

DE PROFUNDIS.

AUT EX EXCELSIS. Penal Establishment or Health Resort ? High Life or Hell, Which?

(BY A PAYING GUEST.)

No. I.

Just at the present juncture, the is-land of St. Helena, to which the paternal Government of Queensland sends its long-sentence prisoners, is very much in the public eye. Many yachtsmen and men of the more or less leisured class -

if there be such a class outside the Tired Tim and mooch-about fraternity— would, metaphorically speaking, move heaven and earth to have the prisoners shifted from St. Helena and to turn that admittedly beautiful spot into sort of Coney Island pleasure ground. The advocates of the change, no doubt, regard, the proximity of the island to Brisbane as an important and (to them) a convincing argument in its favor. It would certainly be far handier for camping purposes than Stradbroke Island, and now that Peel Island is given over to the leper and drunks, the yachtsmen feel that something ought to be done. Someone ought to go that their Saturday to Monday outings on the Bay might be made more pleasurable.. And, as the convict is tongue-tied and can't help himself, let him be the victim. On the other hand, the prisoners know little or nothing probably of the agitation concerning them, and doubtless care less. Though I have some strong opinions on the subject of St. Helena as a pleasure-resort or sanatorium, I shall reserve them until such time as there seems to be a probability of the prisoners being removed. At present, I don't think Messrs. Welsby, Love, and other river rovers have much chance of seeing their pet project carried out. From time to time, globe-trotters of more or less distinction, or some wandering Paul Pry of a parson, have visited the penal establishment, and at such times one invariably reads in the following day's "Courier" some twaddle about an ideal prison, happy prisoners, splendid reformatory methods, excellent and humane treatment, courteous officials, and what-not in the way of fulsome eulogy. Visitors to St. Helena are invariably shown over the prison and the grounds by Superintendent James Ryan, and when a report appears in the press a blind man could tell that it is James Ryan who has indirectly written every word of it. Inspired reports are the bane of many Government institutions besides the St. Helena prison. For an instance, not long ago, a writer pointed out that there had never been any serious trouble with the men in durance; that there had been no disturbances worth chronicling; and, in short, to read his report, one would think that no serpent had ever entered the St. Helena paradise, and that peace and harmony had always prevailed. Officials and old-timers know better than that. THE HOMINY RIOTS some years ago, on account of blue-mouldy, uneatable meal being served out, were a very serious matter. The military had to be called in, and loaded rifles were levelled at the men on strike through the long, perpendicular iron bars which form the front enclosing barricades to the prisoners' yards. But, though the men were undaunted, the order to fire was never given. Again says the writer, no tragedies have signalled the dealings of warder with prisoner. This, too, is a deviation from fact. On one occasion, a man employed in the bootshop was so incensed against a warder— this man is still in the service, and is a son of the Superintendent of — Gaol— that he was determined to "do" for him. Thinking that it was his enemy standing near to his working-stand, he turned savagely on him and drove a sharp knife right into the heart of the WRONG MAN. Realising his mistake, he drew out the bloodstained knife and threw it at — who stood near the entrance to the room, saying, "It was you, you - , I wanted." The warder fell dead, and his assassin died before he could be made to pay the penalty of the law in the usual way at the end of a rope. On another occasion, the blackfellow "Al-bert," now under coercion treatment at Boggo-road, tried to get to the same warder — with a tomahawk, and for this was ordered twenty-five lashes. Before they were all administered — I think when he had got about thirteen — the doctor ordered the punishment to be discontinued. On that occasion, I remember the flagellator expressed a de-

sire to be shown through the prison, but the superintendent earned the gratitude, of the prisoners by very

