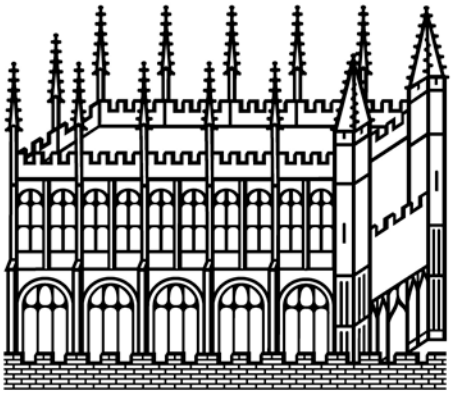

Our discharged convicts [by W. Gilbert].

William Gilbert

OUR

DISCHARGED CONVICTS.

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FROM the atrocities committed by ticket-of-leave men, and recorded almost daily in the public prints, any one who had not gone somewhat deeply into the subject might be led to believe that immediately after their liberation from prison they rush back to their old bad practices, and that the training—religious, moral, and industrial—they have received during their incarceration has been utterly thrown away. Such an idea would, however, be a most erroneous one. The villains whose misdeeds are so often brought under the notice of the public through the police reports, and who are described as discharged convicts and ticket-of-leave men, are the exceptions to a general rule. According to the returns of the Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society, out of every hundred convicts discharged with tickets-of-leave, ninety-three remain honest. We may, perhaps, be told that the honesty displayed by them is merely simulated—their penitence when in prison having been simply hypocrisy, and that, plausible as their behaviour may appear, they form no exception to the old proverb, "Once a rogue, always a rogue."

The late Archbishop Whately is reported to have said, "The master who accepts a liberated convict as a servant in his house will soon find himself the only spoon left in it." The simple logic of facts is sufficient to prove the great logician's opinion to have been incorrect. We could point out in London alone more than a hundred houses in which a vast amount of valuable property has been for years in the custody of liberated convicts, without the slightest suspicion of their integrity having been awakened in the minds of their employers, or any idea having been excited that they had passed some years of their lives in penal servitude, or within the walls of a prison. Nor do the persons employing them belong to the more needy class of housekeepers, who, tempted by the low

scale of wages asked, take a healthy-looking servant without making very careful investigation as to character. On the contrary, discharged convicts are to be seen occasionally in the dwellings of the richest and most aristocratic families in the metropolis, where they have ample opportunities of being dishonest were they so disposed.

We will give a case in point. A certain nobleman of considerable wealth, residing in London, had a butler in whom he had great faith, and with whom he had received an excellent, but short character. One morning the nobleman was startled from his security by receiving from a detective whom he had employed on some other business the confidential information that his favourite servant had once been sentenced to five years' penal servitude for some act of dishonesty, but that he had been liberated on a ticket-of-leave before the expiration of the term. The nobleman was greatly puzzled as to what steps he should take. He did not like at once to turn away a servant who had hitherto given him ground for the most implicit reliance being placed on his honesty. But again, he hardly thought it fair that he should knowingly place his other servants in the society of a ticket-of-leave man, and, to a certain extent, under his control. In this dilemma he applied to the Prisoners' Aid Society for advice. From it he received confirmation of the statement that his servant had been sentenced to penal servitude for breach of trust, and that he had been liberated on a ticket-of-leave. It was added, that the Society had obtained a situation for him; of course, informing the master, as is their wont, of the servant's antecedents. He had remained for several months in that situation, without the slightest fault having been found with him, and from that he had gone to the more lucrative one in the nobleman's family. His lordship then resolved to keep the man in his service; although he admitted that he should not have engaged him had he been aware of his previous bad conduct. He still remains in the family, much respected by all, the secret of his former transgression and its punishment having been faithfully kept by his employer.

As another proof of integrity following on a dishonest action, after the offender had been subjected to the moral training of a prison, we may quote the case of a man who had been in prison three years for robbery, and who had also been liberated before the expiration of his sentence, on a ticket-of-leave. On his liberation, the Prisoners' Aid Society found him a situation in a manufacturing establishment, which employed a vast number of hands, the man's

real character and history being confided to the head of the firm alone. He has now been upwards of three years in this situation, where he still remains. His conduct during the whole of that time has been not only perfectly satisfactory to his employers, but he has so far gained the good opinion of his brother workmen, that they lately unanimously elected him treasurer of their benefit society.

