MY APPRENTICESHIP TO CRIME

An

Autobiography

-by-

ARTHUR HARDING

CHAPTER 3.

Boyhood in Victorian London.

1898. My father's sight was getting worse; it was almost impossible for him to work, he had to be led about.

Through the kind influence of a Mr. King, who was in charge of the Lord Shaftesbury Mission Hall, my father was given the privilege of collecting waste food from certain City restaurants. This food would last us for a few days, we were duly grateful for the scraps from the rich man's table.

In this year, my sister Harriet had found a job at Lipton's tea warehouse and offices in City Road, Hoxton, N.E., from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. with afternoon break. The pay for this job was 7/6d. weekly. This money was a great help to Mother; she was sure of the rent.

The back room on the landing was rented by a family whose sons were doomed to die early in life. They were an Irish family, the father was a cripple who earned a living as a shoe-black. The mother, a hard working woman fond of a drink in the pub next door. They had three sons and one daughter.

The youngest boy died in the canal, the second son was a burglar who served several long sentences in prison; he died of a disease that turned him yellow in the London Hospital about 1906. The eldest son was a soldier in the Boer War, and I never saw him again. The daughter was left with a blind child, by a scoundrel who deserted them.

The rent was by far the greatest cause of worry and anxiety among the very poor, who have large families of children.

Another disturbing factor in 1898 was the demand for the existing housing accommodation. Many thousands of Russian and Polish Jews were seeking refuge in England from political persecution. Tsarist pogroms of the 1880s had driven many of these unfortunate people to seek safety in Great Britain.

Many thousands had reached London's East End. These refugee Jews were crowded into back rooms and other derelict houses. They were exploited by their fellow Jews, made to work like slaves in cellars and old workshops for long hours for very low wages. They suffered and they prospered and always believing in the promise made by Moses to their forefathers: "Thou shalt drive out nations mightier than thyself and shalt take their land as an inheritance."

We have seen this promise come true in Israel.

While speaking of the Jewish emigrants, I should like to record the magnificent work of the Jewish Board of Guardians in

relieving the Jewish poor and needy.

In middlesex Street, the Jewish Free School was built. The children who attended this school were clothed and fed far better than the Christian children of the Board Schools.

In July, 1898, after leaving Dr. Barnardo's Homes, a Board School inspector called at my home to warn my parents that I would have to attend Rochelle Street school because I was still only eleven years of age. After a series of examinations by a Board School Inspector, it was found I was too far advanced for the L.C.C. school, so the authorities did not trouble whether I attended school or not, so I was allowed the freedom of the streets.

The two and a half years I spent in Leopold House had made me quick at learning. I spoke the Queen's English in a different manner to the lads in Brick Lane, and they nick-named me "The Parson's Son" because of my speech, so I was back to the streets again.

<u>27th November, 1899. Thirteen years old.</u>

Officially, on reaching the age of thirteen years, I ceased to attend school, but I was not eligible to be employed in any employment.

The end of 1899 saw Great Britain engaged in a bitter struggle with the two South African Republics: The Orange Free State, and the Transvaal Republic under its President,

Paul Kruger.

Britain suffered several reverses in the early months of the War, and we had many enemies who rejoiced at our discomfiture. It seemed like a Goliath crushing a small David. As a matter of fact, we always seem to start badly.

More troops were needed; the war had aroused a great wave of patriotism and the appearance of khaki uniforms in the streets gave a great impetus to recruiting.

1900. The Twentieth Century.

This year was spent mostly on the streets selling toys, and carrying luggage for travellers at Liverpool Street Station.

I now began to work for my living. With a little capital I would be able to buy and sell toys in the pubs. German toys were the best and cheapest. In Houndsditch, City, a thoroughfare from Liverpool Street to Aldgate, a number of shops were engaged in selling these cheap toys at 8/- a gross.

My sister, Harriet, had already started a stall in the Roman Road market, and she was doing well, so I borrowed the money from her to start up in my own business.

I began by buying half a gross of penny toys for 4/-, and starting from Houndsditch I would work every pub down to St. Leonard's Church, Shoreditch. In this half-mile there were twenty-two pubs. Shoreditch High Street was also a market place. In 1900, there were no restrictions or

regulations forbidding children entering pubs or against children selling their wares in the pubs or streets.

