

BLACKWELLS ISLAND GRAY, DEAD, DESOLATE, DECLARES MRS. BYRNE

Dorothy Day

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"I never realized that Blackwell's Island was such a terrible place," Mrs. Ethel Byrne said last night, confirming the statement secured from her through her sister by The Call Tuesday morning.

"It is gray and dead and desolate and everything seems to tend toward breaking the prisoner's spirit. If you could see the drawn, hopeless and vacant look on the faces of the women committed to that institution, you would never forget it."

Mrs. Byrne, who went on a hunger strike on the island after having been sent there for thirty days for disseminating birth control information, and was released after an eleven days' ordeal, is gray and wan, but still has plenty of spirit. She announces herself prepared to fight for prison reform as well as birth control.

"I realized as soon as I got in there, locked in and unable to get out, that I was fighting for my liberty.

Child Murderer Was Her Neighbor

"The night I was in the Tombs I was placed next to a girl who was in for twenty years for killing the child she did not want and which she was unable to support. She was only 17 years old, and I couldn't help thinking that the knowledge we are fighting to give women would have saved her.

"On the other side of me was a consumptive who was in the last stages of the disease. She had been put in for stealing. The Tombs was not the place for her. But they had no regard for her health.

"Commissioner Lewis made the assertion in last night's papers that the institution was not 'vermin-infested,' but there is a special squad to fight vermin all the time. The first night I was there I could not sleep for the bugs. The next night I was so weak that the nurse, one of the prisoners who was taking care of me, took the job. The next day they had to remove me to the office, so that my room could be fumigated."

Every Meal Brought to Her

In answer to the commissioner's further remarks on the strangeness of Mrs. Byrne's knowing anything about the food when she was on a hunger strike, she was able to say:

“Every meal was brought in to me at first with a jug of water – to tantalize me, I guess. I had ample opportunity to see what was given the inmates to eat. I have no objection to the quality of food, because, of course, I know nothing about that. It is the way it is served, and the fact that a large quantity of saltpeter is put in everything, that I object to.”

Commissioner Lewis said that everything possible was done to put the inmates in good mental and physical condition. “If the city were operating a workhouse to please the inmates, the workhouse would have to be a continuous cabaret, with champagne, brandies and cordials on the side,” he said.

To repress all cabaret instincts in the women, the authorities opposed for a long time the introduction of a piano at the workhouse, Mrs. Byrne said. Finally, after much effort on the part of Mrs. J. Sergeant Cram, a piano was installed. Now, on Wednesday and Saturday nights, the girls are allowed a few hours of enjoyment.

“I thought at first that it was a player piano,” said Mrs. Byrne. “They played with such rhythm and precision. They allow one girl to leave her cell at a time, and go down to the piano. If there is any dancing it is done in the cells. The cabaret girls, and the colored girls especially, have an intense longing for music, however crude it may be. And the grey, dead, repressing system that is in vogue at Blackwell’s Island will not reform these girls: they won’t take a dead, grey job when they get out. They’ll go back to the old life.”

In Mr. Lewis’ comment on Mrs. Byrne’s statements printed in Tuesday morning’s Call, he ignored entirely the charge of cruelty to the inmates. In regard to this phase of prison life, Mrs. Byrne said:

“One of the nurses came in to me and rolled up her sleeve and showed her muscle. ‘That’s what I got my job on,’ she said. ‘Not because I have brains.’ None of the nurses there are graduates. They take six month training, and then go over to the island to hold down a job that any humane person would refuse. They are a strong arm squad and not nurses.”

Mrs. Sanger is a model prisoner, according to the report of the commissioner. She announced in a letter to her sister that she was keeping a diary and preparing for the book that she intends to write when she comes out.

A mass meeting was held by Brownsville women at the Birth Control clinic, 45 Amboy street, yesterday afternoon at 3 o’clock to send a protest message to President Wilson against Mrs. Sanger’s conviction and sentence. The meeting was under the direction of Miss Helen Todd.