

Passive Resistance: Prison Experiences by S.S. Henshaw

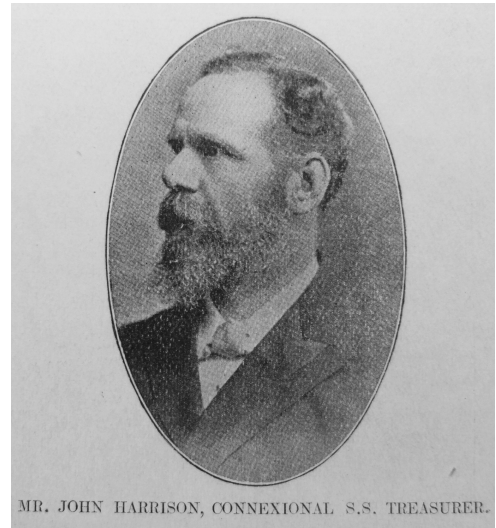
A Personal Narrative

In common with a large number of Free Churchmen and women I was summoned in His Majesty's name to appear on July 21st, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon at the Town Hall, Leeds, before two or more of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace for the said city, to show cause why I had not paid and refused to pay, the sum of five shillings, being a portion of the rate for the relief of the poor. I explained to the Court that the amount I refused to pay was not a part of the poor rate at all but was the sum to be devoted under the Education Act of 1902 to the Roman Catholic, State Church and other sectarian schools of the Borough, where doctrines were taught and practices indulged in which I did not believe and which I bitterly resented and opposed. And I declared that I would not pay it either willingly or in any other way if I could help it, and I thought I could help it. An order of distraint was made. But before it could be executed I had divested myself of all goods. By legal document I made over to my wife "in love and affection," as the document quaintly put it, all my books, pictures, furniture, etc. In due time the officers of the law appeared. I smiled all over them, bade them welcome, showed them into the sitting room, made them comfortable and at home, produced the aforesaid document, and handing it to the police-sergeant told him he would be interested in learning its contents. Having read it, he looked across at my watch-guard and said that it did not seem to be included, I told him that it certainly was. If it was not expressly mentioned it was there by implication. And so with a grim smile he replied, "Well, if you have no effects, of course we can do nothing," and the two civil officers of the police-force departed empty-handed.