There was one pub where I always had good business. About 600 yards from Houndsditch is a famous pub called "Dirty Dick's". It stands on the corner of Bishopsgate and Middlesex Streets, which is popularly known as Petticoat Lane. The proper name of this tavern is, I believe, "The Jerusalem Tavern".

I always began my round by starting at Dirty Dick's. This pub is always crowded day and night; it must be remembered that in 1900 pubs did not close until 12.30 midnight. Its close proximity to Liverpool Street Station made it a favourite pub for travellers. Many ladies of the town made it their rendezvous. I always had plenty of good customers in this pub, so I never missed going downstairs to the bar where they sold a large glass of port wine for 2d. The customers were always merry and free with their coppers.

A local historian describes the history of Dirty Dick's: "A strange commentary on the morbid sentimentality which was encouraged in Victorian days survives in Dirty Dick's." More than a century ago a London shopkeeper who died was found to have preserved untouched for many years the furnishings and even foodstuffs in a room in which his intended wedding breakfast had remained uneaten, when he was cheated of his bride.

Here was the familiar kink in the human mind which helps

us to pretend that something hasn't happened.

Dickens exploited it with the mock bride of Great Expectations. Queen Victoria was its victim when she maintained for forty years the private room and clothing of the dead Prince Consort."

The relics of the London shopkeeper's living room were moved a century ago to the public house in Bishopsgate and there displayed.

By street selling, I was able to earn ten shillings or more weekly, that is from Monday to Friday. On Saturday, my eldest sister had started a stall in the Roman Road Market, and Mother and I would help at the stall all day. This stall was a very profitable business, so much so that we moved from 37, Bacon Street, Brick Lane, to No. 1, Queens Buildings, Gossett Street, Brick Lane, E. This flat was the finest and best home my family had ever lived in; the rent was 7/6d. weekly. We had running water (not hot water, which was unknown), our own sink and toilet. These things we had never had before in our own home. Two bedrooms, kitchen and scullary. These things were luxury we had never expected to have.

But this increased prosperity had brought upon us a great evil, the curse of drink. Mother had ceased to be the bread-winner. She no longer slaved at the table making match-boxes for Bryant & May's. But the curse of drink haunted us.

Monday always saw Mother out on the drink with three or more women friends; these women would start a pub crawl which would only end when they were helpless and without any more money. A drunken woman is about the most beastly sight you can see.

In the early years of this century, a drunk and disorderly woman would be taken to the police station by a hand-wheeled stretcher. The police would strap the drunken woman down on the stretcher, sometimes after a terrific struggle on the ground, a most horrible sight, degrading to the police, to the onlookers, to the children and to the human race, especially to the powers that be whose laws permitted, nay, who encouraged the wretched, half-starved womanfolk to drown their sorrows in drink.

Sometimes I would find Mother in a pub with her apron full of potatoes and raw fish or live eels, which she had bought in the market for our dinner. My young sister and brother would be playing in the pub. No restrictions on children being in pubs. The brewers were in favour of it, the children kept the mothers drinking.

Drink was a beastly business in the poverty-stricken streets of the East End. The pubs were open from 5 a.m. until 12.30 midnight. There were more pubs than baker's shops. Only when the Liberal Party were the Government was there any attempt

to limit the number of pubs.

Under the Liberal Government, hundreds of pubs were closed, and when the 1914-18 War was on the pubs had to close during certain hours. So the drink problem was tackled by the Reformers in Parliament.

So this was my home life. A crippled mother who had to drink to drown the pain; who had worked to feed us until she was exhausted mentally and physically. A father who through failing sight could not keep us. Our home, just a collection of junk.

My eldest sister, Harriet, a hard-working girl who, after working all the week at Lipton's tea warehouse, would work at the stall on Saturday and Sunday morning, so that the children could have a decent home and plenty to eat. I contributed what I could to the upkeep of the home, but it was a hard struggle.

27th November, 1900. I was fourteen years old.

At this time, a wave of patriotism was sweeping through the country; Great Britain, at war, needed more troops, so I decided to join the Army. I was well built and could pass myself for seventeen or eighteen years.