As it is possible that few of our readers are aware by what machinery the great majority of our liberated convicts are enabled to obtain once more a respectable position in society, it may not be uninteresting if we describe it. It may be easily imagined that without the agency of a powerful benevolent society to take the newly discharged felon by the hand, he would be almost certain to resort to his former evil habits, if only to avoid starvation. Fortunately such an agency exists in the Prisoners' Aid Society, and the good it has done is incalculable. It was founded in the year 1857, on the principles of the Birmingham Prisoners' Aid Society. The London Society, however, differs in more than one respect from that of Birmingham. The principal difference is, that while the ministrations of the latter—excellent as they may be—are confined only to country prisoners, that of London takes under its protection liberated convicts from all parts of the kingdom. From some statistics drawn up by Mr. Bayne Ranken, the indefatigable honorary secretary, we find that from the commencement of the Society to the year 1863, a period of only six years, they had taken under their protection no fewer than 3,022 men and women. For all of these they had either found honourable employment, or had assisted them to emigrate to the colonies where, their antecedents being unknown, they were enabled to obtain employment. Although reports of the conduct of these did not reach the Society with the same regularity as in the case of those who remained in England, the secretary is in possession of sufficient information to lead to the belief that relapses have been even less frequent there than at home. Of the gross number named, 868 were assisted with passages to the colonies, 282 had good situations provided for them in England by the direct instrumentality of the Society, and 1,782 were otherwise assisted to find employment.

The method adopted by the Society is shortly as follows. On a convict leaving prison, there is given him, if he wishes it, a printed recommendation from the governor of the prison he has just left, to the Prisoners' Aid Society. This document states the name and sentence of the applicant, his or her age, date of conviction, religion,

education, number of previous convictions, character while in separate confinement, and (if a man) while employed on public works, trade, and degree of proficiency. It also states whether the prisoner is capable of hard labour, and gives name of former employer, place of abode, and family, what employment desired, and, probably, also the amount of gratuity due. Accompanying this document is a *carte-de-visite* of the prisoner, which is inserted in a sort of album kept by the Society, and a paper is enclosed, giving details as to the colour of the eyes and hair, the height and other physical peculiarities necessary to perfectly identify him in case of need. There is something exceedingly interesting in the examination of this album, more especially to the physiognomist. Lavater himself might have been puzzled at these portraits, which often give a shock to all our preconceived notions as to the expression of the countenance being the mirror of the mind. Nothing is more common than to find among these prisoners men of apparently the lowest organization, who after their liberation have conducted themselves with perfect propriety; while others who have an intelligent and ingenuous expression are dishonest to a point that might lead one to believe that there was a taint of insanity about them. In women this peculiarity is even more marked than in men. Frequently a stolid, sullen-looking young woman will turn out a trustworthy, much-enduring domestic drudge, while others, of remarkably mild expression, and with gentle tone of voice, are thoroughly hardened, and occasionally so far advanced in sin, that their histories are almost incredible. We were some time since introduced by Mrs. Meredith, the lady superintendent of one of the "Homes" for discharged female convicts, to a woman of this description. There was something exceedingly attractive in her look, and the tone of her voice was remarkably sweet. She spoke with much feeling of her former wickedness, and shed tears in abundance as she spoke of it, yet the detailed accounts of that woman's crimes, including even murder (although it had never been directly brought home to her), would be more exciting than half the sensation novels of the day. Notwithstanding her assertions during our interview that it was her determination to lead for the future an honest and respectable life, she had hardly been a fortnight in a situation, which had been found for her in the house of an excellent and charitable lady, than she was again arrested on a charge of robbery.

When a discharged prisoner has elected to place himself under

the protection of the Prisoners' Aid Society, immediately on his liberation he attends at the office and places the whole of the gratuity he has earned during his confinement in the hands of the Secretary. From whatever point of view it may be regarded, this rule—and it is imperative—is a most excellent one. In the first place, the prisoner lodges with the Society a pecuniary guarantee for his good behaviour; and in the second, it secures to the prisoner the safe keeping of his money, which otherwise would probably be recklessly expended. In the words of Mr. Bayne Ranken, "It thus prevents a discharged prisoner, under the supervision of the Society, from becoming the prey of former vicious associates and of that large class of the criminal population to whom he is a marked man. It frequently happens that a man, bewildered by the sense of newly acquired freedom and the possession of money, is recognised by certain peculiarities in appearance and dress as having been recently discharged from prison; and though intending to lead an honest life, is, through the influence of those more guilty than himself, thrust back, as it were, into crime."

