

TEA TIME TALK

(BY WILMA J. MARCH)

To-night, beneath Southern starlit skies, let me tell you a thrilling tale, my Northern friends—a tale of convict life in the sunny State of Florida. First of all, how many of you would care to visit a convict camp, your escort a recently pardoned convict from that same camp? Thrilling? Immensely so. And so very interesting too. Afraid? No need to be whatsoever. Mothers, wives and sweethearts visit the inmates every week. Dangerous characters? Yes, some of them but they are closely guarded and have become accustomed to the routine. A great many of the young men in those camps are there because they temporarily forgot their home, mother, loved ones and God or maybe never knew Him as a Saviour. The stress of circumstances, the power of temptation, the inability of meeting the trials of to-morrow, the smooth tongue of the tempter, offering easy money in return for a "tip" or some aid in pulling off a "job", these and many more reasons have brought those boys face to face with the law. It was inevitable, sooner or later they are caught and the sooner the better both for humanity and for themselves. The lesson comes then before the person becomes accustomed to the downward pathway. At heart many of the inmates—the word convict sounds so dangerous—are decent, respectable men who made a mistake and are paying the price of their folly. Perhaps the background of boyhood had not been a happy one and perhaps mother had been taken from that home by the hand of death, leaving a little fellow to run the streets without the care and guidance which he needed. There are multitudes of reasons as different as human beings themselves. But the result is the same. There is a price tag on all things, though sometimes it is hidden from view. Sometimes the price is paid over and over again. One lesson has not been sufficient. But in many cases like those of the erring boy who never stops to realize that a charge account has to be paid some day, half the term of sentence would be enough to impress the truth upon his naked soul in seared letterings. It is well though to make the sentence an enduring one. Perhaps the whole future depends upon the prescription for the cure. The name "convict" comes from conviction or convicted. It sounds harsh and in many cases fits the man, but there is also the other side of it too. The chap who has made a mistake and is paying for it, who is truly sorry and knows he shall never fall into that trap again, that the word "convict" should follow him out through those gates is pitiful. And invariably those who label him so are never the ones to lend him a helping hand. No, they are the sinners with the unbridled tongue, basking in their self-righteousness, too holy to step from their throne and give a word of encouragement. Yet if that convict were their own son how very different it would be.

It is unpleasant that our countries have the need for these crime "hospitals". The laws are not made for the folks who keep them but for the folks who don't. The world has ever known the breaking of restrictions. The location and climate enters into the nature of the place of punishment. In the North it is impossible to have an all-year camp with the men performing the tasks of out-door labor day in and day out. The housing and labor problems are not so easily solved as in the South. Here in Florida twelve months of the year the convicts are able to work out of doors and the camp itself can be a portable one, being taken to whatever locality furnishes such type of work as they do for the State Legislature. They have the freedom of fresh air with the health-giving sunshine streaming down upon them. They have the blessings of sub-tropical fruit and vegetables in abundance. During the warm season they wear only trousers and shoes when laboring. We all know that they wear striped black and white clothes which are conspicuous in case they escape from the camp. Many rigid rules are necessary in these camps as they are also in every reform institution. Law and order must prevail. But the men are treated as well as pos-

sible. To conduct the camp along the Government regulations is not an easy task but the paramount object of the camp is not only to punish but to reform and make useful citizens where possible of those who come within its boundaries. It is a restoration period where the men who repents is given a chance to abide by the laws, to regain health and learn to do work with his hands which will serve him in later years. Weaklings grow stronger, just as many soldiers did through the routine of military life. They are not worked beyond their strength, but they do learn to know that strength and how to make the most of it. When release comes they are more capable of earning an honest living and facing the world with an entirely different attitude. Good balanced meals are provided to suit the season and the labor at hand. Comfortable beds are provided and the rules are such that the men get plenty of rest. Saturday afternoon and Sunday are recreation and rest days. The "trusties" or short term men are given many liberties, such as wandering about the grounds and relaxing in carefree manner. Naturally it would be unwise for them to attempt escape if they were so inclined because they would undoubtedly be caught and the sentence possibly lengthened and their freedom taken from them.

