

CHAPTER XX.

THE EX-CONVICT.

HEAVY are the burdens which men in prison must bear. They are deprived of liberty, separated from friends, no social intercourse, and constantly maintaining an unnatural position. The convict's place is lower than the most degraded menial; he must ask for permission even to get a drink of water. No serf of earth, no slave, however wretched, has a sadder lot. These unhappy mortals have yielded to temptation, have fallen, and are paying the penalty of violated law. Who can think of these degraded beings, without, to some extent, its calling forth the sympathy of the human heart, for we must not forget that they, too, are children of one universal Father. However deplorable the condition of these men while in prison, is it much better when they regain their freedom?

One morning about a month after my release from prison, as I was getting ready for breakfast, there came a knock at the door. Opening it I saw a young man — a tramp — who begged

for something to eat. I recognized him immediately as a former fellow-convict. He had forgotten me. It has always been a rule in my home, when any one came to my door hungry, he should have something to eat. At times, adhering to this practice has almost converted my home into a hotel for tramps. I invited this young man in, and requested him to take a seat with me at the table. He did not wait for a second invitation. He was very hungry. During the meal I inquired as to his past history. He gave me the same old tramp "racket." I had listened to the same story many times. After breakfast was over I asked him if he would have a cigar. With a smile, he said, if I would furnish the cigar, he would be pleased to indulge. I invited him into another room, closed the door and locked it. The turning of the key rather took him by surprise. I reached out my hand to him, and said: "Charley D——, don't you know me? Don't you remember the man who worked with you for a couple of weeks in the penitentiary coal mines, room No. 3? Have you forgotten the last day we worked together, when a large piece of slate fell upon your leg, and I had to

assist you in reaching the foot of the shaft as you were being conveyed to the hospital?"

"My God! Reynolds, is this you?" he exclaimed. "I would never have known you in your pleasant surroundings. Had I met you in the penitentiary coal mines, dressed in prison stripes, your face and hands covered with coal dust, I would have recognized you."

I gave him his much coveted cigar and invited him to a chair. I was anxious to learn his history since he left the prison. He had regained his liberty almost one year before I was released.

After he had reached the quiet contentment which is the inevitable result of a well appreciated breakfast and a good cigar, I said to him: "Charley, just drop your tramp story and tell me your true history since leaving the prison. I am anxious to know just what an ex-convict must meet."

This young fellow was twenty-five years of age. He served five years in the penitentiary for stealing horses. He had an inferior education, and might be considered an average ex-convict. His narrative will show what the great majority of these men are called upon to endure.

His story revealed the fact that when he left the penitentiary he had thirteen dollars in money and a suit of inferior clothes, such as is furnished the prisoner when discharged. Having been closely confined for five years, without even a newspaper to read, with but few visitors, he was entirely ignorant of what had occurred during his period of incarceration. His parents had been dead for several years, and he had no friends to whom he could apply for aid. The large iron doors swung upon their hinges, and he went forth a free but bewildered man. He had liberty, it is true, but liberty replete with such trials as awaited this young man is certainly little better than prison confinement. Passing under the big stone archway, and out beyond the prison enclosure, he paused for a few moments upon the little eminence on which the prison stands, and viewed the surrounding country, not knowing what to do or where to go. Finally he takes the principal road that leads across the country, and in a half hour's walk reaches a farm house. He asks for work. The farmer needs a hand, but asks the applicant for whom he worked last.

"I am just out of prison," was the reply.

"I thought so," said the farmer, "for I have seen so many of these men coming out of that place wearing clothes similar to those you have on. How long were you in prison, and what was your offense?"

"I served five years, and my crime was horse-stealing."

At this frank confession the farmer slightly coughed, and stated that a man called the day before, and he had partially promised the place to him, and he did not feel like employing any one until he heard from him. Had the farmer been as frank as the convict he would have said, "I don't want a penitentiary-bird about me, and particularly one that has been a horse-thief."

