

Return to



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NOTE

Ramona Street Jail
Brooklyn, N.Y.
June 23, 1918

Dear Ones All:

It is a lot of fun to belong to the tribe of Asher. It helps one to enjoy the follies of the high life of our great cities. We are all on the Third tier of cells. Bro. Rutherford is in 9 N 7, Bro. Van Amburgh is in 11 N 7, and I am in 24 N 7. That means we are in North Gallery number 7; in room number 9, 11 and 24 respectively.

When we come up to our gallery, Bro. Rutherford goes in first, after parting with Bro. Van and me; then Van goes in, after parting with me, and then I go in, bringing the heavily made iron doors shut as I do so. The lock is on the outside and shuts with a resounding clang that can be heard all over the prison. When the 155 prisoners in this section go in together the result sounds like an army of locusts going over the top of a tin roof. See Rev. 19:18 comments in Vol. VII, SCRIPTURE STUDIES. Bro. Martin, DeCecca, MacMillan, Robison and Fisher are in 19 S 3, 22 S 3, 24 S 3 and 25 S 3, that is, in gallery number 3, rooms 19, 22, 23, 24 & 25. This gallery is opposite ours, only 20 feet from cell to cell. This enables me to see and exchange greetings with DeCecca, MacMillan, Robison and Fisher. Martin is just outside my range of vision, but I can hear him when he LAUGHS!

Wednesday, June 26

Since writing the foregoing, Bro. Rutherford has been transferred to a cleaner cell, 20 N 7, only four doors from me, and directly opposite Bro. Martin. Bro. Rutherford can also see Bro. MacMillan and Bro. Hudgings in 18 S 2, almost directly under Bro. Martin. Bro. Van cannot see Martin but can hear him talk and LAUGH.

Bro. DeCecca has been transferred to another prison. The Pope has just escaped! DeCecca is the man, so the papers say, that caused the great Italian retreat a year ago! Poor DeCecca! He never did a thing in his life but minister to the needs of a handful of Italian believers - and write one or two unfortunate letters, one of which was to his own brother who had written to him for advice.

But this is the life! You explain a verse in the Bible - say Rev. 16: 13, 14 - and then you attend a three-weeks comedy, or farce, showing the end from the beginning, and each day see it coming closer and closer. You know it is coming, and you know how!

In due time you arrive at the Hotel de Raymondie, you stand in line, and are searched for drugs and sharp instruments of any kind. Residents are respectfully invited to cut their nails with their teeth. By the new process it is very interesting to see Bro. Van trim his hind paws.

Your room is 6x8x8 feet high. It contains one door of eight 1 inch vertical bars set 3 inches apart in a frame of iron posts 3 inches wide, with five crosspieces of equal size. At the bottom is a hole 6x9 inches through which you receive your food. This hotel is very particular to treat all its guests alike, but the arrangements for attending social functions between 3:30 P.M. and 7:00 A.M. are not all that could be desired, and I shall leave here the moment my board is up.

Your room does not have any windows and the scenery inside is not interesting, barring the fact that you can see every private and personal act of the parties in the square of nine cells directly opposite to you. If you cover more than a fourth of your door with paper you disobey a rule, and the disobedience of rules in a prison is no joke. For coughing at night a man was taken out of his cell, and I think, was put in the cooler, as the dungeon is called. I heard him crying on the way there, and afterward.

Your furniture consists of an iron cot, which may be hooked up against the wall, and two large, double, heavy woolen blankets, with a straw tick pillow covered with a slip made of flour sack cloth. No sheets. The walls are very cold and even the blankets have not been able to keep us from shivering all night, some nights. This leads us, sometimes, to sleep in our clothes, and even Bro. MacMillan does not look tidy when he has slept all night in his clothes.

Then you have a sort of Methodist mourner's bench 20 inches high, 13 inches wide and 28 inches long, with one shelf in it, 8 inches above the floor. This contains your fine china and other tableware, consisting of two enameled-ware 1-quart bowls which Mac has christened cuspidores. As for me and my house we were not brought up to eat out of cuspidores, but you can not always sometimes tell what you will do in this world. You do a lot when you learn how.

Then you have a nickel-plated table-spoon. At least you should have. I did not find mine until after my first meal here, and unless you have tried eating ham and eggs out of a deep tray without anything more than your finger to help you, why then you have missed something. Bro. Rutherford did not find his spoon until the fifth day. How he has managed to eat his meals in the meantime is a matter between him and his towel into which I dare not too particularly inquire.