The life or long-term men are kept within the inner fencing of the camp. Some of them are forced to wear chains or hobbles about the ankles, so that should they attempt escape little time could be made. Hence the word "chain gang" originates from this method of security. Only the worst or most difficult types to handle are subjected to this treatment. These men do the work about the sleeping quarters and kitchen. For the hardened and resentful convict, who creates a disturbance and tries to undermine the smoothness of the routine, there is the sweat-box which is used only when necessary. These types have to be treated similar to the unruly child which would disrupt the entire neighborhood if allowed to do so. Wm. Pitt said "where law ends, tyranny begins."

The man who has been a menace to humanity for years is often more difficult to handle than he who, in a moment of passion brought on by dope, liquor, jealousy, etc., lost his head and committed a crime which resulted in a long-term or life-sentence. His act was unlikely premeditated, while that of the habitual law-breaker was planned and was the fruit of a hardened heart and a twisted mind. Those showing a tendency and desire to be penitent, useful, honest and sincere are treated accordingly. If their actions are consistent with their words, their intentions and their promises of living differently, then they are bound to be given consideration and the case weighed honestly by the authorities. That gives them the rainbow of hope on the horizon of good conduct after the stormy trials of the past on a sea of trouble.

At the time of conviction citizenship rights are denied but upon pardon or release, unless conditional, they are restored. He can then face the world a free man and the future depends upon himself. It is pitiful that some unkind critics deem it justifiable to remind the man and inform the world at large that he has slipped in the past. But if his heart is right and his determination to do the proper thing, strong within him, he need not care. Sometimes that very hazard makes him grit his teeth all the harder and show the cynics what he can do. "The greater the obstacle the more glory in overcoming it."—Maliere.

And after all, who of us would dare to question that many of the men in those camps are bravely laboring, with a broken heart sending the life-blood through their veins? They are unfortunate human beings who made a mistake and are paying the price. Instead of criticizing we should thank God that circumstances and His love have saved us from their fate. Disraeli said "It is so much easier to be critical than to be correct."

In Florida the State convicts work on the roads, building new ones and repairing the old. Man and mule strength are utilized to the benefit

of the State and the public. They work hard but not beyond their strength. Hours of profitable labor bring a well-earned rest. As one drives along the highways it is a common thing to see a dozen or more men in their striped uniforms working in groups by the wayside. Or perhaps it is noon and they are relaxing beneath the trees. There is always an armed guard with them equipped with long and close range guns. Most of these highway workers are trusties content to work out their term and honestly deserve their freedom.

When a man breaks the laws of the State he must face the consequences. He is hunted if necessary, arrested, tried and if found guilty is sent to Raiford. Later he is examined to determine his physical condition. If able he is sent to the hard-road camps where only the physically fit are put to work on the highways. This labor is strenuous but until tested out it is a wise type of work. If he is inclined to start trouble he is not so likely to do so if he is kept busy and the toil tires him naturally. Every restriction, law and rule is for a definite purpose. Sometimes out-of-State men come to Florida and violate the law. They are checked, put in a camp and treated similar to all the other convicts and they strongly resent having to do hard labor. They perhaps think they should be allowed to sit around and read or pass the time as they wish, behind those walls or gates.

But let me get back to the tale regarding my own visit to the convict camp in a near-by county. I have also visited the colored camp where a gentleman whom I know is the Captain. There a group of the negroes sang for me. The Captain told me that when he conquered the "ring-leader" or instigator of plans he had little trouble. He treats them just as fine as possible without losing perfect control over them. He is a Southerner and colored folks are accustomed to taking orders from white gentlemen. I doubt if a northerner could handle them successfully.