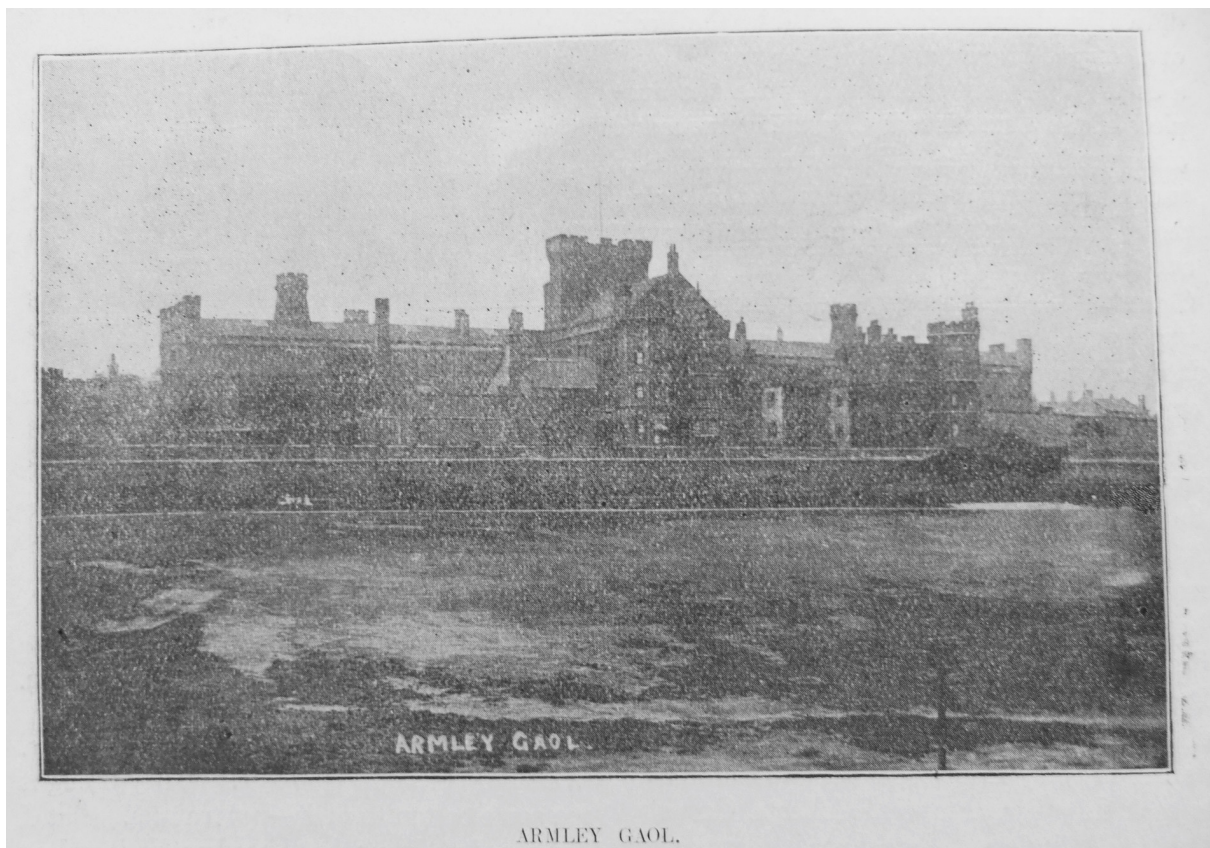


TOWN HALL, LEEDS.

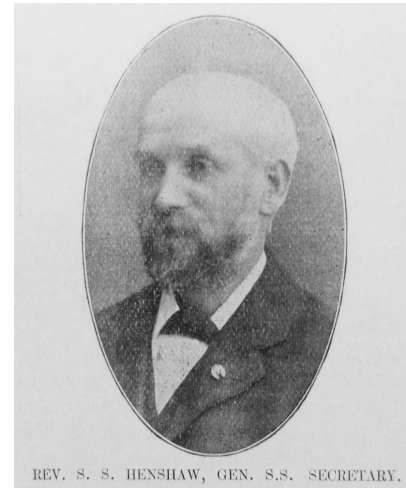
MY COMMITTAL. - Another summons to appear before the magistrates was served upon me, and on Thursday, September 22nd, I was before the court, together with Rev. Peter Miller, Baptist, another incorrigible resister. Our good friend and General Sunday School treasurer, Mr. John Harrison, defended me, and the clever, skilful way in which he conducted the case and put his points of law bothered the Bench and amused the spectators. His main contentions were, first, that the bench was not obliged to commit us – that matter was entirely within their discretion; secondly, when they decided that they must commit us, that the committal order should be issued to the Churchwardens, not to the police, and as the Education Act was passed in the interests of the Established Church he thought the Churchwardens were the proper parties to have the unpleasant duties associated with these prosecutions placed upon them. In the end we were committed for three days to Armley Gaol. Seven days were allowed in which to change our minds and pay the amount.



In the meantime Mr. Harrison announced to the Bench his intention of giving written notice to the overseers that they were not to receive the money from any person on my behalf and without my authority, or he should require a case for the Higher Courts. A fortnight passed before the execution of the warrant.



MY ARREST. - The arrest took place in Mr. Harrison's office. By arrangement I met there Inspector Henderson, who appeared in plain clothes and was as gentlemanly and considerate as any man could possibly be. Accompanied by Mr. J.T. Fleming, Secretary of the Leeds Free Church Council and Citizens' League, we took the tram and rode quietly up to the, gaol. People never suspected that I was a criminal in charge of a constable. Arriving at the gaol door we left Mr. Fleming outside and passed in. I was formally delivered up by the Inspector to the prison authorities and he received a receipt for my body. He showed the receipt to my friend who was waiting for him outside, and he discovered that it was No. 138. The "Leeds Mercury" next day said that for some time to come I should be known not as Rev. S.S. Henshaw but as No. 138.