The prisoner is then interrogated on his prospects of being able to earn an honest livelihood, and what friends he may have who may be willing and able to assist him. These, unfortunately, are generally speaking few in number, for those prisoners who formerly belonged to the respectable classes are in most cases disowned by their friends, while those of the poorer classes, though their friends are willing enough to aid them, very rarely have the power. After the prisoner has explained his wishes and prospects, he is placed under the care of one of the Society's agents, who procures a respectable lodging for him in some locality as far distant as possible from those of his acquaintances who would be likely to tempt him into his old courses again. If the prisoner be a woman, she is placed under the care of some discreet person of her own sex, or is recommended to the lady superintendent of a home in connection with the Society, where she remains until a respectable situation can be found for her. It would only be natural to expect that this would be a very difficult task, but this is far from being the case. Fortunately, there are many ladies in London who do good by stealth, and yet would blush to find it fame. In these cases they rigidly adhere to the Scripture precept—not to let the one hand know what the other doeth. The mistress of the house alone, of all the family or establishment, is aware of the secret of the servant whom she is so nobly assisting to return to the paths of respecta-

bility and virtue. Jewish ladies are very willing to exercise this kind of charity, which is the more honourable on their parts, as there are no female ticket-of-leave convicts of their own community. Mrs. Meredith assured us that she has very little difficulty in finding situations for eligible young women in families of high respectability; and that the relapses among them are not more numerous than among the men, or less than ten per cent.

As soon as respectable temporary homes are found for the discharged prisoners, a small sum—sufficient to procure the means of subsistence and nothing more—is allowed them weekly from the gratuity earned during their incarceration. A decent outfit of clothes is then procured for them, and all being in readiness, the Society's officials employ themselves in finding situations for the women and such of the men as are adapted for domestic service, and employment in different trades and occupations for others. Those who from age or infirmity are not fitted for manual labour have small stocks-in-trade—such as fruit, vegetables, &c.—provided for them, whereby they may obtain a living in the streets. But this last occupation is discouraged as much as possible by the Society's officers, as it tends to encourage a wandering and vagabond life. Perhaps relapses are more frequent among this class than any of the others, from the chances thrown in their way of renewing acquaintance with their former associates. Those of the men who have friends in the colonies (of whom there are a considerable number) are provided with free passages and outfits thither, if they are able to show that their friends are willing to receive and assist them on their arrival. Generally, these cases turn out remarkably well.

When a situation is found for a man, either in a private family or as an artisan, his previous history is told to his employer, under a pledge of secrecy, and the balance of his gratuity is turned over to the employer as a further guarantee for his good behaviour.

A very frequent excuse urged by ticket-of-leave men who are arrested on charges of dishonesty is, that they are so persecuted by the police as to have no chance of obtaining an honest livelihood. In almost every case where the convict has accepted the patronage of the Society this is entirely false. So long as these remain in London the police have no control whatever over them ; and should they be known to the police, they are strictly ordered not to interfere with them, unless they have strong reasons for suspecting that they are about to commit some dishonest action. But the inspection

of the convicts under the protection of the Society is not one jot less stringent than if they were under the surveillance of the police. Every fact concerning them is periodically forwarded to the office of the Chief Commissioner of Police in Scotland Yard. These reports contain the name of each prisoner; the prison in which the latter part of his or her sentence was served; the date of liberation or licence; the address of the house at which he is residing; the name of the place to which a licence-holder intends to remove, if he purposes leaving the metropolitan district; and also the place to which any licence-holder goes beyond the United Kingdom, together with the date of departure. The particulars of any failure of a licence-holder to make the monthly report, or to give notice of changing his address, or of any one who violates the conditions of his licence, and any further information that may be needed by the authorities, are carefully supplied.

Not only are convicts who are resident in London obliged to report themselves monthly at the Society's office, but inspectors—men of unblemished character and great tact—daily visit one or more of the men who have found employment, and furnish to the Secretary a written report of their proceedings. These are all entered in a book, which is kept with great care; so that there exists a complete history of every convict's life since he has been under the charge of the Society. As an example, we may quote the following case, taken at random, of a woman who had suffered a lengthened incarceration for receiving stolen goods, and who had been liberated on a ticket-of-leave.

