Hard Labor and Other Poems. By JOHN CARTER. 12mo, pp. 79. New York: Doubleday, Page & Co. Price, cloth, $1.

A CONVICT'S verses, twenty-six poems in all, shades of the prison darkening most of them, the literary output of an anonymous criminal; verses of such quality that, while the author was in prison, they appeared in such magazines and periodicals as the Century, Lippincott's, the Cosmopolitan, and Harper's Weekly. Sixteen of these poems, grouped beneath the heading "Under the Lash," seem to have been written in prison. Ten of them are under the heading, "In the Greater Prison," which is what the released convict, with the prison brand on him, is likely to find the outside world to be. These are the first prison poems that have met our eye since Oscar Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Gaol." We are not told who this criminal is, nor what was his specialty in wickedness, but he seems a cleaner person than Wilde. Each case is somewhat pathological, as both belong among the abnormals. Normal man is not a criminal. Reading the thin little book before us, we wonder and grieve that a man with such mental capacity and education, such sensitiveness of nature, such acquaintance with fine ideals, such literary taste and accomplishments, such depth and native richness of soul, should have gone wrong, being led captive by

the Devil at his will. He is a musician, a linguist, a poet. He has had high opportunity and flung it away. Somebody loved him, educated him, polished him, told him about God, taught him to pray, yet he despised it all and went to the dogs in spite of them. A man, almost foreordained to heaven by his privileges, went to hell. What made him do so foolishly and wickedly? Now, as always, the most likely guess is "Drink." That trips more men and tumbles them out of their self-control and self-respect into the mire than all other causes put together. An Irish laborer, who knew by experience the truth of what he was saying, said to the writer of this notice: "Ivery saloon is a recruitin' station for hell. The Divil has his agint behoind the bar. And if he can get a man to take wan glass, he telegraphs to hell, 'I've got another victim.'" This "John Carter," whose real name is hid, had kept noble company, probably was born to it. In prison he looks around on his fellow criminals and writes a "Ballade of Misery and Iron," in which he cries, "Have mercy on these my comrades, Lord!" Who were his comrades there? He tells us: "Cut-throats and thieves, a murderous crew, the 'Devil's Own Brigade,' with haggard faces and trembling knees, eyes that shine with a weakling's hate, lips that mutter their blasphemies, murderous hearts that darkly wait." There they are in the grim prison, bearing upon them different brands of shame, enemies of society, a menace to mankind, "ruled by a wave of the hand, watched and bolted and barred." At the close of the hard toilsome day, in the work shops, "the line forms sullenly: there is no sound, save the jailer's sharp voice that rasps its 'Forward, march'! The shuffling feet move onward through the arch; locks clatter in corridor and cell; and in weariness profound most sink unconscious to a dreamless sleep, while some few, through the night-long vigils, weep on their iron cots; some weep silently and others curse and hate." What is "John Carter's" state of mind while in prison? Hear him groan: "How weary are the hours! The long, long years how slow!" Hear him confess that his guilt is greater than that of most others, because *he knew so well the better from the worse;* and therefore his soul suffers penalty a thousand fold: and when a voice says: "You filled your cup; why should you not then drink it?" he replies: "The words are just." "They did no evil in imprisoning me." As for penitence, this is what he says: "Four gaunt years have I moldered in this place. Am I not then repentant of my sin? I know not, for my heart is dead within." "John Carter" knows God. Great music seems to him something divine, and he cries, "Hark! in the mystery of the pure strain God is awake." Chafing against being shut up in prison, he says: "Maybe it's God's command, but some of us call it hard." He doubts if those who draw away from him their garments' hem are, after all, so spotless innocent as they pretend to be, and asks: "What punishment shall an Almighty God reserve for them?" He is bitter toward "the cant of folk 'forever with the Lord,' whose solemn-folded hands," he thinks, "are steeped in slime." He tells of one who charges his fate on God and flings scarred hands to the sky, cursing the God who made him capable of being something worse than the meanest brute; and of another whose first-born son

