MY APPRENTICESHIP TO CRIME

An

Autobiography

-by-

ARTHUR HARDING

CHAPTER 21.

I Become a Hawker.

My initiation into the profession of hawking was just beginning, but I was determined to become a hawker and a good hawker at that. After some months of training, I began to enjoy the life.

One day we went to Feltham in Middlesex; we called at the married quarters of the officers belonging to the Borstal Institution. We were able to buy a good load of uniform clothes belonging to the officers. Some time after, while we were carrying two large bags of clothes, we were stopped by a car-load of C.I.D. men.

One big man, obviously in charge, said to me, "What's in the bags?" I told him, "Old clothes." I had seen this man before and recognised him as the famous Det.Inspector selby of the original Flying Squad.

One of the C.I.D. men took a casual look in one of the bags and said, "O.K." Selby then said to me, "All right, carry on, but I don't want any nonsense round here, understand? I know

who you are," and he mentioned my name. I said to him, "And you are Mr. Selby." He replied, "Well, now we understand each other, let's all carry on," and they all got into their car and drove away, so we carried on to the railway station. That was my first and last encounter with the famous Det. Inspector Selby. That the police had been warned of what I was doing for a living and told to leave me alone.

After some months tuition, I decided to work on my own. I carried a large bag which I had made myself. I had cards printed with name and address as a wardrobe dealer.

1931. During this year my family had increased to four children, a daughter having been born, making two sons and two daughters.

I was now working the better class residential suburbs of Surrey, Kent and Hertfordshire, also Middlesex, such as Kenton and Harrow. The work was hard; by this I mean the districts were very hilly, like Purley - large drives led to the front door, but the work suited me. I made it a rule not to work after 2 p.m. because the lady of the house usually likes to rest in the afternoon, or go to town. Another factor is the police regard hawkers with suspicion if they see them knocking after 2 p.m.

One afternoon, up at Coulston on the Brighton Road, near Purley, I was looking at some advertisements in a newsagents,

when I noticed a man also busily engaged writing in his notebook some addresses from the adverts. I looked him over and thought he might be an afternoon prowler so I paid him more attention.

You see, if an afternoon prowler has a number of addresses in his notebook he can call upon the lady of the advertisement without arousing any suspicions; if she is out and no one at home he has every opportunity of getting in and having a look for money or jewellery. If stopped and asked his business, he has the name and address of a person in the district who he is calling upon. So knowing this, I paid him a more careful scrutiny. Then I was surprised to see he was a police officer. You see, he was writing in a Metropolitan Police notebook.

I said to him, "How you going, chum?" and he said to me, "Any luck?" He asked me if I knew him. I said, "No, never seen you before," and he replied, "I have seen you many times before, on the manor."

I told him how I was able to recognise him and he was surprised, he had never given it a thought. This was my first meeting with Det. Constable Ted Collier of Kenley Police.

... ...

He was a very fine gentleman, a very brave man and a good

policeman; he was also an expert at catching burglars or housebreakers.

Some years before, he had encountered a suspect near Wallington, Surrey, late at night. When about to arrest the suspect, the man produced a gun and threatened to shoot. Collier told the man to be sensible and throw the gun away. Collier walked towards the man who fired point blank at him, the bullet hitting him in the thigh. The suspect was arrested and sentenced to a long term of penal servitude.

No promotion had come his way, he was still only a Detective Constable doing his duty, always by himself, riding a bicycle along the roads of Kenley, Purley and Wallington, looking for burglars and housebreakers. He told me of an old wardrobe dealer from Bethnal Green who frequently worked these isolated districts. This is his story of Johnnie, who was an old-timer.

He was a native of Stepney, he was also a good housebreaker. When on his rounds, he would put his trade cards in the houses round the outskirts of the estate. He would always have a woman with him to carry anything he had stolen. He would begin calling back after about an hour; when he found an empty house he would force an entry round the back, ransack the house for jewellery and money, or maybe a good fur coat. He would give the stolen property to his woman companion and she would

go back to London by train, while Johnnie would continue his rounds.

The police found it very difficult to pin anything on him. I remember a detective of the Surrey police from Ashstead, telling me that they went to his address at Hackney in the night, after he had done a job at Ashstead, but they found Johnnie in bed with his "jimmy" hidden under the mattress but no stolen property.

I remember he told me that once he watched a lady leave her house to go shopping. Johnnie went and drummed the house; no one in or answered, so he got in by the kitchen door which the lady had forgotten to lock. A few minutes after, the lady returned. Johnnie was chased over the gardens and finished up in the "nick" for 22 months.

