MY APPRENTICESHIP TO CRIME

An

Autobiography

-by-

ARTHUR HARDING

PART TWO.

CHAPTER 20.

The End of my Apprenticeship.

On the 21st April, 1924, I married the girl next door who lived in No. 4 Gibraltar Gardens. We were married at 8 a.m. at St. Paul's, Gossett Street, Brick Lane, E.

This young girl of twenty-two years had known me for many years; when she was a young girl of thirteen years in 1915, she was always in my mother's house, doing her shopping and other odd jobs. I had paid little attention to her, she was but a child, but through the years I was away she became like a part of the family, and when I came home in 1920 she and her family were still living next door. What was to be known about me and my character she knew.

When thoughts of marriage and a family began to make sense, and I realised that a wife could be my salvation, my family began to arrange matters for me.

Then I suddenly became aware of the young girl who had waited for me to come home again, determined to make an honest

man of me.

So, although there was a difference of some fifteen years in our ages, we found happiness together; so after a short engagement we married and the best years of my life began. The strange fact of her birth corresponded with the date of my arrest in 1902.

The 21st April, 1924, was an Easter Monday. The bells of St. Leonards, Shoreditch, were ringing for the Risen Christ, and I and my bride were off to a good start, in a new and great adventure that would make amends for the wasted years of my youth.

Immediately after the service, family and guests travelled to Brighton, so we avoided would-be gate-crashers and so all possible causes of noisy trouble-makers.

With friends and relations we numbered some fifty persons. Transport had been provided in a motor coach and cars for the happy couple and their respective parents. It was a glorious day and we were all in good spirits when we reached Brighton, to sit down at the reception lunch. The food and drink were very good and everybody was merry and bright. We spent the afternoon on the beach. At 5 p.m. we had high tea at the hotel, which everyone enjoyed; plenty to eat and drink.

Looking back to those times, we wonder how they were able to supply a party of fifty persons with a splendid lunch

and high tea, with drink thrown in, at twelv-eand-sixpence per head. It is true the hotel where we had the reception catered for the many coach parties that my sister took down to Brighton during the summer.

At 7 p.m. we left for home; on the journey back to London we stopped at several pubs for refreshments and dancing. We reached home at 2 a.m. next morning. Even today, forty odd years after that memorable day, those of us who are still in the land of the living remember that glorious and happy day. For me it was the beginning of a new life.

We set up home at No. 3 Gibraltar Gardens. I soon found employment as a carpenter. I well remember the first week's wages, some three pounds. The future looked bright and full of hope. Soon I induced the Stepney authority for electricity to supply the houses with electric lighting, so we were able to be more modern.

I bought loads of good loam and made a fine garden, in fact as well as in name. The only blot was the Gibraltar Buildings at the bottom, where we had previously lived. I have described these buildings in an earlier chapter - no gas, no electricity, only paraffin lamps; these filthy hovels were some 100 years old at the turn of the century. They were to last until Hitler's demolition workers cleared them from the good earth.

The Government had spent something like a million a day on running the war, but could not spend a thousand a day on clearing the slums. We had thousands of men idle, yet there was so much to do, factories to build and equip with up-to-date machinery, but these poliricians were so busy in laying the foundations for the next war that they had no vision of the present needs of the country.

I saw the future citizens of Bethnal Green living in rat-infested hovels, many with no boots or shoes to wear, hungry and flea-bitten, because the dole was not enough to keep the kids tidy and clean, or to provide father with beer money.

In my workshop I continued making work to sell, so I was able to keep my wife at home without the necessity of her having to slave in a factory, which she had to do since leaving school at the age of fourteen. Her life had been similar to my own; born in the slums of Bethnal Green, her father a railway worker with a large family of ten children; one room for the whole family to sleep in, one room for weekend parties, and a small kitchen to cook in; small wages, high rents, the pub was the only medium of conversation, entertainment and relaxation from the drudgery and slavery of everyday existence.

The father, a slave to the green-eyed monster of jealousy. He loved and at the same time hated the woman who had been a faithful and true wife and mother to his children. The man

was absolutely insane with jealousy or his evil thoughts, and made everybody unhappy.

But amidst the poverty of their lives, the children were taught right from wrong and were a credit to their parents. All the ten children married and remained married to their same partners all through their lives; not for them the new teaching of permissiveness, wife swopping, homosexuality, legalised prostitution, abortion. These vices only belong to the so-called educated professional classes, the so idolised intellectuals who dominate politics and have created the permissive society and filled the prisons with the most satistic murderers this country has ever known. If they are proud of their progressive society, then I am sorry for them.

1925. This year our first child was born, a boy, in the Marie Celesta ward of the London Hospital, Whitechapel Road, E.K. The days of the incompetent amateur midwife who had performed these highly skilled duties in the past, sometimes with disastrous results for their victims, were finished. No more would Mrs. Sarah Gamp and her like be called from the gin palace to bring some infant into a world of want and extreme poverty. Thank God, all this business was in the care of such institutions as the London Hospital, whose highly trained nurses were always ready to take charge.