I went to Angel Lane, Stratford, E, and joined the Royal West Kent's Regiment. I was sent to Maidstone, Kent, which was the training depot for the Royal West Kent's. I believe

I was in the fourth battalion of the Regiment.

The weeks I spent at Maidstone training as a soldier were well spent. I was used to discipline from the two and a half years in Leopold House. The uniform was a red tunic and blue serge trousers, with a red stripe down the seam. For church parade, which we attended every Sunday in full dress and spiked helmets, white belts and blue cuffs on tunic. We marched through the town to the Garrison Church, which was decorated with the battle honours of the Regiment back from Active Service they were dressed in khaki uniform. That was the first time I ever saw khaki uniform.

The Battalion marched through the town to the church, which was decorated with the battle honours of the West Kents. I can still remember gazing with wonder at the battle flags or colours of the old Regiment, which were torn and stained.

Looking at the old discoloured and torn remnants, I pictured to myself the terrific struggles which had been fought around the colours to save their capture by the enemy. Church parade always reminded me of the boys of Leopold House marching to church service every Sunday morning, with the band playing stirring tunes and marches.

The weeks passed and I was just getting over the initial stage of training when I was called before the C.O., who asked me my age. He said, "How old are you?" I replied, "Eighteen,

sir." The C.O. informed me he had received a letter on behalf of my parents stating I was only fourteen years old, too young for the Army. But not too young for prison. So my parents had again taken action to bring me back to the streets of the East End.

Soon after leaving the Army, I went back to life as a street arab, hanging about street corners at night, skylarking about, making myself a nuisance to the police. I was fourteen years of age. I could earn wages so I was an asset which my father did not intend to lose or give up lightly. The years were to bring bitter regrets for the action they took to bring me back to the life of the streets.

One evening, a number of us boys were larking about on the corner of Bacon Street, Brick Lane, when a policeman appeared to mean trouble by rushing towards us. On this occasion we all ran away up the street; the policeman ran after us and I was caught.

I expected a cuff of the ear or a telling off, but the policeman took me to Commercial Street police station and charged me as a suspected person. My parents were informed by the police that I was detained at the police station.

My mother bailed me out with the rent book, which was the usual way to bail persons for drunk, gambling and disorderly conduct. If the police had insisted on money, no one would

ever have been bailed out. They simply never had money to bail anybody.

The next morning I appeared at Worship Street police court, Shoreditch. The magistrate dismissed the charge or suspected person and I was discharged, 10th April, 1901. This charge of suspected person was the first charge ever brought against me in any court.

The arrest and detention or young lads by the police on a formal charge or suspected person is a police formality which is still practised for identification purposes. In all the disreputable districts of London, where young lads get into some form or delinquency, the C.I.D. aides and the uniformed branch are encouraged to pick up likely customers as suspected persons, for the purpose or identification in the future.

These young lads are fingerprinted, and all particulars taken, and all the necessary information concerning the future Borstal Boys becomes available to the C.I.D., even before they have committed any offence. This is a necessary precaution; all youngsters who are picked up like this are charged as suspects, probation or fine being the usual penalty.

So, because I was a comparative newcomer to the Brick Lane area, it became necessary to find out who I was, where I lived, and if I was employed. This was usual police procedure which

is still the practice.

My record states: "10th April, 1901, aged 14 years, charged as a suspected person. Case dismissed." This is how a C.I.D. officer reads record to the Court: "A.H. first came to the notice of the police at the age of fourteen years when he was charged as a suspected person." The Court is led to believe that the prisoner was convicted. This practice of repeating charges that have been dismissed by a Court should not be permitted in a court of law. Really they, i.e. the charges, should be erased from the person's record.

This was my first contact with the police and made me feel very bitter. We young lads of the slums naturally regarded the police with an intense dislike. They were always chasing us lads off the corners of streets; we had to hang about street corners, or gamble round the back streets, with the exception of Father Jay's in Old Nichol Street. We had no youth clubs to spend the evening in. There were no cafés, like today, no dance halls, no cinemas. Even those of us who had a job had no money to spend after Saturday.

The streets had always been our playground - where else could we go? The homes we lived in were not large enough to have friends in to play cards. There were the pubs which we could patronise, but they had no attraction for us. We had all seen the misery caused by drink.

