

MY APPRENTICESHIP TO CRIME

An
(To the memory of my
Autobiography

Grace Maria Treadwell.

-by-

ARTHUR HARDING

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Blessed are the Meek for they shall inherit the Earth.

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It seems Gibraltar Gardens, 1904. not proud of the Gardens and had encouraged the builders to hide the gardens from the public. In 1940, Hitler's demolition workers did the job and the "New Jerusalem" began to take shape from the ruins.

When I arrived home from Borstal in 1904, I was a picture of health, sound in body and mind, 5 ft. 10½ ins., weighing 140 lbs., on the 27th November, 1904, I would be 18 years old. My family had moved from the flat in Gosset Street, to two rooms in tenement house at Gibraltar Buildings, Gibraltar Gardens, Bethnal Green Road. This was to be my home for the next twenty-eight years, in these Gibraltar Gardens. I propose to give a detailed description of this alley, or cul-de-sac, which contained within its few yards of decaying tenements and small cottages, all the viciousness and evil of the East End. This alley was an L-shaped cul-de-sac with the entrance some six feet wide, in the Bethnal Green Road. On one side was the G.P.O. sorting office, on the other side of the entrance was the vicarage. The local vicar lived in the vicarage with his family, which consisted of his wife and one child. The

vicarage had some twelve large-sized rooms, with every convenience. evicted from the flat in which they had fallen behind with the rent which inevitably led to eviction.

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Gibraltar Gardens were enclosed by two large timber yards and some workshops. that he had ordained that the garden should be poor illiterate slum dwellers, who could find some form of

It seemed that the Council were not proud of the Gardens and had encouraged the builders to hide the gardens from the public view so that not even the sunlight could brighten the gloom. entertainment and exchange of ideas. They could not forget their misery. They could not forget their social system which made the poor poor.

Some early Victorian humorist must have named this alley after the barren rock in the Mediterranean. It must have been the same sardonic person who named the entrance to Hoxton End. Workhouse "Paradise Lost". In Gibraltar Buildings lived families who had

Gibraltar Buildings were some 100 years old. Even in 1904, they were in the last stages of dilapidation. There was a basement or cellar in each tenement where the tenants could wash their dirty linen, but as the cellar was in complete darkness it was never used, only by homeless persons. Several years before 1904, the place was to be my home; the rooms were very small, assaulted and the home was small.

This place was to be my home; the rooms were very small, the front room some 12 ft. x 9 ft., the back room smaller. This incident left a vivid impression on my mind.

My mother rented two rooms at the top of the tenement, these two rooms were as bad as any in "The Nichol". One can only guess at the pain she suffered when Mother climbed the stairs daily, owing to her crippled leg. The family had been closed.

evicted from the flat in Queen's Buildings, because she had fallen behind with the rent which inevitably led to eviction.

Drink was the curse of my mother's generation. The powers that be had ordained that the gin palaces should attract the poor illiterate slum dwellers, who could find some form of entertainment and exchange confidences with their friends and forget their misery. They could forget the injustice of the social system which made the rich richer and the poor poorer.

Every eviction had meant that Mother had to accept worse living conditions, until Gibraltar Buildings were the bottom of the social ladder.

In Gibraltar Buildings lived the dregs of the East End. The inhabitants of these filthy dens were families who had sunk beneath the terrible burden of poverty, disease and hopelessness. Not a night passed without the drunken screams and violent fights of the human animals who had long ceased to live the decent industrious lives of working folk.

Several years before 1904, I saw my parents violently assaulted and the home smashed up when we lived in "The Nichol". This incident left a vivid impression on my mind. So I remembered this incident when some time after I had returned home from Borstal trouble started with the family who lived below us. This happened about midnight after the pubs had closed.

The family below started shouting up the stairs filthy abuse at my mother; they were drunk and wanted trouble. I went downstairs and told the man what I thought of him in the only language they understood. Words led to blows and, being young and fit, I gave the man a good hiding.

That night, my eldest sister told me an astonishing story which was supported by my young sister and brother.