The room contains a wash-basin, with no stopper, and a spring faucet which closes the instant the hand is removed. It also contains a porcelain, coverless toilet which is strictly sanitary if kept scrupulously clean. There are 400 of these in this wing. The Russellites keep theirs clean. I cannot speak for the rest' but I can smell for them! The ventilation is entirely inadequate. Singing and whistling is forbidden but we have Wagnerian opera all the time, i.e., heavy airs. This makes everybody sleepy and stupid, and it is a fact that the average prisoner is in bed eighteen hours out of twenty four. We have all found it very difficult to study much except Bro. Fisher who was born wearing spectacles and his hands full of types. Bless his dear heart, he and Bro. Rutherford have already produced some splendid Tower articles, in spite of all conditions.

Then you have a pile of newspapers, and if inclined to think lightly of them at first, you soon come to realize that in these papers and in soap and a wash-rag, lies your one chance of cleanliness and self respect. Your room is painted buff on the ceiling and half way down the side. A reddish brown base 18 inches high is painted around the bottom and the floor and wainscot section of the wall were once painted a light brown. You enter at midnight. The keeper slams the door behind you, and you find yourself in the middle of unspeakable filth and disorder. Worn out with your three weeks attendance at the grand farce you wrap yourself in the top blanket and sleep fitfully until 5:30 when the light in the top of your cell goes on and the tier-man comes running along, shoves a broom under the door and orders you to get up and clean up the cell and put your discarded papers through the door,

along with your soiled towels.

You arise, and stripping for a sponge bath, find yourself bitten from neck to hips and covered with a dozen poisoned blotches, 2 or 3 inches in diameter. You succeed in getting in touch with the jail physician on the fourth day. He looks at you and tells you that is something in your blood. You take his advice with a grain of salt, as you have already killed bedbugs, lice and fleas in your cell. You take a dose of salts, in fact, and are glad to get the morning shower bath and sulphur ointment which he also prescribes.

The jail meals are at 6:00 a.m., 12 noon, and 5:00 p.m., but every hour or so the caterer sends a man through selling coffee, cakes, pies and fruit, and takes orders for excellent meals, which are thoroughly well cooked and very appetizing. By buying one good caterer's meal each day, suitable selections from the regular jail menu provide amply for all one's needs.

Every morning at 6:00 a bell rings. Then comes a clatter of what Mac calls the cuspidors out through the holes in the bottom of the doors and on the front steps. Immediately every boy in the place (for all men are but boys) yell, "Moosh, Moosh," and the Russellites begin to laugh. Martin's yell of boyish glee at the ridiculousness of the whole situation rings to the remotest corner of the dreariest cell in the place, and everybody joins in the chorus.

Down each tier goes an attendant with a big bucket and long-handled dipper, shouting "honor-mush" as he comes. You are an "honor" prisoner. You have not misbehaved in prison, so you get mush. Some mornings it is hominy with milk and sugar already mixed in it, and is palatable. Other mornings it is oatmeal of LePage's liquid variety, and without milk and sugar, I would have to be hungrier than I ever was yet before I could eat it. The morning meal also contains good war-bread, all you want of it, and a hot drink - as it were coffee. The coffee supplied by the caterer at 5 and 10 cents is excellent.

At noon the jail gives a splendid soup, containing lots of meat and vegetables, and all you want of it, and more bread and coffee, potatoes and meat or hash. The evening meal is of bread, apple sauce and tea or coffee.

At 7:00 to 7:45 a.m. we walk in the covered court, a motly array- seventeen of us are Negroes. There are three cells between Bro. Rutherford and me with Negroes in two of them. The court is clean to start with, but many of the men smoke and chew, and make bad shots at the cuspidors. Hence, we have to wipe off the soles of our shoes when we return to our apartments. On these walks we eight brethren seek fellowship with each other by twos and threes and fours, occasionally talking with others when any seem inclined to listen. Stopping an instant while Bro. Hudgings combed my hair, a pickpocket snatched at my watch, but the chain broke and I saved it. Behind me a murderer boasted of getting only ten years for murder. We seven each get 80 years, total 560, theoretically, because Uncle Sam and I disagree as to the meaning of Rev. 16: 13, 14. It is an awful crime to be a Bible Student nowadays: and sincere.

