

MRS. BYRNE TELLS HER FIRST STORY OF LIFE DURING HUNGER STRIKE

Dorothy Day

New York Call Tuesday, February 6, 1917, page 1

EIGHT PRISONERS LOCKED IN ONE CELL OVER SUNDAY, SHE
CHARGES. VERMIN PLENTIFUL, PUNISHMENT SEVERE – MRS.
SANGER TO INVESTIGATE

Mrs. Ethel Byrne's first coherent description of her imprisonment in Blackwells Island was secured by The Call yesterday. Mrs. Byrne's vivid description of conditions there led her sister, Margaret Sanger, who began a 30-day sentence yesterday, to decide to forego a hunger strike that she might keep herself alert for the purpose of thoroughly investigating conditions in the woman's section of the prison.

Mrs. Byrne's story as told through Mrs. Sanger, is one of conditions that are shocking in the extreme. Here are some of the things Mrs. Byrne declares she found on the island:

Vermin in cells and food
Solitary confinement and medieval punishment.
Eight prisoners in one cell from Saturday to Monday.
A woman prisoner found with broken collarbones.

It was still impossible to see Mrs. Byrne yesterday. But she had talked to her sister from time to time and her first account of prison experiences – including her story of how she was fed – was secured by The Call through Mrs. Sanger.

“Because of the things that my sister told me, I have decided to investigate conditions on the island,” Mrs. Sanger said. “And, because I am sent to the island as a prisoner, the results will be all the more convincing and startling. Thomas Mott Osborne investigated the conditions of the men, but all the while he was in Sing Sing he could not get rid of the fact that he was a voluntary prisoner. The woman's workhouse has not been investigated and written up and I intend to do it.”

Hard Fights With Vermin

During the first few days that Mrs. Byrne spent on the island the worst thing she had to combat was the vermin. “Cockroaches and bedbugs overran the place,” she said through

Mrs. Sanger yesterday. "It was impossible to sleep on account of the vermin in the cells. On the second day of my stay the commissioner of correction called up and asked me if I were getting enough exercise. I told him sure, that I had spent the night chasing bedbugs around the room."

"At this information, some disinfectant was sent around to my cell, but it didn't do much good. The place is full of vermin and the unsanitary state is absolutely ignored by the prison officials.

"Although I was not at the table on account of my hunger strike, I heard that bugs ran riot over the table cloth, braving the abysmal danger of soup and coffee and the liability of being mistaken for a bean. Beans, you know, are a prison staple.

"Worst part of all of the imprisonment is the caging of eight people in one cell from Saturday afternoon till Monday morning, with absolutely no sanitary plumbing and only one pail of water with a tin dipper for the prisoners to drink out of. Their food is handed to them. They still have solitary confinement and medieval forms of punishment.

Neighbor Screamed All Night

"For two nights, when I was first in jail, a woman in a cell near at hand screamed and cried. She had been given an indeterminate sentence. Then, strange to relate, she was found with both of her collarbones broken. They had put a stop to her screaming.

"I had my share of the prison barbarities. Dr. Gibb left me with the rubber feeding tube in my mouth for 15 or 20 minutes while he dawdled and laughed around. They took the whole affair as a joke. Although Dr. Ruth Howard had been unable to feed me forcibly before Dr. Gibbs was brought in, because of lack of instruments and ignorance of the methods, she assisted at the feeding afterward. Once when I had endured about all that I could from her, I asked that 'that great big Teddy bear' be put out of the room. Perhaps that made them more than usually harsh with me.

"I hate to have my sister go to the island. They know that she is coming and expect her. And they want to punish her for the inconvenience I put them to."

This afternoon Mrs. Byrne will give a more detailed report to the public. Owing to her sister's sentence, Mrs. Byrne suffered a slight relapse yesterday. Last night, for the first time since her release, she was able to eat a little solid food.