The story I was told by my sister, started some six months before my release from Borstal. The family who lived below were very quarrelsome when in drink. One brother of the wife had served a sentence of seven years for stabbing. They were the terrors of the Gardens, with everybody scared of them.

It appeared that one night the husband and wife had rushed into Mother's room, dragged her from bed and brutally assaulted her so that when the police arrived and a doctor examined my mother, she was taken to the hospital for treatment. Husband and wife were arrested and charged with causing grievous bodily harm; both were remanded on bail for a week. The following week Mother refused to prosecute and the case was dismissed. So with my release, I suppose they thought I would be easy game.

This story so enraged me that the next day I beat them up including the one who had terrorised everyone, and that put an end to their reign of terror. This was the first time

I had ever raised my hand in violence against any person. life imprisonment, that I was refused legal aid, also that my

From now on, I was to acquire a reputation as a person family were still so poor that we could not afford a dock brief, of violent disposition.

which cost a guinea, one wonders how England became famous in In 1905, I applied to the County Court for payment of our estimation for justice and human rights.

some of the compensation awarded to me for my accident. The I was nineteen years of age; I had to wait trial at Brixton Registrar told me my parents had received the best part of prison for some six weeks. The cell was an observation cell the money and there was only twenty pounds left, which he let and I was under constant supervision. The reason for super-me have. So my parents were able to get possession of forty vision was to see if I was mental; if I had been guilty of pounds of my compensation. What a pity they did not get me this offence I would have been in need of a psychiatrist. a solicitor at the time of my dire need.

On the 4th April, 1906, I was put on trial at the Old Bailey. I had no legal assistance but I had a good judge. I conducted my own case. Two witnesses who volunteered to give evidence, having witnessed the whole incident. The judge,

"My First Trial at the Old Bailey" having heard their evidence, asked the jury if they had heard

4th April, 1906. enough; the jury found me not guilty and I was acquitted.

The police were very zealous in carrying out their duties The scene of the shooting was in the Whitechapel area, where I was concerned. In February 1906, some 18 months after a few hundred yards from the notorious Sidney Street, which a my release from Borstal, I was charged at Commercial Street few years later was to become famous for the battle between police station with shooting a young girl, causing her grievous the suspected murderers of three policemen. bodily harm. The police evidence was that I was seen running

The cause of the affray for which I had stood trial was away from the scene of the shooting. That was sufficient aliens fighting among themselves. The girl who was the victim evidence to obtain a committal to the Central Criminal Court of the shooting had been struck by a stray bullet; she was on this very serious charge.

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The cause of the affray for which I had stood trial was aliens fighting among themselves. The girl who was the victim of the shooting had been struck by a stray bullet; she was quite unknown to me, and she had never seen me before. I am glad to say she was not seriously injured.

and s These street affrays were common at this time and place. But as I write these words sixty years or so after this event, the streets of London echo again with the sound of gunshots, on a far larger scale; more people are shot and killed than ever before, and the London streets are far more dangerous. Since my release from Borstal in September 1904, I had become a general nuisance to the police and had degenerated into a menace to all authority. The gang I associated with numbered some dozen of the youngsters who had grown up in the slums of Brick Lane and Bethnal Green. Our favourite rendezvous was Clarks coffee shop in Brick Lane, corner of Slater Street. We were a collection of small time thieves ripe for any mischief. We numbered among our accomplishments snide dropping, counterfeiting, van thieving, gold-chain snatching, in slang "shoot flying". We were ready to steal anything. Most of us had already served terms of imprisonment. The remnants of Walker's old gang had joined up with the younger lads, so making a very mixed collection of villains ripe for any villainy. Many had drifted away from Brick Lane, some to the West End, where they became mixed up with the clubs and ladies of the town. Many found employment in street trading and the docks, also as look-out men for street book-makers. In regard to the regulations.

