

MY APPRENTICESHIP TO CRIME

An
(To the memory of my
Autobiography

Grace Maria Treadwell.

-by-

ARTHUR HARDING

then inform the police. You must understand that professional thieves know where to take and sell stolen five-pound notes, jewellery, etc., without any risk to themselves, so why come to me who was known to have sent two men to penal servitude for demanding money?

CHAPTER 25.

The Ex-Policeman.

So I went along with him and asked when he would bring the postal orders. It was arranged he would phone me at my home.

In 1937 another attempt was made to frame me on a felony charge. So I informed Scotland Yard of the ex-policeman's activities. This is the story.

On receipt of this information the police, in the persons of Det. Sgts. Capstick and Grimsbaw of the Flying Squad, came to the old days called at my business address at 3 Gibraltar Gardens, Bethnal Green. He had an interesting proposition to make to me; I also made a point of the possibility of the whole matter being a conspiracy to get me convicted for receiving stolen property.

He was friendly with some people who had a large amount of stolen postal orders; all that was required to change them was a date stamp. He could get them for me very cheap. I had known this man for many years. Some time in the early years of the century, about 1910 or so, he had been one of the C.I.D. aides in Wensley's time.

About a week later I received a message late at night that He had been dismissed the police force for conduct prejudicial to the force. He was known to be associating with men and women who were known to the police as bad characters, so I had no doubt that some villainy was planned, and in all probability it was intended to sell me the postal orders and

then inform the police. You must understand that professional thieves know where to take and sell stolen five-pound notes, jewellery, etc., without any risk to themselves, so why come to me who was known to have sent two men to penal servitude arrested with hundreds of pounds of stolen postal orders which for demanding money?

So I went along with him and asked when he would bring the postal orders. It was arranged he would phone me at my home.

So I informed Scotland Yard of the ex-policeman's activities. On receipt of this information the police, in the persons of Det. Sgts. Capstick and Grimshaw of the Flying Squad, came to see me. I told them of the conversation I had with the former policeman; I also made a point of the possibility of the whole matter being a conspiracy to get me convicted for receiving stolen property.

On the day I was to receive the postal orders, I went to the appointed place and after keeping observation for some time, I was aware of a squad car in the vicinity of the meeting place. I hurried away from the district, convinced that the whole business was in reality a conspiracy against me.

About a week later I received a message late at night that I should meet the ex-policeman in a certain spot in Bethnal Green and the stolen postal orders would be handed over. The time was near midnight and I had great difficulty in getting a message through to the Squad office for the two Squad men to

be at the meet.

At the appointed time and place I was at the rendezvous, so were the police. The ex-policeman and his lady friend were arrested with hundreds of pounds of stolen postal orders which had been stolen from Wood Lane post office in a burglary. Both defendants were convicted, the lady was the wife of a well-known criminal.

I received a commendation from the P.O. also a monetary reward for my services. I also made a friend in the person of Sergeant Capstick who afterwards helped me a great deal in my business of a wardrobe dealer. I often called at his house to buy his cast-off clothing. He retired from the force which he had served with so much zeal, having reached the highest rank of Chief Superintendent. Just recently I heard of his early death at Worthing where he had retired to, with deep sympathy to his family in their bereavement.

So after this episode I considered myself safe from any more tricks similar to the last, because now they would know I would not meddle with anything that was crooked.

To be a good wardrobe dealer you have to keep a good clean appearance and have polite manners; you have to remember that you will be calling several times in a year at the same house, so if you cheat the lady of the house by giving her less than the goods were worth, then you may never buy any more clothes

from her.

In every locality I had people to call upon who always saved their clothes for me to buy when I visited their district, which would be about every two months. I was able to talk intelligently upon most subjects from religion to politics, and it's surprising how eager most housewives are to have a talk; it relieves the monotony of the long day's drudgery. Being a good listener, I have many times listened to stories of misfortune and unhappiness which the lady confided to me, because maybe she would not let her family or her friends know of her distress. In my thirty years experience of calling at people's doors, I have met some wonderful people, some good and kind, eager to do good, and some who would not tell a blind man the time.

I remember one dear old lady saying to me, "I'm sorry I have nothing to sell, but wait a minute." She went inside and returned with half-a-crown, saying, "Take this and get yourself a meal." Needless to say, I was able to relieve her anxiety that I was in need of a meal.

I have had some varied experiences at the door, some pleasant, some not so pleasant. I believe that most people judge strangers from their personal appearance.

But after spending ten years in convict prisons you soon learn not to trust people by their appearance. I have seen men

in prison and outside who have been blessed with a good appearance, but who have been great scoundrels looking like bishops, but who behave like the villains they are. They I remember being stopped by a policeman in the Croydon area. I had a large bag of clothes, which I was carrying to East Croydon railway station from Shirley. The policeman rode up on a bike and asked me for an identity card. I produced the card, he made a note of the particulars and returned it to me without a word, only an "O.K." I said to him surprised, "Don't you want to look in the bag?" He replied, "No. Anyone can see you are straight enough, you have an honest face." I smiled to myself - what a pity the judge and jury did not think so in 1902.

Appearances can be very deceptive. On another occasion about 1950, I had been to the house of the widow of a well-known doctor in the Horley district of Surrey. I had one of my sons with me to help carry the goods. We had two large bags of clothes, something like fifty pounds worth of gents' clothes. We carried the bags to the nearest railway station, but as we would have to wait some two hours for the London train I hired a cab to drive me to the main line station.