Finding no employment he moved on. For two weeks this friendless ex-convict walked about the country, going from one farm house to another, seeking employment. He practiced great economy, but at the expiration of this time his thirteen dollars were gone. He was now penniless, friendless and almost hopeless. For two weeks he had told the truth, and frankly confessed he was an ex-convict. He had a desire to do right. He felt that the first step down the hill toward the penitentiary was lying.

But two weeks squandered in trudging about the country seeking employment and finding none, convinced him that it was impossible to obtain work and tell the truth as to his past history, so he imagined nothing was left but to practice deception, steal or starve. Reader, what would you have done? He did what you probably would, surrounded by the same circumstances — he made up his mind to lie. On making further inquiries for work, he learns of a farmer living several miles away, who desired hired help. He immediately set out for that place. This farmer, like all the rest, put the question, "For whom did you last work?" Instead of imparting the information that he was an ex-convict, he invented a little story to the effect that he had worked for a farmer living some miles distant, with whom he had become quite well acquainted, having spent a Sunday at his home, and whose name he gave his inquisitor. He received employment. A bargain was made, and our now happy ex-convict went to work. Three weeks passed away. The employer and the employee were mutually satisfied. The prisoner worked hard. He felt that at last the clouds which had so long obscured his sky were about to

break away, and the sunshine of prosperity would soon be his.

But how mistaken we sometimes are when forecasting the future! One afternoon, at the end of three weeks, the old farmer rode up for whom the ex-convict had stated that he worked. The ex-criminal was recognized. The old farmer had some business with the employer of the prisoner, and in the evening before leaving for his home, thinking to do humanity a great favor, confidentially informed his neighbor that he had an ex-penitentiary convict on his farm at work, and that he was an old, hardened horse-thief, and beyond all hope of redemption. That evening, after supper, the prisoner got the "grand bounce." The small amount of money he received for his three weeks' services on the farm was expended in paying his expenses while continuing his search for work.

He at length arrives at Kansas City, with but a few cents, and completely discouraged about securing work. At this place he met a criminal, a former acquaintance. He, too, was without money. They talked over their misfortunes, and after duly considering the matter, came to the conclusion that out of

crime there was no chance to get another start. They planned a burglary for the following night. A residence some distance from the central portion of the city was entered. They obtained ten dollars and a silver watch, and concluded to continue their criminal efforts the next evening. During the day, however, the "pal" was arrested on another charge, and locked up in the city prison. He thought it about time to fly, and so took his departure.

He spent the rest of his time in Kansas, tramping about and stealing. When he had money he would live well; when his pocket-book was empty he would beg and steal. There was one crime he committed for which he could not be much blamed. The old farmer that went to so much trouble to convey the intelligence to his brother granger that the hero of our story was an ex-convict, was the sufferer. The ex-convict, to get "even," one dark night entered the barn, rode away a beautiful riding pony, sold him for fifty dollars in cash, and forgot to mention the fact to the farmer. In stealing, tramping and begging the time had been chiefly taken up from the day he had left the prison, to the morning he

came to my house for something to eat. He will doubtless continue this course until caught in some criminal act, which will result in another term in the penitentiary.

The great majority of the criminals in the penitentiary are young men. One dose of prison life is all they desire. Did they but have the least opportunity of living useful lives, and becoming respectable citizens when out of prison, they would improve it, instead of committing crime and being returned to hard labor without compensation. I am now pleading for hundreds of young men who are in prison for the first time, and have all the punishment along this line they desire, who would like to reform and become useful citizens. But how can they accomplish this? Unaided they will come out of the prison, drift about awhile, and then the current of sin and crime will bear them back again to a felon's cell. In an unguarded hour they succumbed to the tempter's power, and fell. The dark mantle of disgrace has enveloped them. And if there were some kind friend to lend a helping hand, how quickly would they tear it off and put on the robe of useful citizenship. Will not the great State of

Missouri adopt some plan to afford aid to these men who would like to be extricated from this dangerous quagmire into which they have fallen?

THE END.