The men belonging to Walker's age group had mostly married

and settled down to casual work in the docks, the Borough Council as street cleaners or dustmen, where they earned an honest livelihood and had families. There were a few who finished up in asylums through excessive drinking. The business of counterfeiting was only one of the rackets that was common at this period. Garrotting in the streets of the East End was common in some parts of Brick Lane. Merchant seamen were often the victims, having spent long periods at sea, when paid off at their ports they received large wage packets. The harpies who waited for them would often rob them of every penny. Being the number of suspects, it was possible to

In charge of the C.I.D. of H. Division was Detective Inspector Frederick Wensley, who had been nicknamed "The Weasel". He was the typical C.I.D. officer of the time.

Every month, the police would have a round up of all known criminals in the district, especially those known to take part in chain snatching or garrotting or seamen.

The C.I.D. would visit the haunts or pubs, coffee shops and homes of suspects, and take them to Commercial Street police station, for identification parades. The identity parades were always carried out with extreme fairness. The police inspector in charge of the station carried out his duties strictly in regard to the regulations.

Today, 1969, these parades are conducted under the same

rules with the exception that suspects can have their solicitor or friend present to see that all is correct and above board. In 1906, the police would ask six or eight men passing the police station to step inside and take part in the parade of suspects. When the parade is ready for inspection by the witnesses, the inspector gives the word and the witnesses walk up and down the line carefully inspecting every person present; it is not unusual for the witness to identify some innocent person who was brought in from the street. When this happens, the person is allowed to leave without question.

By reducing the number of suspects, it was possible to have an identity parade composed mainly of suspects with a minimum of outsiders. The witness would pass down the parade and whoever they picked out it would be odds on that the person would be a suspect, and would be charged.

After an identification parade, the witness becomes very certain he has identified the real culprit when he learns that the suspect has been convicted before.

So by these methods, quite a number of "shoot flyers" were charged and many convicted. I might add that innocent or guilty, you did not have much chance of getting acquitted once the witness swore you were the man who stole his chain.

In the first week of September, 1906, in the early hours of the morning, I was awakened by two C.I.D. officers entering

my room. They were my old friends Sgts. Brogden and Dessent. Let me introduce these two C.I.D. sergeants, who were known and feared among the criminal fraternity in London. They were to become involved in a famous murder case, which threw some light on the manner in which they carried out their powers of arrest. conclusion of the identity parades, the station insp Detective Sergeant Brogden, who was the son of the Chief Constable of Yarmouth, and Detective Sergeant Dessent, both these two men were fearless in carrying out their duty, and although I was arrested by them on several occasions, they were never guilty of any act which we call villainy. to appear at 01 When they entered my bedroom and told me to dress, I asked them on what charge they were arresting me on. as I was told the "governor" wanted to see me. Rules and regulations did not have any meaning for these two officers of the law. police stati I was taken to Commercial Street police station. The two C.I.D. officers had a talk with the station inspector, andly then I was told I would be detained for an identification parade. No precise charge was stated, that meant I was to take part in a number of parades, to see if any witness could pick me out. That day I took part in a number of parades, for different cases of robberies, but fortunately I was lucky. on th Some time in the evening, while I was on the identity ice parade, I lit a cigarette from the gas jet in the room. D.D.I.

Wensley walked up to me in a rage and said, "Put it out." I refused, he lost his temper and I ignored him, so I had a smoke and was very pleased with myself. The other men on the parade saw this incident and seemed highly amused at the discomfiture of the inspector, which added to his illtemper.

At the conclusion of the identity parades, the station inspector told me I could go home, which I proceeded to do with a certain degree of haste, but not before I received a warning from D.D.I. Inspector F. Wensley, that I would have a surprise before the week was out.

A week or so later, I was served with a summons to appear at Old Street police court to answer a charge of doing grievous bodily harm to one P.C. 47 H.R. The summons was returnable from 18th September, 1906.

The complainant was a P.C. from Commercial Street police station. I knew him quite well, he was an inoffensive man living quite near me. I was accustomed to give him a friendly greeting in passing. P.C. 47 was an elderly man who had completed his service, but had signed on the reserve, in order to supplement his pension.