Old Johnnie had paid his debt to society by serving a sentence of 10 years when he was young. Old Johnnie had long ceased to be a thorn in the side of the suburban police. When nearly eighty he submitted to a series of operations for cancer of the throat and jaw. He was granted a pension by one of our large teaching hospitals, who could not understand why he was still alive and able to walk about. He finally gave up the struggle and retired from life.

He was a hardened old villain, brave as a lion, tough as an old prize fighter, and as tender as a lamb to little children.

He faced everything that came his way and lived to be an octogenarian.

By regular calling at houses, by fair dealing, I became known to the residents of these exclusive residential districts, and by courtesy and civility I was able to become the regular wardrobe dealer to many persons who had never before sold anything at the door.

It was to be expected the police in the districts where I was calling soon began to take an interest in me.

There were many housebreakings in the area where I was calling and I would be stopped by the police; the bag would be examined to see if there was any stolen property. I always gave the police my business card with my name and address. Scotland Yard must have given me the all clear signal, because the searching of my bag ceased after a few months.

This was the testing time in my life. I was already the father of four children. I had broken off all contact with the criminal fraternity. I was now working six days a week to collect the clothes and Sunday to sell them to the dealers who came to the stall.

The old clothes market was in the northern part of Brick Lane; this market was only held on Sunday morning up to 1 p.m. when all the stalls had to close and clear away. These stalls were all licensed by the local authority at a small fee of two

shillings weekly.

It was very difficult to obtain a licence because of the limited number of stalls, so I would take a chance to sell without a licence, which meant interference by the police who would continually move me on. The M.P. for Bethnal Green was Mr. Percy Harris, who was afterwards knighted and became Sir Percy Harris, Liberal M.P. for South West Bethnal Green. I went to see him and told him of my position.

The result was that I was granted a licence to have a stall, also the Chief Inspector of police sent for me and informed me the Commissioner of Police had ordered I should be given a pedlar's licence if I wanted one, but this generous offer I refused because I did not need a pedlar's licence, as I did not sell anything at the door. So I was thankful for their help in obtaining the licence.

One thing I always insisted on was that I should have my name recorded every time I was stopped and searched, because I could then prove I was living honestly.

The years began to slip by and at the end of 1931 I was the proud father of four children, two sons and two daughters. My dear wife, who had done everything she could do to help me, who by her encouragement and willingness to bear hardship had made it possible for me to become an honest man, who had borne four lovely children so that we should have a family to work

for and responsibility for their upbringing. For some eight years I had been free from prison life, the police knew I was living an honest life and I no longer had any cause to complain about their persecution. So there was no interference with me in the suburbs. My old enemy "Jew Boy" had left the force and all my hostility had gone with him.

1931. This year an event happened which finally and irrevocably cut me adrift from the underworld of crime and all its criminal activities. No more would they speak of me "as one of us". While business had been prosperous I had often been asked to give money to certain gangsters who, when in need of funds, would visit the local bookmakers and certain publicans, also any old-timers like myself, had been in prison.

When I had been asked to give I usually contributed my contribution towards peace and tranquillity; it was a sort of insurance against disturbance. Being a father of four children and having to be careful of every shilling, I was not so eager to pacify these parasites who were too lazy to work and too frightened to thieve, who were no better than bullies of the worst type, so I had decided to stop giving.

There are many would-be gangsters in the East End who get a living by "tapping" people for small sums of money, such as ten shillings, a pound, or any sum of money which they think the clients will give. Most of these "tappers" have

built up a record of violence mostly against men who have previous records of imprisonment. Three or more of these characters will attack and scar a victim with impunity because the victim is afraid to prosecute.

CHAPTER 20.

The Two Gangsters, 1931.

The story which I will now relate concerns two of these so-called terrors.

This I may say with truth: I had no fear of these people.

One night near midnight there was a knock on the street door. I looked out of the window and saw two well-known gangsters at the door. I looked at my wife and told her not to worry; I told her to go into the children's room. I went downstairs, opened the street door and asked the two villains what they wanted. You see, I knew these men, they traded on fear, so when they asked for two quid I simply said, "No," and shut the door. My wife opened the window and told them to clear off.

They had started banging on the door and my wife told them, "You won't get anything here." Then they foully abused her, using the most filthy language that even I had ever heard used even from the prostitutes of Dorset Street.

During this time I had put some clothes on; I rushed out and chased the men up the gardens; they managed to escape in a car or cab. They never had the courage to face me. My wife had followed me to the top of the gardens; she had no