

MY APPRENTICESHIP TO CRIME

An
To the Memory of my
Autobiography

Grace Hallie Fredson.

-by-

ARTHUR HARDING

Brick Lane; he was walking behind the cart attempting to pull one of the bales off the cart. He seemed to have some trouble with the ropes which secured the sacks. I was interested to see what would happen if he succeeded in pulling the sack from the cart. CHAPTER 4. Arrested and Charges with Larceny. What would happen.

Finally the man succeeded in pulling the sack from the cart. If you allow people to be badly taught, to be taught evil, their morals corrupted from childhood, then when they are men punish them for the very crimes to which they have been trained in childhood, what is this but just to make to thieves and then to punish them? Sir Thomas More.

The man who had pulled the sack of rags from the cart. In the early days of February, 1902, I was passing through Hare Street, Brick Lane, which is opposite Clarks coffee shop. The time was about eight-thirty p.m., the street was dark, being badly lit by gas lamps. A large horse-drawn cart was slowly passing along in the roadway, loaded with large bales of rags which were hanging outside the bales. The bales of rags were tied to the cart by ropes which prevented the bales from falling off. The contents of the bales could be seen and by the passer-by to be rags. Nobody could mistake the large bales for anything else but what they were - rags.

I noticed one of the gang of known thieves who frequented

Brick Lane; he was walking behind the cart attempting to pull one of the bales off the cart. He seemed to have some trouble with the ropes which secured the sacks. I was interested to see what would happen if he succeeded in pulling the sack from the cart; if the carman caught him in the act there would be a fight, so I followed to see what would happen. Finally the man succeeded in pulling the sack from the cart, which fell into the road where it lay for a few minutes. In the meantime the cart continued on its way, without knowing the loss of the bale of rags. I had stopped on the pavement when I saw the sack fall off the cart, and stood looking to see what would happen. The man who had pulled the sack of rags from the cart must have recognised me as one of the young boys who belonged to Brick Lane, so he asked me to give him a lift up with the bale, which I willingly did. Suddenly a policeman appeared, seized the man by the arm, and both the man and the policeman began struggling. The sight of the policeman was enough for me. I ran as fast as I could away from the scene. The man was taken to Commercial Street police station and charged with stealing a bale of rags, value eighteen shillings. The name of the man was Charles Walker; he lived in Quaker Street, Spitalfields, aged twenty-six. On the following day

he appeared at Worship Street police court and was remanded for a week in custody.

This young man, Charles Walker, lived with his mother and young sister in a room in a tenement house in one of the worst areas of Spitalfields. Through an accident he had lost an eye. He was in the last stages of T.B. which in 1902 was very prevalent in the poorer parts of London. His race would soon be run; prison hospital treatment prolonged his life for a few months.

For myself, I was not very much disturbed about the incident because, in the first place, nothing had been stolen; also I did not think I had done anything wrong. The man, Walker, had pulled the rags from the cart. I was not with him, and would not have received any part of the value, so I was not troubled. Why, I did not know the name of the man at the time. He must have been some ten years older than me, so I considered myself that I had nothing to fear.

But unfortunately for me, the policeman must have known me, and I was arrested the next day while on my way home from work. I was taken to the police station and charged with simple larceny to the value of eighteen shillings (18/-).

I gave my name: Arthur Harding, No. 1 Queen's Buildings, Gossett Street, Brick Lane, aged fifteen years. I was put in a cell for the night: time, seven-thirty a.m. No food was

given to me and as I had no money I could not buy any. No policeman was sent to my home to inform my parents that I was detained in Commercial Street Station. It is a police regulation that the parents or relatives of a person detained in custody must be informed immediately. It must be remembered that on the two occasions when I enlisted in the Army, I had been home on leave wearing Army uniform, so I had been seen by many policemen who knew me. When I was discharged from the Army and appeared in civilian clothes, I was arrested at once as a deserter, so many policemen in the district knew of me and my experience in the Army. The next morning at 8 a.m. I was given a mug of tea and two slices of bread and butter for breakfast. Some time after I was taken by the Black Maria to Worship Street police court, which was situated in Worship Street, Shoreditch. In the Black Maria were the usual collection of drunks of both sexes, prostitutes and vagrants of all types. Worship Street Court was one of the oldest in London, dating back to Sir Robert Peel's new police system. In 1902 it was nearing its end. It had been used as a police court for a long period, its accommodation being very outdated. The court was very small and its acoustic facilities were very bad, so it was not unusual to hear that the defendant

had not heard the evidence against him. The court had a large detention room with a glass partition, round the detention room was a large wooden form for the prisoners to sit on to await their turn to appear in court. Outside the detention room a number of uniformed police and C.I.D. would look through the glass partition scrutinising all the waiting defendants.

I was put in the detention room to be closely inspected by all the police officers engaged that morning, something like the modern sporting practice of showing the hare to the dogs before the chase begins.

When the time approached to appear in court, the policeman, P.C. Stevens, who was in charge of the case, took me from the detention room into the corridor leading to the court. P.C. Stevens did not speak to me, nor did he ask any questions.

When my name was called we entered the court and the jailor led me to the large dock where I stood to attention. I looked like a tramp, my clothes were very shabby and patched in places, and I felt ill through being kept in a cell all night, unable to sleep.

The clerk of the court read out the charge and asked me to plead Guilty or Not Guilty. I pleaded Not Guilty. P.C. Stevens then had a conversation with the magistrate, which was quite unintelligible to me. The magistrate then remanded me to appear the next week with the man Charles Walker. No bail.

Before the magistrate on his desk was the charge sheet which recorded my name, my age, my address and my occupation. So the magistrate knew I was 15 years old and, in law, was a young person, that is, a young person entitled to the protection that was given to young offenders.

The magistrate disregarded these rules for the treatment of young offenders and remanded me to Holloway Prison so that I should associate with old and hardened criminals. In law I had a legal right to be sent to a remand home for young persons.

When I left the court, the jailer took me to a large cell in which there were a number of men, drunks, vagrants and thieves who were remanded or waiting to be taken to prison. There were no juveniles among the inmates. I was the youngest prisoner present; everyone seemed to be smoking and the cell smelt of stale beer and tobacco.

Here I should like to give a description of P.C. Stevens. This police constable was a typical London police constable of the period. Aged twenty-five. Strong, active, brave and unsympathetic to all sentiment or pity for those unfortunate enough to come up against him ~~on~~ his line of duty. I knew him for some twenty odd years after and I can say, honestly, I never knew him do a kindly action. This P.C. never spoke to me from the time of my arrest until I was sentenced at the North London Sessions.

The reason why he did not ask me any questions is simple. He did not want to know anything about my parents. A crippled mother, a partially blind father, would perhaps make the court more inclined to leniency towards me. This p.c. knew the truth about me. He lived only a few minutes from my home.

When I left the court, not understanding a word that had been spoken by the police, I realised that the administration of the law as it affected the young and the poor left a good deal to be desired. I was detained in the cell at Worship Street police court until the prison van arrived. Because I had no money I was

unable to buy any food, so I had no food from 8 a.m. that day until I reached Holloway Prison, N. it had accommodation for some 350 prisoners of both sexes.

Holloway Prison is sited in North London, it has a castellated aspect, looking very forbidding. Today, 1969, it is a prison for women and young girls awaiting trial at the assize courts and also for Borstal.

In 1902, Holloway Prison was a remand prison for men awaiting trial at assize courts, the Old Bailey, and for all prisoners on remand.

The Black Maria arrived at Holloway Prison about 4 p.m. After alighting from the police van, the prisoners were marched to reception room, where each prisoner was examined by the