MY RECEPTION. - These formalities over I was taken to a desk and asked my name, address, occupation, religion, and name of my wife. I was told to take off my boots. Then I mounted a standard and was measured, I jocularly saying that they had not had a man of my measure upon the standard lately. Then I was asked to clear my pockets, after which I was searched. I had two and three-pence in money, I did not dare to take more lest they should appropriate it for the rate. A note was made of the contents of my pockets, and I was asked to sign it. Then I was weighed, with boots on this time. Then I was taken to the doctor's room and was told to toe the line was was painted on the floor. The medical examination was satisfactory. I was physically a fit and proper person for that establishment. I retained and wore my own clothes, and I did not take a bath.

MY CELL. - When these preliminaries had been settled I was taken to my cell. At first the warder was taking me into what seemed to me a rather low, small, poor pokey cell, but as soon as we had entered he was called back and received new orders evidently. I was left to stand in the corridor for perhaps ten or fifteen minutes until the warder returned and escorted me to the cell that was to be my home for the little while I should spend under the roof of what a friend of mine has called "one of His Majesty's Homes of Rest." I was favourably impressed with the appearance of the cell. It was beautifully clean and fairly large. It had a boarded floor and white-washed walls. There were in it a white deal stool and a small white deal table about two-a-half feet long and a foot broad, on which to get my meals. That was all the furniture except the bed, a small enamelled tin for washing water, and a small enamelled washing bowl. I had a small coarse towel but no soap. Besides these things I had a small tin plate and a pint tin mug for my tea, etc. The window of the cell was carefully barred and glazed with thick fluted glass, through which no object could be distinctly seen. In the window sill was a ventilator that could be opened and shut from the inside. There was also a gas light that was controlled from the outside.

MY FOOD. - I entered prison about 5 p.m. Thursday, October 6th. About 6.30 I received my first meal. It consisted of a junk of brown bread weighing 8 ozs., and a pint of skilly as it is commonly called. It was a kind of gruel or porridge, not very appetising, perhaps, but wholesome I should judge, I had made a good tea before going in, so was not in the best form for attacking this new diet. However, I took a little for the sake of making an early acquaintance with prison fare. Prisoners have three meals a day, breakfast, dinner, supper.

Friday morning I got for breakfast the junk of brown bread and a can of cold (supposed to be hot) wishy-washy tea. At noon a 6 oz. junk of brown bread, a can of soup and two boiled unpeeled potatoes. I did not tackle the potatoes. But I enjoyed the soup. It was good – first-rate. There was not much sign of meat in it, but it was really excellent well-made soup. For supper, the usual junk of bread and a can of atrocious cocoa, which I could scarcely touch.

MY BED. - I had the ordinary plank bed of course. It is made of three planed and smooth boards about 6 feet long, held together from beneath by three or four rests about 4 inches deep. There was a mattress about as hard as the bed, a pillow that was as hard as the mattress, a pillow slip, two sheets, two blankets, and a coverlet or counterpane. It will be seen that there was plenty of bedding, and though not of a fine first class quality, it was yet fairly warm and comfortable. The smell of disinfection was upon it and made it a little disagreeable; and sleep! did you sleep, people ask me? I did when I could, and I honestly tried my best. I rolled over and over from side to side, trying to find a soft place in which I could nestle down and be comfortable. But there were no soft places, at least I could not find any. I snatched a little sleep at intervals, just forty winks, a nap, a doze now and again. I lay and rolled on that plank bed until my bones ached, my joints were stiff, and my hips were sore. But it is all a question of habit. You would get accustomed to it if they gave you a chance. After a short experience you would take naturally and kindly to that plank bed, and would sleep as sound as a top.

