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THE BREAKING POINT. BY LAURENCE HOUSMAN.

The "Cat and Mouse" Act is operating amid a perfect buzz of released prisoners. In and out they go-- the air is full of them. The trap clicks like a typewriter; and the Press, conscious the here we have a real and very serious test of the power of coercive government to break down the rebel spirit, keeps its countenance and remains solemn.

Suddenly it bursts into a guffaw, and directs its ridicule, not against the Government or its already dilapidated Act, but against one of the prisoners who are fighting it.

What is the occasion for this burst of merriment? Here are the laughable facts stated plain.

Mrs Mary Wyan, sentenced for some trivial offence to a fortnight's imprisonment, carries her logical rebellion against unrepresentative government into Holloway itself, breaks prison discipline, hunger-strikes, and forces her way out. Being only "a common woman", her sentence is not remitted, or reduced to four days, as in the case of Lady Sybil Smith: it is merely suspended till she is well enough to go on with it.

As soon as she has sufficiently recovered, Mrs Wyan goes back to Holloway, of her own accord, to inquire what Mr. McKenna means to do-- whether he means to treat her as he has treated Lady Sybil Smith, or--differently?

DOUBLY JUSTIFIED.

Differently, says Mr. McKenna, She is rearrested, and at once resumes the hunger-strike. It is now a strike doubly justified-- against differentiation as well as against unjust government. Three days later the authorities once more start "cat and mousing" her. When their prisoner's state of health becomes serious, the necessity to be temporarily rid of her again crops up. They think that they can dispose of her out of prison as well as in, and going entirely beyond their powers, they make arrangements for her to be received at a private nursing home.

But Mrs Wyan will have no nurse save Mr. McKenna or his subordinates. Mr. McKenna took up the case--got a law passed specially enabling him to deal with it--he must go on with it. If he has bungled it, it is he who must attend the inquest-- either upon her or upon his own professional reputation.

This insistence upon Mr. McKenna remaining responsible for what he has begun lands her in the street. The prison authorities have brought her there in a starving condition, and there-- having failed to secure her consent to go where they have no right to make her go-- there they dump her and leave her.

There, patiently she waits; the authorities must solve their own problem.

They solve it by once more picking up their rebellious derelict-- twelve hours more rebellious than when they planted her there-- and, in order to have her death at the furthest possible remove from their own door, they dump her in the workhouse. Compulsorily turned out of prison, but still not free, her sentence untermiated, there she waits either for death or unconditional release-- this woman whose offence, under the ordinary operation of the law, would be expiated by a fortnight's imprisonment ! And still--let it be noted-- still, even after this second bout of endurance and suffering, she has not acquired status with Lady Sybil Smith, whose fortnight was changed to four days after only one bout of hunger-strike.

Only "a common woman" ! Would that we had as many thousands like her as we have hundreds. What is she fighting against ? Merely against a fortnight's imprisonment ? The suggestion is absurd. She is fighting, on whatever ground and in whatever time the Government accord to her to bring to ridicule and contempt an Act which was only passed and put into operation to break down a spirit of heroic resistance to unrepresentative government, which is the finest thing on view in this country to-day.

And the Press takes this occasion to laugh ! Does it really think that that woman and her kind are not going to win ?—that she is not, by her determination to meet death— whether Mr. McKenna brings her to it in Holloway, or in the workhouse, or in the open street, where he first deposited her—that she is not going at some time or another to defeat the "Cat and Mouse" Act, and to force its suspension in regard to herself, lest by operating too far it should substitute capital punishment for the fortnight accorded by the magistrate ?

Do people realise why these fortnight sentences are creeping into favour with the authorities as a substitute for the regulation three months, which was coming to be the standard for slight offences committed by "militants" ? They are given so as to enable the "Cat and Mouse" Act to wriggle through—to enable Mr. McKenna to say that some of his prisoners, in spite of hunger and thirst strike, have completed their sentences. Reducing them presently to a week or five days, Mr. McKenna will triumph, and say that at last, under the efficient working of his Act, sentences are being completed.

ONLY ONE REMEDY.

Here, dodging, wriggling, shuffling, doing all that it can to save its face, is an Act which, so far as it is realised, offends the moral conscience of the community. But how its inhumanity to be realised, except through the continued resistance of the "militants" ?

"Constitutional" Suffragists may be against it; they may protest, petition, agitate; but it is not their constitutional agitation which is going to break down this iniquitous measure and make it of no effect. One thing, and one alone, will break it down—the militant courage of those who face its provisions and fight them. If the militants ceased fighting—if they "constitutionally" acquiesced, accepted its provisions, and bowed

down to them, this monstrous thing would go on, and its "success" would be acclaimed. In this tussle with the power of evil, "conctitutionalism" is nowhere. Militancy alone will bring it to the breaking point.

Let "constitutionals" who boast of themselves take that thought home. Here is something which they believe to be iniquitous—this "Cat and Mouse" Act—alive, and in our midst.

What is going to kill it? Not constitutional agitation—Militancy! The militancy of women like Mrs Mary Wyan and others, who will fight to the death.