I paid the driver a pound, that included a tip of five shillings. The driver phoned the police, thinking we were two house-breakers. The London train was waiting to depart in half an

hour so we put the two bags into a carriage and I began packing the clothes and valuing them. Just then the police arrived in the form of two C.I.D. men from the Surrey police. They looked at the clothes. I went to give them the letter from the widow or the doctor, also my business card, but the head C.I.D. said, "It's all right. Have you had a good deal?" I said, "Very good." Then he told me he knew me from Ashstead when I worked there, so everything was O.K. You see, the P.C. was not permitted to go into the witness box again to be cross-examined, so the charge was withdrawn ...

with the excuse for the P.C.'s behaviour - "well, the defendant has a criminal record." So a previous knowledge of the character of a suspect would tip the scales one way or the other. This is what happened in my case. The following is a true account of what happened in August 1934 (4).

This case illustrates the danger of inquiring into a suspected person's character before a charge is preferred against a suspect. This is done by putting through a call to the C.R.O. (Criminal Record Practice Office.) This is a practice which is becoming increasingly common, to find out what is known about a suspect before you prefer a charge against him.

two men. A police officer can find out if a suspect has a police record. This information from C.R.O. would cause a policeman to hesitate in bringing a charge against a man without a record. that was Milton and myself. We had been collecting out

Yet everyone has to start with a clean slate, so the P.C. may let a guilty man go because he had a clean record.

The police should bring a charge only on evidence, not on the past record of a person. The previous convictions of a convicted person are only proved in court to influence sentence, not to help to convict, like they did in the Steinie Morrison case.

But today the police are using the C.R.O. to convict by colouring the evidence like it was done in my case at Stratford. You see, the P.C. was not permitted to go into the witness box again to be cross-examined, so the charge was withdrawn with the excuse for the P.C.'s behaviour - "Well, the defendant has a criminal record." So a previous knowledge of the character of a suspect would tip the scales one way or the other.

Now this is what happened in my case. The following is a true resumé of what happened in August, 1934 (?).

About 2 p.m. on that August afternoon, an elderly gentleman in the front garden of his house in Redbridge saw two men calling from door to door. He thought they were acting suspiciously when he saw one of the men take a letter from the door and put it in his pocket. He at once phoned 999, giving the necessary information and a description of the two men. Police on bicycles were sent from Barkingside and Wanstead police station to investigate.

The uniform police from Wanstead saw the two suspects, that was Milton and myself. We had been collecting out

circulars from the houses whose occupants had put the letters outside to be collected. The police sergeant challenged us and was satisfied with our explanation. could therefore take That was the end of the matter as far as the local police were concerned. Some time after the prowler car arrived from Hackney. The police went and interviewed the elderly coloured gentleman who had sent the message. He told his story. Then the Hackney police went looking for me and Milton. When they saw us get on the bus they followed the bus to Wanstead and we were arrested. It must be remembered that the prowler car arrived after the local police had conducted their investigation and had gone back to the station and reported all correct.

When I produced the jewellery they were convinced - or rather, the C.I.D. aide was convinced - that we were genuine dealers; taking us down to Barkingside police station was just to see if the C.R.O. would have anything on us. On arrival at the station this C.I.D. aide first obtained names and addresses from the circulars, then he phoned Commercial Street station C.I.D. I might say at once that this information was given to me by the C.I.D. man who was in Commercial Street at the time. When the P.C. from Hackney phoned Commercial Street police, he asked if I was known. from the C.R.O. was The officer answering the phone told the caller that I had a record, but not the other man. He gave all the necessary

information to the caller including the dry remark that I was not a housebreaker. So the detective constable from Hackney was now in possession of my record and could therefore take a chance of charging us and making the charge stick.

So when called upon to give evidence at Stratford court the following day he embellished his story with highly coloured accounts of breaking glass over door, etc. His evidence was a pack of lies from beginning to the end. Being young and inexperienced, he made no allowance for the investigation of the senior C.I.D. officers at Barkingside, who immediately realised we were not two housebreakers and took steps to allow us out on bail.

It is easy to understand why the police at Barkingside were determined to find out the truth. The uniform police had been sent to the area because of the 999 call. They had returned to the station reporting that they had interviewed the two suspects, and they had stated that the men were genuine dealers.

But the Hackney police, by their action in arresting us, had made it appear as if the police from Wanstead had not done their duty.

There is no doubt that the knowledge acquired from the C.R.O. was the cause of the Hackney police charging us as suspected persons. My thanks were due to the efforts of the C.I.D. at

Barkingside for the manner in which they cleared the case up, even against the police from Hackney. If this case had not been handled by Scotland Yard with firmness and decision, it was possible I would have been in peril of a conviction and sent to prison, against an innocent man. But instead I heard the detective constable from Hackney told to stand down, and a detective sergeant say to him, "You have caused enough trouble." ~~ough the letterbox.~~ The cards give the householders time I did not apply for costs against the police although ~~even~~ through no fault of my own I had to pay a large bill for legal costs. ~~I~~ might add that the barrister and solicitor were very surprised at the way the case was settled. ~~nothing that the house~~ It will be noted that in 1909 when I was charged as a suspected person I was also charged under the prevention of Crimes Act. ~~re~~ Still, I had the satisfaction of knowing that the police were now convinced that I was leading an honest life. ~~End on~~ Many years after this event, I had the great satisfaction of telling Detective Constable Gerrard what I thought of him. the poverty of some of these people. The Welfare State has not solved all the problems; the Irish emigrants creating the same conditions as their forerathers did in the years of the potato famine have become the poverty-stricken slum dwellers of the filthy dens in which we East Enders spent our childhood. ~~over~~ In the Brick Lane and Stepney parts of the East End you