At 7:45 Martin, MacMillan, Fisher, and I take a shower bath together - a rare treat. The bath is as fine a shower bath as is to be found anywhere. Then we go back to our cells, but are let out again at 8:45 to 9:30 to see the sun and clouds and the tree tops of a nearby park. We must keep moving with the rest, but this is no hardship. It is fun. At 10:00 A.M. to 11:30 those whose wives are here may go down to the visiting corridor, where they talk through a wire mesh grating - so near and yet so far. This is a curious sight. On one side and on the other a long line of people jabbering loudly at each other, in the attempt to be heard above the general uproar. Martin and I have had visitors twice in the week we have been here.

We attended services Sunday A.M. at 9:00. Bro. Fisher played in the absence of the regular organist. The Chaplain preached at us eight. Manifestly he did not remotely understand the first thing about his text. His talk was silly, so I just passed Job 15:2, 3 along to the seven and they marked Job 15:9 and sent it back - all of which was not without profit - in some sense at least - to the Asherites. See Rev. 7:6.

At 1:30 to 3:30 we have our concluding walk in the inner court, during which time we may get shaved, for 15¢ each. Every man lathers himself and the barber gives him a quick once over and turns him out with his clothing well spotted with lather in "jig time."

HINTS TO HOUSEKEEPING

Be sure to take with you an extra towel, soap, washrag; mirrors are not allowed.

Scrub your side walls, floor, bench, bed, wash basin and toilet thoroughly. At the first opportunity slam your blankets hard repeatedly against the corridor bars. Then carefully pick them over on both sides, inch by inch, eight times.

In making your bed lay a double thickness of the bottom blanket on the bed. Then lay on it eight thicknesses of clean newspaper. Put two thicknesses of newspapers inside your top blanket. Sleep with the back of the top blanket under you. By doing this you will keep warm.

Cover your floor with newspaper turned up 6" around the base. This will hide the tobacco stains which you could not scrub off.

Lay extra floor paper in your little runway. Discard these every day.

Cover your bench and toilet with paper, and make paper napkins to save you r towel. A clean towel, of good quality, is provided each day.

Sort over your papers and magazines and wrap up for discard if soiled or greasy.

Caterer's meals are supplied in three white enameled ware serving-dishes, 1½ inches deep with vertical sides and double handles. They are circular in form and 6 inches in diameter. One contains your soup, one your meat and accompanying potatoes or spaghetti, and the other your dessert.

Wipe off the bottom of these dishes with paper napkins ere you receive them into your suite, lest you be sorry afterward when you see the grease spots everywhere.

Satchels or suit cases are not allowed in cells. Anything left such is liable to be stolen. Supplies from your suitcase can be obtained on application to the office before 3:30 p.m.

The light in your cell must always be burning when you are in it and extinguished when you leave.

In my cell at present I have^{an} the sideboard (i.e., the shelf or mourner's bench) a paper containing two potatoes boiled in their jackets, a paper containing 5¢ worth of salt (enough to last me until I get out). I have learned to peel these deftly by using the handle of the spoon. There is also a ham sandwich and an egg sandwich, saved from my han-and egg dinner.

There are also two peaches, two bananas and an orange, total cost 15¢. These will provide my evening meal today and breakfast tomorrow.

On the same shelf are my Bible, two magazines, pocket hymnal, pocket Revelation and Poems of Dawn, letter paper and envelopes, and Tower. Beneath it is a package of clean linen and underwear. When anything gets soiled I wash it and hang it next the ceiling on the iron pipe which carries the electric light wire. Hanging there now are my nightie, a tie, a paper folded so as to throw my pillow out of the direct light and a string to which my hat is attached by a bow know run through the loop of the bow know on the hat. There it is clean and I can get it and put it on in five seconds.

In the wall I found two small holes. Into these I thrust wood tooth-picks and now have on the wall a beautiful lake and mountain scene, formerly the cover of a Christian Herald, and a spiritual calendar which a dear saint of God mailed to me. Phil. 4:11-13, Eph. 4:1-3, 2 Cor. 13:11-14

In fondest love,

Clayton J. Woodworth

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Since this letter was typed by Brother Clayton J. Woodworth in 1918 it was quite old and fragile and since the photo copy that was sent to me was hardly legible, with much effort this copy was made. Bro. Woodworth became the editor of The Golden Age when it was started in 1919. He was one of the founders of the International Correspondence Schools from Scranton, Pennsylvania. Each weekend he would go home by train to Scranton to see his family and take an interest in the IBS. He was faithful to Jehovah right to the end. The one who copied this letter knew him personally.

Hope that you enjoy reading it and reflecting on it.

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THIS COPY TO)

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