MY OCCUPATION. - When I was going into prison before I left home I slipped into my pocket the little volume on "Nonconformity in Wales," in the new series of books on "Eras of Nonconformity," with the hop that I might be permitted to read it. That book, however, with my fountain pen, lead pencil and every bit of blank paper in my possession was taken from me. "Cannott I read, then ? " I asked. "Yes," they replied, "devotional books." "Is there not library from which I may have books ? " I enquired. "Yes," was the laconic answer. No library book was brought to me, nor did I press for One.

In my cell were placed a Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and the "Narrow Way," a book of prayers published under the auspices of the Established Church. Indeed I discovered that the religious needs of only two classes were contemplated at all, viz, those belonging to the Established Church and those belonging to the Roman Catholic Church. And I dare say the authorities are largely right in making this arrangement. It is notorious that practically the whole of our criminal population belongs to these two churches. The bishops, priests, and clergy are welcome to this fact. We do not grudge them any satisfaction they may derive from it. As soon as I was locked up in the cell I read a number of chapters in the Book of Job, in the writings of Paul, and in the Revelation of John. Then I turned to the Prayer Book and I settled down to the work of perusing it with great earnestness, and during my stay in prison I read it from back to back, Litanies, Prayers, Collects, Gospels, Epistles, Psalms, Catechism, Baptismal, Marriage and Burial Services, Churching of Woinen, Visitation of the Sick, Making of Deacons, Ordering of Priests, Consecration of Bishops, Declaration of King James, the Thirty-nine Articles, everything. If anybody thinks that I rushed and scamped the reading, that it was superficial and slatternly, all I have got to say is that I am prepared to have my knowledge of the subject tested by examination or cross-examination as the doubter may think best. On. Friday afternoon I had an hour's exercise; a gruff old warder opened the door of my cell and enquired if I had taken my exercise. "No, sir." "Do you want it?" he gruffly blurted out. "Oh, certainly." "Follow

me then," said the agent of the law. I followed and was locked up in a yard alone. The yard was flagged and was twelve or fifteen yards long with an average of perhaps six yards wide. I paced the flags for an hour up and down, to and fro, backward and forward. It was a nice relief, an agreeable change. You were walled in on every side by prison buildings, and could not get much sun. In truth there was no sun to get. The afternoon was dull and damp, but the breath of fresh air was exhilarating. "Did I do any work?" the reader asks. Well they brought me some. They brought me some cotton to pick – not oakum. But I happened to know that I need not do it unless I liked, and so I did not pick a shred of it, and when they came for my work at night I turned it out exactly in the same condition as they had turning it in.

MY VISITOR. - A rattlke of keys I heard and the cell door opened, and in strutted a somewhat fussy, officious man whom I instantly saw to be the prison-chaplain. He secured my contempt at the beginning of the interview by asking my name. Now he knew my name perfectly well. It was on the door of my cell. I had seen it there written in bold words thus – "Henshaw – Debtor." Besides which he had my name in the book he held in his hand, which was prepared for him by the officials, and contained a statement of the name of every prisoner, the number of his cell, the term of his imprisonment, the cause of his incarceration, and a description of his religion.

I was indignant and yet did not wish to be rude. And so I answered sharply and with emphasis, "My name is Henshaw, sir." I was anxious the answer should snap like the crack of a rifle, hit the parson as with the sting of a bullet and knock him over. I soon learned that he had not come for my spiritual edification at all. He stood there lisping and hesitant as though he did not know what to say and do. I therefore led the conversation and tried to draw him into an argument on the Prayer Book.

I pointed out that the Prayer Book denominated the Mass, prayers for the dead, the invocation of saints and the worship of the Virgin Mary as "blasphemous fables," "dangerous deceits," and that it styled transubstantiation as a "fond thing, vainly invented," and I wished to know how he reconciled the conduct of so many of his brethren with these teachings of the Prayer Book. He assured me that when you talked to these men the explanations they gave were wonderful. They must be wonderful indeed I admitted, but the question I wanted settling was their consistency. The chaplain could not manage that. As I made him the target at which to fire off the ammunition supplied me by the Prayer Book he grew fidgety and restless, and at the earliest opportunity, vanished. I had previously ascertained from him in answer to my queries that they held in the prison-chapel two services on Sundays and prayers once every alternate week-day, viz., on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, but as he had a cold and was not very well some of the services had not been held that week.

