

Our Penitentiary.

109 Occupying a portion of the eastern slope of Jones' Falls, not far from what will soon be the centre of the city, there is a pile of buildings, in which offenders against the laws, tried or untried, are incarcerated.— Though forming an unbroken square, covering a large space of ground, this pile consists of two separate and distinct establishments—one forming the city and county jail, the other the State penitentiary. With the former we have, at present, nothing to do; with the latter, much; for the recent annual report of its President and Directors contains convincing proof that it has become utterly unfit for the purposes for which it was designed. A penitentiary, as its name implies, is intended to be a place combining two essentials to the well being of society, the punishment of criminals for past misdeeds, and their reform, as a protection to society in future, and as an act of humanity towards the individual. Various modes have been devised, of late years, to accomplish these desirable results, some of which have proved reasonably successful, while others—we allude to the solitary system—may be said to have signally failed.

In the Maryland penitentiary no punishment awarded to refractory prisoners can be carried out, while their reform is utterly out of the question. They may have entered their cells filled with remorse for their evil doings, and resolved to lead, in future, moral lives; but those evil communications which are said to corrupt good manners, also tend to corrupt good resolves, and the associations which, in our penitentiary, a criminal forms with his fellow convicts, are far more likely, at the close of his sentence, to return him upon society a hardened ruffian than a chastened penitent. This arises, in a great measure, from notorious defects in the construction of the building, and from its present over-crowded condition.

The number of prisoners at the present time within the walls of the penitentiary is four hundred and ten. These are huddled together into a space intended to accommodate only two hundred and fifty-six! In the endeavor to gain additional room a portion of the male inmates have been thrust into damp and badly ventilated under-ground cells, where they contract acute diseases, which necessitates their removal to the hospital, leaving their unhealthy dens to be occupied by others, who, also, finally pass into the hands of the physician, and are followed in succession by similar relays of invalids.

A part of the building expressly intended for hospital purposes is likewise fitted up with bedsteads, where six and seven men occupy the same apartment, two and three being thrust together in the same bed. A dormitory, previously set apart for the women prisoners, has also been taken for the men; the women, thirty-two in number, with five young children, being restricted to five rooms, which give an average of over seven to a room, where they too, not unfrequently, are crowded three in a bed!

The scenes of disorder and violence to which this condition of things gives rise, are admitted by the Directors to be beyond the control of the officers of the prison, who acknowledge that it is utterly vain to expect any reformation while the young, and comparatively guiltless, are herded together promiscuously with old and desperate offenders. In the female ward matters are, if it were possible, still worse. A number of benevolent ladies, members of the Society of Friends, who, for ten years past, on Sabbath afternoons, have administered religious instruction to the female prisoners, bear emphatic testimony to "the confusion, uncleanness, and utter want of discipline resulting from the present crowded state of the prison." In brief, outspoken, energetic language, they declare that, "at this time, the female convicts present the shocking spectacle of a lawless gang of the most degraded of human beings—setting at defiance, in a great degree, the authority of both Warden and Matron, and, for the want of suitable cells where the greatest offenders can be put away into solitary punishment—the last is the only punishment!" These revelations of prison life in the State Penitentiary of Maryland, terrible they appear to be, are yet far from expressing the grossness of the excesses, and the magnitude of the evils which now bid defiance to all discipline, and are proof against all Christian teachings. Female members of the Society of Friends have, for nearly a decade, sought unweariedly, on each recurring Sabbath, to win back the wretched prisoners of their own sex to paths of virtue and rectitude. The success which once crowned their efforts stimulated them to persevere; but now, they have not only to contend with sullen and intractable spirits, but are also alarmed for their personal safety, while the warden confesses the impossibility of correcting by discipline depravity so foul, and conduct so outrageous.

Doctor Frick, the able physician to the Penitentiary, bears testimony to the fact, that through the ministrations of these ladies—ladies in the true meaning of the old Saxon compound word "laff dien," or bread giver—there are in our community many discharged convicts who are leading upright and honest lives, in consequence of the christian instruction received while inmates of the prison. But he is constrained to add, that seeing the utter impossibility of accomplishing their benevolent purpose, the members of this praiseworthy association "have resolved to abandon their charge unless some change can be effected which promises them a better opportunity of doing good."