We paid the police such small wages and also miserable small pensions that on retirement they were forced to serve on the reserve in order to live and pay their way. The police at this period were forced by economics to accept a shilling

The magistrate who heard this case had all the relevant facts before him, he knew my record and how far he could trust me; he also knew his policemen.

It appeared that in the early days of September, at about 11 p.m., P.C. 47 had been assaulted by two men who were friends of mine. The men had been arrested and were very violent on the way to the station, several policemen were involved, and there is no doubt that the crowd resented the brutality of the police, because I saw the charge sheet on which it was recorded that a number of witnesses went to the station to

27th November, 1906. I was twenty years old. P.C. 47 was supposed to have been assaulted during this melée.

1907. My family had moved from the Gibraltar Buildings to No. 5 Gibraltar Gardens. At last we had a house to ourselves, with a large forecourt in front for storing any goods or timber.

The summons against me was heard by Mr. Cluer, a very fair and just magistrate. The police were legally represented and called five policemen to support their case. I conducted my own defence. I called three witnesses. Result: case dismissed. Magistrate made some caustic comments about the police evidence, etc.

This case was a major triumph for me. "The Weasel" and other C.I.D. officers left the court highly incensed at the decision of the court.

These steps had been taken to curb excessive drinking. The national press got hold of the story and played it up for what it was, police and public, story of police persecution.

poor relieved their misery by frequent drinking which stopped them from thinking of the deplorable conditions under which facts before him, he knew my record and how far he could trust they were living. me; he also knew his policemen.

Through the publicity gained from the report of the police The year 1900 had opened with a great victory for the court proceedings of the 18th September. I had become a member Liberal Party; among the new under-secretaries was Winston of the Police and Public Vigilance Society whose president Churchill. The new Government had a mandate for social reform. was Earl Russell. The object of the society was to investigate The new Prime Minister was Campbell-Bannerman; there was a every case of police brutality, police persecution and new Labour Party of thirty Socialists, the beginning of the illegal arrest, etc. Socialist Party of the future.

Some time in the early days of 1901, I was talking to a 27th November, 1900. I was twenty years old. friend in the High Street, Shoreditch, one morning, not many 1907. My family had moved from the Gibraltar Buildings yards from Old Street police court. I noticed my old friends to No. 5 Gibraltar Gardens. At last we had a house to ourselves, Sergeants Brocken and Dessent, coming towards me from the with a large forecourt in front for storing any goods or police court. On seeing me they stopped and Sergeant Brocken timber. My mother had become more sober in her habits, she said to me, "I am arresting you on suspicion of house-breaking had stopped going out on her drinking bouts. Habitual drunkards were afraid of the new Acts of Parliament which made it an offence to become a habitual drunkard. Penalties under the new Act meant being put on the black list of people whom every publican must refuse to serve; worse, courts could commit stealing, so I was alerted to the possibility of a fabricated the offender to an inebriates home for three years, where charge.

hard work, abstinence from strong drink were expected to work wonders. On arrival at the station, the time was 11 a.m. The two

C.I.D. men had a talk with the inspector in charge of the station. I heard the inspector say to them, "Well, get your which had become one of the great evils of the times. The very

poor relieved their misery by frequent drinking which stopped witness here at once. "I'm not having him detained here all day. This case must be settled today." they were living.

At about 12 a.m., the identity parade was held and a witness from Chilton Street came into the room, walked up to me and court proceedings of the 18th September, I had become a member of the Police and Public Vigilance Society whose president had been identified. The parade was dismissed and I was taken into the charge room to be charged with the offence. Realising the need to illegal arrest, etc.

Some time in the early days of 1907, I was talking to a friend in the High Street, Shoreditch, one morning, not many yards from Old Street police court. I noticed my old friends, Sergeants Brogden and Dessent, coming towards me from the police court. On seeing me they stopped and Sergeant Brogden said to me, "I am arresting you on suspicion of house-breaking in Chilton Street, Bethnal Green." This street is opposite Gibraltar Gardens and it is no exaggeration to say I was known to every person in the street, which was about as well off as the Gibraltar Gardens. Not a house had anything worth stealing, so I was alerted to the possibility of a fabricated charge.