31st October, 186—.—Liberated from Prison, and sent to a Servants' Home.

3rd November, 186—.—Obtained a situation for her as a servant-of all-work, at the house of Mrs. ——, City-road.

5th December, 186—.—Has left her situation of her own accord, and returned to the Servants' Home. Her conduct has been good.

19th December, 186—.—Another situation found for her with Mrs.——, a lady of fortune in Belgravia.

26th January, 186—.—Same situation; going on well, and giving great satisfaction.

14th June, 186—.—Same situation; conduct perfectly satisfactory.

13th August, 186—.—Going on well.

2nd November, 186—.—Has left her situation with a perfectly good character, and has taken another in the country.

17th January, 186—.—Has returned, at the invitation of her former mistress, to her old situation.

16th April, 186—.—Still in the same situation; conduct perfectly satisfactory.

The records of the men's conduct are kept with equal regularity, and are mostly of a satisfactory character. It may appear somewhat improbable that a body of men so desperate as our liberated convicts have formerly proved themselves, should so implicitly submit to the regulations of a society of gentlemen, whose whole staff of officials does not probably number more than half-a-dozen individuals. It should be remembered, however, that in case of any disobedience, or of any one neglecting to give the monthly report of himself, information is immediately sent to Scotland Yard, and the defaulter is invariably removed from under the superintendence of the Society, and placed under that of the police. It is difficult to imagine anything more distasteful to a convict than this change. He knows that, strict as are the regulations of the Society, the members comprising it are his friends, and are actuated solely by kindly feeling towards him. The police, on the contrary, he looks upon as his natural enemies; and he smarts fearfully under any interference by them. It should be understood that the authority of the Society is confined solely to the metropolitan districts, although their charitable ministrations are spread over the whole country and the colonies also. The Society is in constant communication with magistrates and clergymen throughout the kingdom, respecting the character of those whose cases it has undertaken, as well as their mode of life. A man who has conducted himself honourably, even though his ticket-of-leave may have expired, is still considered to be under protection; and in case of misfortune, not occasioned by the man's own misconduct, it is always ready to assist him to re-establish himself.

Let us now endeavour to ascertain the value, both moral and financial, of this Society to the community at large. In the first place, it has been mainly instrumental in solving the problem as to the possibility of turning loose on a metropolis, already having its full share of criminal population, some thousand liberated convicts, to be kept under strict discipline by a body of a dozen gentlemen, assisted by two intelligent honorary secretaries, a secretary, two or three clerks, and perhaps as many inspectors, performing, in a satisfactory manner, a duty which it would require a regiment of ordinary policemen to carry out with effect. This, we believe, comprises the whole of their machinery. They find respectable situations for men and women, who have lost all hold on respectability, and whose first introduction to them was a certificate from the governor of a prison that the bearer's reputation had formerly

been of the worst description, and that he had just been liberated from imprisonment for some serious crime. Here, however, the credit has to be shared with others. It would be very unjust to the governors of our prisons, and to that most wrongfully abused body, our prison chaplains, not to admit that a vast amount of improvement in the habits and morals of prisoners takes place, on the whole, during the period of their imprisonment. The records and experiences of the Prisoners' Aid Society also go far to overthrow a commonly received notion, that one great evil to be dreaded from turning a vast number of liberated convicts on society, and restoring those who are married to their wives and families, tends to the encouragement among us of a race of felons, the children being likely to follow the criminal example of their parents. Never was there a greater fallacy. The punishment of the parent generally acts as an awful warning to the child, and he scrupulously avoids the pit into which his father had fallen.

In the colonies, during the time the old transportation system was in force, the same held good. Judge Terry, of New South Wales, as well as Sir William A'Beckett, lately supreme judge of the Australian colony of Victoria, both stated that they never met with an instance of the child of a liberated convict becoming a thief. Even among our professional London thieves, who have not had the advantage of the moral training of a prison, their children are rarely thieves. Those who have fathers are certainly never so. It is very difficult to find an instance of a man having trained up his child to acts of dishonesty, bad as he may have been himself. With women, on the contrary, terrible as the statement may appear, instances of their teaching their own children to thieve are not uncommon. In these cases, however, the women are invariably drunkards; no sober woman, though her character may be bad, ever trains her child to systematic dishonesty. Some time since we had pointed out to us in the Philanthropic Society's Schools at Red Hill, a poor boy who had been six times convicted of theft, to which he had been instigated by his own mother. Of course, she was a drunkard, and had been several times in the hands of the police for breaches of the peace committed while intoxicated, but she had always escaped a conviction for acts of dishonesty herself.