INCIDENTS. - There was a little glass bull's eye in my cell door through which officials could come and search the cell and see what the criminal was doing. I did not like anyone fixing his eye upon me in that sneaking fashion, and whenever I was conscious of anyone fastening his eye upon me from without I fastened my eye upon him from within. And as long as he stood there peeping and squinting at me I stood staring and gazing at him.

In prison we retire and rise early. We go to bed at eight; we are up at five-thirty. On Saturday morning I had just washed and dressed and was beginning to roll up my bed and tidy the cell when an official told me to take my pillow slip and sheets and go and stand at the bottom of a broad open

corridor. I was the first to take up position on my side of the corridor. On the other side was a row of poor fellows in prison garb about to be discharged who stood with their faces to the wall. I was looking at them and generally taking in the situation, when I heard an official with a stentorian voice shout, "Face to the wall there." At last I discovered that he was addressing me. My first instinct was to rebel, to flatly refuse. But on second thoughts I decided that in the interests of discipline it was better to obey, so I wheeled round and stood face to the wall. Presently an official came and told me I could go to breakfast. Looking him straight in the eyes and assuming an air of authority I said in a commanding tone, "Face to the wall, sir." "I don't understand you," he said. "Face to the wall, sir," I cried again, as though I meant to be obeyed. I had just got seated to my junk of bread and can of prison tea when a still higher official opened my cell door and told me I could leave at once. My reply was to look straight up at him and ring out the order, "Face to the Wall sir," and every official I met afterwards I greeted with the same order that issued from the stentorian voice to me as I stood at the end of the corridor. As I stood there with my face to the wall, a thing happened that touched my heart. There was pathos in it. The next prisoner who came and stood beside me there, quietly turned to me and said, "Are you remanded?" "Discharged," I replied in undertones. He was remanded and going up that day for trial, poor fellow! and whatever the charge against him his face bore traces of deep anxiety and nervousness.

I left my breakfast almost untouched and received back my property. The heavy door of the gaol slammed behind me; I had regained my liberty. As I walked from the prison the clock chimed half-past six. It was a dodge. The Resisters and friends of Leeds had planned and advertised a public welcome and meeting to be held on my release at the gaol gates at seven o'clock. Had I known of it I would have taken every crumb of that breakfast and I would have taken plenty of time to it. I would not have been turned out one minute before seven.

But we had our revenge in a magnificent meeting at noon the following Monday.

I had no complaint to make of my treatment. Most of the prison officials were courteous, some of them were kind.

REFLECTIONS. - I regard my imprisonment as an honour and as a humiliation. It is always an honour to suffer in however small a degree in the cause of justice, truth, and righteousness. But what a humiliation to feel that you are being treated as a criminal because you will not sacrifice your conscience and betray your faith and the future of your children, your Church, and your country, into the hands of the priest. It pained me, made me weep to think that in England we had come to this. But courage, friends! The battle goes well. I am proud of the noble part my own Church is taking in it. Brave men and women amongst us are in the fiercest of the fight. A number of my brethren in the ministry for longer terms than I have submitted to be cast into prison. Amongst the William Sharman, W.S. Spencer, Freer Bell, George Baldwin, John S.W. Stanwell, Edgar Ball, J. Leach, G. Litten, and W. Barnsley. By persistency we shall win the day and shall wipe out the Education Acts of 1902 and 1903 which disgrace and stain the statute book of the nation and the pages of our current history with the enactments and the deeds of sectarian tyranny. Once more we shall, by the help of God, carry the banners of civil and religious liberty to complete and splendid victory.

References

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