime—and thus a prison—that will not entirely shut off his journalistic activities. The reason given by the officials of Sing Sing for stopping the prison newspaper is that it was costing too much money. This sounds familiar; it has been the reason for stopping many another publication from the days of papyrus down to the advent of the news-print trust. A correspondent of the Federated Press suggests another possibility—that the newspaper was stopped because of the publication of an editorial stating that 176 out of 1,200 inmates of Sing Sing had served in General Pershing's forces overseas and suggesting army life as a cause of crime. However this may be, the Drifter conceives that the first serious mistake was the change of the newspaper's name. When started more than twenty years ago, it was known as the *Star of Hope*. A pleasing and appropriate name, that, which ought to have been retained. But in recent years a rival called the *Bulletin* was started. The two were eventually merged, after the manner of modern newspapers; the combination was called the *Star-Bulletin* and, finally, just the *Bulletin*. That was a pathetic mistake. There is a *Bulletin* of some sort in almost every sizable city of the country, but the *Star of Hope* was unique.

The passing of the *Star of Hope* (1899 – 1920) was mourned by *The Nation* magazine. See the opening paragraph (above) of the unsinged regular feature column, *In the Driftway* from the April 27, 1921 issue.

manners and courtesy. Back of their present estate were weird and romantic histories, which were occasionally revealed in whole or part, and which furnished entertaining and profitable conversations. Sometimes they contributed out of these rich stores of experience to the *Star of Hope*, and it rarely happened that these vivid transcripts from strange lives were lost. . . .

One department of the paper was devoted — I speak in the past tense, it still is — to the female prison at Auburn, and was written by the inmates. Although there were only one hundred or so from whom to obtain contributions, as opposed to three thousand men, the women's page was the brightest and cheerful in the whole paper. It was most hopeful and

As editor I noted that egotism was a predominating factor of their nature, but perhaps under the same conditions anybody of men would reveal the same quality, — since egotism is a quality not peculiar to convicts.

Mr. Gilbert's verses about the esthetic joys sought by the burglar and by the cut-throat "when not occupied by crime," are not so wide of the mark as a careless mind may fancy. Even the worst men had some redeeming qualities. .

. . There were among them many of excellent education and unimpeachable



Lyricist William Gilbert, left, of the famed Gilbert & Sullivan operetta team, was the “Mr. Gilbert” whose verses Inmate #1500 noted on the preceding page were not wide the mark regarding felons. Composer Arthur Sullivan is right. The relevant lyrics from the Policeman's song in *Pirates of Penzance* (1879) are

*When a felon's not engaged in his employment
Or maturing his felonious little plans
His capacity for innocent enjoyment
is just as great as any honest man's
. . . When the enterprising burglars not a'burgling
when the cut throat isn't occupied in crime
he loves to hear the little brook a'gurgling
and listen to the merry village chime*

generally healthy and sane in tone. Sometimes it was too bright, making the sheet lopsided, and I was forced to suppress its vivacity. . . .

Not infrequently a man would take advantage of the opportunity to pour out the stored-up bitterness of his soul; to revile the whole system of society; to point out that dishonesty was the practice of the whole world, but only the profession of those few who were caught and couldn't deny it; that virtue

was a myth and honor a dream; but from the women convicts never issued any sentiment that would not do credit to the best of their sex; what they wrote, and they wrote much, was marked by simple faith in the right, a belief in God and justice in Heaven as well as on earth.

Long before *The Star of Hope* had attained its first year of life, its permanency was assured. The superintendent recognized its good work and the prison commission and

Mrs. Ballington Booth, of whom I shall have much to say presently, indorsed it heartily . . . Every prisoner was furnished with a copy and every official was similarly provided. When I left Sing Sing it was flourishing and vigorous, and there is no reason to expect that it will not long continue to be so.

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