The relapses among ticket-of-leave convicts, though less than ten per cent. of their whole number, certainly makes a formidable body for the police to cope with. The first step to crime after their liberation seems to be invariably the meeting with their former evil

associates, and the second is the public-house, this latter being especially powerful among the women. They have generally sufficient strength of mind to resist the temptations of their former associates, even although there may be among them some man to whom the woman may have been attached. But what neither persuasion nor affection can bring about, the public-house effects without difficulty—a single glass of gin frequently being the turning point.

Among the most irreclaimable of the liberated male prisoners is the London rough. This class of criminal is unique, and appears indigenous to the metropolis. He is generally supposed to be drafted from the worst of the working classes, but this is not the case. He has no connection with them whatever. Great as may be the faults of our working classes, they bear no resemblance to those of the London roughs, who are cowardly, vindictive, hypocritical, and utterly dishonest. They never attack a policeman unless they are at least six to one against him. They never rob a foot passenger unless they can get him in such a position that he is utterly powerless in their hands. It is no uncommon thing to find half a dozen committals registered against one of these scoundrels. We are inclined to believe that their psychology is imperfectly understood by the prison authorities. It would be better, after every case of robbery with violence, to give at least one of the thieves a short imprisonment, supplemented by a sound flogging. If the latter could be administered shortly before leaving the prison, he might, with the marks of the cat still on his back, take with him a good lesson to his associates. The dread the villains have of that punishment is most edifying. Already it is occasionally used, with excellent effect, for robberies committed with violence. Lately, on more than one occasion, these cowards have told their victims, when robbing them, that if they offered no resistance, no violence would be committed—their humanity evidently arising from the probability of their being subjected to a flogging in case of maltreatment.

In a pecuniary point of view, the operations of the Prisoners' Aid Society are a great saving to the public. The gross cost of every prisoner, when in confinement, is about fifty pounds a year above the value of his labour. When liberated this sum is, of course, saved. It is calculated that the Society effects a saving to Government of at least fifty thousand a year, by finding respectable employment for liberated convicts. Nor is this all; the parochial

ratepayers are also great gainers. One-third of our male convicts are married men, and, during their incarceration, their wives are almost invariably thrown upon the parish for support. Some inquiries made a few years since brought out the fact that two metropolitan parishes—St. George's in the East and Fulham—had between them more than one hundred women and children whose husbands were in prison. Assuming that the wife of each prisoner has two children, it will follow, that for every man in confinement at the expense of the Government, there is a woman or child supported out of the parochial rates. When the husband is liberated from prison, and employment found for him, this expense of course ceases.

We feel assured it will be readily admitted by the reader that the gratitude of both the Government and the public is due to the Prisoners' Aid Society for their success in thus transforming the most dishonest portion of the population into respectable members of the community. This debt, however, has not been paid. The Society, on the contrary, has been treated with gross injustice by both; and a few benevolent gentlemen, assisted by subscriptions from their private friends, are left to carry on their self-imposed onerous duties as they best can. For the public some slight excuse may be offered, it being a difficult matter to raise the sympathies of the charitable in favour of the ticket-of-leave convict. He is known to the world at large only through the reports of criminal trials at the police-courts and the Old Bailey, and it is generally imagined that those accused there are only average specimens of their class; instead of being, as they generally are, the exceptions. Few know that for every ticket-of-leave convict charged with a fresh offence, there are at least ten earning an honest livelihood, many of whom are maintaining their wives and families in respectability.

But if an excuse can be offered for the public it would be very difficult indeed to find one for the Government. The Society in its relation to the State bears an almost official position, and the Directors of Convict Prisons, in their annual reports, always compliment it on the efficient manner in which its duties are performed, and the purely philanthropic sentiments which always actuate its managers. In their report of 1865 they say,—

"The well-being of the convicts after discharge from prison has been materially advanced by the operations of the Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society, to whose philanthropic and useful labours

we cannot bear too high testimony. During the year the cases of 577 discharged convicts have been undertaken by this Society, and it is very gratifying to record that of these no less than 513 have been satisfactorily disposed of, and are believed to be earning an honest living.