Brick Lane, where we lived, was a hotbed of vice, every kind of villainy could be found in the district. Men's doss-houses, women's doubles. In Spitalfields, women paraded up and down in hundreds. They sold themselves for a few pence. Under the railway arches, down-and-outs slept covered with sheets of newspaper. Dr. Barnardo went out nightly to rescue waifs and strays; small children of both sexes wandered in the streets without parents or relatives to care for them.

Can it be wondered at, that boys of my age who lived in this cesspool of evil were contaminated by their environment and became, in their turn, members of the criminal classes beyond the pale, to be punished by the utmost severity of the law?

In Brick Lane, there were gangs of young men who were known thieves; many had served terms of imprisonment. Their average age was about twenty years. Most of them were pick-pockets and could skilfully steal a watch from a person's pocket, or take loose money from a pocket of a jacket in a crowd.

This gang of thieves frequented a coffee shop named Clarks; as this coffee shop plays a very important part in this narrative, I will describe it more fully. Clarks coffee shop was situated in Brick Lane, E, quite close to Slater Street, opposite Hare Street, now renamed Cheshire Street, which had a

pub on each corner. When the gangs were not inside eating, they would hang about outside waiting for something to turn up.

There were some twelve of these thieves, some six or seven years dividing these young juvenile delinquents from my friends and companions. You could say the elder ones were the first eleven team, and me and my pals were the second eleven.

We young lads would sometimes use Clarks for a meal or cup of tea, which at that time cost one penny. Tea, two slices of bread and butter and a rasher, or bloater, cost threepence.

So, by using the same coffee shop, we became known to the professionals. The strange thing is, we young lads looked up to the professionals with respect and admiration. We would watch them follow a cart or van loaded with goods and steal a bale of cloth or a side of bacon. They would lift any goods from the vans quite openly. They never worried about people seeing them steal; not many people would inform the police. I have seen boxes of eggs, tubs of butter, large sides of bacon, etc., lifted, and these goods would be sold within half an hour.

It must be remembered that road transport was horse-drawn and the speed of the vehicle was about ten miles an hour, or even less, so it was comparatively easy to steal goods from vans or carts.

This gang of petty thieves were never very smartly dressed, they were very small time thieves. The whole district was covered by many such gangs who were the victims of unemployment, bad housing and terrible economic conditions. Most of these young men never had a chance from the day of their birth until the day of their death in some convict prison or mental asylum. Many of this gang died in Claybury Asylum, from the effects of drink.

Several died in France fighting for King and Country, and I who admired them have seen the end of their worthless and wasted lives, and wondered why they were born.

Of the whole gang, only one became a real professional criminal conforming to the characteristics of Cesare Lombroso's ideal criminal, and as the years pass we will meet again some of these characters and maybe the manner of their deaths can be better understood when we know how these lives were lived.

The boys with whom I associated had not reached the stage when they could be called criminals or, in modern legal jargon, juvenile delinquents. Most of these boys like myself earned a few shillings selling newspapers or carrying luggage at Liverpool Street Station. Some worked for the City Corporation as street cleaners; these boys were in great demand for street cleaning in the City in the years before the motor

vehicles when horse traffic fouled the roads and streets. The boys were employed in large numbers to keep the City highways clean and tidy. These boys wore a uniform and were permanently employed by the City Corporation. This was a job for lire and was much sought after.

My next attempt to get into the Army took place within a few months of my discharge from the Royal West Kents. I again went to the same enlistment office at Angel Lane, Stratford, E. At this time, 1900, this recruiting station was one of the chief recruiting depots for the East End.

There were some six or more recruiting sergeants dressed in their full dress uniform, complete with medals. Being in close proximity to the docks, the depot did a brisk business for recruiting the unemployed.

So I enlisted in the Royal Fusiliers stationed at Houndslow Heath, Middlesex. The huts in which the battalion were quattered had been erected on the Heath and it was very cold in them, especially in the night. After a week or two I developed a very bad cough which disturbed the other men in the hut during the night, so I was ordered to go and see the M.O.

I accordingly went sick; the medical officer examined me, asked me a few questions regarding my age, told me I was too young, also that I was medically unfit. I was discharged the

same day with my discharge papers.