On arrival at the station, the time was 11 a.m. The two C.I.D. men had a talk with the inspector in charge of the station. I heard the inspector say to them, "Well, get your About midnight one Sunday night, I was walking through

witness here at once. I'm not having him detained here all day. This case must be settled today."

At about 12 a.m., the identity parade was held and a witness from Chilton Street came into the room, walked up to me and touched me on the shoulder, so according to the rule book I had been identified. The parade was dismissed and I was taken into the charge room to be charged with the offence. Realising the need to act quickly before the witness made a statement, I said to the station inspector, "Ask him what he had identified me for. What did I do?" The station inspector then questioned the witness. The witness then stated, "This is not the man who broke into the house. The 'tec told me to touch anyone I knew, so I touched Harding because I know him."

The inspector looked at the two C.I.D. men who at once said, "Let him go." So ended that little episode. You see, these two C.I.D. men could not resist the chance of taking me in, although they knew perfectly well that I was not a house-breaker. A few hours detention in the station was their idea of a good joke.

During this year I had an adventure which proved that it is possible for an innocent man to be convicted for a very serious crime, could be murder even. About midnight one Sunday night, I was walking through

Boundary Street, Bethnal Green, E. My companion was a well-known funeral undertaker, who had a business in Bethnal Green; by name Joe Barker.

We were walking towards home. Suddenly I saw lying in the middle of the road the figure of a man very still. At first I thought it was a drunken man, but a closer look revealed that the man was a policeman. He was bleeding from a severe wound in the head, he was unconscious, his helmet had fallen off and was lying close by.

It happened I was wearing a light raincoat, and in lifting the P.C.'s head to stop the flow of blood, my raincoat got stained. My friend was rather frightened and near panic, wanting to leave the P.C. lying there, not through any dislike of the police but the possibility of being involved in a court case. Present time, 1969. In regard to discipline, I will give. For myself, I had quickly realised the dangers of the own case; or if I panicked someone may have come along and seen me leave the unconscious man. He could have died, then we would indeed have been in trouble. My clothing stained with his blood - do you believe the police would have accepted my story that we left an unconscious man bleeding from a wound in the head, because we were afraid? No jury would accept such a story. So I blew the whistle of the P.C. and helped him as much as possible. Soon a number of police arrived and

to go to hell. In a flash the P.C. pulled his truncheon out and started poking the man with his stick. The next minute the P.C. was knocked to the ground and the young men made off. The P.C. was not hurt and got to his feet and ran after the

These men were afterwards convicted and sentenced to long terms. For myself, I was arrested and detained until the P.C. was able to clear me of any connection with the attack. This P.C., who I knew by the name of Gus, suffered from ill health for years afterwards. I was always given a friendly smile when I saw him on duty.

According to the story told by other police officers who were present, they had considerable difficulty in holding the young P.C. from inflicting further punishment upon his defenceless prisoner. The man was charged with assaulting the young

There is no doubt in my own mind that the police in my early years were more highly disciplined and better trained, than the present time, 1969. In regard to discipline, I will give an account of the way in which this discipline was shown.

One night, or rather early morning in 1907, four young men were standing on the corner of Sclater Street, Brick Lane, E. It was summer time and the bugs were very active, so many preferred the streets to their sleeping quarters. The four young men were talking. A young P.C. came along and ordered them to clear off. The P.C. was inexperienced in the act of persuasion. The young men on the corner were tough and experienced in street brawls. They told the young P.C.

to go to hell. In a flash the P.C. pulled his truncheon out and started poking the men with his stick. The next minute the P.C. was knocked to the ground and the young men made off. The P.C. was not hurt and got to his feet and ran after the man who struck him; he caught him on the corner of Bacon Street and, using his truncheon very brutally, he rendered the man unconscious. Then he began to blow his whistle for assistance. He waited until other police arrived to carry the unconscious man to the police station.