"The immense difficulties which convicts on discharge from prison meet with in their efforts to return to a better life, render the aid afforded by this Society most valuable, and it is now the more worthy of public support since the country must from henceforth, to a great extent, absorb its own criminals."

Notwithstanding the high opinion thus expressed, this compliment is the only assistance the Government offers to a society which, with a handful of officials, performs, in an admirable and business-like manner, one of the most onerous duties of the metropolitan police. Surely, on grounds of common justice as well as of economical expediency, a moderate grant might be made to a society which yearly saves £.50,000 to the State, being the minimum cost when in prison of the number of ticket-of-leave convicts for whom its officers have found respectable and remunerative employment. Nor is this the only saving effected. The wives and children of the convicts cost, when thrown on the rates for relief, at least five shillings per head, and by being maintained by their husbands and fathers, a saving is also made in the metropolitan poor rates of at least £.13,000 a year.

If the Society has hitherto been able to meet its expenditure, it will not long continue to do so, or a considerable addition to its funds must be obtained; not for staff and office expenses, but to enable the liberated convict to provide himself with an outfit, and obtain the means of existence till remunerative employment has been found for him. Formerly, when a prisoner was discharged, he brought with him a gratuity ranging from three to ten pounds, and this, with economy and assistance from the Society's private funds, was generally found sufficient to maintain him till a situation had been found for him. A new regulation, however, was lately passed, and which is at present being carried into effect—that the *maximum* amount of the gratuity to be awarded to any prisoner, no matter how satisfactory his conduct may have been during his incarceration, shall not exceed three pounds. The average, unfortunately, will not be more than one, and with such facts before us we would earnestly submit to the public whether some steps ought not to be

taken to prevent the more frequent relapse into crime on the part of discharged prisoners. With its present funds, it is a mathematical impossibility for the Society to do more than it does. Short as the time has been since the new regulation for the diminished gratuity has been in force, relapses have been more frequent than formerly, and the formidable number, already mentioned, of discharged prisoners preying on the public is rapidly augmenting. Nor is this to be wondered at. Although the Society can always succeed in getting employment for the prisoners who place themselves under its control, still it occupies a far longer time than to find occupation for persons of unblemished character. The difficult question then arises—how is the liberated prisoner to live in the interim? His small gratuity will generally be expended long before employment can be found for him; and unless the Society is able to assist him, the too probable result will be, that he will renew his acquaintance with his old disreputable associates, or fall into the clutches of the host of receivers of stolen goods, even on the look-out for him, offering him not only an advantage of money, but promising to turn into cash, at a moment's notice, the produce of any robbery he may commit.*

The present is, perhaps, the most critical position the Prisoners' Aid Society has hitherto found itself in, and that, too, at a moment when its sphere of usefulness might be greatly enlarged. It has lately entered into an arrangement with the chief Commissioners of the Metroplitan Police, by which two intelligent detective officers in plain clothes are placed at the orders of the Society, whose sole duty is to visit the discharged prisoners at their different occupations, to ascertain whether they are conducting themselves in a satisfactory manner, and to report thereon through the Society to the office of the Chief Commissioner. By this arrangement the Society guarantees to the public a strong protection against a class of the community which, without its aid, might become far more dangerous and difficult to cope with than at present; yet all is likely to be abortive from lack of funds to carry out the Society's labours effectually.

But far more praiseworthy result of the Society's labours yet remains to be impressed on the mind of the reader—the transformation of the hardened criminal into the honest and industrious

* From the official returns it appears that there are no fewer than 3,022 receivers of stolen goods known to the Police in the Metropolis alone.

member of society; and this it has done, not only in hundreds, but literally in thousands of cases. Of the truth of this assertion the reader may easily convince himself by a short visit to the Society's offices, where, unless the reception he meets with is the very opposite to that which we personally experienced, the utmost courtesy will be shown him.

In conclusion, it is only bare justice to Messrs. Bayne Ranken and S. Whitbread, M.P., the honorary secretaries, Major Tillbrook, the official secretary, and the staff of the Prisoners' Aid Society, to say that, quiet and unostentatious as their method of working may be, there is not a charity in London that does more good, and the limited amount of support it receives, both from the Government and the public, is miserably inadequate to the valuable services it renders to the community.

WILLIAM GILBERT.

PRINTED BY THOMAS BRETTELL AND CO. 51, RUPERT STREET, LONDON,—W.