Two years ago I was told by a Canadian evangelist about the work he was doing in the prison camps and jails in this State. I was very interested and little thought that some day I should meet one of the men of whom he told me. I was glad to learn of his experience in meeting and talking with our minister friend. To know that he was bringing happiness, cheer and the Gospel to one who needs his guidance and love was splendid indeed. Then last Fall soon after our return South our friend came to town, had dinner with us and told how he had taken the young man's case to the authorities and he hoped to have him pardoned. The chap had accepted Christ as his personal Saviour and wished to be able to help others to avoid the temptations and pitfalls which he had encountered. I was told that the Captain, the guards and the men in camp all had a liking for the chap. In fact they called him the parson and he was trusted beyond the average trustie. Many people had an interest in him and hundreds were praying for him.

And what had he done you ask? I'll tell you the story back of the arrest and conviction.

Born of fine Southern parentage he had lost his mother when but a boy. A colored mammy had cared for him from birth in true Southern style. His parents had truly loved one another and he inherits that loyalty to his friends. During the peak of prosperity he knew what it was to make good money and, being accustomed to the best money could buy, he naturally missed these things when the depression came. Being a successful salesman he met every class of people and encouraged their friendship for the sake of business. This sometimes is unwise and proved to be in his case. With a happy carefree disposition he had many friends and his company was much sought after, for he was free with the money he made. This made for him fair-weather friends, who cared for the good times he furnished. We all know that type of friendship. One thing led to another and with the ups and downs drink came into the picture. When things went wrong a drink was supposed to drive away the blues. But, as always, it only made things worse. Then during the lowest point of depression with a mind inflamed by drink he and three other companions held up a party and took what money they could find. Two of the four were girls, one of them becoming fearful and at a later date confessed to the police.

Our young friend was arrested upon his arrival from another State. But that was the end of drink, fair-weather friends and the period of life which had brought him face to face with the law.

The customary proceedings were gone through. He was convicted, pleading guilty and taking his medicine like a man. It was while he was in jail that our evangelist met him and brought such encouragement into his life. It was then that I first heard of him and rejoiced at the good fortune or shall we call it God's will, that brought them together. "Some call it evolution but others call it God". Only for that meeting he would still be a member of a Florida convict camp. How very true it is that "God works in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." Then he was sent to the camp but the minister was ever his loyal friend, constantly keeping in touch with him, praying and visiting him when possible.

Then this past Fall during dinner the minister told me how he hoped to have the youth's pardon through in time so that he could accompany him to the Bahamas on an evange-

listic tour. Even the Captain of the camp wanted to see him pardoned and offered every aid that he could, taking his case before the Governor of the State. I was told the Captain had said he trusted the chap so much that he would feel confident if he were sent across the State on an errand he would return when expected.

Then I heard no more till one day early in December. The minister called saying that he expected a telegram from the Governor with the youth's pardon. He left full of hope, returning in a few days. It was nearly noon when he came to the door with a broad smile lighting his face. I knew that his efforts had not been in vain. He said the man was in his car and would I care to meet him? Of course I wanted to meet someone who had been worthy of all the help he had received. I fully expected to see a broken down man with a sad face. But to my surprise and delight I gazed upon a young man with the radiance of joy and happiness falling from his lips, shining in his eyes and his whole personality bespeaking of the gratefulness he entertained. He was almost hilarious with joy. And how very, very natural it was to feel that way! Freedom, life, opportunity and all that makes the world worthwhile were his once more. Youth with its dreams, its ambitions, its mountains to climb and valleys to view were again his birthright. How glorious, beautiful and wonderful it was to be alive and able to expand one's chest with the breath of freedom again! And the man who had helped win those things for him was just as happy in his own way. The whole atmosphere was charged with joy. I was happy too, seeing their joy. Who wouldn't be happy who had a grateful heart in their breast? The minister told how the chap had been dressed in his striped clothes when he went for him that morning. With tears in my eyes I said "By God's grace you took them off for the last time didn't you?" He replied "Yes ma'am, never again. The rest of my life is going to be lived helping others."

"And many a man with life out of tune,
And battered and torn with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to a thoughtless crowd.
Much like an old violin.
But the Master comes—and the foolish crowd
Never can quite understand the worth of a soul
And the change that is wrought,
By the touch of the Master's hand.

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