

MY APPRENTICESHIP TO CRIME

An
(To the memory of my
Autobiography

Grace Maria Treadwell.

-by-

ARTHUR HARDING

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This was the evacuation of women and children with their gasmasks slung around their shoulders, their haversacks over their backs. This indeed was a very sad and terrible sight after nearly two thousand years of Christianity. The assembly point was opposite my house and about 10 a.m. a large number of buses arrived to take the evacuees to their destination.

My wife and five children were there to be evacuated to one of the supposedly safety areas. My eldest son remained at home; he was fourteen years old and had just started work.

The following week I went to the place they had been evacuated to. The reception area was regarded by some brainless civil servant as a safety zone. Even after the terrible lessons of the Spanish Civil War, the havoc caused by the bombing of the towns of Barcelona and Guernica, etc., we had learned nothing. The instructions issued by the Home office, called Air Raid Precautions, if followed by the population, would have doubled the casualties.

When I saw my wife with the youngest child, she told me they had separated her from the other four children. Their mother was naturally upset, but I consoled her with the promise that we would soon all be home together again.

With the approach of Christmas, I decided to have the children home because their mother had been home some time. In my large garden at home, I had built an air raid shelter. It was really a double Anderson shelter built around with bricks to support a concrete roof of several feet in depth; large concrete blocks made the shelter look like a bunker, with a long passage and steel doors.

In the shelter we had bunks and a stove in the passage leading to the interior. It was regarded as a safe shelter, except for a direct hit.

Being a full time warden with only three pounds weekly put me behind with my mortgage repayments. Then the rates fell due, so as nothing was happening with reference to bombing I left the A.R.P. as a full time warden and went to work at my business of dealer. Needless to say, second-hand clothes were very saleable because of the clothing coupons which were required for new clothes.

The surprising thing about wartime buying of second-hand clothing which through the scarcity of clothing coupons one would have thought to have been entirely negative, was on the contrary

very good. I was buying more gents' suits than I had ever bought before in one day, good quality suits, complete wardrobes. I was buying more cheaply than before. Trade being good, I suddenly made enough money to pay my Christmas mortgage dues and also the rates. Christmas came and went with the children back home and the phoney war nearly forgotten. The shipping losses were a constant reminder that Hitler had not forgotten us. Then it happened. The Maginot Line failed its creators and France failed its allies, and we were left to face our enemies alone with nothing - and I mean nothing - but the indomitable Churchill. A merciful providence gave us back our armies to prepare for the come-back. When the blitz started we were all at home on that September evening when London had its baptism of bombing and fire, when the nights came and no cessation in the raids. I decided it was time to give the family a country holiday, so I went to Great Waltham a few miles from Chelmsford in Essex, and rented an old country cottage in the agricultural district and we moved some furniture down to the cottage where everything seemed peaceful. The children soon forgot the terrors of bombing and destruction and my wife, who had begun to show the strains of

the war, soon recovered in the peace and quietness of the countryside. I would visit them at weekends and spend the time to Monday morning with them. Then back to the long nights looking for incendiaries, wondering when it was all going to end, thinking how daft the clever ones of the world must be to give one man the power to send millions of men, women and children to their deaths. How was it possible for one man of humble birth, without wealth, who was only a corporal in the 1914-18 War, and never attained higher rank, at a time when men of ability were in great demand, to fill the ranks of the large number of officer casualties.

The great tyrants of the human race have all been of humble birth with the gift of rousing the rabble by their eloquence. Joe Stalin was as great a tyrant and mass murderer as Hitler.

January, 1941. My wife's sister and her husband were both killed when the shelter in the Bank Underground Station the air received a direct hit. I had the job of going to the mortuary to identify my brother-in-law, not a very pleasant business. It had been a very bad weekend and there had been several incidents so the casualty list had been heavy. The inside of the mortuary looked like a slaughterhouse. I was warned not to look either right or left.

One very sad incident stands out in my memory of that

morning in Cripplegate Street mortuary. A bus driver's wife was waiting to go into the morgue and the keeper was advising her not to go in. She answered by saying, "No one else would come, I went to the garage, but no one was willing." So this poor woman had to look at the battered body of her husband, because none at the garage would help her. The bus garage where the driver worked were so ashamed of their action that they employed the wife in the canteen as compensation. My wife's sister was never found. She was only one of many who have no known grave. During the blitz, my old home in Gibraltar Gardens was badly damaged like the rest of the Gardens. My old mother and sister had to find another house to live in. My mother had reached the ripe old age of eighty-five. She would not leave Bethnal Green, so with my eldest sister they slept in a factory shelter underneath the factory. The people had settled down to the discomforts of the air raids. What they grumbled at was the coupons for everything. Some sold their books of coupons for three pounds or more. They liked to listen to Lord Haw-Haw, because he made them laugh. 1942. My family had returned from the cottage. The war in Russia was occupying all the energies of the German armies and air force. The West was enjoying some tranquility. The year had opened with the death of my dear mother, through an illness

accident. She fell and broke her thigh. She had reached the good age of eighty-six, so she had fought the good fight to the end, and the Good Lord would say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

My business was prospering and I was working every day to save money for my children's education. It must be remembered that there was no Welfare State, child allowance, no public assistance like there is today, 1969. If you had a family then in those days you had to work to keep them.

For myself, I found that people were willing to sell their clothes more readily than before the war, to account for this was the fact that hundreds of thousands of men were casualties or missing. This was the kind of unseen suffering that I came across in going from door to door in the war years.

A lady at Coulsdon near Purley called me into her large house, knowing that I came from the East End; she gave me a large quantity of lovely children's clothes on my promise to sell them cheaply to the poor or the East End, then she sold me all her husband's clothes. He was a major in the Army and had been reported missing. Among the things she sold me was a silver cocktail set, wedding gifts, gold watches, etc. Such tragedies were to be found everywhere in middle class districts.

At Shirley, near East Croydon, I was in the habit of calling

at the house of a Mrs. Smith. This lady would always tell me of her family troubles. Her eldest son was one of the Battle of Britain pilots holding a very high rank; her youngest son named Norman had been reported missing at Dunkirk. She was beside herself with grief; she said to me, "If he is dead I shall die too." She had received a letter from his C.O. telling her that the last he saw of her son was with his battery fighting a rearguard action.

About a month later, I was in the district again and called at the house. The maid told me Mrs. Smith was dead and buried and the house and furniture was going to be sold by auction. They say only in the East can people be found who have the power to will themselves to die.

So on this day I journeyed to London and bought some part-worn clothing from the lady, just a couple of coats, suits and a few dresses. The goods were not very good and looked part-worn, not valuable. By no stretch of the imagination could they be described as new goods or worth more than three pounds.

I travelled back to the district, that being the nearest railway station to my place in Essex Lane. The goods were packed in my bag which I carried over a postman, over my shoulder. As I passed the police station, a P.C. was just coming out of the police station, which is next door to the court.

The P.C. was a middle-aged man with about twenty years' experience.