This incident finally ended my intention to be a soldier and serve the Queen. After this set-back I went looking for a job to learn a trade.

My first job was at a glassblower's in Hanbury Street, Brick Lane, E. While working at this job I was burned on both arms and taken to hospital. The burns left large scars on both arms. No compensation!

After trying my hand at two or three other jobs, I finally started work at a cabinet maker's in New Inn Yard, Shoreditch. The name of the firm: Butlers & Sons. This firm made every kind of furniture from coal scuttles to bedsteads with canopies. I worked for this firm for some nine months, and I was able to acquire a good knowledge of the trade of cabinet making and the use of tools, which I learned at Butlers, caused me to always describe myself as a cabinet maker. My wages were 5/6d. a week. Mother had 5/- and I had sixpence for myself.

Things began to look brighter. I was on the road to learn a trade.

Sometimes, perhaps she would be drinking three days a week. My sister and I would return home for dinner at 1 p.m. No dinner. Back to work after a makeshift dinner of bread and tea, hastily made and eaten. So increased prosperity brought

unhappiness to our home. Father would sometimes mind the children while Mother would be drinking.

27th November, 1901. I was fifteen years old.

The constant repetition of my birthday and age is to prove beyond all question that on this date I was fifteen years of age, and therefore in law was classed as a young person, entitled to the protection of the law as such.

During this period, I would leave work at 7 p.m. and after tea would hang about Brick Lane until midnight. It must be realised that the pubs did not close till midnight and the shops would keep open very late. Most of the factories worked from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and the workers had to walk home, not ride.

On a Tuesday evening, my sister would take me up the Brittania Theatre in Hoxton Street. At the "Britt" we would see some of the great dramas that were played each week; we paid 3d. up to the gallery and enjoyed every minute of the play. We would boo and hiss the villain and wait outside for the hero and heroine.

It was now some three years or more since I left Leopold House; these three years had not improved me. I had deteriorated from the well-mannered boy of Dr. Barnardo's Homes. Gambling and hooliganism were part of every night's pastime. The police were my natural enemies, or should I say, we boys regarded them as such.

About this time, a firm of printers decided to build a factory inBacon Street, Brick Lane, E. The firm was named Darling & Sons, and they engaged all the school leaving boys, and also most of my friends who had no work were soon employed. All the boys who found work grew up into respectable citizens, proving that such arrangements between a local school and a local factory can solve many questions.

What I have written in this foreword to my autobiography is my early childhood, so that the reader will have a complete picture of the circumstances which caused me to become what Mr. Justice Avory described as "a very dangerous man".

The following history of myself at an age when even in Victorian times I was a boy. The law by sending me to prison for a trivial offence, on my first conviction, by its harsh treatment of a first offender started the serious and gradual process of the manufacture of a criminal.

When one considers the terrible conditions which existed all through childhood and boyhood. The environment of the slums and the prevalence of evil influence on my character, so that what I became in manhood was the direct result of the bitter experiences of my early years.

The following is an abstract from a speech by Lord Hewart, a former Lord Chief Justice, when giving the Clarke Hall Lecture to magistrates on the treatment of young offenders:

"You owe the highest respect to the young as the State disregarded a minor as a suitor it should exercise special care over his interests when he was the subject of a criminal charge.

"We owe something to all minors, we owe a great deal to the children without a chance and it is probable that nearly every offender, however old and hard, having been once a child was once a defendant in a juvenile court.

"Each young offender," he urged, "must be studied as closely as his crime and the information concerning his character and circumstances given to a court must be as full and accurate as that which was offered in proof of his crime. The years hurry on with an almost tragic pace, soon the irresolute adolescent, refusing to face many issues, shirking a definite decision, will become either a sound citizen or an expensive criminal.

"In these years between seventeen and twenty-one the die may be finally cast. You are concerned not as your forefathers were to punish naughty children by hurting them but rather to study difficult and absorbing human problems and to make good men and women out of boys and girls who for the time have lost their way."

This is the story of one boy who had lost his way, who had the misfortune to meet one of those Victorian forefathers

of whom Lord Hewart spoke, whose only concern was to hurt and degrade young lads whose misfortune it was to appear before them.

I am satisfied to let the reader judge and pass his verdict upon the justice of my accusation, that the State made me a criminal.