According to the story told by other police officers who were present, they had considerable difficulty in holding the young P.C. from inflicting further punishment upon his defenceless prisoner. The man was charged with assaulting the young P.C. and kept in a cell all night.

The prisoner was in a very bad state bleeding from cuts on the head, etc. No doctor was called to attend him. He was brought before the court the next morning.

The magistrate sitting at Old Street police court that morning was a former Liberal Member of Parliament, named Mr. Pickergill, who had represented Bethnal Green in Parliament. When the man appeared in the dock charged with assaulting the policeman (who was in no way marked), the magistrate asked, "Who was charged with assaulting the prisoner?" The man was in a piteous condition, his two eyes had been blackened, his

head cut, and he bore the signs of other injuries, mutely to testifying to the beating up he had received. A P.C. and called the magistrate dismissed the case with the words, "If you do this to defendants, I will not convict." I saw the condition of this man the same morning he was discharged by the magistrate. A few years after this severe beating, this man died in, he is Claybury Asylum, Woodford, insane.

As I had witnessed the assault on the P.C. and the beating up of the man, I was keenly interested in this young P.C. A few inquiries elicited the information that the police in the Commercial Street station were in fear of this young constable, because of his resort to violence on the slightest pretext, both in the police canteen and in the performance of his following duty in the streets. Section House, Commercial Road, E.L.

Some weeks later, I saw the young P.C. talking to a uniformed policeman. The young P.C. was in plain clothes, and the two P.C.s stood by the bus stop talking. I stood a few yards away from them and I could see that the uniformed P.C. was telling the other P.C. of my identity. My friend, who was an elderly ex-convict named Griffin, walked by the two P.C.s giving the young P.C. a look of contempt.

Then it happened. This bully masquerading as a policeman violently attacked the old ex-convict, striking him in the face and knocking him to the ground. A crowd had collected; the

uniformed P.C. had walked away very quickly, not wishing to be involved in the matter. I seized the young P.C. and called the other policeman to come back. I then told the uniformed P.C. what had happened and asked him to arrest the young P.C. for assault. deal with the young P.C. P. Redmond and I was assured. The uniformed policeman said, "I can't arrest him, he is a policeman," so I demanded his name and address. He refused, then the uniformed policeman realised the seriousness of what was happening, a crowd of witnesses to the assault and the possibility of becoming involved himself. So he said to the plain clothes P.C., "Give your name and address or I will have to take you in. I'm not taking the can back for you." The young P.C. then gave his name and address, which was as follows:

Peter Remond, Section House, Commercial Road, E.1. conviction.

The next morning, we applied for a summons for assault against the young P.C. Peter Remond. The magistrate sitting at Old Street police court, after hearing the sworn information, granted the summons free.

This was the beginning of a week of intense activity among the betting fraternity. The complainant, William Griffin, was offered a fairly large sum of money to let the case drop, by not appearing to prosecute.

I had taken charge of these proceedings and was determined to press the case unless the police gave an assurance that this

young P.C. would be disciplined.

The summons was returnable the following week, so if the police wanted to avoid publicity the matter had to be settled before the case was due to be heard. I was informed that the police would deal with the young P.C. P. Redmond and I was assured that we would not be troubled with him again. So I decided to let the police authorities deal with the case.

William Griffin, the man who was assaulted, was compensated with a good sum of money from the local bookmakers.

The fighting policeman, Peter Redmond, was never seen again in H. Division. I heard he was sent to one of the suburbs where he became disillusioned with the police and resigned. secretary, a Mr. Timewell.

For myself, increased police activity to secure a conviction. had been arrested and detained without any evidence.

I gave my consent to an application for leave to be heard by the Royal Commission on the Police, which was then sitting in the Guildhall, Broad Sanctuary, Westminster. I wanted the Tribunal to inquire into the gradual process of the manufacture of criminals, under the present police system in the Metropolitan Police. I quoted incidents in my early life, that I had been taken into custody something like 27 times without the police having any evidence to justify a court in convicting me.

The Tribunal, after some deliberation, decided to hear only