Having become the father of a son, it became highly

imperative that I should take up some business which would allow me to save money for a deposit on a house outside London. If we were to have a large family it was necessary to move away from Bethnal Green.

November 27th, 1925. I was thirty-nine years old and the time were getting tougher and it became harder to earn a living. In 1926, the year of the General Strike, I started making boards and easels for the warehouses and shops. This business was a success from the start. The shops in Houndsditch gave me orders for many gross, and I was able to make and sell them cheaper than others who copied the pattern. Towards the autumn, the demand increased, so that we were hard pushed to supply the shops. What I sold for 30/- a dozen, today are sold for 37/6d. each, with a better finish.

I worked for long hours and was able to save quite a large sum towards our dream home far from the slums, where the children would have a fair chance of becoming something better than was possible in Bethnal Green. I found that when a man has the incentive to work for, he will find the energy to work long hours, to suffer great privation if it is for something, or someone, they love.

In May, 2,500,000 men came out on strike in support of the miners, who had been locked out. The mine owners maintained they could not pay the same rates of pay as before the economic

depression. The strike lasted eight days. The law officers of the Crown declared the strike illegal, so the T.U.C. called the strike off. The miners continued to strike. Mr. Stanley Baldwin was Prime Minister, Government Conservative.

The General Strike did the country tremendous damage to trade and industry. Unemployment increased daily. The dole affected the economy of the country to such an extent that there was no money in the kitty for social reforms.

The General Strike was marked by some very ugly scenes when strikers clashed with non-strikers, but at no time did the strike look like becoming revolutionary.

In 1926, during those days when things went wrong with the Socialist movement for equality for all, I witnessed some very ugly scenes, police using their batons freely. Working men fighting against their fellows with a bitterness and brutality hard to believe. Having witnessed these things, I can understand civil wars.

I remember watching an infantry brigade marching through Bethnal Green Road from their camps in Victoria Park, North Country men. An elderly woman tried to force her way through their ranks; she was subjected to very rough treatment, so rough in fact that the crowds hooted and booed them. I myself was ashamed for them.

Our boasted civilisation and Christianity are just skin

deep. When the brakes are taken away and we can kill and maim legally, then we show the world what good Christians we are. One look at the graveyards of Belsen and Dachau, and humanity stands condemned. These crimes were not committed by ignorant savages, but by educated men, doctors and scientists. The so-called intellectuals, let the mind dwell on the fate of Dresden; it is said there were a million refugees in the city which was not defended by anti-aircraft guns or planes. Many thousands of non-combatants were massacred in a few hours. The air crews called this a piece of cake, no opposition. We always associated the word "Dresden" with beautiful china, but to the people who suffered, Dresden ranks as one of the most terrible massacres of the war.

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My old dad used to say, "When one door shuts another one opens," so I decided to enter the second-hand clothes business. In 1929, when the economic depression hit the country, the Labour Government under Ramsay MacDonald could not cope with the situation and had to call upon the leaders of the other two political parties to help him to form a National Government in 1931.

The times were hard and money was scarce, so I decided to

branch out into another line of business. Bethnal Green was noted for the large numbers of second-hand clothes dealers. They were called "hawkers" because they hawked plants, ferns and china around the estates on the outskirts of London. They exchanged their plants, crockery, cups and saucers for old clothes, which they sold in the exchange in Cutler Street, Houndsditch. (Exchange Buildings, scene of the Houndsditch shooting, 1910.)

These old hawkers were called the "guinea getters" because they were able to earn more than the average working man whose wages at the turn of the century was less than a pound. I can remember suits of men's clothes at eighteen shillings; it is noteworthy that the price of a working man's suit was the price of a week's work. Today, the average wage is supposed to be near twenty pounds - that is also the price of a new suit for the average man.

I realised the possibilities of the second-hand clothes trade where references were not required, so I began to look about for someone who would teach me the trade.

With this intention I asked one of my new friends, a man named Bill Berry, whose family had been hawkers for many years, if he would take me with him. He willingly agreed, and to his everlasting credit he kept his word. To this day I can still remember the first district he took me to; it

was Acton, West London. The day was Saturday about 10 a.m. Berry told me to knock on one side of the road and he went across to the other side.

I was not too sure of myself and passed several houses before I plucked up the courage to knock at the door. Soon the shyness wore off and I began to speak quite freely to the people when they opened the door. What surprised me most was the large number of people who were very nice when they answered the knock on the door.

My first day earned me a pound, not more than three hours' work. It must be remembered that in 1929 a pound was equal to three or four pounds today.

Believe me, that day's work made me so happy that my wife and I went out to celebrate. My wife was very proud to know that she was helping in my rehabilitation to a better way of life. My family had increased to three, two boys and one girl, so it had become vitally necessary to work harder.