has died and who calls God a robber, crying out, "How can I say to an Almighty Thief, 'Thy will be done'?" Bitterness and hatred rankle in the rebellious soul. In one poem, "John Carter" sees for himself only a shattered life, hard labor, brooding, and at the last a few square feet of earth. How desperate and bitter he is, judge from his words: "What care I for your jargon of New Birth? Why should I strive again, only to fail? To have my sin atoned, my shame forgot, to rise triumphant to a Love-God's breast, I crave not. Ruthless I lived; unpitied let me rot." One of a sinful man's bitterest thoughts, if he has any shred of manhood left, is of the misery he has brought upon those to whom he owed consideration, gratitude, and love, whose love for him he has crucified upon a cross of shame. No wonder he calls himself "infamous wretch." In one of his poems this criminal, in sudden agony, forces his lips to unaccustomed prayer, and cries: "Spite of my unbelief, if thou art God, and if thou wilt guard her who hath not sinned against thee, who hath not mocked thee in her deepest grief, then my mouth shall revile no more, O Lord." He will cease blaspheming on condition—namely, if God will do what he bids him do; otherwise the Almighty whom he has defied, must stand and take his creature's insolence and insults! She, the woman whom the convict pleads for, needs most of all that God should guard her from the cruelty of such as he is who, having broken her heart, attempts to drive this bargain with God, who needs no request or hint from him to watch over and comfort a worthy woman covered with humiliation and stabbed with anguish by a "ruthless" (that is his own word) and wicked man. He writes of her "faithful love dishonored long ago," and "dark remorse that fills the age-long nights" for him. This remorse seems the only thing left that has power to wring his heart. One convict remembers "blue eyes and hair of gold and lips so red," and then prays: "Have not pity on me, O Lord; have pity upon her!" Why did not *he himself* have pity upon "her" when he was tempted to bring shame and anguish on her by his wickedness? Then she would not have become an object of pity to men and angels, and the compassionate Father of men. But "O Lord, come and undo what I have done" is the prayer that often goes up from our poor sinning souls; and if it is sincere and not maudlin, not merely emotional, but purposing reform, then He who loved us and gave himself for us hears our cry and helps us to make atonement by a better life. "John Carter" sings of the occasional reawakening, within his soul, of "dim creeds long since outcast." What if he should take to his heart those creeds which he long ago cast out? What if he should let them make their nest and sing in his soul? Might not his feet be lifted out of the miry pit of horrible clay and put upon a rock, and a new song be put in his mouth? One of the early verses says: "I who have sinned and gone astray, voicelessly to a far God pray." If he had prayed in simplicity and godly sincerity, the "far God" would have drawn nigh to him. In the book of verses we are noticing the convict, after "six barren years of shame," is released, but presently finds the outside world to be for him only "the Greater Prison." Deciding that he would rather be in

the smaller prison, he writes: "I will go back to those for whom I cried, outcasts and thieves, and slayers of their kind. . . . I pray you, comrades, open wide your gate; nay, pity me not, I was with you of late." The poem says that Oscar Wilde, who sang of Reading Gaol, knew all that he could learn of what lies behind the eyes of prisoners, whom this poet calls "my friends." But while Wilde looked out longingly through prison gates to the outer world, this imitator of Wilde in some other things differs in that one thing, for he says to us:

"To me that firm-bolted grate,
Through which Wilde could but gaze disconsolate,
Seems but a lattice where Delight keeps tryst,
And they, whose sins ye think beyond all cure,
To me are holy, in that they endure."

To him cut-throats and thieves, a murderous crew, the "Devil's Own Brigade" (that is what he calls them), are holy! And as for Heber's great hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty," "John Carter," if he means his verses, would cry, "Away with it!" Where does such a man belong? Closing this notice of a prisoner's book, we opened a new book entitled The Theology of a Preacher, by L. H. Hough, and on page 41 read this sentence: "The blighting tragedy of life is when a man turns from the good he knows to be good, to the evil he knows to be evil."