

# Northern Messenger

Wm Bronscombe 0006

VOLUME XL. No. 37

MONTREAL, SEPTEMBER 15, 1905.

40 Cts. Per An. Post-Paid

## The Regeneration of Skinny.

(Frank Barkley Copley, in 'Pearson's Magazine'.)

This is the true story of a man, who, after more than a quarter of a century of crime, had his whole nature changed in a remarkable way by a woman. He shall be known here simply by his old nickname of Skinny; but it may be said that he was the pal of 'Butch' Tobin, who a few years ago startled New York City by cutting off the head of a man he had robbed in a Tenderloin dive and attempting to burn the body in a furnace. For this crime Tobin was recently put to death in the electric chair in Sing Sing. The little woman who wrought such a marvellous change in Skinny also tried to befriend Tobin, but he threw away the chance his pal accepted. The little woman referred to is Mrs. Maud Ballington Booth.—Editor 'Pearson's'.



### I.

His body racked with pain, and all hope crushed out of him of any escape in this world from the life of a criminal, of which he was weary to God, Skinny, clothed in his shameful stripes, sat in his narrow cell in Sing Sing Prison, gloating over a little handful of morphine tablets as a miser might gloat over a heap of precious stones. And exactly like a miser's was the furtive glance he occasionally gave about him, to make sure no one was watching.

All bent over was Skinny as he sat upon his cot; if he had tried to hold himself erect, he would have experienced excruciating agony. When he lay down, he had to draw his knees almost up to his chin. Lumbago was the trouble, and that is how he came by the tablets. He refused to go to the prison hospital; there he would not see his cell-mate, Tony, or his old pal, Butch Tobin; and, besides, the time passed faster at his cobbler's bench, where he could work, bending over in the only attitude he now could assume. So about all the prison physician could do was to give him now and then a little morphine to relieve his sufferings.

'Be careful how you use the tablets,' the doctor had said one day, 'twenty will kill a man.'

Oh, they would! Hearing that, Skinny took no more. But he continued to beg for them, just the same—begged harder than ever, in fact. All he got he hid carefully away. His pile was steadily growing. Alone in his cell, he would take them out, and, counting them over one by one, would softly chuckle with a sort of ghoulish glee. Just a few more, only a few more, and then—well, the tortures of hell could be no worse than what he was suffering now.

### II.

In the course of his career, Skinny had been a pickpocket, thug, sneak-thief and burglar. He had also killed his man—a detective. Nearly twenty years of his life had been spent in prison. He was now thirty-five years old. He was born in a tenement house, down near the Battery in New York City. His father, an Englishman, deserted Skinny's Irish mother

before Skinny, the first child, was born, and he was brought up in the family of a neighbor. From the boys in the street he learned how to rob the apple-women in Battery Park.

At the tender age of seven, Skinny was sent to the Catholic Protectory in Westchester for tapping the till in a bakery. There he met a boy about a year older than himself who was in for picking pockets. His name was Tommy Tobin. Even at that early age he showed signs of a reckless cruelty that later on was to make him ready to shoot or stab at a moment's notice, and earn for him the nickname of 'Butch;' but there was a streak of generosity in his nature that attracted Skinny, and the two, forming a close friendship, planned a 'glorious' career of crime.

Escaping from the protectory, they proceeded to 'make good.' Before they were eighteen they had been repeatedly imprisoned, and were classed by the police among New York's most dangerous criminals. Skinny was barely twenty-one when he tripped up a detective who was chasing a pickpocket. The detective blackened his eyes and punched his nose out of joint, and three days later Skinny attacked him in the street with a knife. At first it was thought the detective would recover, and Skinny, pleading guilty to felonious assault, got off with a sentence to four years in Sing Sing. Soon after he 'went up' his victim died; but Skinny could not now be prosecuted for murder, and so he escaped the gallows.

After that the police hounded him more than ever. Once six detectives got him in a cell at Police Headquarters, and pounded him within an inch of his life; then he was sent back to Sing Sing on a trumped-up charge of grand larceny. During that term he spent two weeks in the 'cooler,' or dark cell, for cursing the keeper, and that is how he developed his lumbago. Back in his old haunts, he sought relief from the pain in his back, by guzzling the poisonous compound that passes for whiskey in the Bowery 'morgues.' The effect of this 'remedy' can be imagined. Down, down into the lowest depths he sank, diseased in body, mind and soul.

A crook in this condition always takes reckless chances, and the police found no difficulty in once more railroading Skinny to Sing Sing.

This term, which was to prove his last, began in December, 1894. Tobin came up a little later. Skinny then was as tough a ruffian as ever put on the stripes. If you could have looked into his bear and shifty eyes, and beheld his hardened and besotted features, you would have said: 'Here is a man lost for good and all to everything honest, pure and true.'

Summer came; another winter passed. Whatever may be said about Sing Sing to-day, its conditions at that time certainly were not conducive to the development of athletes, neither was it a place where men were likely to be filled with the joy of living. Skinny's lumbago steadily grew worse; his sullen stoicism began to yield; and it was in the spring of 1896, when the birds outside the gray walls of the prison were caroling their love songs, and all nature was rejoicing in the glories of the new creation, that he, with two years more to serve, and no prospect beyond that but more hounding by the police, finally gave way to the despair that was gripping his soul, and began to hoard his morphine tablets.

### III.

'One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight'—slowly Skinny counted his little flat pills—'ten, twelve, fourteen—sixteen.' Only four more and he would have ready to hand an easy escape from his sufferings.

On that very day a new era dawned for Sing Sing. Mrs. Maud Ballington Booth came there to begin the work of the Volunteer Prison League. She had a theory that if convicts were treated, not as wild animals, but as human beings, they would respond; that what was needed in the case of the great majority of confirmed criminals was a little sympathy and love. Her ideas amused the prison officials; but, believing she had only to test her theory to be convinced of its impracticability, they agreed that the seven hundred prisoners should be assembled in the chapel on Sunday, May 24, 1896, to hear her talk.

Skinny was unable to attend the service; but Tony, his cell-mate, did, and so did Tobin. The scene was a strange one. In the body of the chapel sat the seven hundred men in stripes, their faces shaven, their hair closely cropped, most of them debased, vicious, vile; while about them hovered their armed and vigilant keepers. On the platform stood all alone the winsome little woman with the sweet voice and the gracious presence.

She did not preach a sermon, neither did she from the heights of conscious superiority and smug sanctimony hurl down at the heads of her hearers cant phrases that well-meaning but misguided missionaries had used 'ad nauseam'; as a woman speaking unto men, she simply tried to make them take the common-sense view of the sufferings engendered by sin, and the happiness that comes from right living, and she promised that if any man present wished to start anew when he got out of prison, and would come to her, she would see he got a chance. Then she asked all that were desirous of turning over a new leaf to stand up.

It was a critical moment. For a convict to stand up meant that he should show what his old associates would regard as a 'yellow streak.'