curtly telling him to get back on to the Otter and stay there. It may be that he exercised a wise discretion in this matter also, for the sight of the "flogger" passing among men who care very little for human life and value their own less than that of others, is not calculated to please desperate and angry lawbreakers, to whom death appears rather as the portal of freedom than the messenger of extinction. Another mistake which writers make is that no attempts have been made to get away from St. Helena. During the brief period I spent there, two men tried to get away and failed. A gang of men were working in the quarry at the western end of the island, behind the superintendent's house. Warder Rhodes, in charge, was on the ground. A number of men were on top engaged in cutting out shelves. It was midwinter; rain and mist obscured the atmosphere, and a semi-darkness set in about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Two young fellows, each serving a three-years term, slipped away from the top unseen by the warder, and hiding in the mangrove swamp, were not missed until, about ten minutes to 5, when the gang mustered for return to the stockade. Then a dirty nigger, one Johnny Norman, an old-time police tracker doing life for shooting on the white police during a fracas with the natives, volunteered to track the fugitives, and his services were availed of. The younger of the two gaol-breakers was found in the mud, wet and hungry, about 7 o'clock, and created a good deal of amusement, on being returned to the stockade, by demanding, "Where's MY HOMINY?" The other, a more experienced bushman, was at large until nearly midnight. He got into the water, and remained concealed there, his head hidden by the overhanging branches of a mangrove tree, until he thought he might safely

venture forth. His plan was to get one of the horses, and by its aid swim the shark-infested channel to the mainland. The plan miscarried, owing to all the horses having been stabled, as soon as the alarm was given. As he approached the stable-door, he found himself looking down the barrel of a rifle steadily poised in the hands of a warder. The game was up, and he submitted quietly to recapture. Both men were punished by the loss of five months out of the six of remission that good conduct might have earned for them. Let me now return to my own experience as a prisoner. My term was six months. The present Visiting Justice, ex-explorer J. G. Macdonald gave it to me, and I have had no regard for his mental equipment ever since. Be that as it may, the Boggo-road tenement was overcrowded at the time, and though it is unusual to send anyone serving less than a year to St. Helena I received marching orders. An examination, more or less cursory, by the doctor, always precedes removal from Brisbane and the vicinity of the hospital, but prisoners are so anxious to get sent to the "Rock" that they often conceal afflictions to prevent further detention in Boggo-road. Better food, more liberty, and, on the whole, a far more manly set of men are to be found in the long-time prison. All the "worbs" and "wasters" of the city are perpetually in and out of the local "boob," and to live amongst them even for a very short time is a trying experience that gets very much on the nerves. When the morning for departure comes, the little escort is lined up in its drab prison garb and handcuffed in twos on to a long chain such as serves to keep a team of bullocks together. In "Black Maria" they are conveyed to the Otter, and until they arrive at the St. Helena wharf are objects of callous curiosity, cruel criticism, and malevolent scorn on the part of the virtuous passengers whose sins have not yet found them out. Oh, the misery of that trip to a sensitive, heartsore prisoner! I know that if I could have shed my manacles and jumped overboard, letting the waters of oblivion roll over me, I would gladly have exchanged such a heaven for the HELL THAT I ENDURED. Some of my companions took it all as a matter of course, brazenly "cadged" cigarettes and "chews" when the warders' backs were turned, and spoke in terms of such glowing enthusiasm of the pound of steak and quart of tea they were to get on arrival as one would expect to animate the breast of a Fijian cannibal invited to a feast of fat missionary. As none of the escort was looked upon as a really dangerous man, and as our particular warder in charge was something of a human being, as well as a "screw," he acceded to my request to remove our manacles after we had rounded the Pile. Light and headed for our insular destination. Now from time to time, men have been discharged from St. Helena who, though they might not be able to write, could be sufficiently articulate on the subject of a personal grievance. "Truth" has been the receptacle for many a 'de profundis' wail. Many a cry, too, of the dog-in-the-manger variety has come from men who, either because they were "narks" or had an unhappy faculty for getting themselves disliked, had passed a time of extreme misery which was intensified in their jealous souls by the sight of other men with more "nous" getting through in comfort and something like luxury. Whether the cries are all out of the depths, or whether some might not be regarded as paeans from Paradise, I shall endeavor to show calmly and dispassionately in my next article on the subject. I am afraid it will be my duty to explode some fallacies on the subject of the reformatory character of the St. Helena prison, and I shall

join with others who have gone before in indicating abuses that might very easily be remedied.